Young Somali Women and Narrative Participatory Photography: Interrupting Fixed Identities through *Dumarka Soomaaliyeed Voices Unveiled*

**DISSERTATION**

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By

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the articulations and interruptions of Dumarka Soomaaliyeed Voices Unveiled (DSVU), a narrative participatory photography project that resulted in an exhibit of photographs and stories exploring what it is to be Muslim, Somali women in Columbus, Ohio. The primary source for the concepts of articulation and interruption is the community theory of Jean-Luc Nancy (1991, 1997, 2000).

I employed participatory action research with fourteen young women to develop the narrative participatory photography method asserted in this study. In addition, a conceptual framework bringing together Nancy’s community theory, diasporic cultural identity, and political action as interruption emerged from the intersection of the fields of Somali Studies and Community Arts.

In this research, I identify and analyze two articulations of Somali woman, which include: 1) stories about who they are told they are, how they identify themselves as a group of young women, and how they identify themselves as individuals; and 2) stories about not knowing what it means to be Somali. The stories of s interrupt: 1) stereotypes and assumptions held by others (both Somali and non-Somali) through creating points of empathy, presenting multiple viewpoints, experiencing affronting encounters, and giving attention to relationship; and 2) participants’ perceptions by offering a space to share stories and consciously choose what to follow and what to leave behind.

This research offers a retheorization of relationship and political action in PAR and Community Arts, a new model of narrative participatory photography, and strategies for community arts educators engaged with immigrant and refugee communities.
To the women who opened their lives and homes to me:
Qorsho, Nasra, Hoda, Muna, S., Zam Zam, Asha, Bahja, Miriam, A., Kayla, Zahra,
Ladan, and Raamla.

To my family for all their support,
especially my husband who always sees the good in the work I do.

To God, who led me to this place and taught me what relationship means.
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CHAPTER 1: Introduction to Dumarka Soomaaliyeed Voices Unveiled

Introduction to Study

*Dumarka Soomaaliyeed* Voices Unveiled (DSVU) is a participatory action research (PAR) study with young Somali women in Columbus, Ohio. DSVU began as an initiative to challenge common misconceptions and stereotypes about Somali culture and evolved to address issues facing young Somali woman in a diasporic community. Through storytelling, photography, interview, and writing; participants explored perspectives of young Somali women and created a public exhibition of their work. This research considers the way that the stories told visually, orally, and through writing interrupt fixed perceptions of the Somali community, and offers a new philosophical conceptualization of the political action in PAR and community arts projects.

**Background**

DSVU began in 2012 as a project for the Schweitzer Fellowship, a program providing graduate students resources to implement projects reducing community health education disparities. As a Schweitzer Fellow, I partnered with the Somali Women and Children’s Alliance (SWCA), a Somali run social service agency, to create an educational exhibit about Somali culture with the goal of bridging communities through public education. The first initiative, DSVUOSU, engaged five Somali women between the ages of 19 and 31 all of whom were associated with The Ohio State University as students or alumni. A second initiative, DSVUNL, began in 2013, initiated by a young woman in the Northern Lights neighborhood, and brought together nine young women in their late teens and early twenties. The DSVU exhibit to date has been displayed at five libraries in central Ohio, and is currently on display online (DSVU, 2014). See Figure 1 for a list of acronyms used throughout this dissertation.

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1*Dumarka Soomaaliyeed* means “Somali women” in Somali.
CML ……... Columbus Metropolitan Library
CMLNL …. Columbus Metropolitan Library – Northern Lights branch. One site of exhibition (March 2013 and January 2014) and the site of the second project initiative.

DSVU……... Dumarka Soomaaliyeed Voices Unveiled
DSVUOSU. The first initiative of DSVU with 5 Somali women associated with The Ohio State University as students or alumni, ages 18-31. Initiative led by Qorsho. Recruited participants through Qorsho (Nasra and Hoda), Somali Student Association (Muna), and the Schweitzer Fellowship (S.).

DSVUNL… The second initiative of DSVU with 9 young Somali women, ages 18-22. The project was based out of the Northern Lights library branch, and led by Zam Zam, a young Somali woman employed at CMLNL. Includes A., Asha, Bahja, Kayla, Ladan, Miriam, Raamla, Zahra, and Zam Zam.

HHC……... Homework Help Center, an afterschool program at CML.
PAR……... Participatory action research
SCRI……... Somali Cultural and Research Institute
SDP……... Somali Documentary Project
SWCA……... Somali Women and Children’s Alliance

Table 1: List of acronyms

Somalis in Columbus, Ohio. Columbus is home to the second largest population of Somalis in the United States. While the Somali community in Columbus is not a monolith, there are some common experiences that resonate across many of the women who participated in this study. Keeping in mind the tensions between over-generalizing cultural attributes and neglecting to acknowledge cultural connections, the women participating in the project each discussed the specificity of their experiences, which pointed to a list of three identity categories explored in this study. The participants revealed that at times these categories affirmed, and at other times challenged, representations of Somali women in academic literature and social discourse. Though there is danger of overgeneralizing the experiences and culture of Somalis in the diaspora, establishing several broad categories helps to define some aspects of Somali identity including: 1) migration histories of Somalis in Columbus, 2) religious identification, and 3) the visibility of changing gender roles.

Somalis began arriving en mass in Columbus in the late 1990s as refuges of the Somali Civil War (1991-present). A large influx followed in the early 2000s as a result of
secondary migrations, which occurs when refugees move from the location of primary resettlement, and chain migrations, a series of migrations within a family. It is generally accepted that the city of Columbus was not prepared for such a large community of refugees and that upon arrival Somalis faced many challenges (Moore & Joseph, 2011; Roble & Rutledge, 2008; Waters, 2012). Though the Somali community in Columbus is preparing for full participation in central Ohio (Roble & Rutledge, 2008) through the establishment of social service agencies like SWCA, hundreds of Somali owned businesses, increased political participation, and enrollment in higher education, anti-Somali ideologies persist as a result of xenophobia, racism, and Islamophobia among non-Somalis in central Ohio (Waters, 2012).

Most Somalis identify as Sunni Muslim, forging a strong and often contested connection between religious and cultural practices and values. The relationship between religion and culture is significant for many of the women in DSVU. Religion and culture do not exist in opposition in this case, but reciprocally impact their expression as individuals identify themselves as both Muslim and Somali. For many, there is a movement to distinguish between cultural traditions and religious practices, as exemplified in discussions around female genital mutilation (FGM) (Baron & Denmark, 2006) or manifest in standards for women’s dress (Akou, 2004). However, the relationship between religious and cultural identification and practice remains central to discussion about Somali identity in the diaspora.

The visibility of gender roles among Somalis is especially important since Somali women in Columbus are particularly visible as “other.” Women dressed in long skirts or jilbab (a long dress worn over pants) and a headscarf (hijab) is a common and distinctive site around central Ohio. Akou (2004) found in a study of Somali women’s dress in Minneapolis (the largest Somali community in the United States), non-Somali Americans consider Somali dress as traditional. Moreover, many Americans believe that the veil represents an oppressive religion and culture from which women need to be liberated (Abdurraqib, 2006; Lombardo, 2013). However, the religious dress seen in Columbus is a

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2The visibility of Somali women is a common phenomenon in Western countries of resettlement. See Berns-McGown (1999), Besteman (2012), and Leitner (2004).
relatively recent phenomenon for Somalis, tied into a variety of factors leading to increased religiosity across the diaspora. Some of these factors include ideological confusion during the Barre regime (1969-1991) and leading up to the Civil War (1991-present), the rise of Islamist movements in 1970s, and resettling in primarily Judeo-Christian countries as refugees (Abdi, 2007; Berns-McGown, 1999; Kapteijns & Arman, 2004; Van Liempt, 2011). Many women in the diaspora take this as an opportunity to redefine themselves within the contexts of Western women’s rights, the worldwide movement within Islam towards personal interpretations and authority of the Qur’an, and within a Somali diaspora concerned with preserving Somali culture and traditions.

These aspects of identity that define Somaliness, a term I use to describe the collective cultural identity of Somalis (particularly in the diaspora) – migration histories, religious identification and practice, and cultural practices such as language and dress – have emerged from the stories told in DSVU, and will be explicated in this dissertation.

**Conceptual framework.** The community theory of Jean-Luc Nancy (1991, 1997, 2000) forms the theoretical framework for this study. Nancy establishes the relationship between the individual, identity, community, and narrative as one of coexposition and interruption in an ontology, which Nancy (2000) calls being singular plural. Being singular plural means that singularities (Nancy’s term for beings both human and nonhuman: a human being, a culture, a city, etc.) exist only in relationship with one another so that being is essentially being-with. As such, singularities share their finitude (or difference), simultaneously constituting identity, community, and being. Thus sharing difference forms the basis of community rather than the sharing of the same. The relationship between singularities is constantly moving between being-with (having to do with relationships between singularities) and being-in-common (having to do with politics, and the negotiation of identity), a movement that works against fixed identities or concepts of community, so that community is in fact always interrupted.

The relationship between individual and community, as Nancy explores in being singular plural, offers a different understanding of identity in the Somali diaspora. Within

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3 Somaliness is discussed further in Chapter 2, with the review of studies on soomaalinimo.
the field of Somali Studies, there is expansive literature on the diversity of the Somali diaspora from different migration histories, ethnicity including clan membership and concepts of Somaliness, socioeconomic status, education, gender, and religious practice and identification. Though diversity of identity is well established within Somali diaspora studies, there is evidence of a tension between a desire for a unified Somali culture and identity across diaspora locations and the multiplicity of backgrounds, experiences, identifications, and practices in scholarship and in the stories of DSVU. Moreover, the stories told in DSVU exemplify a myriad of experiences of what it means to be a Somali woman, affirming some aspects of the dominant narrative put forth by scholarship while challenging and extending others. Understanding the complicated relationship between individual, community, and identity through the narratives told by those experiencing the diaspora presents a more comprehensive account of it (Crosby, 2006; Langellier, 2010; Magan, 2012).

**Singular plural identities and interruption.** Nancy’s reconceptualization of community necessitates a rethinking of politics, which he defines as the site where “what it means to be in common is open to definition” (Nancy, 1991, p. x) and where being-in-common is at stake. The political imperative of his philosophy is “to create a world” in which “there is room for everyone: but a genuine place, one in which things can genuinely take place, where there is a place for being there (in this world)” (Nancy, 2007, p. 42, emphasis original). This imperative is tied to justice, which happens “in the singular-plural expositions of existence and remains an inappropriable that is shared out

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by each but irreducible to a particular or a whole” (Nancy, 2007, p. 23). In other words, working towards justice for Nancy is working against fixed identities, or totalizing conceptions of the world.

A practical response to this theory is through the practice of writing, which for Nancy affirms “singular plural difference” (James, 2006, p. 200) through the presentation of what happens at the limits of community where singularities touch and share their difference. Storytelling offers a site for such sharing, through literary communism (Nancy, 1991). Like Arthur Frank (2010), Nancy recognizes the capacities of stories to share and create, to act in people’s lives, and to connect people but reminds us that this can only happen “if, by itself and for itself, the work does nothing other than trace and retrace this limit” by reinscribing singularity (Nancy, 1991, p. 73). This type of storytelling should not, as Morin (2012) puts it, “present the community but exhaust[s itself] in trying to indicate the sharing” (p. 85). Literary communism works to undo community by interrupting the foundational narratives, or myths, which organize and fix communities. The sharing of stories – both telling and listening – then can be understood as interruption.

**Community arts.** Interruption offers a different way to consider community arts initiatives such as DSVU. Community arts is a form of social justice art education, which centers artmaking that encourages social equity, focuses on action, and engages people through “culturally specific art forms toward the end of mutual understanding as a way to humanize and de-objectify each other – to see each other not as stereotypes but simply as people, much like ourselves in our shared basic humanity” (Anderson, 2010, p. 8). There have been many ways that art educators have conceptualized the action of social justice including:

- **transformation** (Bastos, 2010; Darts, 2006; Dewhurst, 2010; 2011),
- **encounter** (Albers, 1999; Hutzel & Resler, 2010; O’Sullivan, 2006; Pearlman, n.d.),
- **intervention** (Duncum, 2010; Desai, Bui, & DiFillipo, 2003; Richardson, 2010; Williams & Taylor, 2004), and
disruption (Gooding-Brown, 2000).

Given the purposes and goals of DSVU, Nancy’s concept of interruption offers an alternative perspective of the capacities of art making (including storytelling) and community art education as political action.

Somali arts initiatives as community arts. There are arts initiatives within the Somali diaspora including documentary photography and film, cultural exhibits, visual arts, and storytelling that address the tension between the “myth” of a single Somali identity and the multiple and different experiences of being Somali in the diaspora. These initiatives have several characteristics, which position them as community arts.

This is made apparent in this study; first, these community arts initiatives often educate young Somalis about their history and culture in an effort to preserve Somali culture. Simultaneously these community arts experiences work to inform non-Somalis about their new neighbors in order to improve the relationship between host and Somali communities by challenging stereotypes (fixed perceptions of identity, culture, and community) and increasing understanding. Documentary efforts such as The Somali Documentary Project (SDP) (SDP, n.d.; Roble & Rutledge, 2008) and the Somali Elders project (Jordan, 2007; 2008) in particular address community education concerns.

Second, negotiating and redefining Somali identity in the diaspora is common concept, especially for young visual artists such as Nadia Faragaab (2012) and Mohamad Mumin (n.d.). These initiatives all work to interrupt fixed perceptions of Somali identity and culture held by those outside the Somali community as well as those belonging to it.

Statement of the Problem

As an arts-based PAR study with Somali women, this research intersects the fields of Somali Studies and Community Arts. Consequently, it addresses relevant concerns in each. Within the field of Somali Studies, there is expansive literature on the diversity of the Somali diaspora, particularly regarding diasporic Somali identity. However, common perception in central Ohio paints a homogenous Somali culture typified by language, dress, religion, and ethnicity (Fangen, 2007; Griffiths, 2002; Lewis, 1988; Putnam & Noor, 1993), often racialized and thus subject to anti-Somali ideologies.
(Waters, 2012). Presenting stories of women’s experiences in a public exhibition puts forth a form of cross-cultural learning, which Ali (2009) has identified as an integral element in resettlement and integration. *DSVU* works to educate the wider community in an effort to dispel cultural misunderstandings. Furthermore disruptions of stereotypical understandings and representations of Somali and Muslim women through the presentation of multiple viewpoints (visual and written) support an effort to “reposition the site of struggle from the individual to their narratives and,” as Britzman (1995) describes, “to pluralize their retellings to account for the competing stories, new structural formations, and the hesitations of chronology that were made present and absent through their language” (p. 234). Moreover, creating a space for women to share their stories is important. As Magan (2012) states, “Stories matter. People matter. Somalia today is in desperate need of the voices of her people” to present the multiplicity of diasporic identity and experience to more accurately describe Somali culture. In other words, *DSVU* is an effort to affirm the singular plural – the differences that create community.

Moreover, this project answers Schaid and Grossman’s (2007) call for more public education directed towards American communities such as SDP (Roble & Rutledge, 2008) and Moore and Joseph’s (2011) cultural training for Columbus Public School teachers, who are often the first point of contact for assimilation and resistance to mainstream US social expectations. These local examples present what Rogoff (2000) describes as the agitation of public space, efforts to undo its certainties, a similar sentiment as Nancy’s interruptions of the perceptions of fixed identities. Moreover, as Crosby (2006) asserts, more narratives of women’s experiences will serve to interrupt what it is to be Somali women in the diaspora and how they are represented in scholarship as well as within American communities. Thus, *DSVU* as a PAR project is a response to the call for narratives within Somali studies as well as continued cross-cultural learning towards full participation and cultural understanding.

Keeping in mind Nancy’s assertion of politics as the site where “what it means to be in common is open to definition” (Nancy, 1991, p. x), conceptualizing the political
action of *DSVU* as interruption serves to retheorize foundational concepts and offers a reconsideration of the connection between identity, relationship, community, and the political. Nancy’s philosophy – including the concepts of being singular plural, being-with, being-in-common, and interruption – presents an alternative language for describing and understanding the way that collaborative artmaking and PAR enacts change with and among communities. The continued theorization of PAR within community arts and the retheorization of foundational concepts, such as action, is something that PAR researchers (Kesby, Kindon, & Pain, 2007) have called for in addition to the multiple theorizations of action in Community Arts literature. Continuing to explore the theoretical and philosophical foundations of political action within and amongst communities, as well as the impact of our research (Cahill, Carecer, & Bradley, 2010), helps to think through “the enabling aporias” (Lather, 2007, p. 96) of practice that are often taken for granted or undertheorized. Examining the interruptions of *DSVU* using Nancy’s theory offers another conceptualization of the action of PAR and Community Arts.

**Research Questions**

Given the sociocultural context explained here, this study is a response to several intersecting needs: 1) the need for Somali women’s voices to be advanced in the greater Columbus community, 2) the need for education of the broader community in central Ohio about Somali culture, 3) the call for more narratives of women’s experiences in the diaspora from Somali Studies, and 4) continued theorization of action in PAR and community arts in order to work towards more responsible practice. As such, the stories told through word and image and the way in which they interrupt perceptions of the Somali community are the foci of this investigation. The main question of this research is:

*How do participants of Dumarka Soomaaliyeed Voices Unveiled (DSVU) articulate what it is to be a young Muslim Somali woman in Columbus, Ohio through visual, oral, and written narratives, and how do these stories interrupt perceptions of Somali women?*
Sub questions (drawing from Jean-Luc Nancy) include:

- What are the interruptions of DSVU?
- What perceptions and conceptions are the stories and photographs interrupting?
- How does conceptualizing the action of this project as interruption impact community arts and PAR practice?

**Research Design**

*DSVU* includes project initiatives during two different time periods in two distinct locations. The first initiative (*DSVUOSU*) occurred from August 2012 to February 2013 and engaged five Somali women between the ages of 19 and 31. The second (*DSVUNL*) worked with eight Somali women ages 18 to 22 from August 2013 to January 2014. In each project, we worked together to document stories and take photographs exploring what it is to be a Somali woman in Columbus, Ohio.

PAR is the organizing methodology of this study and *DSVU* is driven by the principles of PAR – relationship, education, and political action (Chatterton, Fuller, & Routledge, 2007; hunter, emerald, & Martin, 2013; McIntyre, 2008; Stringer, 2007). Participants determined the topics of inquiry, the way that the project was carried out including methods, timing and participant/researcher roles, and the curation of the final exhibition – what I call participant informed design. As such, each project initiative varied in focus, process, and final product.

Both project initiatives culminated in a public exhibition, the content of which was created through what I call narrative participatory photography, a derivation of Wang’s (1999) photovoice method. Writing poetry and essays as well as telling stories about being young women in the diaspora emphasized narrative. Thus, narrative inquiry following Clandinin and Connolly (2000) became a supporting research method. In *DSVUOSU*, I conducted oral history interviews to elicit stories from each woman and carried out individual photography sessions. The second project, *DSVUNL*, diverged from individual interviews as we focused on telling and discussing stories during group interviews. I also utilized participant observation, writing, and field notes to construct field texts throughout the duration of the project.
Layered analysis. As a result of utilizing multiple research methods to carry out PAR, layered analysis offered a means of implementing analytic frameworks from each of the methods employed, further crystallizing the field texts. These layers include 1) the juxtaposition of stories within broad cultural categories (Abu-Lughod, 2008/1993), 2) dialogical narrative analysis (Frank, 2010), 3) writing as a method (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), and 4) thinking with theory (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). While many PAR researchers utilize various forms of grounded theory and are often critical of the potential imposition of theoretical frameworks foreign to participants (Stringer, 2007), Jackson and Mazzei (2012) as well as other qualitative researchers such as Lather (1991, 2000, 2006, 2007) and St. Pierre (2012) have identified the benefits of utilizing philosophical concepts to extend and challenge researcher practice and understanding. Despite the dangers and challenges of marrying an a priori theoretical framework with PAR, I utilize Nancy’s (1991) triad of community, identity, and relationship to help organize my thoughts about DSVU in what I aim to be a productive and transformative manner.

Utilizing multiple methods of research and analysis is an important aspect of maintaining plurality and validation. The analytic layers – narrative, cultural, and theoretical – derived from methods selected by participants come together to offer multiple perspectives and interpretations of the stories told. As such, crystallization is the central image of validity. Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) describe crystallization as a combination of symmetry and substance with a range of dimensions, shapes, and angles of approach. A variety of practices, analytics, and perspectives “fosters difference” and creates “a between space of what seems impossible” in order to work through “stuck places of present practice” (Lather, 2006, pp. 44-45). Therefore, multiple methods and analytics are utilized to examine DSVU, analyze the interruptions taking place in the project, and offer implications for Community Arts and PAR practices.

Defining Terms and Boundaries

In PAR, the identity of the researcher and relationship to the community is of upmost importance. For this study, my identity as a white Christian woman in higher education was trumped by my identity as a non-Somali and non-Muslim woman. Though
this research could be read through race, the fact that I am not Somali and not Muslim has mattered much more than my color and power position. While race cannot be discounted, it is not the focus of this study. Moreover the issue of race was not explicitly broached by participants during our time together; the only time that discussions of race occurred was when I introduced it to our conversations. Thus, the defining terms used throughout this work are “Somali” and “non-Somali.”

Occasionally, I distinguish between the Somali community and the wider American or Columbus community, avoiding insider/outsider terms. This is primarily because my involvement in the community has blurred the line between insider and outsider. Rutledge, a non-Somali member of SDP, described this position as an “intimate outsider” (Roble & Rutledge, 2008). Three years of working with SWCA and SCRI and being called an expert in Somali arts organizations by Somali coworkers (much to my embarrassment) pushed me from an outsider to something else. Though visually I am never mistaken for Somali, in many ways I am tied more closely to the Somali community than to other groups with whom I share more similar beliefs, physical appearance, and cultural and socioeconomic background. When I made my first visit back to Columbus after moving out of state in 2013, it was the sight of a hijab clad woman that welcomed me home. Moreover, the collaborative nature of my work with the women of DSVU is meant to challenge traditional power relations between researcher and participants, rethink who is considered knowledge bearers, and reconsider what constitutes community membership. Though I may still be an outsider to the Somali community at large, amongst these women, I feel that I belong. This has much to do with establishing trustworthiness through honest relationship building, transparency in motive and intent, and integrity in actions.

Another issue that helped to define this study is the fact that this research focuses on Somali women and culture. As such, it falls into the category of Somali Studies. Although similar documentary projects such as SDP have been published for non-academic audiences (Kapteijns, 2009), inclusion of narrative and photographic inquiry in

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11See Waters (2012) as an example of a reading of race in relation to the Somali community in Columbus
Somali Studies adds to contributions by scholars such as Glenn Jordan (2007, 2008) and makes academic scholarship more accessible to a wide range of audiences. Moreover, the current discussions of social justice art education, the action of PAR, and the inclusion of women’s narratives in Somali Studies focuses this study on the stories that the women tell and how they function as political action rather than the process itself, the effects that participation had on participants or that the exhibit had on the audience from a visitor studies perspective, or any number of other issues.

Other terms employed.

- **Community**, relationship between singularities based on a shared difference (Nancy, 1991), which is not a fixed concept, but always interrupted.
- **Community arts**, a form of social justice art education in which artists and educators work with community partners towards social change.
- **Community invitation**, a recruitment method in which community project leaders identify and invite suitable participants to participate, ideally through already established relationships.
- **Narrative participatory photography**, terminology I coined in the process of this dissertation, a derivation of photovoice (Wang, 1999), which engages PAR participants in photography and storytelling to explore community issues and develop an exhibition with the goal of community education.
- **Participatory action research (PAR)**, a qualitative research process that works with and for a community group to collaboratively investigate an issue, experience, question, or problem determined by the group and in which participants are actively engaged in determining and carrying out the processes of inquiry, analysis, and presentation. PAR forefronts relationships and works with the goal of transformation and change, a political process in which learning plays an important role.

Limitations of the Study

There are a number of limitations to this study having to do with site and participant selection, the project title, role definition, analysis using a priori theory, and
the review of literature. First, there are many difficulties in defining a research study when the participants, sites, questions and methods are fluid and changing due to the necessary responsiveness to the needs and situations of the communities and participants engaged in PAR. For example, I intended to carry out DSVU initiatives at two library sites after the completion of DSVUOSU. At each there was interest and a significant Somali population among their patronage. Despite this interest, a project initiative only began at the Northern Lights branch of the Columbus Metropolitan Library (CMLNL) where a young Somali woman employed in the Homework Help Center (HHC) took charge of the project, recruited participants, developed discussion topics, spearheaded many of the meetings and much of the photography, and coordinated the writing efforts.

In addition, though one of the goals of this project is to work with a cross section of young Somali women in Columbus, Ohio with regard to ethnic affiliation, migration history, class, and education, I was only able to work with two groups of women. The method of participant selection, community invitation, limited participation to those with whom at least one of the women already had a relationship, which often included family members, classmates, and family friends. As a result, there were many segments of the Somali population in Columbus who were not asked to participate, including for example the Somali Bantu community residing on the west side of Columbus. The omission of perspectives was not discussed openly, and although some of the issues accounting for the lack of participation were addressed such as clan affiliation, they were not discussed with regard to participation in this project. Other issues such as race, influence of migration histories, and socioeconomic status were also not extensively discussed. In addition, this study focuses on women ages 18-31. Only one participant from DSVUOSU was older than 25 (S.); the others were all recent high school or college graduates. Although several older women indicated interest in the project, we limited our scope. Future initiatives may choose to include older women and women from minority groups.

Second, the titling of the exhibition poses some limitations of audience perception as well as future participation. It is a strong title, as Hoda warned (November 12, 2012, personal communication recorded in research journal), with significant connotations.
Though veiling is certainly an important topic of discussion, it was not the only topic addressed. Despite push back regarding the title from one library staff member concerned that the connection to preconceptions of Muslim women regarding the veil would offend Somali women, we kept the project title. However, the title remains something to consider.

Another issue limiting this study was the lack of clarity regarding participant and research roles due to the tension between my authority as a researcher and the desire to let the women lead the project. Although this made roles difficult to ascertain at times, it also is an interesting enactment of Nancy’s temporal communities (Pente, 2008). Moreover these relationships added accountability for me to honor the creativity and the knowledge the participants share and create while we are together through my representation of our work and the venue in which it occurs (publication, exhibition, presentation, etc.) and establishes another limitation on my work – I do not and will not include stories, details, or images that have not been approved by those that have created or lived them. There have been instances when participants shared stories that were redacted during the editing and curating process. These stories/images have not been included in the exhibition, and I do not include complete transcripts in this dissertation.

Even with IRB approved participant consent, which encompasses all photographs and audio/video recordings taken during project meetings, I continue to member check. A project is not inherently ethical simply because it is participatory (or approved by the IRB), but attention to representation, self, accountability to the researched communities, social responsiveness, agency, and reflexivity (Manzo & Brightbill, 2007) helps develop ethical processes.

Fourth, with regard to data analysis, the categorization was rooted in the marriage of the stories with Nancy’s theory. Issues related to the use of a priori theory have already been discussed. The interruption categories came from participants’ presumptions about what the exhibit would do for others within the Somali community, particularly parents and men, rooted in their own experiences. I did not do any interviews with audience
members or parents, and as such rely on the women and my own observational inferences. The three limits that are most salient include:

- As many of Nancy’s critics point out, interruption as goal is an impossible endeavor. It is an *ideal* like PAR. I was interested in what the stories *did*, and I venture to say that the women were more interested in what the stories *said*. I am careful not to dismiss the creation of an exhibit as a relevant form of analysis – choosing what images and stories to include, as well as working on how stories are told either through poetry, essay, or spoken word/transcripts is a huge endeavor, which has as much to say about how the women articulate their identities as any exterior theoretical frame. However, the context of presentation and consideration of audience as well as my interest in what theories can do for practice and understanding temporarily overrides my concern for thorough collaborative analysis for the purposes of this dissertation.

- Utilizing terminology such as *myth* is problematic. The common usage of the word does not coincide with the theoretical usage, and would imply that Somaliness is a false notion. That is not Nancy’s point in discussing myth; it is to bring to light the stories we perpetuate about ourselves as members of a particular community as stories and not inherent qualities or values or beliefs. Muna reminded me of the problems of using a priori concepts as interpretive frames.

  Muna: I don’t know if I like that word fixing. It just seems like going, like making it a project. Like, I don’t know, I feel like that’s not the right term. But…I would say redefining.

  Ruth: When I talk about fixing something…it's something we're working against. And that's a problem with the term, because I see that's important. I’m glad you brought that up. I know there are some things that I need to find other ways of talking about it.

  Muna: Yeah...I like the term redefining when you said that because like I said everybody has a stereotype that they fit into. So redefining that stereotype is exactly what is happening here. Even if one person reads
all these stories that you put together, that one person understands that
the way that they saw Somali people is not the way that they really are. [Ruth: Yeah] So I feel like it doesn't matter the amount of people that see it, that one person that saw it has a totally different way of thinking now. Yeah. It's redefining but I don't know if it's fixing.

Ruth: Yeah, I think maybe one of the things that is problematic about that term is that it could be seen as if we're fixing a problem when we're what I would be hoping to do is work against something that has already been "fixed" so it might be too confusing to use those two things. Yeah, that's helpful. (Post project interview, November 15, 2013)

• The concept of identification, though illustrative of the process of forming identity in relation to other singularities (individual, culture, place-space, community) runs the risk of negating participants understandings of identity as something “you are” and the concrete experiences of identification that solidify identity as something “you are” at particular points in time. As Illeris (2014) warns this concept runs the risk of “sustaining the neo-liberal myth of the emancipated individual as a flexible position, always open to play with” (para. 2). Identity as something “you are,” though not the only way that identity is understood, is one way that identity is understood, so in the affirmation of sharing individual experiences of identification consideration of identity is also needed.

Finally, I was asked to look at gender, religious practice and identification, ethnicity, education, and migration history as part of my candidacy exams, and continued to utilize these categories as representative of the body of scholarship and how to approach studying how women articulate their identities. While a useful exercise, I recognize the lens that I used to read this body of work resulted in trying to force my work into these categories even with my intent of juxtaposing specific experiences within them per Abu-Lughod’s (2008/1993) analytic frame. This was not an accurate or particularly responsible approach; there is more nuance in many of these studies than I
allowed in my efforts to pull from them information about gender, religion, etc. in the diaspora. Starting with the women’s words and working backwards through the review of literature proved to be more fruitful – highlighting which studies were immediately pertinent to my work and which were informational to the background fabric – and led to the development of analytic layers. My future work with Somalis will certainly benefit from the extensive review of literature, but further work on this study will necessitate a refining and rethinking of the background literature, including a reclassification of studies and more attention to cultural identity and identification as well as studies specific to women refugees.

**Summary of Chapters**

Chapters 2 and 3 present a review of literature establishing the conceptual framework of this study. Chapter 2 explicates the theoretical frame through discussion of Jean-Luc Nancy’s community theory and ontology of being singular plural, which explores the relationship between the individual, community, and identity. Being singular plural guides the discussion of identity in the Somali diaspora. Reviewing the growing body of literature addressing migration history, ethnicity, gender, and religious identification and practice within the diaspora establishes a diverse diasporic identity. Chapter 3 positions DSVU as community arts education, defines community arts for the purposes of this study, and discusses several examples of arts initiatives in the Somali diaspora. Conceptualizations of the political action in artmaking are then discussed and I conclude by proposing community arts as interruption.

The methodology of this study is explicated in Chapter 4. PAR is established as the centralizing methodology. Participatory photography and narrative inquiry were chosen as supporting methods with participant input and come together to develop a new method that I call narrative participatory photography (Smith, 2014a). The layering of methods is further emphasized by the layering of analytic frames.

Chapter 5 is the first of two presentation chapters and details the development of the first DSVU initiative, DSVUOSU, as well as the transition from project to research. Chapter 6 then describes the second initiative, DSVUNL, and presents the second
exhibition, which includes work from both initiatives in the form of a photo-essay. Though framed as presentation chapters, the use of *writing as a method* and the creation of field texts resulted in blurring project narrative and analysis.

Chapter 7 presents the analysis of stories in *DSVU*. This analysis details the participants’ articulations of what it is to be a Muslim, Somali woman in Columbus, Ohio and the interruptions of *DSVU*, including what is being interrupted and how the stories interrupt perceptions of Somali women.

Finally, Chapter 8 facilitates a discussion of the implications of this research for Somali Studies, PAR and Community Arts practice, putting Nancy’s philosophy to work with the principles of relationship and political action and offer a discussion of artmaking as interruption. Conclusions and directions for future research are then offered.
CHAPTER 2: Literature Review Part I: Community Theory and Somali Studies

Introduction to the Review of Literature

_Dumarka Soomaaliyeeed Voices Unveiled (DSVU)_ is a narrative participatory photography (Smith, 2014a) project engaging Somali women in artmaking with the goal of challenging common stereotypes held among the wider Columbus community about Somali female identity, Somali culture, and Islamic practice. As such, DSVU resides in the intersection between the fields of _Somali Studies_ (which is concerned with the study of Somalia and Somalis across the diaspora) and _Community Arts_ (which involves collaborative artmaking with community members and organizations with educational and social justice aims).

The following literature review is divided into two chapters. The first addresses the theoretical framework employed in this study and offers an overview of Somali Studies literature addressing diasporic identity. Because this project works with Somali women and addresses their experiences in the diaspora and subsequent identity negotiation, an overview of studies exploring migration history, ethnicity, gender, and religious identification will be provided. Although the stories told in _DSVU_ often contest or challenge the identity categories within Somali Studies literature, the review of literature will serve to establish a background to the stories that the women tell.12 Chapter 3 will position this study within Community Arts, a form of social justice art education.

Conceptual Framework

As a participatory action research (PAR) study (a methodology discussed further in Chapter 4), _DSVU_ attends to the relationships among researcher, participants and communities, education, and political action. This study focuses on the action of

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12Abu-Lughod (2008/1993) uses a similar strategy by juxtaposing within the broad categorization of cultural phenomenon established in anthropology the stories told by the women she worked with, working within and against the assumptions of identity categorization.
community arts and how it is conceptualized with the aims to improve the understandings of and relationship with Somalis among the wider Columbus community. Though political action has been conceptualized from a variety of philosophical foundations as discussed in the next chapter, this study utilizes Jean-Luc Nancy’s ontology of being singular plural and its implications for community, identity, and the political (1991, 1997, 2000). Nancy addresses different levels of relationships, specifically: the political nature of community, and the role of storytelling in the creation of identity, community, and myth.

Though some PAR researchers are critical of using a priori theory to analyze data (Stringer, 2007), I submit that it can be useful in some cases. In this study, Nancy’s concepts helped to organize my thoughts about DSVU as PAR and artmaking. The co-constitutive nature of relationship, politics, and storytelling/artmaking in Nancy’s philosophy made it possible for me to position myself and participants as singularities sharing experiences of difference rather than outsiders or others. Furthermore, conceptualizing action within Nancy’s ontology offers an alternative perspective of the actions of the participants within the study including storytelling and the action initiated by the project itself. Thus, the conceptual framework of this study includes three concepts:

1. community
2. identity, and
3. political action as interruption (Nancy, 1991).

In order to discuss these three concepts, I begin with an overview of Nancy’s ontology of being singular plural, and the concepts of community, the political, and interruption (Nancy, 1991; 1997; 2000). Then, these philosophical concepts guide the review of scholarship addressing Somali diasporic identity within the field of Somali Studies.

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13Nancy prefers the term “singularity” to “other” and infers the impossibility of separation of me from other because being is essentially being-with and rejecting the definition of community as individuals bound with exterior ties.
Being Singular Plural: Community, Politics, and Interruption

The concepts of being singular plural (Nancy, 2000) and community (Nancy, 1991) provides the theoretical framework for this study. Nancy’s philosophy is situated within poststructuralism, a French philosophical tradition, and works against fixed and presupposed understandings of community and relationship. French philosophy endeavors to develop a new critique, rethinking politics and community without foundation, guided by no final utopia or regulative ideal (as was communism for example), and with “no guarantee other than its own activity, no necessity other than its own responsibility” (Balibar, Rajchman, & Boyman, 2011, p. 274). While on the surface, this philosophical project does not lend itself to practical applications or emancipatory ends, some scholars (Britzman, 1995; Kesby, Kindon, & Pain, 2007; Lather, 2000; St. Pierre, 2012) are utilizing the postructural approach as a way to interrupt rather than simply reverse existing models in a move towards different ways of thinking and living and implicating a constitutive and transformative underpinning of philosophical inquiry.

Nancy reconceptualizes community and politics through the development of an ontology of being singular plural, which focuses on the relationship between individuals, the contingency on one another, and the way that their stories make and remake themselves. From this ontology, Nancy has developed an epistemology of the between in which there is no single, independent truth immediately identified as the origin. Instead, Nancy looks to the actuality of movements and their articulations in an effort to play between singularities. Nancy uses a circular mode of writing and thinking to bring concepts like community into movement and to reexamine critique itself so that it no longer is practiced from an ontology of Self and Other, but from being-with-one-another. Thus, Nancy’s philosophy addresses different levels of relationships: between individuals (or singularities), which he terms being-with; between a group of individuals in community, or being-in-common; and how a group of individuals tell stories about themselves and compear (appear together) or coexpose (to be exposed together).

The triad of community, identity, and relationship offer a useful organizing framework for considering the stories and relationships in DSVU. The consideration of
identity as a process of becoming in-common while simultaneously sharing difference offers a useful perspective of diasporic experience, while storytelling as an integral aspect of developing a fluid, relational, and interrupted community garners an alternative conceptualization of community arts practice. The following sections provide an overview of community theory beginning with being singular plural; community, which includes the relationships between individuals (being-with) and within community (being-in-common); the political imperative of Nancy’s community arising from the coexistence of being-with and being-in-common; and the practical application of this philosophy through writing and artmaking as the interruption of community and myth.

**Being Singular Plural**

*Being singular plural* is not simply the multiplicity of particular things, but encompasses three major ideas. First, there is always a plurality of singularities coexposing.\(^1\) Singularity encompasses both thing and human, and is not a fixed point of identity. Marchart (2007) explains that while singularities do not occupy a fixed space or time, they come about through and by the act of sharing, the movement of relationship. Because singularities only exist in relation to other singularities, there is always by necessity more than one singularity. Therefore being is always being-*with*.

An implication of this coexposition is that *identity* is not fixed, nor is it distinct. Rather it is a process of *identification* that has “always already taken place, [is] always already gone, or always already still to come. And [it is] in common, shared by all, between all, through one another” (Nancy, 2000, p. 149). Moreover, singularities are “both entangled with and different from other singularities” (Morin, 2012, p. 37). This is the second element of being singular plural: singularities have their “identity” in the double movement of entanglement and disentanglement, or shared difference.

The last point is that singularity is always itself a plurality of singular “events” and irreducible to a “fixed list of properties” (Morin, 2012, p. 37). Identity, being, and

\(^1\)In an interview with Nancy, Jacques Derrida describes singularities not as “the individuality of a thing that would be identical to itself” but as that which dislocates or divides itself in the very act of “gathering itself together to answer to the other, whose call somehow precedes its own identification with itself, for this call can only answer, have already answered, even if I think I am answering no” (Derrida & Nancy, 1991, pp. 100-101).
relationship are bound up with one another, coexposed, and not fixed despite originary unifying events, identities, or the “in-common.” Being singular plural then has to do with the relationship on the individual level between singularities, the relationship between individuals and community, and the identity of individuals and community through acts of sharing.

**Inoperative Community**

Nancy discusses the issue of community most directly in *The inoperative community* (Nancy, 1991). For Nancy, community is not composed of or defined by a communion of subjects, but is an un-worked or inoperable community. The inoperable community “assumes the impossibility of its own immanence, the impossibility of a communitarian being in the form of a subject” (Nancy, 1991, p. 15) and instead is founded on the sharing of difference. Community is “what is given and what happens to ‘singular beings,’ the exhibiting or presenting of their singularity, which is to say, the copresenting of their finitude as the very basis or condition of their commonality” (Van den Abbeele, 1991, p. xiv).

Nancy critically deconstructs the concept of community through a reaffirmation of the Marxist concern for social justice and by reworking Heidegger’s *Dasein* (being-in-the-world) with the concept of *being-with* and asserting community as “the original situation of all human existence” (Elliott, 2010, p. 28). Nancy’s work does not simply redefine community (Devisch, 2013) but rethinks the relation between being, thinking, and community and examines relations between subject, identity, truth, and the constitutions of experience (Foucault in May, 1997, p. 394) in an effort to combat totalitarianism, or what Nancy calls *immanentism* – the total domination of an idea, concept, or system. Nancy’s concept of community avoids making an object of community as well as avoiding both myth (establishing a community to come or a lost community, the grand narrative of community) and nihilism (the erasure of community). In other words, for Nancy, community works against fixed concepts of community in favor of an articulation of community as a series of contingent singularities.

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15See Domanov, 2008 for overview.
who make themselves and their community through the process of experiencing difference. While he does not develop a definition of community,\textsuperscript{16} Nancy offers a variety of concepts including finitude, sharing, compearance, singularity, interruption, and unworked in order to imagine the possibilities, or what Domanov (2008) calls presentations, of community.

**Singularities in relationship:** Being-with and being-in-common. **Being-with** is a central idea throughout Nancy’s work (Nancy, 2000).\textsuperscript{17} In being-with, community forms the basis of being where singularities copresent, or share, their finitude. Finitude is a property of subjectivity that is the “mutual presentation of the common absence of common substance” (Nancy, Ronell, & Schirmacher, 2001, p. 155). Finitude is hence understood as difference, which occurs on the edge between me and the other, the place where singularities touch\textsuperscript{18} and are “infinitely exposed to the otherness of our own ‘being’” (Nancy, 1993a, p. 155). Singularities subsequently compear, or appear together, making the separation of singularities impossible despite their difference.

While **being-in-common** and **being-with** are used interchangeably in much of Nancy’s work, these are most clearly delineated in *The sense of the world* (Nancy, 1997). As previously discussed, **being-with** has to do with the relationship between singularities and what Morin (2012) describes as “the face to face of the one with the other” (p. 103). As such, being-with is aligned with love and the expression of truth (the sharing of finitude, or the presentation of a particular experience of difference). On the other hand, in its pure sense **being-in-common** has to do with sense formed across the anonymous many, beyond the individual. Consequently, being-in-common is the place of the political. The political, for Nancy, is the place of being-together among singularities. This

\textsuperscript{16}Nancy’s thinking arises from multiplicity and fragmentation (James, 2006, p. 2) and produces a series of singular instances rather than a system of thought. In the same way, rather than developing a definition of community, Nancy offers a series of singular instances, encouraging others to do the same. The move towards multiplicity informs the rhythm and organization of this dissertation.

\textsuperscript{17}**Being-with** is not a thing itself, and cannot be thought on the model of the Subject: “To exist does not mean simply ‘to be.’…To exist, therefore, is to hold one’s ‘selfness’ as an ‘otherness,’ and in such a way that no essence, no subject, no place can present this otherness in itself – either as the proper selfness of an other, or an ‘Other,’ or a common being (life or substance). The otherness of existence happens only as ‘being-together’” (Nancy, 1993a, pp. 154-5, trans. mod. in Morin, 2012, p. 30).

\textsuperscript{18}As Domanov (2006) states, “the community of sharing is that of singularities touching one another but with these singularities constituted by sharing itself” (p. 113).
distinction becomes important in the reconsideration of political action and the realization of the interrupted community.

**The singular community interrupted.** Community is not a single thing. In fact community as an object is what Nancy is working against in the *singular community*. The singular community is not defined by its commonalities, but compaers among singularities “in the face of withdrawal of their common being” (Nancy, 1993b, p. 68). This rejection of individuals composing a unified community demands rethinking relationships as Marchart (2007) considers:

If they do not relate to the whole of community (to the communion as the One), but rather to the very withdrawal of community as a whole, then one is forced to approach the questions of relation from the angle of division, and connection from the angle of disconnection, of community from the angle of its retreat, and of communion from the angle of its disruption. (p. 74)

The singular community then is not one of unity or of communion, but one of difference.

The withdrawal of community takes place in the interruption of a community understood as lost,\(^\text{19}\) based on collective action, rooted in the logic of the same, and/or perceived as having a homogenous and fixed identity. It is a community without community, which “is always coming, endlessly, at the heart of every collectivity” (Nancy, 1991, p. 71). The impossibility of the singular community is the site of criticism for some scholars. These criticisms revolve around Nancy’s failure to address difference holistically (May, 1997), to clearly develop an unambiguous community (Domanov, 2008), and to offer a praxis of resistance to dominating conceptions of community (Elliott, 2009 & 2011). Moreover, if Nancy is concerned with rethinking politics and the political, then Elliot’s (2009) concern and admonition that “any contemporary theory of

\(^{19}\text{The lost…community can be exemplified in all kinds of ways, by all kinds of paradigms: the natural family, the Athenian city, the Roman Republic, the first Christian community, corporations, communes, or brotherhoods—always it is a matter of a lost age in which community was woven of tight, harmonious, and infrangible bonds and in which above all it played back to itself, through its institutions, its rituals, and its symbols, the representation, indeed the living offering, of its own immanent unity, intimacy, and autonomy” (Nancy, 1991, p. 9, emphasis added).}
community that wishes to aid social justice must therefore give a credible and positive account of concrete means and sites of democratic resistance” (p. 901) is well founded.

However, Nancy develops a method for unworking community in the interruption of myth. Myth is the foundational narrative around which a community is organized and provides the basis of commonality, the in-common of being-in-common. The interruption of myth affirms the multiplicity of singularities, making it possible to derive a being that builds a differentiated social body. The praxis of the interruption of community is the practice of writing that Nancy calls literature. Literature affirms the “singular plurality of beings” (James, 2006, p. 200) in which beings simultaneously share the in-common and are different in their experiences. This is done through articulating what happens on the limits, the finitude shared between singularities, or shared difference.20 Presenting these experiences can only happen “if, by itself and for itself, the work does nothing other than trace and retrace this limit” (Nancy, 1991, p. 73). Nancy is quick to interrupt his commission, warning that this work “cannot be dictated” or be an object of “a morality or of a politics of community” (Nancy, 1991, p. 73).

Community Arts and the Political Imperative of Nancy’s Community Theory

The ontology of being singular plural and its reconceptualization of community necessitate a reworking of politics and the political. Nancy defines politics as “the site where what it means to be in common is open to definition” (Nancy, 1991, p. x), where being in common is at stake, and identity can be read through this definition. However, it is the political consequence of this ontology, that “to be is necessarily to be with, to be exposed to, to compose the plurality and sharing of the world” (Morin, 2012, p. 96), which is of most concern. How does such an ontology tell us how to orient our actions, and how do we think about political action as community arts practitioners?

Politics has to do with the distinction between being-with and being-in-common, which Nancy articulates in “Politics I” and “Politics II” in Sense of the world (Nancy, 1997). Being-with is associated with love and the expression of truth while being-in-

20“Where different pieces touch each other without fusing together, where they slide, pivot, or tumble over one another, one at the limit of the other without the mutual play – which always remains, at the same time, a play between them – ever forming into the substance or the higher power of a Whole” (Nancy, 1991, p. 76).
common has to do with the political and works on the side of sense. These form two limits, which never exist in their pure form; they always co-imply. “Sense needs to be punctuated by truth in order to be sense (or else it dissolves into pure, meaningless circulation) and truth needs to be exposed as sense for it to be true (or else it collapses into immanent punctuality)” (Morin, 2012, p. 103). For example, scholarship on women in the Somali diaspora offers a cohesive presentation of shifting gender roles (the political working on the side of sense). However, this portrayal needs to be punctuated with the narratives of women’s specific experiences of the diaspora (love and the expression of truth) in order for either to have meaning or sense. In the same way, both relationship and political action must be considered in PAR and Community Arts in order to address community issues. Therefore sense and truth, politics and love are always becoming, pushing love/truth into the social and political realm.

Nancy goes on to explore the connection between sense and politics in *The truth of democracy* (Nancy, 2010) advocating for a rethinking of democracy as that which opens up the very experience of being in common rather than a particular political regime. It is towards a democracy that is a genuine space of a ‘we’ (or being-with) characterized by infinite opening, the creation of sense, and being-in-common that community works. Democracy is thus the responsibility before and for existence and the “praxis that keeps open and engages the space of our exposition” (Morin, 2012, p. 113).

This study does not look specifically at the deconstruction of democracy; however, what is important to take away from Nancy’s discussion of the political is the political imperative of his philosophy: “To create a world” in which “there is room for everyone: but a genuine place, one in which things can genuinely take place, where this is place for being there” (Nancy, 2007, p. 42) because

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21Love is, indeed, qualified as the genuine space of a ‘we’...a shared faith in the “story of the other” and a shared grasp of the “potential of the other,” in such a way that love is always a singular with” (Nancy, 2008, p. 13).

22Sense is decided in the sphere of the in-common, as “multiple bursts of existence. Politics only gives the affirmations of non-equivalent sense their space and possibility” (Morin, 2012, p. 119). It does not prefigure the good, but allows all to develop their own, incommensurable good(s).
we are in-common, we are world-forming, yet we must be or become what we are. What is or what we are, then is given not as a bare fact but as an exigency that is at once ethical (we are responsive to existence, and hence responsible before and for existence) and political (existing as a praxis, a comportment).

(Morin, 2012, p. 96)

This imperative is tied into Nancy’s (2007) conception of justice, which happens “in the singular-plural expositions of existence and remains an inappropriable that is shared out by each but irreducible to a particular or a whole” (p. 23). In other words, working towards justice for Nancy is working against fixed identities, or totalizing conceptions of community and the world. This imperative is the impossible task of what Nancy (1991) calls interruption.

**The Impossible Task of Interruption: Writing, Storytelling, and Artmaking**

This theory of community and being “requires and permits the ordinary to be presented not as extraordinary but in the extraordinary. It is a matter of that which makes an event and makes it come about from the common” (Nancy & Strong, 1992, p. 386). The presentation of community for Nancy comes about in writing. While Nancy focuses on literary communism as a response to myth and other forms of totalitarianism, I suggest that artmaking, particularly community arts, offers another productive site of resistance and intervention in an effort to interrupt fixed perceptions of community.

**Literary communism and the interruption of myth.** Literary communism is the form of literature, which Nancy proposes as a response to his philosophy. Morin (2012) describes literary communism as a process of undoing a community –rather than producing it–by bringing us to the edges, exposing “us to each other and ourselves. On these edges, where we exist, where we are turned outside instead of toward center, there is a passion, a communication or a propagation of our being-in-common” (p. 92). This communication is “writing so as to expose the limit upon which we are exposed” (Nancy, 1991, p. 76), and in so does not “present the community but exhaust[s itself] in trying to indicate the sharing” (Morin, 2012, p. 85). Literary communism is the articulation of a shared sense (being-in-common). It does not constitute knowledge nor gives mastery over
being-in-common. The inscription of meaning through the sharing out, or offering up of work, must be “presented, proposed, and abandoned on the common limit” (Nancy, 1991, p. 73). Abandonment cannot occur if it creates a grand narrative, or myth, but only if “by itself and for itself, the work does nothing other than trace and retrace this limit: in other words, only if it does nothing other than inscribe singularity/community, or inscribe itself as singular/common, as infinitely singular/common” (Nancy, 1991, p. 73). In other words only if it interrupts myth.23

**Telling of and listening to stories: Writing as interruption.** The critical deconstruction that typifies literary communism is understood as interruption. Interruption is an important concept for Nancy and has to do with the interruption of myth and the interruption of community practiced through the telling of and listening to stories.

We know the scene: there is a gathering, and someone is telling a story…we call them brothers and sisters because they are gathered together and because they are listening to the same story…They were not assembled like this before the story; the recitation has gathered them together. Before, they were dispersed (at least this is what the story tells us at times), shoulder to shoulder, working with and confronting one another without recognizing one another. But one day, one of them stood still, or perhaps he turned up…and he started the narrative that brought together the others…The story often seems confused; it is not always coherent; it speaks of strange powers and numerous metamorphoses; it is also cruel, savage, and pitiless, but at times it also provokes laughter. It names things unknown, beings never seen. But those who have gathered together understand everything, in listening they understand themselves and the world, and they understand why it was necessary for them to come together, and why it was necessary that this be recounted to them. (Nancy, 1991, pp. 43-44)

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23This political act has been described by Nancy and Nancian scholars as an intervention of ‘we’ (Van de Abbeele, 1991), a critical resistance (Hoy, 2004), radical passivity (Wall, 1999), and interruption (Nancy, 1991).
There are several important aspects of storytelling seen here. First, storytelling is connected to myth, which for Nancy is the foundational narrative around which a community is organized. Myths arise for and from a community. They are self-communicating (it does not communicate a knowledge that can be verified from elsewhere), communicating the common. While myths bring people together, there is danger in myth; the invention of myth is bound up with the use of its power to found and determine community. However, as soon as a myth is recognized as such, interruption of myth occurs. The interruption of myth is also necessarily the interruption of community, because myth belongs to and constitutes community.

Second, the interruption of myth indicates that instead of turning inward towards the center, myth forms the basis of communication towards the outside. “The singular being appears to other singular beings; it is communicated to them in the singular…the interrupted community does not flee from itself” (Nancy, 1991, 61). As indicated in the passage above, the invention of myth has to do with being-with, but with awareness of its construction comes a shift towards being-in-common (or being-together) and the political realm. Interruption of myth is then tied up with politics, and storytelling becomes a recounting of an unfinished story. This leads to my third point: the relationship between community, identity, and stories offers an alternative way to understand storytelling and artmaking as a form of political action in DSVU.

Singular beings understand themselves through the stories they tell (documented by many narrative inquirers) and create a community through the telling, listening and sharing of stories. However, the danger remains of fixing community and identity. Hence, interruption becomes a key concept working against totalization. In the same sense, stereotypes can be seen as myths of identity. The challenge then is to write so as to do nothing but affirm and inscribe the singular community (Nancy, 1991, p. 73) while trying not to, as Morin (2012) puts it, “present the community” (p. 85). Sharing stories is an act of undoing by bringing us to the edges, exposing “us to each other and ourselves”

\[24\] It recounts it interrupted and it essentially interrupts its own recitation. The text interrupts itself at the point where it shares itself...In a sense, it is the sharing of myth. It is community exchanging and distributing its myth” (Nancy, 1991, p. 65).
Morin, 2012, p. 92). Interruption thus forms the basis of this research. It informs the research questions and guides the language used to describe what is happening in and with the stories of the exhibit, an important consideration for Jackson and Mazzei (2012) who assert that transparency in the way that theory informs the questions of analysis is vital in qualitative research.

**Writing and artmaking: in-common, between and intervention.** The practice of writing can also be understood as artmaking. Art is multiple and expansive, and for Nancy, “retains something of the in-common, something that perhaps it alone does” (Nancy & Strong, 1992, p. 387). Artmaking is an articulation of exposure to the limits, and to engage in artmaking that articulates these experiences is a political act. “It is to attend to the voice of the community and to make it heard” (Fynsk, 1991, p. 28). Artmaking has the potential to “articulate a ‘common’ space that, while existing only by these articulations, remains nevertheless the articulation of a ‘between’ that joins them and defines them (even as they define it)” (Nancy, 1991, p. xxiv). It also can work to share the voices of the community in politically effective language, acting “not as an instrument or means for the communication of some signified content, but rather as a kind of intervention [by which the essence] itself is brought into play” (Fynsk, 1991, p. 28). Artmaking offers another site in which the need to ‘write’ despite the threat of signification works to intervene in an effort to transform relations, community, and society.

*DSVU* presents an example of such an effort to intervene. Considering *DSVU* within Nancy’s ontology removes criteria such as a common goal or culture as the defining feature of community and looks instead to the relationships and political action of artmaking/storytelling as interruptions of fixed preconceptions of community. Viewing identity and community as coexposed keeps both in play, eliminates the presupposition of a “common being,” and instead emphasizes the fluid co-implication of being-with and being-in-common. Moreover, being singular plural offers a different consideration of the emerging literature on diasporic identity in Somali Studies, which addresses the diversity

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25 The connection between artmaking and storytelling is further established in Chapter 3.
of the diaspora through distinct identity categories. These categories create a sense of
diversity, the in-common. *DSVU* offers specific experiences of the diaspora, and the ways
it confirms or challenges academic findings, that punctuate this sense with truth.

Looking at the connection between being, relation, and stories in an effort to put
forth a way of being offers a different perspective of community and community arts that
focuses on the between. This is achieved by

exposing it in presenting or representing it, to make the (re)presentation itself, in
turn, the site and the focus of an exposition; so that thought itself might risk itself
and abandon itself to community, and community to thought…what is called into
play here…is exposing ourselves to the partition and sharing of the “in,” to this
distribution of “sense” that first withdraws being from sense, and sense from
being – or else, does not identify one with the other, and each as such, except
through the in of the “common” through a “with” of sense that properly
disappropriates it. (Nancy, 2007, p. 10)

Moreover, the offering of multiple experiences of difference (for example coming up
against cultural expectations and the renegotiation of what it means to be a Somali
woman in the diaspora) through an exhibition of images and stories offers the
representation of the women as a site of exposition working against the threat of
signification. Nancy’s theory positions stories, storytelling, and artmaking as interruption,
punctuating the portrayal of diaspora Somalis in the following review of literature as well
as the perceptions of young Somali women held by other Somalis in form of expectations
and by non-Somalis in the form of stereotypes, and presents an alternative view of the
action of community arts including initiatives in the Somali diaspora dealing with
community education and identity negotiation.

**Somali Studies: Negotiating Identity in the Diaspora**

Somali Studies encompasses research concerning Somalis and Somalia across
disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, linguistics, and history. Somali identity in
the diaspora is an area of particular interest. Presenting the academic scholarship
exploring diasporic identity offers a different perspective than the personal narratives
shared in DSVU. While this necessarily privileges published accounts that have been seen to have greater authority, it is a conscious choice to establish one background against which this project is working.

Academic scholarship within ethnography and specifically in Somali Studies has developed broad identity categories such as migration history, ethnicity, gender, and religious practice and identification. This typology is at a disjuncture with the women participating in DSVU who describe their experiences in terms of culture and religion, cultural expectations, crossing the line and discovering boundaries, relationships and family, and coming of age among others. These categories, as defined by the women of the project, exemplify intersectionality and the negotiation of facets of understanding identity active in Somali Studies. In addition, I include studies from across the diaspora in this review rather than focusing on Columbus-specific studies. The women with whom I work have resided and are currently living in locations across the diaspora, and as such it is impossible to isolate one city within a transnational diaspora.

A number of dissertations and theses present backgrounds and reviews of literature about Somalis in Columbus (Carlson, 2004; Good, 1999; Moore, 2007; Reed, 2003; Tyree, 2010 for example), yet there appears to be little reflexivity or comparison between scholarship and lived experiences of the diaspora to complicate the findings. Subsequently, I decided to represent the literature review following the categorizations common to academic studies rather than those developed by participants in order to complicate the typologies in my analysis, and offer a sense of the in-common established within scholarship. This organization draws from Abu-Lughod’s (2008/1993) analytic frame, which categorizes women’s narratives into broad social phenomenon typical of ethnographic studies and then juxtaposes within this typology the lived experiences, stories, and descriptions that challenge, extend, and contest them. It is also a means of following Nancy (2000) to explore being singular plural – the relationship between identity and the foundational narratives (in this case academic and cultural) that articulate, share, and define individuals and communities. Therefore, the following overview serves two purposes: 1) to establish identity as a concept informed by diaspora
studies in Somali Studies, and 2) to establish a background against which this project is working by discussing broad identity categories in academic discourse.

Identity and Diaspora Studies in Relationship to DSVU

Identity is understood within a variety of frameworks in Somali Studies, including globalization, transnationalism, and diaspora. While globalization and transnationalism offer important contributions to scholarship, it is within diaspora studies that this study situates its discussion of Somali identity. In Somali Studies, globalization privileges economic processes, and is attuned to the increase in transportation technologies, communication in information technologies, and international flows of trade, capital, information, and services.\(^{26}\) Transnationalism alternatively offers a way of thinking about social ties and networks not defined by a state (Sorensen, 2007). While transnationalism often focuses its analysis on issues of identity, it looks primarily to the relationships between people and places beyond nation-state boundaries.\(^{27}\) Diaspora studies emphasize identity and history, particularly the events and environments tied to the movement of people. A brief overview of the historical context of the Somali diaspora is found in Appendix A.

There are multiple scholarly definitions of diaspora from a range of research disciplines. Farah, Munchie, and Gundel (2007) for example describe diaspora as a “distinct community with an identity linking members to their geographical area of origin” (p. xiii), while for Kayne and Leedy (2013) it is more about maintaining connectedness while negotiating social, economic, and political insertion. Kleist (2008) offers a forward looking definition, in which diaspora is not simply a migrant group defined by dispersion but a “potential community which can be identified with or mobilized in the name of a shared origin” (p. 309).\(^{28}\) In this study, identity is primarily

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\(^{26}\) Examples of studies utilizing globalization include Horst’s (2013) and Lindley’s (2010) work on remittance practices and Shire’s (2004) identification of telecommunication technologies, air travel, and money transfer companies as the primary linkages in the Somali diaspora.

\(^{27}\) Abdi’s (2011) study of remittance as well as the multiple considerations of citizenship (Dickson, 2011; Leitner, 2004; Lithman, 2010) offer examples of transnational Somali studies.

\(^{28}\) The idea of a potential community is an important consideration for art educators, as Illeris (2013) has acknowledged in her work with Nancy’s community theory and art education. It is significant if only to acknowledge that community is not inherently inevitable or good (as Nancy has thoroughly discussed).
discussed following Griffiths (2002) who brings together aspects of globalization and transnationalism in order to consider diaspora as an organizing concept, which includes attachments to home, experiences and forms of migration and resettlement, and the processes of identity formation in receiving countries.

Griffiths (2002) puts forth a theory about cultural identity among Somalis in London, which deals with imagined identities, and a concept of diaspora identity that brings together transnationalism with Hall’s (1996, 2000) cultural identity. Rather than rooted in a shared culture, ancestry, historical experiences, and cultural codes, cultural identity for Hall (2000) is defined simultaneously by the common history and the rupture and discontinuities that constitute its uniqueness. Hall (1996) also describes cultural identity as a process of articulation of identity based on the play of differences, the constant marking of boundaries and frontiers, and is temporary and provisional thus addressing positionality. Though diaspora runs the risk of over-emphasizing culture and consciousness thusly eliminating analysis of social inequality and exclusion, it provides a lens for understanding refugee identity and experience that accounts for the competing cultures and worldviews that interact and inform the resettlement and acculturation processes. Diasporic identity in this study follows Griffiths (2002), Hall (1996; 2000), and Langellier (2010) to view identity of a process of negotiation of defining and redefining who we are, and often who we are not, to ourselves and others, through imagined and narrated identities, cultural divisions, and renewal in the context of diaspora. Similar to Nancy’s definition, diasporic cultural identity is a matter of coexposition, entanglement and disentanglement.

**Diversity in the Diaspora**

Somalis are often considered a homogenous people (Griffiths, 2002; Lewis, 1988; Putnam & Noor, 1993) because they share the same language and practice the same religion (Fangen, 2007). However, as Leitner (2004) asserts, migrants (including Somalis) inhabit “multiple intersecting subject positions and identities” (p. 48); have

Moreover, within diaspora studies there is a tendency to assume community is present simply because of shared origin. While this is often the case, it is important to recognize the ways in which community actually forms and functions and the possibilities of doing so.
migrated under varying circumstances as refugees, documented, or undocumented workers; and stay in their countries of residence for different lengths of time. Horst (2007a&b) points out there are all types of people in the Somali diaspora including students working multiple jobs, single mothers, low-income residents, middle class social workers and teachers, non-English speaking factory workers, elite professionals, and elderly Somalis with no relatives. They come from cities, towns, and countryside, as well as from all classes and all education levels (Berns-McGown, 2007, p. 235). They come from all regions of Somalia where there “are significant differences in culture and even language between the Northern pastoralists and the Southerners…and between the histories that have accompanied each tradition” (Berns-McGown, 1999, p. 21). There is a growing body of literature in Somali studies examining individual and comparative cases dealing with issues of diversity in the diaspora including migration history, ethnicity, gender, and religious practice and identification that works within and against the singular conception of the Somali community perpetuated within the general American population.

The diversity of experiences within the diaspora and the common conception of a singular community provide the underlying assumptions of my work with DSVU. Moreover, the diversity of a unified Somali community puts Nancy’s being singular plural to work and conceptualizes community as interrupted by plurality of events and the processes of identification and singularization. These processes are reflected in the ways that Somalis are creatively negotiating and redefining what it means to be Somali in the diaspora (Kroner, 2002) and are informed by Somalis’ experiences in the diaspora, the culture from which they came (its memory, imagined and narrated), the culture into which they settle, and the governmental policy that shapes their resettlement (Boyle & Ali, 2010; Griffiths, 2002).

Migration history: Order of arrival. The Somali diaspora is most often organized into three time periods, often referred to as waves: the first occurring prior to 1980, the second beginning in the 1980s lasting into the early years of the Somali Civil War (1991-present), and the third following the fall of the Barre regime in 1991. While
waves provide a useful metaphor, Santa Ana (2002) urges migration studies to decouple the movement of people from metaphors tied to unstoppable natural forces that produce and sustain negative public perceptions and instead develop metaphors that contest oppressive public discourse concerning migrant communities. Because the Somali diaspora is explicitly connected to the persecution and violence leading up to and initiated by the start of the Civil War in 1991, a different organizing metaphor is more appropriate. As such, I will utilize Fangen’s (2007) organization of refugee movements by order of arrival.

Order of arrival affects and is informed by the experiences of migration including the route taken (refugee camp, family reunification, secondary or chain migration, political asylum, or voluntary migrants looking for work or education), immigration policies, and issues of identity (gender, ethnicity, class, etc.). Although migration histories are recorded primarily according to individual cities or countries, there are a number of general characteristics cutting across geographies including diversity of identity, perception, and acceptance (Fangen, 2007). The remainder of this section explores the broad characteristics in relation to the order of arrival, and then focuses specifically on the migration histories typical of Somalis in Columbus, Ohio.

**The earliest migrants.** Few Somalis resided in the West prior to 1960 and before refugee movements began in the 1980s, Somalis that left Somalia were primarily workers and students. Those that resided in the United Kingdom (UK) for instance were there

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29Secondary migration occurs when refugees move from the location that they were initially resettled. If occurring within eight months of resettlement, federal funding will follow; if occurring after the first eight months, no funding is provided to agencies in the location of secondary migration. A chain migration is a series of migrations within a family, usually beginning with one family member who sends money (remittances) to bring other family members to a new location. Secondary and chain migration often result in migration fields, areas with a large cluster of one group of people.  

because of the colonial link (Griffiths, 2002). Somali seamen and steel workers also resided in the US from the 1920s on (Putnam & Noor, 1993). However, by 1960, a first major group of immigrants started to coalesce as students began to study abroad in cities in Canada, the UK, and the US (Berns-McGown, 1999; Griffith, 2002; Putnam & Noor, 1993), propelled not only by increased movements of African students, but also immigration reform such as the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act in the US and general political and socioeconomic turmoil in African nations (Goza, 2007). In addition to students, a distinct community of Somali males, many of whom owned land at home in northern Somalia, and wives who joined them abroad beginning in 1967, settled in London (Griffith, 2002) and many young men moved to Gulf nations such as the United Arab Emirates to work (Kusow, 2007).

**Early arrivals.** A second movement began in the 1980s as a small number of asylum seekers joined those leaving as “cosmopolitan students” (Griffith, 2002), to work in the Gulf nations, and through family reunification. Violence and persecution increased in the late 1980s in Somalia, and many (particularly the elite) began to leave forming what Fangen (2007) describes as *early arrivals*. The first asylum applications for Somalis were granted in 1988 in UK (Griffith, 2002), marking the beginning of a rise in refugees, war victims, and young single women and children. The US also saw a rise in Somali migration initiated by political oppression in the late 1980s, primarily to New York City, Washington D.C., Boston, Los Angeles, San Diego, Atlanta, and Detroit. In Canada, many of these first arrivals settled in Dixon, high-rises in Toronto, which Kusow (2006) describes as the first significant destination of the diaspora. Here, characteristics of the Somali diaspora – including the reproduction of clan identity, transformed gender relations, pronounced devotion to Islam, and continued political engagement with Somalia – first became apparent, alongside challenges.

**Late arrivals.** A third movement, which Fangen (2007) describes as *late arrivals*, followed the fall of the Barre regime and subsequent start of the Civil War in 1991. While northern Somalis comprised earlier movements, more Somalis began to arrive

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31 Kapteijns and Arman (2004) remark that every family who could afford it sent youth abroad to school in the years leading up to the Civil War.
from the south (Lindley, 2009). Families of all kinds and sizes took many escape routes depending on asylum policies and clan membership (Kroner, 2002). For example, Lindley (2009) describes different migration routes taken to the UK. Some came directly, some after first living in refugee camps in Kenya and Ethiopia or cities in other countries. Others came by smuggling and “many made circuitous journeys in search of safety and rights” (Lindley, 2009, p. 41). Restrictive asylum policy in the UK made it difficult to obtain legal status without false documents and social networks and resulted in many failed asylum seekers who were often homeless or dependent on NGOs. Others obtained citizenship or subsidiary protection. There were also those who came under family reunification or were earlier arrivals with EU citizenship in other nations that migrated to the UK in search of employment opportunities and a better life (Van Liempt, 2011). Federal funding in the US, for example, provided much needed services to official resettlement cities. However, the high cost of living and safety issues often drive refugees to seek affordable and safe housing, job opportunities, better education and social services, and an established Somali community elsewhere. As a result, Somalis have settled in small cities such as Columbus, Ohio and Lewiston, Maine as well as towns in proximity to original destination cities. These secondary migrations have transformed the Somali diaspora record in the US.

The Somali community in Columbus. Columbus, Ohio is home to one of the largest populations of Somali-born residents in the US, second only to Minneapolis. There are an estimated 35,000 Somalis currently living in Columbus, though the actual size is unknown and debated with numbers ranging from 15,000 to 75,000 (CRP, 2009; Moore & Joseph, 2011; Roble & Rutledge, 2008; SCAO, 2005; Waters, 2012). As Moore and Joseph (2011) stress, historically Columbus has been home to immigrant communities. Sizable communities of immigrants from Latin America, the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia, and the former Soviet Union during the last quarter of the 20th century have made it one of the US’s new gateway cities (Waters, 2012).

Though Somalis began arriving in 1994, the city of Columbus, including its citizens and service providers, was unprepared to deal with such large numbers of Somali newcomers. While many East Africans resettled in Columbus with official refugee status, most Somalis accepted as political refugees were initially resettled in other cities. Secondary and chain migrations to Columbus began en mass in the early 2000s as Somalis learned of affordable and safe housing, jobs, and better living conditions and joined the small number of pre-war Somali migrants and family members. For example, while a group of 160 Somali Bantu were resettled in Columbus in 2004-2005, the influx of secondary migrants in the year following more than doubled the number of Bantu (CRP, 2005). Although some secondary migrants resided with relatives already settled in Columbus, others occupied the city’s homeless shelters, which not only strained their capacity to serve local needs, but were also unable to provide the needed transportation, translation, and employment services.

Many nonprofit organizations have formed and offer vital services such as ESL education, job training, and case management (CRP, 2005; Roble & Rutledge, 2008). Yet common anti-Somali ideologies and misperceptions persist regarding Somali religious and cultural practices. This is exacerbated by misinformation regarding immigration and resettlement policy (especially relevant to housing and health care), representation in local media, and portrayals of Somalis in popular culture. Upon arrival, Somalis were faced with racism and Islamophobia while simultaneously learning to speak a new language and function in a new social system. This was compounded by the stark circumstance for many who were also dealing with the trauma of war and displacement (Moore & Joseph, 2011; Roble & Rutledge, 2008; Waters, 2012). Incidents of work-place discrimination (Waters, 2012) and more extreme examples such as the shooting of Nasir Abbi by Columbus police in 2005 exemplify the lack of knowledge about Somali culture and language among non-Somalis and the many challenges facing newcomers.

33For example, blockbuster films such as Black Hawk Down (Scott, Bowden, & Nolan, 2001) and Captain Phillips (Greengrass, Ray, Phillips, & Talty, 2013) as well as Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s (2007) public denouncement of Islam.

34For more about the case of Nasir Abbi, see Roble and Rutledge (2008).
Despite the homogenous and frequent negative portrayal of Somalia, Somalis, and Somali organizations in local media outlets such as the *Columbus Dispatch* (Waters, 2012), there exists a range of diversity among Somalis residing in Columbus. For example, there are many clans represented in Columbus, including a large group of the ethnic minority of Bantu. In addition, many have earned graduate and professional degrees from Somalia, Italy, China, and the United States. Furthermore, many held professional positions in Somalia before migrating, such as director of the National Museum, ambassador to Djibouti, and a variety of medical professionals. Moreover, although it is common knowledge that Somalis are 99.9% Muslim, Islam is not – and has not been – practiced or interpreted identically. Many did not start seriously reading the Qur’an until after leaving Somalia, and some women began covering as a result of this personal study. Despite the variety of backgrounds and experiences, resettlement policies and the general ignorance about Somali culture in central Ohio altered the significance of the diversity by compelling a renegotiation and redefinition of identity and culture particularly among younger Somalis as a reaction to negative assumptions about their communities.

Roble and Rutledge (2008) describe the Columbus community as still preparing to participate. *Participation*, rather than assimilation,³⁵ is used to describe the Somali experience of resettlement, and indicates that when Somalis begin to participate in the host community, they actively choose which aspects of the dominant culture to engage with and which elements of Somali culture to retain. It also means that needed services are available, and that Somalis are actively participating in politics, education, and the local economy. There are over 350 Somali-owned businesses in Columbus, including

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³⁵There are many theories of resettlement, including assimilation, acculturation, and participation. Kapteijns and Arman (2004) state, “Instead of being told to disappear in the American melting pot through complete assimilation, immigrants are now expected to achieve “acculturation,” defined as “a developmental process towards adaptation and gaining competence within more than one cultural setting.” Unlike assimilation, which is a one-way process by which the inferior immigrant culture should give way to the superior host culture, acculturation is assumed to affect both parties and be reciprocal” (p. 23). There has been a shift in migration and diaspora studies from one-way assimilation to reciprocal change under acculturation. Participation however, addresses the agency of the resettled, actively choosing what elements to retain and which to adopt. While participation may describe more accurately the Somali experience, assimilation remains embedded in American consciousness, causing tension between expectation and reality when it comes to the resettlement experience.
three Somali malls and numerous restaurants, markets, money exchanges, and clothing stores, forming a substantial, transnational trade network that makes it possible to exist in an insular Somali community. Somalis are beginning to participate in local politics; the Mayor of Columbus created a New American Initiative as part of the Community Relations Commission for the city, which includes African Outreach (CRC, 2013). A Somali man currently holds that office. In addition, initiatives such as cultural training for Columbus public school teachers (Moore & Joseph, 2011) and arts initiatives such as the Somali Documentary Project (SDP, n.d.) aim at educating the greater Columbus community about their new neighbors so that they can relate to Somali people on Somali terms (Roble & Rutledge, 2008). Yet despite these advances, most Somali people in Columbus are still preparing to participate in American life…This means that Somali people in Columbus are struggling to learn the language and adjust to the culture of central Ohio, while mainstream Americans are still trying to decide how to respond to their new Somali neighbors….There is little cultural dialogue on the community level…the Somali community is much more isolated and segregated in Columbus than it is in Minneapolis. Perhaps this separation will be overcome in time, but for the moment, it means that Americans [in central Ohio] remain more unfamiliar with their Somali neighbors than they should be. (Roble & Rutledge, 2008, pp. 95, 98-99)

There are a number of issues that are of particular concern within the Columbus community, including ethnicity (or the distinction between clan membership and defining what it means to be Somali), the role and visibility of women, and religious practice and identification.

**Ethnicity: Clan or Somali?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>It’s a pertinent question</th>
<th>Waa su’aal ee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What really is Somaliness?</td>
<td>Soomaalinimo maxay tahay?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is it a country?</td>
<td>Ma dal aa?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Or a people?</td>
<td>Ma dad aa?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May be our blood?</td>
<td>Ma dhiig aa?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Or the land?  

**Ma dhul aa?**

(Excerpt from Guudle, 2009)

Guudle’s (2009) poem, *What is Soomaalinimo? Somaliness?/Maxay Tahay Soomaalinimo?*, introduces the debate about ethnicity amongst Somalis in the diaspora and in Somali Studies. Somalia has long been described as an “ethnically homogenous state” (Griffiths, 2002, p. 28) with the exception of the Somali Bantus, and the few Arabs and residents (Putnam & Noor, 1993). Yet notions about clan, a term frequently used interchangeably with ethnicity in Somali Studies, and Somaliness, or that which constitutes Somali identity, are debated in scholarship as well as among Somalis across the diaspora.

Clan membership and structure (patrilineal social units) resides at the heart of Somali society and maintains a contested identity category among Somali Studies scholars. Informed by ancestry, clan shapes the structure of Somali society, migration patterns, diasporic identity, and at times what it means to be Somali. Clan determines the status and quality of life for Somalis, serves as a social security system, and unit of solidarity in times of warfare (McCloud, 2006), and social structure and control (Boyle & Ali, 2010). Moreover, clannism determines social stratification and cultural identities and enforces the social boundaries of Somaliness. Clan is an important aspect of Somali identity, history, and culture.

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36The Somali Bantu offer an interesting case for the way in which clan determines status (McCloud, 2006) and social stratification (Kusow, 2006). Somali Bantu is a conglomerate of minority groups descended from East African slaves and farming communities settled prior to Somali-speaking pastoralists. While Bantus often share language, culture and religious practices with the majority of Somalis, their racialized identity, distinct ancestry, and sedentary life as farmers make them a vulnerable target for marginalizing economic and social policies. During the Civil War, they fled to refugee camps, where they suffered abuse from other refugees. They developed a shared ethnic self-consciousness and leadership in order to apply for resettlement (Van Lehman & Eno, 2003). Some Somali Bantu with strong ties to ancestral lands in modern day Tanzania were resettled there (Eno & Eno, 2007) and 12,000 others were resettled in the US (the largest group of refugees from Africa to be resettled at one time) between 2003 and 2006 (Besteman, 2012). A group of 160 Somali Bantu were resettled in Columbus from 2004-2005, while a large influx of secondary Bantu migrants arrived in 2005 (CRP, 2005).

37There are a number of clan families. The nomadic clans of the north include Dir, Isaaq, Hawiye, and Daarood. In the south, farmers and herding clans include Digin and Raxanweyn as well as minorities such as the Somali Bantu (Putnam & Noor, 1993). Spellings vary among scholars.
However, clans as distinct ethnicities are disputed. Abdi Samatar (2010) offers the case of former BBC Somali Services employees who alleged racial and ethnic discrimination in hiring processes based on clan identity. British social anthropologist I. M. Lewis and geographer Abdi I. Samatar provided expert testimony representing two competing schools of thought concerning the role of clan in Somali Studies. Lewis argued for the centrality of clan to Somali identity and that Somalis are divided into ethnically distinct groups predisposed to the discrimination of nonmembers. Samatar disputed Lewis’s arguments, claiming that Lewis based his analysis on outdated, Eurocentric fieldwork. Samatar argued that Somali genealogical groups share the same ethnic and racial group, and that Somali identity is more complex than genealogy.

Nearly all of these scholars [such as Lewis] exaggerated Somali’s homogeneity by overlooking the existence of significant communities in the south of the country who have different histories and social organizations. Despite such variations, the vast majority of the people in the country share the same fundamental social, cultural and religious values that defined the nature of traditional Somali identity: Islam, Somali language, genealogy, oral and poetic literature, Xeer (customary law), and sharing material risks. Collectively, these traits bounded Somali identity. (Samatar, 2010, p. 55)

The British tribunal dismissed the case, supporting Samatar’s reading of clan as a “living and ongoing process resulting from multiple and interactive forces” (p. 43) rather than a distinct ethnicity or race. Moreover it established clan as only one aspect of Somali identity, albeit an important one, and that despite variations among clans and people there is a shared Somali culture and background.

Somaliness (a shared Somali culture and background), rather than clan, as an ethnic category has resulted in a number of studies focusing on Somali identity. One type of study includes those focusing on soomaalinimo, or a unified Somaliness. Though soomaalinimo is a concept that underpinned anticolonial nationalist movements across

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38One result of discrimination based on clan is equal distribution, a topic Eno and Eno (2009) address in their examination of the 4.5 factor, which grants the four major clan families equal political representation, while minorities only half.
the Somali territories (1943-1960), the first postcolonial civilian government of the Somali Youth League (1960-1969), and the state ideology of the Siad Barre regime (1969-1991) (Safferz, 2013); it continues to be debated in works such as The Invention of Somalia (Ahmed, 1995). For Al-Sharmani (2007), soomaalinimo is a “positive identity rooted in moral values, associated with being Somali” (p. 71) including peace, community, honesty, commitment to family including diasporic community, and democracy.

However, for many Somalis, their Somali identity is determined through clan and religion (Cassanelli, 1982; Omar, 2008), pastoral/nomadic traditions (Simons, 1995), language and “love of freedom and open spaces as celebrated in Somali poetry and folklore” (Putnam & Noor, 1993, p. 2) and the similar glorification of nomadism and subsequent demotion of other Somali traditions (Ahmed Samatar, 1995; Lewis, 1988 for example). For Griffiths (2002), the often historically conflicting traditions of Islam, pastoral nomadism, clanship, Somali nationalism, state socialism and free market ideologies, consideration of minority identities, and different interpretations of African identities and links with Arabs compose what it means to be Somali.

While certainly disputed, clan has continued to play an integral role in the diaspora. There are many examples of clan clustering, such as Lewiston, Maine where there are primarily Bantu, Darood, and Isaaq (Akiwumi & Estaville, 2009). Berns-McGown (1999) also found that Somali immigrants tend to resettle alongside clan, or family members. This was the case in Minnesota, where some Somalis hoped to “recreate the extensive networks that provided social and financial sustenance in Somalia” (Boyle & Ali, 2010, p. 200) and in Australia where Omar (2008) observed geographically concentrated Somali communities based on clan divisions “seeking socialization and assistance from their kinship network and … access [to] Islamic institutions” (p. 58). However, clan clustering is not always self-selected. In Ethiopian refugee camps, refugees are placed based on clan membership (Kroner, 2002). Moreover, Bjork’s (2007) ethnographic study of clan identity in Finland revealed that newcomers were directed to self-identify by clan, even if they did not know much about it.
Many scholars have found that clan identity is weakening with the development of transnational networks. Particularly within the younger generation, Somalis in the diaspora are selecting and deselecting elements of different cultures and identities, including African-American, Somali, and Muslim (Griffith, 2002; Omar, 2012). Furthermore, clan, as Omar (2012) found in his study of young Somali men in Australia, is perceived as the main factor in the Civil War and the inability to rebuild Somalia. Youth instead are “influenced by cultures and social systems of the societies in which they live, which diminish the importance and influence of clan connections in their perceptions” (p. 58). In many cases, this is African-American culture (Bjork, 2007; Omar, 2012; Fangen, 2007; Griffith, 2002). Despite the weakening of clan ties, Griffith (2002) found a “growing awareness of clan and its signification for identity and belonging as a result of the conflict at home” (p. 106)\textsuperscript{39} as well as its reanimation in diasporic communities particularly among younger Somalis.

As evident in the literature, Somaliness is disputed among diasporic community members, in addition to the role clan plays in migration and resettlement experiences and diasporic Somali identity. While Isotalo (2007) found that diaspora Somalis become “more Somali” in comparison to Somalis in Somalia with regard to gendered roles, social segregation, religious practices, dress, and other cultural traditions, the practice of being Somali has been conceptualized by some as a constructed narrative (Langellier, 2010). Moreover, Somaliness can be viewed as a myth, a foundational narrative for and of community (Nancy, 1991). Beyond the debate surrounding clan and Somaliness, the important point is the tension between the idea of and desire for a unified identity across diasporic communities and participation in a diverse, fluid identity. What it means to be Somali changes with generation, gender, migration history, religious practice, and is constantly subject to negotiation. Though changing, constructed, and negotiated through relationship to the host community as well as to Somalia and other diaspora communities, the definition of a Somali identity remains central to the conversation.

\textsuperscript{39}Griffith (2002) draws heavily from Lewis (1993, 1994 among others)
Gender transformations, changing roles and family structure. Gender within the Somali community has been a topic of study of many scholars, and changing gender roles, what Kusow (2007) and Predelli (2004) describe as gender transformations, play an important role in the diasporic experience. In Somalia, gender roles are clearly demarcated, less egalitarian, and less fluid than those in the West. Women generally dominate private and domestic domains, while men occupy public spheres. Griffiths (2002) points out that while efforts such as the Family Law 1975 in Somalia gave equal rights in divorce, property, and inheritance; in practice this law mostly affected educated and professional women in urban centers.

Within Somali communities in the West, where gender roles are less demarcated and more egalitarian, “social and gender schizophrenia” (Kusow, 2007) occurs with the contact of two different systems and dealing with settlement issues in the context of women’s rights and equality (Crosby, 2006). Women in particular have new educational and employment opportunities and begin to participate more in the economic sphere, all the while often trying to maintain traditional cultural and social roles (Crosby, 2006; Kusow, 2007). For example, many Somali women are the primary recipients of social assistance, garnering more economic power in their family and community, and thusly affecting men’s role in the family and society as the location of women’s work shifted from inside to outside the home (Aidid, 2010; Crosby, 2006). Boyle and Ali (2010) found that the concept of masculinity in the US, tied to full-time employment and the ability to provide for one’s family, similar to men’s role in Somalia, affected it as well. An outcome of these conflicting systems is the challenge to male authority by Somali

41The Civil War and subsequent migrations disrupted the clan-based security system in place for women and families, an economic and property structure that helped to police the borderland between female and male. Studies such as Isotalo (2007) show the ways in which gender roles continue to be policed by practices such as gossip, which serves comment on the behavior and dress of Somali girls and women, an important sign of “individual and collective commitment to religion, culture of origin, and moral standards” (Isotalo, 2007, p. 187) of the ideal Somali female.
42While women occupied the private sphere largely, scholars are beginning to examine the roles that women historically played in Somali society and politics (see Aidid, 2010 and Mohamed, 2012 for example).
women. Berns-McGown (1999) found this to be the case in Toronto and London, where one interviewee commented that Somali women, rather than men, were leading the community, a change from life in Somalia. Boyle and Ali (2010) found similar experiences in Minneapolis and Predelli (2004) in Minneapolis and refugee camps.

While the juxtaposition of traditional gender roles and Western feminist ideals typifies women’s experiences, differences among women based on socioeconomic status and residential location of origin exist, among other factors. Crosby (2006) notes several important variations among Somali women in Clarkson, Georgia. While employment and economic contributions have a significant effect on family structure, gender roles, and in some cases financial power, men remain decision makers. For other women, the role as wife and mother remains sacred because of Islam, and the family hierarchal structure is maintained. As Crosby (2006) writes, “gender roles are challenged in some married couples [but] they change in terms of single women” (p. 80), who more often take advantage of women’s equality and resist traditional gender assignments. Leitner (2004) also found variations among women, particularly between generations, in small town America. Younger women often had more interactions with the host community, better English skills, and more education; older women felt more isolated because of their dress, the fact that they did not go to church (a central institution in small towns), and have few interactions with non-Somalis outside of work. Differences between acclimation rates often lead to parent-child conflict particularly concerning gender role expectations, as Mohamed and Yosuf (2011) found.

**Two cases of changing gender roles: Remittances and leadership.** Remittances provide an interesting case for scholars to study gender. Working with émigrés and refugees in Egypt, Al-Sharmani (2010) found that while Somali men also migrate, remit

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43 The study of women and remittances offers one perspective of what Freedman (2013) terms the feminization of migration. This phenomenon describes the way in which refugee and resettlement policy enables women and children to migrate, tending to engage more with state through social security to ensure well-being of children and renegotiate gender roles, which causes tension because expansion of economic opportunity for women and downward mobility for men. As a result, “Women become the foundation of African communities abroad and catalyze the emergence of diasporic identity” (Kayne & Leedy, 2013, p. 12).

44 Émigrés, according to Al-Sharmani (2010) are former refugees who had resettled in western countries, obtained citizenship, and are now living a transnational life based in their countries of citizenship (p. 503).
money, and facilitate movement, women are becoming the main members of family networks sustaining the pooling of resources and sharing of family obligations. This is the result of the impact of the Civil War on family structure, policies regarding refugees and migrants, and post-Civil War family discourse about the dependability, reliability, and loyalty of daughters and female relatives. While often understood as oppressive and reinforcing traditional female roles, interpreting remittances as an oppressive practice overlooks the negotiation of individual goals and needs within the family and the way that changing relations between genders affect family transnational support systems, benefits, and concessions. Hammond (2010) echoes this paradox, describing the way that shifting gender roles open doors to women participating in clan matters such as the *diya* system\(^{45}\) that have traditionally only included men while simultaneously preventing them from continuing their education – including ESL and vocational skills – or accumulating savings. Lindley’s (2009) study of remittances in London found that while women are taking a more prominent role in decision-making and income generation, there is increased marital breakdown as a result. Decimo (2007) offers a unique perspective of Somali female workers in Italy, where work in the lowest bracket of care such as nursing homes is immediately profitable. Young, single women come to Italy to work and send family members to Europe and American countries whose welfare systems grant minimum protections, “actively [participating] in the construction of a transnational community network which creates, supports, and strengthens further relations and exchanges” (Decimo, 2007, p. 207). The practice of remittance informs the expectations for and behaviors of women in the diaspora, affecting concepts and performances of identity.

Leadership in the diaspora is another important site of changing gender roles. Many men, especially those experiencing downward professional mobility, engage in

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\(^{45}\)The clan, or *diya* group, is a social security network for Somalis. The *diya* group traditionally consists of the male members of one or more family lines with the same forefathers going back four to eight generations. Group members are obliged to support each other in political and legal responsibilities defined in the *xeer* (traditional Somali law) agreements (Gundel, 2006). The *diya* group is also responsible for providing assistance to members who are in difficult financial situations. *Xeer* is considered to be an important bonding element within the Somali community. However, *xeer* is only entered into between Somali clans; minority groups are normally excluded from the *diya* system (Landinfo, 2008).
transnational reconstruction associations as a way to use education or job-related experience that are otherwise difficult to exploit in Western economic systems. As is seen in Kleist’s (2008) study of the Development Organization of East Africa’s 2003 International Somali Conference in Denmark, participation in such organizations allows men to demonstrate responsibility and initiative in ways they would not be able to otherwise. However, Kleist (2008) noted that “some women and younger men commented that many men used too much time talking about homeland politics, rather than concentrating on their lives in Denmark” (p. 317). Sorensen (2007) found that in addition to participation in homeland politics and reconstruction, the dream of returning “is seen as an expression of a gendered social order, where an ideal patriarchal family life can be realized. Such an option may be more attractive to men losing status in a transnational social space than to women” (p. 11). Participation in reconstruction efforts can also be seen as a reaction against public invisibility. While Griffith (2002) revealed some Somali men interpreted this invisibility positively, it was also a symbol of the loss of status in public sphere. It is important to note that the effect on family structure varies by situation, whether or not there are dependents or education from back home. While men maintain political connections with Somalia, women “in the diaspora have excelled in weaving the community together through smaller and continuous ad hoc acts of mutual support and collaboration” (Kapteijns & Arman, 2004, p. 33). More women are taking responsibility for their families and finances. Younger women especially are enrolling in higher education to positively contribute to their community through health care, policy, and social work fields. There is little published specifically on women’s leadership in the community.

Women’s narratives of diaspora. Despite the number of gender focused studies, few attend to the narratives of women. However, some scholars including Phoenix (2011), Hopkins (2010), Langellier (2010), and Crosby (2006) provide greatly needed attention to women’s narratives. Phoenix’s (2011) study includes narratives of lived experiences of young Somali women in the UK, their understanding of their identity and its position within a ‘War on Terror’ us/them discourse, and their sense of belonging.
Hopkins (2010) examines Somali identity within transnational networks among women in London and Toronto, indicating a changing sense of Somaliness through indicators of belonging including dress, religion and language. Langellier’s (2010) analysis examines the storytelling of a young Somali woman in Lewiston, Maine, “who embodies the performative tensions that animate Somali identity…contests definitions of Somali ethnicity, feminism, blackness, and Islam…[and] rewords two dominant narratives used to explain Somali identity: identity-as-culture and identity-as-religion” (p. 66). However, it is Crosby’s (2006) call for attention to the stories of refugees (including women), which Freedman (2013) extends by asserting the importance of listening “to the voices of women seeking asylum and refuges if the trap of essentializing their experiences and treating them as passive victims is to be avoided” (p. 226), that offers a connection to Nancy’s being singular plural. More narratives focusing on the redefining and negotiation of Somali female identity are needed to prevent the essentializing of Somali women in the diaspora, offering up shared experiences of difference.

Religious practice and identification: Variation and interpretation. Islam, for many scholars, is a primary identifier of Somalis in the diaspora (Berns-McGown, 1999; Cassanelli, 1982; Omar, 2008).46 However, “Islam is not a monolithic entity, either in its coherence or in terms of how its principles are interpreted by its adherents” (Berns-McGown, 1999, p. 8), and not all Somalis practice Islam, such as the growing number of Christian Somali Bantu (Van Lehman & Eno, 2003). Increased religiosity in the Somali diaspora is the result of a number of factors, including ideological confusion during the Barre regime,47 the consequent rise of Islamist movements in the 1970s,48 and establishing an identity in and as a response to secular, historically Judeo-Christian Western countries (Abdi, 2007; Berns-McGown, 1999; Kapteijns & Arman, 2004; Van

46Somali Muslims practice Sunni Islam, though historically informed by Sufism and indigenous traditions.
47The Barre government espoused a socialist government. However, during the Ethiopian War, shifting alliances from the Soviet Union to the United States caused some ideological confusion. While Barre did not deny his socialist project, it was a major turning point concerning trust and stability.
48This often clashed with older Somalis as the young and urban populating Islamist movements “destroyed some of the tombs that were points of annual pilgrimage, decried dancing and drums during dhikr; demanded that men and women not touch one another, even to shake hands; required that men grow beards and that women wear the hijab and not merely traditionally flimsy headscarves” (Berns-McGown, 1999, p. 35).
Liempt, 2011). Each of these factors has contributed to a more conservative practice of Islam informed by increased individual study of the Qur’an. Religion, while a unifying factor particularly in the diaspora, is negotiated and continuously redefined as it informs religious and cultural practices, identity, and gender roles.

Islam is practiced in many ways for many purposes. Predelli (2004) studied the way that Islam affects gender roles in the diaspora, identifying four orientations that present different uses and interpretations of Islam. This framework is fluid, contributing to the complicated and sometimes contradictory reality of gender roles and the use of Islam as a flexible resource “used to support a range of views and practices” (Predelli, 2004, p. 473). In Finland, for example, many Somali women regard Islam as a way to preserve cultural and ethnic identity and traditions in addition to religious reproduction, while “Somali men active in mosques define and recreate the new Somali identity, based on ‘nonnative’ or ‘correct’ Islam, purified from culture practices” (Tiilikainen, 2007, p. 224). Women in particular have played an important role in redefining Somali identity and religious practice, as they participate more in the mosque interpreting the Qur’an and maintaining cultural and religious practices. Tiilikainen (2007) found that mothers in particular actively interpret Islam to maintain, create and strengthen moral boundaries, but also compromising religious requirements such as eating Halal meats in order to manage households and care for children. Moreover, young women easily distinguish between culture and religion, while older women often devise strategies resisting the loss of traditional female knowledge, such as saar (spirit) rituals having to do with healing and alleviating suffering and memory of identity (Tiilikainen, 2007).

Women’s dress offers an important example of Islamic influence and demonstrates the range of views and practices of Islam among diaspora Somalis. According to Berns-McGown (1999), “many Somali women [in the diaspora] have consciously taken the hijab…for religious reasons, distinguishing between culture (how they used to dress before leaving Somalia) and religion (how they are more self-consciously Muslim in the West)” (p. 39). The distinction between religion and culture is

49 These orientations include: sameness-oriented modernist, society-oriented Islamist, family-oriented Islamist, and culture oriented traditionalist.
important and debates about the blurred line between them are manifest in debates concerning appropriate dress. “Whether women will choose to wear cultural, religious, or Westernized styles of dress is not an idle question. Dress is a visual symbol that reflects and shapes personal and political attitudes, and their choices about it can shape...Somali identity” (Akou, 2004, p. 60). Many forms of traditional Somali dress, such as the colorful, semi-transparent fabrics of the garbasaar and dirac, both long women’s dresses, are considered not modest enough to some for a proper Muslim woman, yet are frequently worn to traditional Somali weddings (Akou, 2004; Roble & Rutledge, 2008).

Dress is a prominent site of religious practice. Jilbab, a long dress typically worn over pants,50 and hijab, the Islamic practice of modesty most often demonstrated by wearing a headscarf,51 are common practices. However, not all Somalis who practice hijab dress the same; some girls do not cover, and young girls often wear western clothing with a headscarf (Tiilikainen, 2007). Even within religious dress, there are areas of debate. For example, Tiilikainen (2007) found that the niqab, a face veil, divided women’s opinions. For some, the wearing niqab is evidence of devotion to God. For others, it is considered to be a symbol of Arabization, as potentially detrimental to preserving Somali culture as Westernization. Still others view it as a dangerous and politically charged garment (Akou, 2004; Tiilikainen, 2007). Moreover, in a study examining the production of gender and sexuality in the Somali diaspora, Abdi (2007) describes dress as a response to political and conflict contexts across various locations. While dress is relatively homogenously conservative in refugee camps where women wear jilbab because of the constant threat of violence and rape, in other locations of the diaspora such as Minneapolis, dress varies greatly across class and education lines.

Religious identification and practice is intertwined with and often opposed to culture and cultural traditions. Because of the overwhelming synonymy of Muslim and Somali in academic and community discourse, sites of blurring between religion and culture prove to be complex examples of identity negotiation, often resolved on the

50The word jilbab has special meaning because it appears in the Qur’an (Akou, 2004).
51The practice of hijab is also linked to increased religious knowledge and is an easily recognizable symbol of Islam (Akou, 2004; Tiilikainen, 2007).
individual level with regard to personal interpretation of the Qur’an and as a response to the historical events launching the diaspora, as evident in the stories of DSVU.

**Summary of diversity in the Somali diaspora.** The identity categories of migration history, ethnicity, gender, and religious practice and identification are common in Somali Studies. Despite the diversity of the Somali diaspora evident in the academic review of literature, what it means to be Somali remains at the heart of inquiries into Somali identity in the diaspora. As many scholars have identified, many factors constitute Somaliness, and are sorted into distinct aspects of identity such as religion or gender. However, as evident in the literature on women’s roles and religious practice and identification, there is a gap in addressing topics prevalent in DSVU such as the relationship between culture and religion that blur the lines between identity categories. Because of the visibility of these practices, for example women’s dress, Somali women are in a position to not only define what it means to be a Somali woman within their families but also for the Somali community. The stories in DSVU attest to this redefinition and negotiation of identity. Moreover, markers such as the headscarf establish women as representatives of the community to non-Somalis. It is an on-going process of negotiation and, as Langellier (2010) asserts, performance, as policies change, political and social climates evolve, and events occur in Somalia and in countries of resettlement.

**Educating others through DSVU.** Projects such as DSVU offer a site for Somali women to intentionally address these issues through the creation of an exhibition to educate non-Somalis about them and challenge categorical perceptions. Utilizing Nancy’s being singular plural to examine the relationship between individuals, community, and identity positions narrative as an important site of creating and sharing community, countering the dominant discourse in academia. Crosby (2006), Freedman (2013), and Magan (2012) have each expressed the need for more narratives of women’s experiences, and Nancy furthers this call. Narratives that affirm the single plurality of being work to dispel the myth of homogeneity, stable categories of identification, and fixed perceptions.
of refugees, immigrants, and women by punctuating the in-common with articulations of difference.

Summary of Literature Review Part I

This chapter introduced the study’s conceptual framework, which includes community, identity, and political action as interruption. In order to further explicate these concepts, I provided an overview of Nancy’s ontology of being singular plural, and the concepts of community, the political, and interruption (Nancy, 1991; 1997; 2000). Then, these philosophical concepts guided the review of scholarship addressing Somali diasporic identity within the field of Somali Studies, which include migration histories in general across the diaspora and for Columbus, Ohio specifically, the debates surrounding ethnicity with regard to clan and Somaliness, gender transformations, and religious practice and identification. At times there is disjuncture between these categories and the narratives of women’s experiences in DSVU, therefore presenting the academic discourse of diasporic identity establishes one of the preconceptions the stories interrupt. Moreover, the tension between Somaliness and the diversity of experiences, backgrounds, and practices of Somali culture offers a productive site to explore being singular plural in which there exists a tension between being-with (relationship) and being-in-common (politics), the sharing of finitude (difference) among singularities, the existence of a foundational narrative (or myth), and the necessity of the interruption of myth. One such site includes hijab narratives, which present a variety of practices and interpretations. These stories and photographs explore the line between religion and culture and extend the debate by juxtaposing images of covering and uncovering, stories of confronting cultural expectations and norms from within the Somali community as well as from non-Somali Americans. These tensions will be discussed further in my analysis of the interruptions of DSVU in Chapter 7. The next chapter will continue the review of literature and position DSVU among other arts initiatives in the Somali diaspora as community arts education.
CHAPTER 3: Literature Review Part II: Community Arts Education

The literature review continues with a discussion of community arts including arts initiatives in the Somali diaspora in order to position *Dumarka Soomaaliyyeed Voices Unveiled (DSVU)* as community arts education. Then, the conceptualizations of political action within social justice art education are explicated including *transformation* (Bastos, 2010; Darts, 2006; Dewhurst, 2010; 2011), *intervention* (Duncum, 2010; Desai et al., 2003; Richardson, 2010; Williams & Taylor, 2004), *encounter* (Albers, 1999; Hutzel & Resler, 2010; O’Sullivan, 2006; Pearlman, n.d.), and *disruption* (Gooding-Brown, 2000). Each draws upon varying theoretical foundations and offers possibilities for extension. I propose an additional conceptualization – *community arts as interruption*, which draws upon Jean-Luc Nancy’s (1991) community theory.

**Art Education and Social Justice**

Art that engages issues of social justice has been given many names including activist art (Felshin, 1995), community-based arts (de Nobriga & Schwarzman, 1999), public art (Lacy, 1995), socially engaged art (Thompson, 2012), art for social change (O’Brien & Little, 1990), theater of the oppressed (Boal, 1979), art for democracy (Blandy & Congdon, 1987), and community cultural development (Adams & Goldbard, 2001). Regardless of the name, what all these terms share is a commitment to engage in artmaking that, as Dewhurst (2011) describes, “draws attention to, mobilizes action toward, or attempts to intervene in systems of inequality or injustice” (p. 366). Anderson, Gussak, Hallmark, and Paul (2010) follow the examples of socially concerned artists and put forth a vision for attaining social justice through art education. For Quinn, Ploof, and Hochtritt (2012), social justice art education gives attention to the complex contexts of people’s lives and their engaged responses aimed at change (p. xxi). Just what this vision of change entails, however, has been conceptualized in many ways including Anderson
(2010) who describes the aim of social justice as social equity and the opportunity to achieve vocational, professional, persona, social, and economic goals in the world (p. 5). However, Dewhurst (2010, 2011) points out that the characteristics of social justice are difficult to define, and encourages art educators to continue investigating where the action lies in order to provide more nuanced understanding of what is possible in the social justice art education domain, and “make sense of the many ways people approach making art to change the world around them” (Dewhurst, 2011, p. 377). Considering what action entails and how it is conceptualized within social justice art education forms the basis of this study.

**Defining Community Arts Education**

Community arts education is one type of social justice art education that forefronts partnerships and collaborative projects and programs occurring within and among communities, whether defined by geography, shared interests and goals, or a cultural group. Mazadiego (2010) offers community arts as a creative, collaborative interaction with a community that attempts to remedy local issues through a prolonged exchange in an effort to reconcile culture with a broader political, social, and economic agenda. Moreover, as Clements, Stiller, Bowen, and Hughes (2005) assert, “person-centered community artists are actually seeking to facilitate change within the participants’ lives.” Community arts are thus relational practices, attuned to the relationship between researcher/artist and participant/community.

Community arts practice is explicitly educational and activist oriented. First, community arts have an educational aim to help people gain new skills and new opportunities through artmaking (CAP, 2013). Second, community arts are overtly social justice oriented, aiming to “maximize the access, participation, authorship and ownership in collective arts activities, often privileging process over product” (Fegan, 2003). As a result, they promote participation and provide opportunities for people who typically have little access to or means for participation in the arts (Valley and Vale, 2013).

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52There are different views about length of time spent with communities – whether temporary activities versus prolonged exchanges, which reflect debate in PAR and other socially engaged research methodologies.
Despite the difficulty of synthesizing different understandings and practices of community arts into a comprehensive definition, four characteristics distinguish community arts education from other forms of community-based arts and art education:

1. collaboration with the community;
2. attention to the relationship between artist/researcher/teacher and community partners;
3. use of artmaking as a vehicle towards social justice, and
4. explicit goals of social change often drawing on community assets rather than focusing on community needs.

Furthermore, community arts pulls from the field of art education, employs action research methodology and its derivations, is concerned with social justice, and draws inspiration from socially engaged artists. As such, the following section will explore several examples of arts initiatives within the Somali diaspora, which deal explicitly with community education and identity negotiation, situating them as community arts towards social justice.

**Arts Initiatives in the Somali Diaspora**

The arts have a prominent place in Somali culture and identity and offer a response to many of the challenges of diaspora through documentary, visual, and oral arts. First, loss of history and culture is a great concern in the diaspora, and many arts initiatives address this awareness of loss through cultural education. Second, documentary and exhibitory efforts are particularly concerned with public education. Many of the arts initiatives within the diaspora have educational aims, which I call *community education* because it includes both cultural and public education. Lastly, many arts initiatives in the diaspora address and offer a space for identity negotiation – redefining what it means to be Somali across diaspora locations as well as exploring the role and contributions Somalis can make and are making in their new homes. Visual and oral artists expressly deal with issues of identity in their work.

**Preserving culture.** Omar (2012) found “understanding and knowledge of Somali culture is not deep. [Youth] know more about tangible aspects, such as food and
clothing, than about values and literature” (p. 39). Examples of efforts to combat this loss of culture range from the collection of folksongs (SI, 2013) and immigrant and refugee stories (MHC, 2013) to the publication of traditional folktales (MHC, n.d.). Other individual efforts to amass collections of Somali art and artifacts serve as a resource for younger generations of Somalis to learn about their heritage, such as Osman Ali’s work to establish a museum of Somali artifacts in Minneapolis (Crann & Shenoy, 2013) and exhibitions such as Reer-Gurraa/The Nomad (SSA, 2012). Mohamud Diriyie (known as Dirios), director of the Somali Cultural and Research Institute (SCRI), is an example of an artist and collector in Columbus. Under Dirios’ direction, SCRI housed a sizable collection of Somali art and artifacts in an informal museum space at Global Mall, a Somali mall in Columbus, Ohio, until the collection’s donation to another museum in 2012. Dirios used this collection to create educational materials including videos, books, and posters and cultural exhibits to educate Somali youth and non-Somalis about traditional Somali culture. SCRI was involved in many community efforts such as Moore and Joseph’s (2011) cultural training for Columbus Public School teachers. In addition to cultural education directed towards Somali youth in the diaspora and non-Somalis working with Somalis, the arts also serve as a site of public education, which is integral to resettlement and integration according to Ali (2009).

**Documenting the Somali diaspora.** Documentary video and photography offers methods of artmaking that respect Muslim prohibitions of image making, making it a prevalent artform in the diaspora.53 Documentary photography has been theorized and discussed, particularly regarding migration (Demos, 2013), transcultural and interdisciplinary research practices (Grossman & O’Brien, 2007), and representing diasporic communities (Mirzoeff, 2000). Mirzoeff’s (2000) concept of the multiple viewpoint present in any diasporic visual image is of particular importance. Drawing

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53 As far as I know, this topic has not been explored in scholarship. In several instances, I have been told by Somali artists and non-Somalis working with Somalis to frame my work in documentary terms to circumvent the Muslim religious prohibitions on art beyond the illumination of the Qur’an. However, there are Somali artists, such as Dirios and Nadia Faragaab, who advocate for artmaking within Somali culture. Moreover, when I inquired about “documentary” versus “artmaking” among the women of DSVU, no one had a problem calling what we were doing artmaking, though several women requested that their face not be shown in any photographs.
from Derrida’s (1982) notion of différance, multiple viewpoint is concerned with polycentric vision located “between individuals and communities and culture in the process of dialogic interaction” (Shohat & Stam, 1998, p. 46). It is forward-looking, challenging the insistence of privileging the past and origins in many diasporic studies aligning with Kleist’s (2008) description of a potential diasporic community. In addition, the diasporic image is transcultural, intertextual, and a transitive place creating polyvalent symbols that are sometimes shared and sometimes contested. These images then become a critical activity in which the way people see themselves is altered, renewing the past (rather than creating a myth) so that it “innovates and interrupts the performance of the present” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 7). Thus diasporic documentary practice offers not only a living archive of history as it happens, but also attends to the negotiation of identity, and engages its viewers in deconstructing (or interrupting) the myths and stereotypes of diasporic identity, culture, and representation.

There are several pertinent examples within the Somali diaspora, including the Somali Documentary Project (SDP, n.d.). Founded in 2003 by Somali photographer Abdi Roble, SDP uses photography and writing to: 1) “document the worldwide Somali Diaspora” (SDP, n.d.) as it happens, 2) educate hosting cultures, and 3) advocate for the plight of Somalia and refugees around the world. The mission of SDP points to the focus on addressing important social issues through research and critical media in order to bridge communities. “We believe that understanding promotes respect, which in turn promotes justice” (Roble & Rutledge, 2008, p. 189). In addition, Roble and Rutledge (2008) discuss in detail the process of gaining trust and access to members of the Somali communities they seek to document. They stress the importance of spending time in the community:

Documentary photography is an extension of the relationship you already have with a person. So we never simply went out and started taking pictures and doing interviews. Instead we would go and sit in an ESL class for weeks, we would have meals with families, and we would attend meetings. (Roble & Rutledge, 2008, pp. viii-ix)
They also address research once those relationships are developed – making choices about when to use the camera, when to help, and when not to intervene.

In addition, SDP plays an active role in mentoring young artists within the Somali community and educating youth in documentary photography. As a result, apprentice artists involved in SDP go on to produce individual works. One example is Tariq Tarey, whose *Women, war and resettlement: Nasro’s journey* aired on PBS in 2012 (WOSU, 2011). *Nasro’s journey* tells the story of one woman’s journey from Somalia to Columbus, Ohio, including life in Mogadishu during the civil war, the resettlement experience, effects on family, and challenges of being a newcomer in the US.

SDP has been involved in a variety of arts-based projects, including *The Somali diaspora: A journey away* (Roble and Rutledge, 2008). *A journey away* follows one family’s travels from the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya to Anaheim, California, as well as documenting the Somali communities in Minneapolis and Columbus. As Kapteijns (2009) notes, this work was written for a general audience (a testament to its community education focus) and the photographs offer a glimpse into the everyday lives of Somali Americans as they move towards active citizenship from dependence on assistance in order to participate in American life. However, the invisibility of the photographer raises some questions – Is invisibility only appropriate if the photographer is also a member of the community? What effect does an intimate outsider like myself or Rutledge have on the composition, interpretation, and political action (whether in the form of advocacy, education, or identity negotiation) of the photographs?

Glenn Jordan’s *Somali Elders* project in Cardiff, Wales addresses these issues of representation, construction, and political intervention. *The Somali Elders Project* is “a cultural-political intervention combining humanist portrait photography, collaborative ethnography and oral history” (Jordan, 2008, p. 332) of forty-seven elders, all born in British Somaliland, who came to the UK between 1937 and 1961. The stories and portraits of these early pioneers (Jordan, 2007) address politics of representation and the construction of self in front of the camera through an
exercise in anti-racist education and an appreciation of cultural diversity. It is a located intervention in a world where there is currently great difficulty between ‘Islam’ and ‘The West’; in a culture where images of black people still often carry primitivist and racist connotations; in a city (Cardiff) and society (the UK) where Somalis are held in very low status. (Jordan, 2008, p. 333)

As such, Jordan’s work is explicitly activist and interventionist.

While SDP and Jordan’s *Somali Elders* project are historically and politically situated, Camille Coleman and Murat Gungor produce documentary projects that they assert are without historical or political context; rather, they are about “everyday Somalis” (Coleman & Gungor, n.d.). A short film, *A Holy Month in Maine* (aired on Maine’s public channel during Ramadan 2012 and several film festivals), offers a look at one Somali and one Iranian man’s experience of Ramadan. Their latest project is a documentary following two Somalis in the US and Denmark, exploring the idea of home as they travel back to where they came from – Kenya’s refugee camps. This project will feature one of the characters in *A Holy Month in Maine*, and they are currently searching for a female Somali in Denmark to participate (Coleman & Gungor, n.d.).

Despite Coleman and Gungor’s claims, any documentary effort has political, historical, and social implications if for nothing else because of the knowledge it constructs (Grossman & O’Brien, 2007). The documentary initiatives in the Somali diaspora have public education aims whether explicitly stated (SDP, n.d.) or not (Coleman & Gungor, n.d.), and seek to offer multiple viewpoints of the communities they depict. Moreover, transcultural and diaspora documentary practice is complex and fraught with political, ethical, and representational issues (Demos, 2013; Grossman & O’Brien, 2007; Mirzoeff, 2000). The identity and role of the photographer, the images, and the words are important elements of political action to consider in documentary practices, and will be addressed in this study.

**Visual artists negotiating identity.** Contemporary visual artists in the diaspora, such as Nadia Faragaab and Mohamud Mumin, use multimedia installations, interventions, and gallery exhibits to address the negotiation of identity within the
diaspora. Nadia Faragaab is a young Somali-Australian artist, the first Somali Australian to exhibit in Australia, who juxtaposes material artifacts of pre-war Somalia with those of the diaspora to explore Somaliness in a contemporary setting including the constraints, changes, and nuances of what it means to be Somali across the diaspora (Faragaab, 2012). Examples of her work include *Dhadig Labo*, portraits of contemporary Somali women in *hijab* composed of photographs of women from the pre-civil war era that intends to initiate conversation about the aesthetic change in women’s dress, and *Smoke Alarms*, a humorous installation featuring a wall of smoke alarms under which a row of incense burners rest on the floor. Faragaab’s work addresses the lack of Somali imagery and symbolism in the wider Australian culture, confronts the negative portrayal of Somalis in media representations as well as “the preoccupation with ‘preservation’ of culture, which constricts and binds expression…rather than allowing for evolution and growth” within the Somali community (Black Dot Gallery, 2011).

Mohamud Mumin, a self-described “visual storyteller” based in Minneapolis, Minnesota “has set out to examine through the camera the Somali community in a new land as it negotiates and redefines the essence and boundaries of its identity” (Mumin, n.d.). *The Youth/Dhallinyarada* presents in-depth portraits of “thirteen young Somali men living in Minnesota, who are actively and positively engaged in their community” (Mumin, n.d.). The project incorporates a traditional gallery show, a tabloid-sized newspaper for distribution in the community, and a multimedia piece in which the men “share their journey to Minnesota, and the conflict they feel in trying to be themselves despite their attempts to belong here; as well as describe how they earnestly and indubitably engage in their community” (Mumin, n.d.). Mumin’s inclusion of forms beyond documentary photography demonstrates a creative approach to community education. This innovation is further embodied in *Halal Hotdogs*, a collaboration between Mumin, chef Mowliid Yussef, and Ahmed Hirsi (a member of Students4AfrIca.com) to create a tool to explain and celebrate Somali culture within the Midwest. *Halal Hotdogs* brings together “one of the most outward symbols of the Somali community” found on shop signs in the Twin Cities – Halal – and the classic American
hotdog. In addition, the *Halal Hotdog* cart is used to fundraise for local community organizations and as a potential source of sustainable employment for newly arrived immigrant families (Mumin, n.d.). It is a symbol of identity negotiation between cultures and geographic locations, a site for community education, and a tool for tangibly providing opportunities for newcomers to achieve their economic and social goals. Both Faragaab and Mumin demonstrate a community consciousness as well as an exploration of Somali identity in the diaspora. They invite audience participation through humor, juxtaposition of cultural artifacts and symbols, and performative elements.

**Oral arts: Storytelling and poetry as artmaking.** The oral arts have long been an important form of expression in Somali culture. As Afrax (2010) points out, storytelling is a dominant form of cultural expression in Somali society. Because of the importance of the oral arts, and its prevalence and practice among project participants, storytelling was chosen as a primary method of artmaking in *DSVU*. In fact, Kayla’s (2012) spoken word poem [see Appendix E] about Somali identity propelled other poems and performances to be included in the project.

Storytelling, including poetry, has been a part of arts initiatives with migrant communities, for example *Crossing the BLVD* (Lehrer & Sloan, 2003) a project that brings together oral history and photography to share the stories of immigrants of Queens, New York in order to address immigration policy and resettlement issues. Ifrah Magan, in a presentation at Stanford University, describes her initiative to promote storytelling for Somali refugees in order to document a more accurate picture of Somali culture through an initiative to put together a book highlighting the stories of Somali refugees. She states, “Stories matter. People matter. Somalia today is in desperate need of the voices of her people” (Magan, 2012). Initiatives like *Crossing the BLVD* and Magan’s forthcoming publication provide a platform to share stories and affect resettlement policies and public perceptions. Storytelling as such has social justice aims and deals with issues of identity.

Poetry, according to Ahmed (n.d.), is a salient element of Somali storytelling with didactic and moral qualities. As such, poetry for the purposes of this study is considered
an element of storytelling. Storytelling in the diaspora has taken the form of published (written) texts in addition to spoken word. For example, the Minnesota Humanities Center (MHC) collaborated with the Somali community of Minneapolis to develop the Somali Bilingual Book Project (MHC, n.d.). The MHC goal was to create “high-quality authentic resources that promote and preserve heritage languages and increase English literacy skills of refugee and immigrant families” (MHC, n.d.). The project resulted in the publication of four traditional Somali folktales. The practice of spoken word is continued and transformed through online initiatives such as Poet Nation (2012), a platform for “positive voices for the modern Somali generation” to share poetry, music, and stories and enrich Somali culture.

Moreover, the oral arts play an important role in Somali political life. Artists and poets perform in important political times, such as during the national movement prior to independence in 1960; subsequent revolutions; the 2000 Somalia National Peace Conference in Arta, Djibouti, which resulted in the formation of the first Somali Transitional National Government (Afrax, 2010); and the presidential election of 2012 (Hussein, 2012a&b). Poets such as Abdi Shire Jama share poetry responding to political and historical events in an effort to transcend clan differences and promote peace (Jama, 2011). The political imperative of poetry has been applied to music with musicians such as Somali-Canadian rapper K’naan and Somali hip hop collective Waayaha Cusub creating what K’naan describes as “urgent music with a message” addressing taboo subjects and imported ideologies or condemning atrocities such as “the punitive actions of Al Shabab” (Gerstle, 2012). Poetry and music provide a creative outlet for expressing political views and advocating for action and an alternative vision for the future of Somalis and Somalia.

Storytelling in written and oral forms is an important practice in the theoretical underpinnings of Nancy (1991). According to Nancy, storytelling offers a site in which to share experiences of difference among singularities, establishes the in-common for a

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54Humanitarian Bazaar (2012) documents these efforts in the documentary, Somalia: Music too powerful to ban, which follows a number of musicians, producers, and radio hosts working to promote music that rallies youth to resist extremist rebels such as Al-Shabab.
community, and affirms the interruption of community. The sharing of difference in the stories of Crossing the BLVD (Lehrer & Sloan, 2003) and Magan (2012), the negotiation of Somaliness and preservation of culture seen in examples such as Guudle (2009) and the Minnesota Humanities Council, and the political assertions and interruptions of Jama (2011), Waayaha Cusub, and K’naan among others all demonstrate the ways in which storytelling is not only a form of artmaking but also a form of political action.

**Arts initiatives of the Somali diaspora as community arts.** Community arts projects involve collaboration with and in communities to educate and work towards social justice. Many arts initiatives within the Somali diaspora, including those described in the previous sections, while not explicitly labeled as such, can be understood as community arts projects. Community arts, as Vega (2010) describes, is activism that focuses on developing an inclusive society for which difference and diversity is the norm by engaging people in culturally relevant “projects of meaning with the purpose of changing systems of inequality through the voice of culture and art” (para. 16). The documentary, visual, and oral arts initiatives described above focus on community education (both public education directed towards non-Somalis as well as cultural education directed toward Somali youth) and the negotiation of identity, which not only activates a lived and living identity, but also challenges the dominant homogenous conceptions of what it means to be Somali. Organizations like SDP initiate individual documentary projects that seek to educate and raise awareness of the culture, history, and experiences of Somalis in the diaspora as well as establish mentorships with young artists within the Somali community in order to build skills and opportunities for arts participation and profession. Individual artists such as Mumin and Faragaab invite others to engage in the ongoing identity negotiation within the diaspora through their work. The continued use of the oral arts, in particular spoken word and poetry, offers a platform for expression as well as political engagement across the diaspora. As a project engaging Somali women in photography and storytelling to address issues of identity and representation, DSVU is situated as an arts initiative within the Somali diaspora and as community arts education.
Conceptualizations of Action in Social Justice Art Education

As the previous section has demonstrated, many arts initiatives within the Somali diaspora have explicit social justice aims and work with and among the community to achieve them. In addition, action is a key concept within social justice art education and subsequently community arts education (Anderson et al., 2010; Dewhurst, 2011). The action of community arts is a focus of this study, particularly the conceptualization of political action and the points at which artmaking engages and endeavors to impact issues of social inequality and injustice. In the case of this study, DSVU is an artmaking project utilizing photography and storytelling to explore issues of identity; raise awareness of the complexity of the lives, perspectives, and identities of young Somali women; dispel stereotypes; interrupt fixed conceptions of what it means to be a Somali woman; and address issues of representation. The explicit and owned political action of this project necessitates an examination of how action in social justice art education is visualized.

The political action of artmaking is described in a myriad of terms; this review attends to these five: transformation, encounter, intervention, disruption and interruption [see Table 2]. The first four categories – transformation, encounter, intervention, disruption - have varying philosophical foundations drawing from critical pedagogy and theory, poststructuralism, and postmodernism and implications for implementation. I propose that artmaking can be also be understood as interruption, drawing from community theory (Nancy, 1991) and offers a conceptualization that is specific about what is changed (fixed perceptions of identity and community), where the action occurs (among individuals who are co-constituted with community, thus among community), and addresses the potential of change.
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<td>Individuals working within and against structures</td>
<td>Individual and community working within and against fixed identities and perceptions of communities</td>
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Table 2: Theorizations of action in community arts education

**Transformation.** Art as a practice of social transformation has strong foundations in critical pedagogy, a way of teaching that seeks liberation for all people (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994), and the connection between art, education, culture and society is well documented in art education (Darts, 2006). Art education as a transformative vehicle for Bastos (2010) critically and creatively engages students in transforming self, community, and world (Darts, 2006). Dewhurst (2010, 2011) follows in this vein to offer social justice education in the arts as an evolving, iterative process rooted in people’s experiences, involving concomitant processes of reflection and action, and seeking to dismantle system of inequality to create a more humane society. Transformation is associated with emancipatory and social responsibility through individual reflection and action.

**Encounter.** Art as encounter has roots in poststructural philosophy and critical theory, and is often used in conjunction with artmaking initiatives that bring together
people around an issue in order to enact a change in thinking or acting. O’Sullivan (2006) describes this type of artmaking as an object of encounter, “the creative movement…that obliges us to think otherwise” (p. 1). Art as encounter is as much about rupture and affirmation as it is the pragmatic processes of connectivity and interpenetration, which foster sideways movement of specifically transversal connections engaged in creative acts.

What distinguishes encounter from transformation is the space designed to encourage encounter. This space is participatory, interdisciplinary, and encourages dialogue and self-reflection. Pearlman (n.d.) indicates that this type of space draws from Joseph Beuys’ expanded definition of art that is created through interdisciplinary and participatory processes where thought, speech and discussion become materials of artmaking. Pearlman (n.d.) offers the case study an internationally collaborative project dubbed “go_HOME” that draws attention to globalization and displacement through international artist residencies and dialogue. The aesthetic constructions resulting from virtual and real dialogues were intended to generate a structured discourse drawing simultaneously upon critical theory and the personal experiences of the participants. go_Home is just one example of constructing spaces to encounter art and civic issues through participation, reflection, and discussion.

Hutzel and Resler (2010) describe sidewalk encounters, informal exchanges with openness to assets and surroundings in the community, of a community arts project with residents of the Weinland Park neighborhood in Columbus. The transformation of college through action and reflection was of primary concern. As is seen in Daniel and Drew’s (2011) community act, self-reflection is a vital aspect of participatory and community-based processes. It is through the process of identification and rethinking of how we see the world, that Albers (1999) discusses the possibility of social change by making ideologies and the resulting positions of privilege visible. As Hutzel and Resler (2010) describe:

We had all crossed some borders in coming together for this experience. The borders were physical, emotional, intellectual, and personal, creating a slight
discomfort in the beginning that eventually dissipated with our focused and collaborative work toward completing our art piece...With ongoing involvement, we can only imagine these multiple borders and boundaries we encountered in Weinland Park could eventually dissipate. (p. 50)

While community change is often only a possible result of individual change, the strength of conceptualizing the political action of artmaking as encounter lies in its potential. Often in encounter, the change occurs within the participants. Reflecting on and ultimately changing ways of thinking and doing at the individual level makes encounter an easily accessible and applicable theory for community arts educators.

**Intervention.** Art education as intervention is one of the most expanded visualizations of action within social justice art education. Beyes and Steyaert (2011) bring together the aesthetic with the participatory, suggesting a uniting of artmaking and action research through interventions. Duncum (2010) describes a continuum of intervention from social critique to social action with foundations ranging from cultural studies to interventionist art, offering both alternative and oppositional stances to power, and presents either a prescriptive or proscriptive model of society or both. This continuum includes critiquing private and public space, engaging in community and environmentalist art, and activist art.

Community and activist art in particular offer examples of intervention. Community art presents an alternative, prescriptive model of society through collaborations with community partners. One example includes Williams and Taylor’s (2004) work with incarcerated abused women utilizing narrative art to address the issue of domestic violence, presenting alternatives and the potential for change. Activist art on the other hand involves direct interaction with the public about topical and local community issues through public dialogue, challenges power and seeks to encourage people to take action or at least to “change the conversation” (Desai et al., 2003, p. 127), and offers an oppositional, proscriptive model of society using art as a vehicle. Activist art often manifests in the staging of public interventions, a form of creative resistance (Darts, 2004, p. 313). Richardson (2010) offers an expanded case of interventionist art
education and Thompson (2012) presents a collection of socially engaged artists and projects that intervene in issues of public space and social issues. In intervention, individuals and groups work within and against structural issues such as power, consumerism, globalization, and neoliberalism.

**Disruption.** Gooding-Brown (2000) developed a disruptive model of interpretation pulling from postmodern and poststructural theory, primarily the work of Foucault (1972), and offers strategies for understanding “the social construction of interpretation, self, and difference through discursive positioning” (p. 36). This model begins with the identification of the authoritative interpretation of the work under investigation. Then, the discussion focuses on interpretation as a discourse rather than the work itself; allowing students to explore their own positions in the discursive practices and better understand how the various positions construct interpretation. This is all done before returning to the work under investigation. Considering the action of social justice art education as disruption engages individuals with the identification and critique of power relations, dominant practices, positioning, and social constructions towards new ways of thinking and acting. More examples of community arts as disruption are needed to adequately explore its possibilities and limitations.

**Community arts as interruption.** I suggest another conception of artmaking as political action, drawing from Jean-Luc Nancy’s (1991) community theory. The field of art education has begun to explore the usefulness of Nancy’s work, which has contributed to the philosophical foundation of a/r/tography (Springgay, Irwin, Leggo, & Gouzouasis, 2008) and been put to work with art education curriculum in Finland (Illeris, 2013; 2014) and Canada (Pente, 2008). Illeris (2013) recognizes the useful ontology Nancy puts forth as a “continuous dynamic of relationships and ruptures” in which “being is always renewed” to propose a relationally constituted praxis (p. 81). This praxis places togetherness as politics and works between external and internal relationships to conceptualize a community of being-in-common and being-with whose “movement takes place not within established presupposed communities…but rather in everyday forms of coming together and coming apart” (Illeris, 2013, p. 81). This means looking at the
temporary communities, groups of collaborators working on community-engaged arts projects that resist a romantic understanding of community. For Pente (2008), Nancy’s concepts of finitude, being, and community and the implications on meaning and agency have the potential to move schooling towards a more empathetic emphasis by underscoring “the emergent relationship between individuals as integral to existential being, to learning, and to the nature of community” (p. 18). Most of the work with Nancy in art education has focused on the emergent and dynamic nature of community and its implications for meaning making; there is still much work to be done on the possibilities as well as the limits of Nancy’s theory of community particularly regarding action towards social justice.

Nancy states that his theory of community “requires and permits the ordinary to be presented not as extraordinary but in the extraordinary. It is a matter of that which makes an event and makes it come about from the common” (Nancy & Strong, 1992, p. 386). This for Nancy comes about in the writing of community. While Nancy focuses on literary communism as a response to the between, I suggest that artmaking, particularly community arts, offers another productive site of resistance and intervention in an effort to interrupt community. Artmaking has the potential to “articulate a “common” space that, while existing only by these articulations, remains nevertheless the articulation of a ‘between’ that joins them and defines them (even as they define it)” (Nancy, 2007, p. xxiv). Storytelling can also work to share the voices of the community in politically effective language, acting “not as an instrument or means for the communication of some signified content, but rather as a kind of intervention [by which the essence] itself is brought into play” (Fynsk, 1991, p. 28). Artmaking offers another site in which the need to ‘write’ despite the threat of signification works to intervene in an effort to transform relations, community, and society.

The action of community arts conceptualized as interruption means that artmaking works towards justice, exposes difference as community, and shares the experiences of being singular plural. Community arts acts are done with love and the political, addressing both truth and sense, so that working together is an expression of being-with
as well as being-in-common. While certainly relationship or political action is often emphasized above the other, for Nancy they coexist and are coexposed. Moreover, it establishes fixed conceptions of identity and community as that which must be changed, thus interrupting community and myth – the work of community arts.

**Conclusion of Literature Review**

In this literature review, I explicated the conceptual framework of this study. In Chapter 2, I introduced the theoretical framework for this study, drawing on the philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy. Somali identity was discussed through a review of studies across the diaspora addressing migration history, ethnicity, gender, and religions identification and practice. In this chapter, I situated DSVU as community arts education by defining community arts education and discussing a number of arts initiatives in the Somali diaspora. Finally, interruption was put forth as an additional conceptualization of the political action of community arts in an effort to forefront issues of identity and the role of storytelling in the relationship between individuals and community. The conceptual framework derived from community theory (Nancy, 1991), Somali Studies, and Community Arts establishes the methodology detailed in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 4: Methodology

This chapter addresses research methods and design. First, I describe the origins of this study and my initial resistance to formalizing *Dumarka Soomaaliyeed Voices Unveiled (DSVU)* as a research study. Then, I position *DSVU* within participatory action research (PAR) methodology (and its derivations of PA'R (hunter, emerald, & Martin, 2013) and P(A)R (Chatterton, Fuller, & Routledge, 2007) both stressing political action), participatory photography, and narrative inquiry. After explaining these origins, I define the study by presenting the research questions and explicating the research design and methods of field text construction, analysis, and presentation.

**Why Work with Somali Women?**

I am often asked why I work with the Somali community. Sometimes the inquiry comes from other non-Somalis, who are curious about the culture; sometimes it comes from Somali women with whom I am talking about *Dumarka Soomaaliyeed Voices Unveiled (DSVU)*. The identity of the inquirer prompts me to answer the question in different ways. For the former, I usually respond that I began volunteering with a Somali social service agency when I moved to Columbus because I enjoy working with people from different cultures. For the latter, my response revolves around wanting to challenge stereotypes. The question is laced with skepticism and my answer has everything to do with establishing a connection, trustworthiness, and credibility. Though both answers are comprised of some truth, neither response is complete. I continue to work with the Somali community because I want to get to know them better. The people I met have lived through events that I have difficulty comprehending: moving from continent to city, possessing vast global knowledge and experiences, speaking languages I do not understand, dressing, eating and praying differently than I do. Despite this diversity of experience I still often perceive their identity as singular based on factors such as dress. I
am not alone in this, so I work with members of the Somali community with explicit intentions of making a positive difference in my life and theirs, as well as the lives of those also working with and living alongside them.

Doing work with Somali women’s stories of diaspora could easily be read as a form of tourism or exoticism, ultimately working to fix the very identities we are trying to loosen. The constant threat of objectification – through the tools used to document the stories (the camera and the interview), the positionality of researcher and participants, and the process of research itself – demands critical sensitivity to the way in which research is carried out. This sensitivity led me to participatory and narrative forms of research, where community members are involved throughout the process of inquiry – deciding what is important to ask, what is meaningful, and what is worth telling and showing. In addition, our collaborative aim of drawing attention to issues of representation and totalizing concepts of community, identity, and culture emphasizes the political action of our work. The stories of the experiences coming to and redefining what it means to be a Somali woman in Columbus challenges stereotypes of Somali Muslim women. With the emphasis on participation and action, PAR is the organizing methodology of this study.

**Entering the Study: Methodology and Research Methods**

Women’s actual experience tells a different story. There is a split between the fictitious woman represented publicly and how we know our daily and private selves to be. How can we as women tell stories that eradicate the disparity between how we are seen and what we feel? How do we present who we really are in terms of images? And why does it matter that we do? To answer this we need to understand the very fundamental way that the representation of people helps to determine who they become. (Solomon, 1995, p.9)

**Project to Research Study**

*DSVU* began as an exhibition project for the Schweitzer Fellowship in 2012, a program providing resources to graduate students to facilitate projects addressing community health education disparities in underserved communities. From the start, this
orientation towards social justice aligned with the principles of participatory action research (PAR) including relationship, education, and political action. However, as I discussed project ideas with my community partner organization, the Somali Women and Children’s Alliance (SWCA), I avoided talking and thinking about these notions in terms of research. I had recently finished my master’s work, a PAR study resulting in the 2011 SWCA summer arts camp. I had drawn upon the work of Deleuze for my analytic frame and the resulting written product produced some tensions regarding my representations in that research. The language borrowed from Deleuze did not translate smoothly to practical application and the way that I subsequently represented SWCA was not interpreted as complimentary. Trying to balance professional and personal relationships with staff members, I opted to preserve the personal and continued working with the organization as a volunteer rather than a researcher. Conversation continued about the research, but I walked cautiously and felt I needed to find another route of analysis, interpretation, and presentation. Beginning a new project from this position, I situated it as community work rather than research despite the continued guidance of PAR.

Subsequently, for this new project funded by the Schweitzer Fellowship in 2012, I loosely drew on Wang’s (1999) guidelines for photovoice (a participatory action research method also known as participatory photography) and developed a method, which I call narrative participatory photography (Smith, 2014a). DSVU was designed to involve the women participating in the development of the focal questions, photography and storytelling, and the curation of the final exhibition. While Wang (1999) emphasizes the role of policymakers at the outset of any project as an ongoing and active audience for the work, DSVU’s goal from the beginning has been to offer multiple perspectives of young Somali women to the wider Columbus community in an effort to challenge common misconceptions of Somali culture. Because the emphasis of DSVU was not on policy, but rather on community education, I identify also with participatory photography, following examples of artists such as Wendy Ewald (2000), Wing Young Huie and the Lake Street USA project (Huie, 2000), the Somali Documentary Project (Roble & Rutledge, 2008; SDP, n.d.), and Crossing the BLVD (Lehrer & Sloan, 2003). Each of these examples
utilizes collaboration with community members to investigate a community issue through photography and dialogue. Though the projects and artists act as advocates, they do so without the explicit aim of photovoice to incorporate policymakers in the process.

While concern about maintaining relationships with my partner organization dominated the first DSVU initiative titled DSVUOSU, it also led me to pursue funding as an individual artist rather than under the legal protection of SWCA. This decision catapulted the project to pursue a life of its own, growing in directions uninhibited by concern for the representation and reputation of a nonprofit organization, while also preserving my relationship with SWCA. This ultimate break allowed the participants to drive the project. The separation also generated additional questions about my role: Am I a researcher, friend, artist, or fellow student? These questions were further conflated by my initial insistence of separating this project from my research endeavors. Ellis (2007) also asked similar questions, using her inquiry to explore relational ethics where one does “what is necessary to be true to one’s character and responsible for one’s actions and their consequences on others” (p. 4). This friendship as a method forefronts listening to and engaging in others’ stories, which Tillman-Healy (2003) describes as “radical reciprocity, a move from studying “them” to studying us” (p. 735, emphasis original). Without the constraints of working with a nonprofit organization and acting from a relational ethics, I refocused the project explicitly as PAR.

Considering relationship building as research, the act of listening to and engaging in stories as research, and placing storytelling at the center of our work together gave new life to the PAR principles that I value. This approach raised issues for me about my previous research with SWCA from the degree to which the research actually empowered those researched to act (which Lather (1991) describes as catalytic validity) to the extent that community members were engaged in all aspects of the research and to what ends.

55The first initiative was funded by the 2012-2013 Columbus-Athens Schweitzer Fellowship and the Ohio Art Education Association Franklin County Neighborhood Arts grant awarded to SWCA in 2012. The second initiative was funded by The Ohio State University Urban Arts Space Idea Lab grant and a grant from the Puffin Foundation West, ltd. These funds were used to provide small stipends to project participants and print and frame the exhibition.
As I reflected on the research process of previous work in my master degree program, I realized that the development of the action plan (the camp) was participatory, but the analysis of the data was not. I had kept separate the praxis and the theory. The research ultimately was not about us, it was about me and them separately.

This time, for this dissertation project, I had a new opportunity: I wanted to make sure participants drove the analysis of the stories – at least in the exhibit, but also in determining what was important about their stories and storytelling for my analysis. Though I continue to use poststructural theory to organize, extend, and challenge our practice, I made a point to discuss the concepts with participants. Moreover, I was deeply cognizant of what Glesne (2010) describes as attention to the mode of representation – offering the researcher and reader access to know the research participants, you as the researcher, and the meaning being made. In this vein, I kept in mind questions of representation and representation (related more to issues of interpretation). The intentional questioning of the roles of storytelling and research in this project led to the reframing this work as research.

**Participatory Action Research**

What makes research relevant is shaped not only by those involved in the research but also by the social context in which research is presented, interpreted and used…The challenge for PAR researchers who are serious about social change is to think through how to effectively provoke action by developing research that engages, that reframes social issues theoretically, that nudges those in power…and that motivates audience to change both the way they think and how they act in the world. (Cahill & Torre, 2007, p. 205)

From the beginning of my work with SWCA, I have utilized the principles guiding PAR as explained by Cahill and Torre (2007) to frame and reflect upon my work as an artist, a practitioner, and a researcher [see Figure 1]. Broadly, PAR is a qualitative research process that forefronts collaboration with participants in order to generate a “community response to a community issue” (Krieg & Roberts, 2007) through a cycle of “think, look, act” (Stringer, 2007). For DSVU, this meant that as I began the project and
worked with participants, we observed our surroundings and responded to what we saw through discussion and action, in our case developing the project and exhibition. As we continued to observe and reflect, the project process changed as well as the content of the exhibition. Each of these stages is represented in Figure 1 by a different color: blue for “look,” orange for “think,” and green for “act.” Method changes as a result of these cycles are noted in blue boxes.

Figure 1: DSVU as PAR

There is little agreement on a definition and application of PAR; yet the literature that explains the main tenets of PAR all involve three primary characteristics:

56See hunter et al., (2013); Kindon, Pain, & Kesby (2007); McIntyre (2008); Reason & Bradbury (2001); and Stringer (2007) for more on PAR methodology.
1) collaboration with research participants; 2) attention to the relationship between researcher and participant; and 3) the goals of learning and social change. Even within those broad values, the emphasis on participation, action, and research vary across derivations. For example, there is a growing movement of PAR researchers who emphasize (A)ction, maintaining that with the growing interest in PAR emanated a move away from an explicitly political and activist intent. Chatterton, Fuller, and Routledge (2007) have coined the phrase P(A)R, while hunter, Emerald, and Martin (2013) put forth Participatory Activist Research (PA'R), utilizing the term “activist” to emphasize the commitment to action within PAR. PA'R in particular is a values-driven process, what hunter et al. (2013) describe as “an open and interconnected approach, one that is unashamed of its political and ideological foundations and is constructed through relationships to the ‘other’ as defined by shared place-based interests” (p. 8). Attention to relationship and political action is key to the way PAR is practiced in this study.

Following in this explicitly social justice oriented PAR practice, I define PAR as a research process that works with and for a community group to collaboratively investigate an issue, experience, question, or problem determined by the group and in which participants are actively engaged in determining and carrying out the processes of inquiry, analysis, and presentation. This research forefronts relationships and works with the goal of transformation and change, a process in which learning plays an important role. Transformation and change is political, and occurs within the process of PAR and as a result of its product – thus making the goal of PAR and PAR itself political action.

Two of the definitional elements in particular are of concern in this study – relationship and political action. Building reciprocal and equitable relationships is the first key value of PAR, informing the type of participation and action advanced. Stringer (2007) identifies cooperation and consensus as the orientation of PAR activity, making the relationship between researcher and participant a deliberately working relationship. However, as Chatterton et al. (2007) describe, relationship moves beyond participation, to develop solidarity among participants and researcher, what McIntyre (2008) describes as building alliances between researcher and participants. In such a relationship, all work
together with mutual respect and understanding, changing power relations, and building emotional connections. hunter et al. (2013) explain that a PAR researcher learns how to listen to and care for others and through the process of relationship building, participants and researcher personally and collectively enact the changes envisioned day to day. Thus relationship is both a means to, and an end of, action.

These relationships encompass the friendships developed through a shared sense of values, purpose, and interest, often through collective participation in the research. I feel deep affection for the wellbeing of the women with whom I have worked; we share details about our lives through correspondence (email and Facebook), and they often inquire about my family and invite me to family and community functions. How do these relationships shift, and change with experiences, time, and communication? How do race, religion, background, and culture affect our relationship? Most important, how do these relationships facilitate sharing and political action? hunter et al. (2013) describes the researcher as a fellow participant working in relationship towards shared understandings and action; an activist working deliberatively for change.57

Because the PAR researcher is working for social change, it is important to consider what constitutes change. Chatterton et al. (2007) describe PAR as making spaces for action, providing opportunities for transformative dialogue, mutual learning, and even conflict. Cahill and Torre (2007) acknowledge the role that research and theory play in motivating the audience to change the way they think and act, encouraging researches to consider to develop research that engages and reframing social issues theoretically. DSVU takes Chatterton et al.’s (2007) and Cahill and Torres’ (2007) recommendations to heart by 1) creating spaces of dialogue for both participants and audience to explore their understanding of what it is to be a Somali women in Columbus through critical storytelling, a process of mutual learning about each other and ourselves through sharing experiences of difference and 2) introducing theoretical framework drawing on Jean-Luc Nancy’s (1991) community theory and engaging research methods that offer different considerations of thinking and acting in the world. DSVU is a political project, changing

57Nancy addresses the connection between relationship and the political in his concepts of being-with and being-in-common, discussed in Nancy (1991, 2000) and particularly delineated in Nancy (1997).
perceptions of the Somali community through the sharing of stories exploring the identities, perspectives, and roles of young Somali women participating in the project. For Nancy (1991), this means unworking community, or “a community consciously undergoing the experience of its sharing” (p. 40).

An integral aspect of PAR for hunter et al. (2013) is making the political action “explicit, owned, and deliberately aimed at making a positive difference in the lives of those suffering disadvantage or oppression and in the lives of those working in your cultural profession” (p. 21). Although this emphasis on political action uses the language of oppression, disadvantage, and marginalization, hunter et al.’s (2013) point that the political action is both the means and outcome of PAR and that it is unashamedly a driving force in the research is well made. PAR is a political endeavor and while PA'R utilizes language informed by critical theory, hunter et al. (2013) recommend determining the philosophical foundation (and its implications) from which researchers work. Considering the effects of the language used in conceptual and theoretical frameworks is an important element of the political nature of PAR. This is why I do not draw from Critical Race Theory, for example, because the concepts do not translate well into the experiences of the participants. Framing our discussions in terms of race places the stories into a culture and history with which the participants do not identify.58 One of the things missing from my previous research with SWCA was consideration of the cultural meaning that philosophical concepts may take. The relationship between the individual and the collective offered the basis of our inquiry, and Nancy’s (1991) community theory offered helpful insight to the levels of relationship between individuals, communities, and culture as well as the role of story in cultural identity and community.

This project aims to jointly produce knowledge and a critical interpretation and reading of the world (Freire, 1970) with young Somali women. The result of this collaboration is an educational tool (an exhibition of photographs and stories) that challenges common misconceptions and stereotypes of the Somali community. The goal of the exhibition is to change the way that non-Somalis think about and relate to Somalis,

58See Kusow (2006) for discussion of perceptions of race among Somali Americans.
as well as positively impact the way that the women participating in the project think about their identity and role in the community. We – the women participating in the project and me – are aware and take ownership of the political nature of this project; we work together consciously challenging stereotypes, “denouncing how we are living and announcing how we could live” (Chatterton et al., 2007), and creating spaces of dialogue, mutual learning, and even conflict. In fact, the conflict, the challenge, and the misconceptions are the driving forces of this project. What it means to challenge misconceptions, whose misconceptions, and indeed even what misconceptions entail has come to the forefront of this research study necessitating ways of thinking (epistemologies) and doing (methodologies) beyond PAR.

**Other Research Methods: Participatory Photography and Narrative Inquiry**

If we wish to understand the deepest and most universal of human experiences, if we wish our work to be faithful to the lived experiences of people, if we wish for a union between poetics and science, or if we wish to use our privileges and skills to empower the people we study, then we *should* value the narrative. (Richardson, 1990, pp. 133-134)

Photography and narrative were chosen as research methods as a result of participant input and support the values of PAR [see Figure 2]. While initially framed as an exhibition project, participatory photography emerged as a vital research method and quickly became the first descriptor of the project to prospective participants as well as the exhibition audience. It was at the point that participatory photography was chosen by research participants that the exhibition project became a research study. As *DSVU* continued, it became more about the telling of stories through images and words both oral and written. My background in studio arts and role as an arts educator grounded the project in artmaking; however the participants’ desire to write essays and poetry, the role of oral arts in Somali culture as discussed in Chapter 3, and the importance of the space of dialogue present in the development of the exhibition as well as created by the exhibition stories necessitated methods that more explicitly attended to narrative. This
section focuses on the methods used within the PAR project - participatory photography and narrative inquiry – and the reasons for choosing them.

**Figure 2: Research methods**

**Participatory photography: Photography and narrative.** Participatory photography is a derivation of photovoice, a PAR method that engages research participants in photography and storytelling to explore community issues and document community assets through a series of meetings and discussions (Wang, 1999). There have been a number of notable photovoice studies including Krieg and Roberts (2007), Lykes (2001), McIntyre (2003), Prins (2010), Wang (1999, 2006), and Wang and Burris (1997) that have documented the process of photovoice and discussed ethical issues such as inclusion/exclusion (Kaplan, Miles, & Howe, 2011) and surveillance/empowerment (Prins, 2010). Wang (1999) and Krieg and Roberts (2007) in particular outline specific steps to utilize photovoice, which involve several distinct phases: 1) identifying target audience, selecting and informing participants about potential risks and benefits, discussing themes and topics of investigation, and distributing cameras and taking photographs; 2) selecting, interpreting, and discussing photographs; 3) contextualizing the photographs through group discussion, voicing individual and group experience; and 4) codifying the photographs, identifying achievable target actions from the emergent issues, themes and/or theories including format for presentation (Krieg & Roberts, 2007; Wang, 1999; Wang & Burris, 1997). Krieg and Roberts (2007) however acknowledge
that there is a great deal of trial and error when it comes to employing participatory photography, including techniques for choosing and interpreting photos. Thus, the process development and implementation varies from project to project.

**Narrative participatory photography in DSVU.** We emphasized storytelling as well as photography in DSVU, and thus developed a method, which I call *narrative participatory photography* (Smith, 2014a), using the following steps:

1. **Recruitment.** Participants were recruited through what I term *community invitation*. Community invitation begins with community project leaders who help identify and invite suitable participants to participate, ideally through already established relationships. In addition, initiate relationships with potential community partners for exhibition.

2. **Focus.** With participants, we determined the focus of inquiry, methods of research (individual interviews, group interviews, individual photo sessions, group photo sessions, writing/photography between sessions, etc.), form of presentation (types of writing/photography to include in exhibition, general form of exhibition, where to exhibit, corresponding events), and target audience. I also worked with community partners to book exhibition venues, develop programs, and advertise events.

3. **Discuss and transcribe.** We co-facilitated discussions with community project leaders amongst participants. We discussed topics/questions developed in step 2; then, participants worked on writing and photography to bring to next meeting; discussed writing and photographs and additional topics decided upon by group, encouraging sharing stories; facilitated group/individual photography sessions; and then met to discuss writing and photographs and any additional topics. I transcribed interviews/discussions and then shared transcriptions with participants. We identified important themes or topics and pulled out individual stories or important conversations to use in exhibition/publications.

4. **Sharing.** I developed a space for sharing work online to allow for asynchronous discussion and interaction between sessions. DSVU utilized a private Facebook
group, but other platforms could be used such as Google Hangout, Weebly, Adobe Connect, Flickr, etc. This space also provided a different mode of communication and oftentimes a safer space for sharing ideas and opinions without silencing.

5. **Analyze through co-editing and co-curating.** We co-edited transcripts (we decided to edit transcripts into narrative form, which included deleting interviewer questions and cleaning up the “likes” and “ums”) and photographs. We co-curated the exhibit. Participants played an active role in choosing what to display and what not to display and discussed choices, arrangement, and sizing. I continued to member check and offered participants opportunities to add, redact, or edit work.

6. **Presentation.** I discussed plans with staff at the exhibition venue. Community partners may have input regarding content and arrangement. I prepared and installed the exhibit. Depending on timing and interest of participants, this may be done collaboratively. In the case of *DSVU*, I took care of printing/framing and installing the exhibit after posting layout templates on our Facebook page.

7. **Celebration event.** I invited participants to speak about their experiences with the project and to share their work. We invited community leaders, funders, targeted audience, and the general public to our event. I made a point to express appreciation for and contributions of participants and community partners.

8. **Explore other opportunities for presentation** including articles for scholarly and community-based publications, presentations, community forums, other exhibition sites, project website, and collaborations with groups in other cities. For example, we are pursuing several online magazines/newspapers for Somali women in the diaspora as an additional site for publication. As much as possible, work with participants to co-author, help initiate other projects, co-research, etc.

**Different art forms: Photography and storytelling.** As established in Chapter 3, I consider storytelling as well as photography as artmaking. The relationship between photography and narrative has been well established through research methods like
photo-elicitation (Harper, 2002; Ketelle, 2010), phototextualities (Hughes & Noble, 2003), and documentary artists such as Wing Young Huie, the Somali Documentary Project, *Crossing the BLVD*, and Wendy Ewald. In the following discussion, storytelling and photography are considered as different art forms. Arts-informed research uses various forms of artmaking to “enhance understanding of the human condition” (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 59), promote dialogue (Leavy, 2009), and to make scholarship more accessible to multiple audiences by giving access to alternative ways of knowing, “ones that offer the possibility of understanding, differently, matters of self, Other, history, and culture” (Hughes & Noble, 2003, p. 6). Photography and storytelling together encourage participation, drive the inquiry process, and facilitate presentations of finding.

**Encouraging participation.** Offering different methods of inquiry is an important aspect of encouraging participation. I have found that many people respond to artmaking with expressions of doubt, “I can’t even draw a straight line!” Taking photographs is something that almost everyone has experience with because of the availability of tools and the popularity of applications such as Instagram and sites such as Facebook, Tumblr, and Flickr. Utilizing a common media and repurposing it for the expressive intent of collaborative inquiry and meaning-making positions photography as a structural element helping to arrange the theoretical constructs, narratives and experiences of a project as well as their various representations “so that there is a coherent articulation of a particular perspective that illustrates knowledge production and purposeful communication” (Coles & Knowles, 2008, p. 62). Moreover, harnessing art forms already present in the community, such as oral art forms prevalent in Somali culture, is an important way to connect with participants. For example, while recruiting participants for the project at the Columbus Metropolitan Library Northern Lights branch (CMLNL), Zam Zam referred me to a friend’s YouTube video of a spoken word poem exploring Somali American identity (Kayla, 2012) [transcript in Appendix E]. This is not a unique case, as efforts such as Poet Nation (2012) provide a virtual platform for sharing poetry, music, and stories with the world. The explicit connection to oral traditions opened up possibilities
within the project, shifting the research methods to ones in which participants held
erpise and subsequently taught me to incorporate.

Driving the inquiry process. Bringing together photography and storytelling
(including poetry) in participatory photography as a research method drives the research
in different ways. Though there are few high quality examples of photovoice, the use of
visual images creates a platform for dialogue and mutual learning with a specific
outcome of creating an educational tool informed by local knowledge (Krieg & Roberts,
2007). Photography, as Ketelle (2010) so vividly describes, offers a different way to look
at and understand the world for the photographer and the viewer (whether the viewer is
the subject or the audience).59 Utilizing photography in addition to narrative offers a
method for data collection as well as initiating analysis by considering photographs as
texts.

More accessible presentation of findings. Lastly, these art forms facilitate more
accessible presentation of findings. Arts-based and arts-informed researchers have long
acknowledged the way that creative forms of inquiry and presentation have made
research more accessible (Coles & Knowles, 2008; Leavy, 2009; Ely, Vinz, Downing, &
Anzul, 1997). Narrative and photography make heady theories (like poststructuralism)
and complicated ideas about experience, identity, and culture accessible to wider
audiences beyond academic venues, inviting others to participate in critical
deconstruction and political action.

It is not only the process of exhibiting these stories and images that works to
“eradicate the disparity between how we are seen and what we feel” (Solomon, 1995,
p.9), but also the process of listening to the stories we tell through the process of the
developing the exhibit that makes what we do matter. It is our hope that these stories
disrupt any illusions of a fixed, singular identity that may persist among its participants
and audience. In Barthes’ (1981) analysis of photography, he explores three practices
involved in creating the final product: doing (which involves the photographer), looking

59Photographs can be examined for how they are composed and understood by the photographer, how
subjects help compose and interpret the images, how the photographs shape subjects understanding of
themselves, and how the combination of photographs and narratives contribute to the general public’s
understanding of Somali culture.
(involving the spectator) and undergoing (the Object). It is the work of all involved – the creator/storyteller/photographer, the viewer/reader/listener, and the object itself (text, story, and photograph) – to work together to make something happen.

**Narrative inquiry.** The prominence of storytelling in the participants’ culture and day to day life led to the use of narrative inquiry. While photovoice utilizes narrative, story in this method is seen in as part of a contextualizing process rather than an equal participant. Narrative inquiry, on the other hand, is “a way of understanding experience” through “living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up people’s lives, both individual and social” (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000, p. 20). In *DSVU*, we privileged narrative, both visual and written, to tell a different story about the experiences and lives of Somali women.

Several important aspects of Clandinin and Connolly’s (2000) narrative inquiry contribute a unique perspective to *DSVU*. First, telling stories is a manner of retrospective meaning making connecting memory, narration, culture, and identity development. Telling a story not only highlights the ways that context determines the choices the teller makes in representing experiences, but also determines the meanings of those choices. Secondly, the transactional nature of experience in the “continuous interaction of human thought with our personal, social and material environment” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 39) limits the ability to close a story (Frank, 2010) and emphasizes the relationship between the teller, the listener, the characters of the story, and the context in which the story is told. It is a process in which all are altered as the result of the telling and retelling. One might say that identity, community, and meaning are coexposed in the telling of stories (Nancy, 1991). Finally, narrative inquiry attends to the co-constitutive nature of stories and the people who tell and listen to them. Stories according to Frank (2010) are actors, acting in human consciousness – they create identity, make social lives. Stories do. The capacity of stories directly contributes to the action of PAR, emphasizing the activist intent of our work together.
Defining the Study

This research brings together narrative inquiry and participatory photography – what I call narrative participatory photography (Smith, 2014a) – in a PAR study. This study examined the stories and interruptions of two project initiatives engaging 14 women in storytelling and photograph through layered analysis of field texts. The questions guiding this research, methods of field text construction and analysis, and the format of field text presentation are expounded upon in this section.

Research Questions

The questions defining this research study focus on the content and capacity of the stories told in DSVU. They are derived from the project itself as well as the theory chosen to conceptualize political action. The main question of this research is:

*How do participants of Dumarka Soomaaliyeed Voices Unveiled (DSVU) articulate what it is to be a young Muslim Somali woman in Columbus, Ohio through visual, oral, and written narratives, and how do these stories interrupt perceptions of Somali women?*

Sub questions (drawing from Jean-Luc Nancy) include:

- What are the interruptions of DSVU?
- What perceptions and conceptions are the stories and photographs interrupting?
- How does conceptualizing the action of this project as interruption impact community arts and PAR practice?

This research is about an exhibition of stories, the storytelling process leading to it, and how the stories operate as interruption. It considers the women’s stories and how telling these stories have impacted themselves and others. It attends to the way that the stories enter into and challenge circulating perceptions of community. It works with building a new series of narratives that claims community narratives constructing stereotypes, assumptions, and cultural expectations and retells them in order to construct a language of lived experience, how it is received, perceived, misunderstood, and constitutive of identity, community and being (Rogoff, 2000 and Nancy, 1991). Thus,
this research is concerned with the women involved in *DSVU*, their stories, and the sites at which it has been exhibited and examines the exhibit content, participant observation of *DSVUNL*, and reflections of the project and its interruptions.

**Research Site and Participants**

The research study officially began with the start of the second *DSVU* initiative summer 2013. Because the project had already been implemented with five women (ages 19-31, all associated with The Ohio State University as students or alumni, primarily middle class although one participant described her family as upper lower class because of their dependency on welfare to continue to send remittances to family in Africa) and exhibited at three libraries, participants of the first initiative participated in follow-up interviews reflecting on the experience of participating, the process of storytelling, exploring possible interruptions, and how they have seen the exhibit evolve and impact others. In addition, I began a second initiative (*DSVUNL*) in Columbus at CMLNL. *DSVUNL* was facilitated with nine women (ages 18-21, all but one residing at the time in the neighborhood surrounding CMLNL, middle class, and enrolled or intending to enroll in college). The *DSVUOSU* exhibition at CMLNL in April 2013 incited interest from Zam Zam, a young Somali woman employed by the library’s Homework Help Center (HHC), as well as library staff, which led to a project initiative based out of CMLNL as well as a reopening of the exhibit (which included work from *DSVUOSU* and *DSVUNL*) in January 2014. See Figure 6 in Chapter 5 for project timeline.

From my initial contact with Zam Zam, I relied on *community invitation*, a form of *snowball sampling* (Stringer, 2007), to establish and extend participation. In this practice, relationships develop based on personal recommendation from participants, an important aspect of trust building particularly within the Somali community. In order to explore more diverse perspectives, it was important to start snowball sampling with different gatekeepers. If the project only continued through connections with the original five participants, who had similar backgrounds with regard to migration history, education, religious practices, and socioeconomic statuses, *DSVU* would have continued to collect stories and images that represented only one segment of the Somali community,
ultimately serving to refix preconceptions of Somali women. Working with CMLNL engaged a more diverse group of women in the project.

**Field Text Construction**

I utilized participant observation, interviews with project participants, writing and photography including those created during the project as well as my own, and evaluation feedback from exhibit audience and library staff to construct field texts. hunter et al. (2013) prefer the term *field text* to *data*, which implies something finite and definable, while observations, documents, and narratives are in fact constructed texts during research, often fluid and changing. The methods of construction are typical of PAR projects and have been informed by the other research methods employed [see Figure 3].

![Image](image.png)

**Methods of field text construction:**
- Oral history interviews
- Group interviews
- Participant observation
- Artmaking: Photography and writing
  - (poetry, essay, journal)

Figure 3: Field text construction methods

**Participant observation and writing as a method.** Participant observation is a common method used in PAR in which the researcher engages in activities of the group over a prolonged period. Participant observation began long before this study was initiated with my involvement in SWCA and *DSVUOSU*, and while I kept a research journal throughout this time, intentional recording of field notes did not begin until *DSVUNL* began in August 2013. In my field notes activities were reconstructed through inscription, transcription and description (Schwandt, 2007), while my research journal focused more on my reflections and reactions to events. Both texts are utilized in this study.

Keeping fieldnotes is an important element of fieldwork, which Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2001) describe as writer’s prose in which we set out to describe and analyze
complexity (Blommaert & Jie, 2010). These notes include not only what we witness, but how we witness it and the ways “in which we tried to make new information understandable for ourselves, using our own interpretive frames, concepts and categories, and gradually shifting into new frames…finding our way into the local order of things” (Blommaert & Jie, 2010, p. 37). Blommaert and Jie (2010) continue to encourage the use of any form of writing that makes sense to capture the what and the how, echoing Richardson and St. Pierre’s (2005) writing as method.

Writing as a method collects data in the writing itself (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) through techniques such as analytic memos, which help trace the growth of theoretical understandings (Ely et al., 1997; Emerson et al., 2001), and the recording of dreams, memories, and other often overlooked sources of data. Especially because participant observation began before the recording of fieldnotes, retelling these experiences and connecting them to the events and fieldnotes of subsequent project initiatives is an important way to incorporate and make meaning of the DSVUOSU initiative.

Retroactively defining the boundaries of this study makes it difficult to return to the state of mind in which I was working in the original initiative (before candidacy exams and the extensive review of Somali Studies literature, and still close to the relationship with SWCA) and reflect on DSVUOSU without the influence of the experience of facilitating DSVUNL. However, I worked with DSVUOSU participants to identify and discuss critical incidents (Hunter et al., 2013) and told and retold the stories from the exhibitions through writing looking for new understandings and trying to think about the stories in the context of my current work.60

**Interviews.** An important aspect of DSVU includes interviews in a variety of forms [see Appendix B for interview questions]. In DSVUOSU, we utilized oral history

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60I write about the return to critical incidents through writing and artmaking in a yet unpublished manuscript (Smith, 2014b). This return serves to collapse the temporal nature of the action research (AR) cycle, following Drummond & Themessl-Huber’s (2007) model of Deleuzian enhancements for AR. Considering the relationship between time, memory, and the process of retelling or remaking a story has important implications for the consideration of PAR and the presentation of research. Rarely do events sit neatly in the past, informing present actions and constructing futures through their reiterations.
interviews to collect life stories of the five young women participating in the project. However, *group interviews* (my preferred term for focus groups ranging in size from 2 to 8 participants) were utilized in *DSVUNL* due to time constraints and the wishes of the participants. Both were *semi-structured interviews* endeavoring to better understand complex behavior without categorization (Fontana & Frey, 2007) by bringing broad topics and questions to help initiate conversation, but allowing for participants to lead the direction of talk. Moreover, both types of interviews attend to the relationship between researcher and participant, acknowledging each player’s role in constructing the knowledge and meaning shared through the ensuing dialogue. I conducted follow-up interviews with research participants of *DSVUOSU* and *DSVUNL* where we explored how the stories and images were constructed, what was eliminated and why, what challenged the participants’ perceptions, what they thought interrupted others’ perceptions, and further elaboration of these points.

**Field Text Analysis**

The work of field text analysis requires critical thought and ethical reflection as described by Fine (1998):

> The project at hand is to unravel, critically, the blurred boundaries in our relation, and in our texts; to understand the political work of our narratives, to decipher how the tradition of social science serve to inscribe; and to imagine how our practice can be transformed to resist, self-consciously, acts of othering… qualitative researchers are chronically and uncomfortably engaged in ethical decisions about how deeply to work with/for/ despite those cast as Others, and how seamlessly to represent the hyphen. Our work will never “arrive” but must always struggle “between.” (p. 140)

Following Fine (1998), my analysis was “chronically and uncomfortably engaged in ethical decisions” with an examination of how the participants articulate what it is for them to be young Somali women in Columbus and the way that their stories (visual, written, and oral) operate as interruption. *Layering analysis* is one way of working “between” different conceptions of Somali women. As Ely et al. (1997) write, “Layered
stories…underscore each person’s creative, active interpretation of experience” (p. 80). Putting the data to work through multiple analytical frameworks mines the stories for all their possibilities. These frameworks include *juxtaposition of stories within cultural categories* (Abu-Lughod, 2008/1993), *dialogical narrative analysis* (Frank, 2010), *writing as a method* (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), and *thinking with theory* (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) [see Figure 4].

![Layered analysis](image)

**Figure 4: Layered analysis**

**Juxtaposition of stories within cultural categories.** Examining the meaning co-created by participants and researcher through ethnographic dialogue, which involves the
contextualization of specific texts – in this study, stories – cultural analysis seeks to “analyze at the level of meaning, social structure, power relations and history” (Lather, 2000, p. 481), attends to microscopic (the contexts that define the story) and macroscopic contexts (social, cultural, historical, political, institutional contexts), and addresses the role that research plays in knowledge production (Blommaert & Jie, 2010). Abu-Lughod’s (2008/1993) analytic frame in *Writing women’s worlds*, a narrative ethnography of women in a small Bedouin community, categorizes stories and observations into abstract social “institutions” and cultural phenomena (e.g. patrilinearity, marriage, reproduction, honor and shame) and contrasts these categories with complex, detailed, and personal arguments, experiences, and stories. By juxtaposing the broad with the specific, this analytic frame explores the ways that various elements of broad depictions, “although often present, do not always take the expected form or fall into patterns” (Abu-Lughod, 2008/1993, p. 18). In *DSVU*, this analytical strategy means juxtaposing the women’s stories within broad cultural categories such as family, traditions, religion, and dress.

**Dialogical narrative analysis.** Frank (2010) describes *dialogical narrative analysis* as concerned with the capacities of stories and their structure. In other words, dialogical narrative analysis looks at what stories *do*, focusing on what is at stake for whom, how the story and the way it is told defines and redefines those stakes, and how the stories changes people’s sense of what is possible, what is permitted, and who is responsible or irresponsible. The questions are asked to determine all the variations and possibilities inherent in the story, and look for how the story realizes its capacities. Some tactics for interpreting narratives include translating the story into images, translating the story to tell it from the point of view of previously marginal characters, notice which details might have been expected but are omitted, attend to differences between the storyteller, and slowing down. Working from the ideas drawn from interpreting the stories, this analytic layer includes developing a typology of stories told.

**Writing as a method.** Writing as a method, as St. Pierre (in Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) describes, is “writing to think” (p. 970) and writing into spaces that could
not be found using other forms of analytic induction such as coding or categorization. In this study, I use experimental and narrative writing\textsuperscript{61} to put the stories collected through interview, observation, and artmaking to work with the larger body of literature concerning Community Arts, Somali Studies, and community theory (Nancy, 1991). Utilizing different forms of experimental writing, including poetry and narrative drama,\textsuperscript{62} to work with field texts helps move beyond what the women and their stories mean to address issues of representation and subjectivity.

Writing as a method is a response to postmodern qualitative research method. It calls into question what is meant by method itself and blurs the lines between methods of data collection and data analysis. As such, writing is used to create field texts as well as analyze them. Subsequently the presentation of field texts in Chapters 5 and 6 include analysis as well as presentation.

**Thinking with theory.** Finally, *thinking with theory* (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) is akin to what Ely et al. (1997) describe as *conversations with theory*. Thinking with theory is a way to think methodologically and philosophically together within and against stuck places, lifting levels of thinking in order to deepen and extend insights (Ely et al., 1997, p. 218). It offers a different analytic tool than those coding, categorizing, and identifying themes in key experiences (strategies of analysis offered by Stringer (2007) for action researchers). While PAR researchers are often critical of the potential imposition of theoretical frameworks foreign to participants (see Stringer, 2007), Jackson and Mazzei (2012) as well as other qualitative researchers such as Lather (2006, 2007) and St. Pierre (2012) have identified the benefits of utilizing philosophical concepts to extend and challenge our practice and understanding as researchers. Therefore, I put Nancy’s (1991) community theory to work with my data in order to decenter both theory and practice, showing how they constitute one another, while being deliberate and transparent about the analytical questions made possible by Nancy’s theoretical concepts and how those questions have emerged in the middle of plugging in. This process of plugging in works

\textsuperscript{61}Narrative writing is more than “reflections of experience” and “descriptive free-for-alls…Rather, narratives [provide] the analytic platform, tools, and sensibilities for capturing the rich and variegated contours of everyday narrative practice” (Gubrum & Holstein, 2008, pp. 250-251).

\textsuperscript{62}See Ely et al. (1997) for a rich description of different forms of experimental research writing.
the same data chunks repeatedly, offering brief stopping points as the data pushes into the theory pushes into the data.

**Validation and evaluation.** Using multiple methods, sources, and analytic frames provide “corroborating evidence” in an effort to shed light on a theme or perspective, what Creswell (2007, p. 208) defines as *triangulation*, a strategy of validation. While this study utilizes several forms of validation including prolonged and persistent observation; member checking to establish credibility; and rich, thick description, *crystallization* offers the central imagery for validity. Drawing from Richardson and St. Pierre (2005), crystallization “combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angle of approach… [reflecting] externalities and refract within themselves” (p. 963). While crystallization permits more than three perspectives to validate interpretation and analysis, it does not imply infinite possibilities. Simply adding as many perspectives as possible will not produce a better study. Therefore, I limited my interviews to participants in the project, allowing their experiences to grow crystals, and layering their perspectives to create a multifaceted, reflexive, and collaborative account of a PAR study. Moreover, utilizing different practices and multiple analytics, as Lather (2006) states,

fosters difference via impossible practices of excess, affect, speed, and complexity…This is between space of what seems impossible from the vantage point of our present regimes of meaning, a between space situated as an enabling site for working through stuck places of present practice. (pp. 44-45)

An important aspect of a narrative approach to inquiry is the reconsideration of evaluation criteria. Following Richardson (in Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), criteria for Creative Arts Practices (CAP) Ethnography, apply to this process – with its attention to narrative forms of writing and ethnographic inquiry. These criteria include substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, and impact. Does this piece contribute to our understanding of social life? Is it rigorous, and credible? Does the use of photography, narrative, and storytelling open up the text and invite interpretative responses, leaving the story open? Is the text artistically shaped, satisfying, complex, and not boring?
adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to make judgments about point of view, the author’s role in producing and being a product of the text, and accountability? Does the text impact the reader emotionally? Does it invite new questions, inspire to write or try new practices, or move to action? Utilizing evaluation criteria addressing both the scientific and the aesthetic raises the merit of both.

**Formatting the Presentation**

Refusing to deliver the women to the reader in a linear, tidy, return of narrative, we intend to block and displace easy identification and sentimentalizing empathy. Thus, the text works toward constructing a respectful distance between the reader and the subject of the research. (Lather, 2007, p. 143)

“Here, I must interrupt myself: it is up to you to allow to be said what no one, no subject, can say, and what exposes us in common” (Nancy, 1991, p. 81).

The remainder of this dissertation is structured to share the interruptions of *DSVU* utilizing narrative conventions. It begins with the telling of a story. Already, I have oriented the reader to this study in Chapters 1-4. Chapters 5 and 6 describe the sequence of actions through the presentation of the project and exhibition in narrative and photo-essay. While these chapters are described as presentation chapters, the creation and analysis of field texts are not easily separated following writing as a method. Next, Chapter 7 evaluates the significance and meaning of the stories offered up, or shared out, by discussing the participants’ articulations of being Muslim, Somali women, and how these stories interrupt perceptions of Somali women. Here, the interruptions of *DSVU* are described, examined, and worked for their possibilities using Nancy’s community theory as an interpretive frame. Chapter 8 brings us to resolution and coda, a return to the present. Working to interrupt my writing, as *DSVU* worked to interrupt fixed perceptions, refuses as Lather (2007) so eloquently describes “to deliver the women to the reader in a linear, tidy, return of narrative” (p. 143) so as to continue to interrupt any fixed notions of identity or community. Thus, the discussion and conclusions laid out in Chapter 8 pertain to PAR and Community Arts practice.
Summary of Research Design

This chapter has established PAR as the organizing methodology, utilizing participatory photography and narrative inquiry as supporting research methods as a result of participant informed design. Multiple methods and layered analysis are employed and work together towards crystallization, an alternative method of validity. Finally, the forms of presentation of the research support PAR’s commitment to engage audiences and interrupt fixed perceptions, or stereotypes, of the participants and their stories. See Figure 5 for overview of research design.
Figure 5: Overview of research design
CHAPTER 5: Presentation Part I: DSVUOSU

Introduction to the Presentation Chapters

As a reminder, Table 1 serves as translation of the multiple acronyms used in this study. Participant voices are differentiated from my voice with the use of italics throughout the remainder of the dissertation, except when presented as part of an interview transcript where the speakers are clearly demarcated. Throughout the presentation chapters (Chapters 5 and 6), I use writing as a method (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), which involves layering field texts including interview transcripts, field notes, research journal entries, and photographs through creative writing. As a result of this approach, there are analytical elements in these chapters, although findings are not explicitly addressed until the presentation of analysis in Chapter 7. This chapter provides an overview of the first initiative, DSVUOSU, followed by a discussion of the transition from project to research. Chapter 6 presents the second initiative, DSVUNL, and the second exhibition including work from both DSVUOSU and DSVUNL.

Revisiting Methodology

Participatory action research (PAR) is “messy, often slow” work that engages issues of ideology, power, culture, politics, and context; sustained by relations, engages in the contradictions of everyday lives as well as the possibilities, and harnesses the power of collaboration (Cahill et al., 2010). DSVU is a PAR study, and as such the interactions between participants drive the process and the resulting product. This study focuses particularly on building relationships and the political action of our work together. Relationships were developed among individuals participating in the project, and though many participants had already established friendships, familial ties, and acquaintances, DSVU provided an opportunity spend time together with the specific intent of exploring issues and expectations relevant to young Somali women in the
diaspora. As a result of these relationships, story became an important aspect of the project resulting in the use of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) through the telling and retelling of stories in the form of oral exposition, poetry, and written essay to discuss the issues and questions identified as important among participants. Moreover, because many of the issues were relevant to cultural expectations and perceptions of Somali women from within the Somali community as well as those held by non-Somalis in the form of stereotypes, an understanding of these stories and their role in the micro context of the participants’ lives as well as macro context within the diaspora was important (Blommaert & Jie, 2010). Thus narrative and cultural contexts informed the construction of field texts.

What follows is a narrative account of developing DSVU, intermingling my experience as documented through various modes of reflection and observation and the voices of the participants. I begin with the start of the project in the summer of 2012, which overlaps with the end of my work with the Somali Women and Children’s Alliance (SWCA). The first initiative, DSVUOSU (July 2012 to April 2013), engaged five women – Qorsho, Nasra, Muna, Hoda, and S. – and is primarily documented through my research journal, Schweitzer Fellowship monthly reports, significant Facebook and email communications that I copied into my journal, participant interviews and the narratives and photographs created from them, and post-project interviews with Muna (recorded interview), Nasra (written responses), and Qorsho (field notes). The second initiative, DSVUNL (August 2013 to January 2014), engaged nine women – Zam Zam, Asha, Bahja, Miriam, A., Kayla, Zahra, Ladan, and Raamla.63

As previously discussed, I began intentionally documenting DSVUNL as research and as a result rely on field notes and interview transcripts in addition to the stories and photographs created by the women. I include a sampling of the data collected here, to

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63Interviews are cited using the following notation: (name of the speaker, interview title, date). Stories and poems taken from the exhibition materials are cited by the project website: (DSVU, 2014). In my research journal, I included headings for each of my entries identifying the overall topic of the entry and date. Excerpts of my field notes are cited using the date and heading or type of entry. Schweitzer monthly reports are cited: (Schweitzer monthly report, Month and Year submitted). Comments from the DSVU comment book are cited: (Location of exhibit, comment book, Month and Year).
indicate the types of conversations and stories told. Stories published in the exhibit are found in Chapter 6 as well as Appendix C and E. Full transcripts are not provided due to confidentiality agreements. I stopped collecting data for the intents of this study after conducting a post-project interview with Zam Zam two days following the opening of the DSVUNL exhibit in January 2014, though communication with the women, photography, and writing for the project continued. For a complete project timeline, please refer to Figure 6.

Though both DSVUOSU and DSVUNL were established with the same goal of challenging stereotypes, they differed greatly in content and process with the participants’ guidance. This chapter explores the creation of the exhibition materials by describing the process of developing DSVUOSU and the transition from project to research study. Then, the DSVUNL initiative is presented in Chapter 6. In both chapters, I introduce each participant and explore how our relationships informed the exhibit and the research. The culminating exhibition at Northern Lights (CMLNL) in January 2014 is then presented at the end of Chapter 6 as a photo-essay, and includes photographs and narratives from both project initiatives.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September 2010</td>
<td>Begin working with SWCA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2011</td>
<td>SWCA summer arts camp (master degree thesis research)</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 2012</td>
<td>Submission of master’s thesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2012</td>
<td>Begin Schweitzer Fellowship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2012</td>
<td>Begin meeting with Mohammed &amp; Qorsho to start DSVU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 2012</td>
<td>Conflict with SWCA about thesis representation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2012</td>
<td>Interview Qorsho, Nasra, &amp; Muna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2012</td>
<td>Meeting with Qorsho &amp; Nasra about participatory photography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2012</td>
<td>Qorsho’s photo session</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2013</td>
<td>Interview Hoda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2013</td>
<td>Work through email &amp; Facebook to co-edit and curate exhibition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2013</td>
<td>DSVU OSU exhibit at CML Main with participatory photography workshop</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 2013</td>
<td>DSVU OSU exhibit at Westerville Public Library with participatory</td>
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<td></td>
<td>photography workshop</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 2013</td>
<td>Schweitzer Fellowship ends</td>
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<tr>
<td>Summer 2013</td>
<td>Candidacy exams &amp; relocate to Indiana</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Begin doctoral research</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 2013</td>
<td>Meet with Zam Zam for the first time and begin to plan DSVUNL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2013</td>
<td>First group meeting at CMLNL with Zam Zam, Asha, Bahja, Miriam, &amp; A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2013</td>
<td>Second group meeting at Kayla’s with Zam Zam, Zahra, Asha, Miriam, A, &amp; Kayla.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2013</td>
<td>Easton photography session with Zam Zam, Asha, Bahja, Miriam, &amp; A.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post Project interview with Muna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cancelled third group meeting at Easton. Ladan joins project.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uninstall CML Hilltop DSVU OSU exhibit</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Work through Facebook, email, phone, &amp; text to collect stories, poems, &amp; photographs. Raamla contributes poem from Toronto.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post project interview (email) with Nasra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2014</td>
<td>CMLNL DSVUNL opening event for exhibition including poetry reading by A., Ladan, &amp; Zam Zam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post project interview with Qorsho (unrecorded, in field notes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post project interview with Zam Zam (recorded)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6: DSVU project timeline

**DSVUOSU: The First Initiative**

*DSVU* began as a project for the Schweitzer Fellowship, a program to develop leaders in service among graduate students and provide resources to develop community health education programs. In my application, I proposed to partner with SWCA and their umbrella organization, the Somali Cultural and Research Institute (SCRI), to develop a cultural exhibit utilizing the artifacts in SCRI’s collection. However, by the time I was
accepted as a Fellow and began to develop the project in summer 2012, several events had occurred resulting in changes to my plans.

**From Objects and Artifacts to Human Experience and Photography**

First, when I met with Dirios, the director of SCRI, after his return from Holland in April 2012, I found his office empty. Just a few weeks prior, the shelves were filled with artifacts that I expected to use in the exhibition. He told me that he donated them to a Somali museum in Minneapolis, presumably Osman Ali’s museum (see Crann & Shenoy, 2013). With no objects to use, I had to rethink the content of my exhibition. I wanted to focus on the community here and now, not just nomadic culture and Somali heritage; and explore how younger Somalis define their culture. After seeking out and meeting Tariq Tarey and Abdi Roble from the Somali Documentary Project, a photography exhibit focusing on the role of women seemed to be more feasible. They recommended a young Somali photographer, Mohammed, and subsequently Mohammed and I met several times to discuss the project.

**Representation, Conflict and Rethinking**

Second, as a result of the conflict resulting from representation in my master’s research discussed in Chapter 4, I tried to position myself at SWCA as a volunteer, not a researcher. I continued to work with SWCA, and sought input regarding the focus of the project and gaining entry with other Somali women. While in past projects, such as the 2011 Summer Arts Camp, I relied on staff members and my association with their organizations to implement programming, with the disappearance of the cultural objects at SCRI and the challenges in my relationship with SWCA, I pursued my own contacts and began *DSVU* with an unaffiliated group of women.

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64 Because Dirios is a public figure and was referred to by his actual name in previous research, I continue to refer to him in this manner. However, he was not a participant in this research study. All other research participants chose to a) use their first names, b) use an initial, or c) select a pseudonym to identify themselves in the exhibition and project website as well as this research study. All participants chose to use first names or initials.

65 Though Dirios no longer has a store/museum in Global Mall, Zam Zam informed me that he has a cultural store in another Somali mall in Columbus (Zam Zam, post project interview, January 19, 2014).

66 Pseudonym used to maintain anonymity since not a research participant.
**Meeting Qorsho.** I met Qorsho while volunteering at SWCA in 2011. She came into the office while I was sitting at a table with a little girl, working on alphabet flashcards. She was dressed more conservatively than some of the other young women I had seen in the Global Mall, wearing a deep red hijab with gold stripes threaded in and fringe at the end, a black robe to her feet with stripes at the cuffs and circling the torso, and tennis shoes. She was an intern helping Dirios translate Somali folktales into English; her schedule as a junior at Ohio State did not allow her to volunteer with the adult programs, which she told me was her real interest. “The kids get ESL at school. They don’t need opportunities to learn English and to learn about American culture like the adults do” (April 20, 2011, research journal). I came to learn that she is a strong advocate for Somali women and youth in particular, seizing every opportunity to educate others about Somali culture and to mentor Somali teens to help them through school and into college. We exchanged emails about our work over the next few months and she helped translate IRB consent forms for my master’s research. However, I did not meet her face-to-face again for a year when we ran into each other at the 2012 Somali Cultural Festival where I was leading children’s activities and starting to recruit women to participate in what would later come to be known as Dumarka Soomaaliyeed Voices Unveiled.

**From Project to Participatory Photography**

Qorsho immediately agreed to participate in the photography project. I emailed her after the Festival, telling her about the ideas Mohammed and I discussed in our initial meeting. The three of us met to determine the direction for the project. Mohammed suggested that he would take studio portraits of each woman, and we agreed that I would do the interviews and Qorsho would help recruit participants and assist with the interviews. We brainstormed topic ideas, and decided to start our interviews by asking about each participant’s arrival to Columbus, their perceived roles in the community, and how they would define their community, family, religion, dress, and traditions. Afterwards, Qorsho told me:
The project is taking an interesting direction. I originally thought the pictures would be more natural - an example would be the iftar\textsuperscript{67} we discussed or something similar that would have the subject engaging in a particular activity. The way I imagined the photo shoot is coming out differently. That being said, I am still willing to be a part of the project and will try to see if my friends are still interested as well. What about you? What are your thoughts? (August 7, 2012, personal communication recorded in research journal).

We continued to email feedback. I told Qorsho that I too “had pictured the images being more ‘natural.’”

It may be that Mohammed is wanting the same (in addition to the studio shots) but is describing them differently. I think that as we start collecting words and images, we’ll get a better idea of what we have and what we’d like…it’s a little hard to visualize it right now – at least for me. (August 7, 2012, personal communication recorded in research journal)

We scheduled an interview together and I soon received an email from another future participant, Nasra.

\textbf{Nasra.} Qorsho told her friend Nasra about our project and she contacted me to learn more. After exchanging several emails about the project, Nasra agreed to participate and wanted to interview immediately. We agreed to meet at the student union, and I sat by the stairs scanning the passing students for a woman in a headscarf. We found a table tucked away on the third floor to do our interview.

These individual interviews took the form of oral histories. I brought some basic framing questions [see Appendix B] that Qorsho and I had compiled, but each interview took its own shape depending on the interests and stories of the woman telling them. For Nasra, the recent move from Pittsburgh to Columbus put into relief many aspects of the Somali community in Columbus:

\textit{Living in Pittsburgh for two years and away from my community had an impact on me. Great things were happening in Columbus and I would have loved the...}

\textsuperscript{67}If\textit{tar} is the meal eaten after sundown to break fast during Ramadan.
opportunity to have been more involved with them. Youth and young adults were
more active and begin quickly working together to help those devastated by the
famine in Somalia. I was inspired to help as much as I could. In Pittsburgh, my
friend Jamaad and I decided to host a fundraising event at our school and donate
the funds to an orphanage in Somalia. Pittsburgh does not have a large Somali
community, so many people did not even know about the famine at the time. It was
a great way of spreading awareness while helping those in need. (Nasra, DSVU,
2014).

Like after the interview with Qorsho, I followed up with an email copied to Mohammed
about scheduling a photo session.

All Woman, Creating Not Collecting

As the first participants, Nasra and Qorsho played the most active role in shaping
the first iteration of the project. I interviewed both separately and then asked them to
arrange a time to meet with Mohammed to take photographs. There was some concern
about the fact that he was a male photographer, and as a result, they arranged to do their
photo session together. The day of the first photo session passed and I heard little
mention of it. I soon received an email from Qorsho explaining that Nasra and she tried
to have a meeting with Mohammed the Friday before and were unable to. “We wanted to
have a discussion with you about the photography portion of the project. Are you free this
Thursday?” (October 21, 2012, personal communication recorded in research journal). I
was nervous, and quickly arranged a time to meet.

Up to this point, I relied on Mohammed’s expertise with documentary
photography – partially because I did not trust myself to do research (even if not
explicitly framed as such) after the conflict with SWCA and partially because I did not
and do not consider myself a photographer. As I told Qorsho in my email, “Perhaps I
need to be a little more hands-on with the photography portion. I didn't want to step on
any toes. But let's talk about it more!” (October 21, 2012, personal communication
recorded in research journal).
The day of our meeting came and the girls arrived in cheerful spirits. We chatted while I ate dinner between classes. After making our way through greetings, catching up, and sharing about our days, I broached the unknown.

“What happened?”

After rescheduling the photography session twice and shortly before the most recent meeting, Mohammed called to cancel their session. Qorsho had already taken the bus across the city and Nasra was on her way. It was not simply the inconvenience of rescheduling and then cancelling last minute, although that was considered disrespectful; it was that he was a man, and had a different vision of the project. After listening to their objections, I described an idea I had been toying with: participatory photography. We would take our own photographs and choose our setting, our subjects, and our actions based on the topics we selected. The girls agreed with this idea, and I promised talk to Mohammed about our change in plans.

I was nervous when I called Mohammed to tell him of the change of plans. He offered his assistance and told me to let him know when we scheduled our photo sessions so he could help. In the end, I did not hear from him again, although I emailed him information about the first photo session and our first exhibit, thanking him for all his help getting the project started. Now the project was all women with no concern about restrictions due to the presence of men, and was defined by creating stories and photographs by participants rather than the collection of stories and photographs by a researcher.

**Transformative Transition**

Though Qorsho had always played an active role in the development of the project, from this point on each of the women demonstrated leadership in developing the project. They were not simply involved in the research, but were invested in its success.68 Listening to and acting on their suggestions in order to rethink the photography portion of

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68McIntyre (2008) discusses the quality of participation in PAR, drawing from McTaggart (1997) who distinguishes between “involvement” and “participation”, the latter meaning that participants share “in the way research is conceptualized, practiced, and brought to bear on the life-world” (p. 28).
the project was an important catalyst designating the value of collaboration and participation. As Qorsho and Nasra wrote,

_I must say I'm really excited to start creating concepts for my photography bit and can't stress how much I prefer it! I think personalizing this area will allow for more candidates to feel comfortable with the idea of it all...I look forward to working on this project more and helping developing ideas for the photography portion. I am excited to be a part of this :)._ (October 28, 2012, personal communication recorded in research journal).

In fact, this meeting initiated more communication between participants and myself about all aspects of the project, including sharing summaries of the interviews and creating a private Facebook group page to share photos and create a group space to make decisions regarding the project. This is also the point where I began to think about this project as a PAR study and allowed the developing relationships between the participants and myself to define the research.

**Recruitment**

Upon Qorsho’s suggestion, I emailed the Somali Student Association at the Ohio State University. Their president, Muna, responded and agreed to participate in the project. In addition, Qorsho introduced me via email to her sister Hoda, who was working at a research lab in the university hospital. Though I continued to send emails to other student organizations and contacts in the Somali community about possible participation, the only contacts that panned out were people referred to me directly by one of the participants. I was frustrated with the slow pace at which the recruitment was taking place, but I was also coming to learn the value of networking through relationships, what Stringer (2007) calls snowball sampling. I hesitate to call it snowball sampling since sampling suggests picking and choosing; we were inviting others to participate in a project that we believed in and created together. It was a process of community invitation, akin to Ladson-Billings’ (1994) community nomination method, where I relied on community members to decide who else would be suitable participants.
**Muna.** Meeting Muna was a pivotal experience for me. We agreed to meet at a coffee shop near campus where I often work between classes. I arrived early to do some reading for class. It was five minutes past our meeting time, and then ten when I received a call.

“Ruth, are you here? I’m sitting by the counter.”

I looked up. Muna had been sitting at a table in front of me for the past ten minutes. She was not wearing a headscarf. I laughed, but my embarrassment at having my own stereotypes exposed and challenged was surely apparent. I quickly packed up my things and joined her at her table. Despite my shaky start, we discussed the project, arranged another time and place to do our interview, and left the meeting feeling invigorated.

We met a few days later at the mall where she worked for our interview. Dress emerged as an important topic, not only because of my own perceptions but also because of Muna’s. She was the first Somali woman I met who did not cover, and after telling her so, she embarked on a story that explained why.

*I don’t dress the part. I feel that I will wear hijab when I’m ready, when it comes from the heart and not just because I’m supposed to do it. Although, for example, I would never walk into a Somali mall dressed the way that I am right now, just for the mere fact that people, especially the older people, would lecture you in front of everyone. Why would you dress that way? Why won’t you wear a hijab? You’re a girl. And they keep going. I’d rather just go there covered. There was a point when my mom told me I had to put it on. I told her that I’d either wear it to make you happy and when I leave the house, I’ll just take it off, which I don’t want to do, or I will do it on my own. She realized that it was better that she knows what I’m wearing when I walk out of the house. My older sister wears it because she’s married. Once you’re married, you kind of have to. My other sister, she just now recently started wearing it. She’s not super religious, but she’s trying it out and staying committed to it.*
There was a point in my life where I thought I was ready and I wore it for a year straight. I still wore jeans and stuff, but I tried to cover my hair. It was about 2 years ago, my freshman year at Ohio State. One of my really good friends, she started wearing it. She uplifted me a little and I thought it’s time to grow up. So I put it on. I saw that friend switching back to her old ways and I kind of looked at it like that’s not cool, you know? She was talking a big game about it and I respected her a lot for putting it on. For me to see that she was turning back to her old ways and even becoming worse, I thought maybe I just did it in the heat of the moment. I’ve realized since that I just wasn’t ready and I just jumped into it. In Islam, we call that having low iman, which is faith. That’s just what I went through at that period of time and I took it off and said, you know I’m just going to restart. I feel like dress is so important. If it wasn’t so important I would just cover up because I’m supposed to. But you know dressing the part has a lot to do with your modesty. I just I’m still young. I don’t want to be kind of caged into doing something that I’m not proud of, that is not coming from the heart.

Taking it off was not as hard as putting it on. Taking it off was the easy part because you just took it off when you walk out of the house. Putting it on was hard because people see you without it all the time, so what are they going to think of me having it on? Most of my friends are Somali and they are Muslim, so they were happy to see me with it on because it was a big step. They didn’t say anything when I took it off. A big part of being Muslim is not judging anyone. Anything you do is between you and God. People don’t say anything when you’re doing something wrong, but when you’re doing something right they always congratulate you and respect you and are proud of it.

I’m still not ready to wear it. Hopefully one day soon. I need to become more dedicated to my religion. It has to do with me uplifting my iman. I just feel that right now I’m busy with school and work, that I don’t have the time to sit down at the mosque to listen to a lecture. So it just has to do with me working on it.
My friend doesn’t wear it anymore. We’re not friends anymore. She graduated from high school and her parents let her move to Cincinnati. She started doing things she wouldn’t do when she lived here. That’s the big thing. Most parents don’t allow you to move out because if you leave you’re going to wild out. You don’t have anyone on your back, telling you to come home or to do something at a certain time. You’re on your own completely. That plays a major role. It probably has something to do with why there are such big Somali communities places. We like to be around Somali people, we help each other out even if we don’t know each other. We have our faith. It’s just the idea of being around people that are the same as you. (DSVU, 2014)

I returned to this encounter throughout the project and in future interviews. It informed my questions, and initiated my work with the idea of interruption (Nancy, 1991). Muna helped me identify assumptions I continued to hold about Somali women, despite my years of experience with them, and through the many stories about dress the women told, we reconstrued a “single story”69 into one that affirmed differences in experience. Jean-Luc Nancy’s concept of interruption made sense in this context – that the identification of what he calls myth, the narratives that are told by and that form communities (such as Somali women wearing headscarves) simultaneously affirms the in-common as well as the plurality of experiences, what he calls being singular plural (Nancy, 1991; 2000). How do these stories interrupt our preconceptions, including my own? How is interruption a supporting concept? Muna taught me the most about what it means to cover, the choice that it entails both spiritually, physically and culturally, and what it means to choose not to cover. I noticed my conscious difference and my own learning in this engagement with Muna; I was building on the lessons I had learned from my representation of SWCA, and growing in my work as a researcher and collaborator.

69The concept of the single story comes from the TEDtalk by novelist Chimamanda Adichie entitled, “The danger of the single story,” retrieved from http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story. The TEDtalk was mentioned in the November 17, 2013 project interview, when Zahra mentioned that she wanted to do the single story on Somalia.
Hoda. I met Hoda soon afterwards, immediately recognizing her as Qorsho’s sister though she was softer-spoken and more reserved.

Ruth: This will be fun because I don't know much about you at all. I know a little bit about your sister, but let's get started. If you can say your name and then start talking a little bit about when you came to Columbus, how you came here.

Hoda: Ok sure. My name is Hoda Hassan and our family moved here to Columbus, Ohio 2000. We actually came from Atlanta, Georgia where we [were] at for four years and prior to that we lived in Canada for a few years. We came to, we moved to a suburb of Columbus, Ohio initially called Hilliard and we stayed there for about seven years and then we moved to the actual city proper. One of the reasons we came to Ohio in particular because there were more job opportunities for my mom, more jobs for my mom and she wanted more opportunity for new jobs and also she felt like, the perception that the schools here were better from where we were in inner city Atlanta. So it was kind of seen as coming here would be beneficial for her and beneficial for her children as well. And since we came here I’ve noticed that, initially when we first came in 2000 there weren’t many Somalis at all in Hilliard and also Columbus. But I think over the past twelve years, there’s been a pretty large expansion of the population both from overseas and from other parts of the U.S. coming together to sort of making the community here bigger.

Ruth: Can you talk a little more about the expansion of the Somali population a little more? I don't know if you've noticed any differences between Somalis overseas versus Somalis from different parts of the US and how you've interacted.

Hoda: So when I, or I should say, in Hilliard, there weren’t many Somali families so my interaction was mainly with my mom. A lot of the Somali women would get together at different places and at one point she actually owned
her own shop in one of the Somali malls out here at Innis and Cleveland Road. It's a really big one. So she owned a shop there, so she had a lot of interaction there, much more than I did. My interaction was pretty limited in high school with other Somalis, I did get along better with those who had been in America for longer – I could understand them better. Even though I am fluent in Somali, the cultural differences made it difficult for me personally to interact with a lot of the people who have come here more recently. I think in Columbus in particular there’s a larger refugee population in Columbus than other cities and so that makes it so the community here more fragmented and now it's starting to coming together where there are actual areas where people can get help if they need to, organizations that are sort of coming together. I think at first, in the beginning my interactions were pretty limited.

Ruth: When did you start connecting more with the Somali community?
Hoda: Probably when we moved here to Columbus, about four years ago in 2007, 2008. So when we came here there were a lot more Somalis here just, especially the northeast Columbus, there’s a much larger Somali population. Some of our neighbors are Somali and my interactions with them I mainly try to be with the mothers and their children. You know, I guess in Somali culture, you’re supposed to be really respectful of the parents. Anytime I visited I was always nice to them, and ask them how their day was. But there is a type of culture, especially amongst the women, it’s sort of an inherent understanding that younger women sort of hang out with younger women and the older women have their own place. And even, there's a sort of hierarchy so even the oldest women, the elders have their own thing where they're separate also from the younger ones. You notice this at weddings as well. Actually a lot of the weddings in Columbus that are by Somalis, the younger women aren’t always welcome. It’s seen as an older woman thing. It’s like they’re the ones who
have the dances, I guess you could say ritualistic dances, and the younger women are usually not a part of that. So there’s a distinction there.

(Project interview, November 9, 2012)

Photography Sessions

Working with Qorsho helped define the rest of the project. The first photography session, I drove to Qorsho’s house. As I entered the apartment complex of identical townhouses, I remembered Qorsho’s description of her neighborhood – calls to the police of domestic disturbance and her mother’s fear for their safety. I locked my car twice and knocked on her door. She welcomed me in, offered a drink, and as I slipped off my shoes in the front hall and placed them among the others I peered into the dark living room beyond the foyer. Thick curtains covered the window and plush cushions lined the room. Qorsho explained that they were slowly packing to move to a safer neighborhood so much of their furniture was gone. A box sat in the middle of the floor. Qorsho wanted me to take pictures of her sorting clothes to be donated to Africa through her mosque. She had a small pile and as she folded and I snapped pictures, I asked her about the program. People donated clothes and books to the mosque and when someone was flying to Africa volunteers packed up boxes for them to check with their luggage. It was more reliable and cheaper to send things that way then to ship them. She was demonstrating zakat, the almsgiving pillar of Islam. When she finished, we drove to campus to take pictures where she often studied.

The following photograph sessions went similarly. Beforehand, I asked the women to think about what was most important to them about the topics we discussed in their interviews, and a few places they’d like to take pictures. Nasra chose to take pictures on campus when unable to secure permission to take pictures at the school where she worked. We found an empty classroom and reenacted one of her programs. Muna chose to meet at the student union to take pictures in the Student Activities Room. There were many people around, and she did not relax until we went to an empty room and I asked her to show me how to wear a hijab. She proceeded to put on and take off her headscarf while I took pictures. We then drove to the mall and took pictures while she
browsed the department stores to challenge the juxtaposition of “traditional” Somali dress with typical “American” dress. I picked Hoda up after work from campus and we drove to one of the mosques where she attends. She checked to see if anyone was inside before going in. I took pictures as she went through her evening prayers. I had her do them again and explain to me about each movement and utterance. Though we began thinking about photography through the interviews, the images ended up telling their own stories independent of the text and offered another form of narrative.

S. The last woman to participate in *DSVUOSU* was a doctoral student who received a recruitment email about the Schweitzer Fellowship that I sent. S. responded wanting to meet and learn more about the fellowship. We began talking about graduate research, our shared interest in community education, and her story as a young professional Somali woman in the diaspora and I asked if she would be interested in participating. She agreed and we scheduled an interview and photography session. We interviewed at a coffee shop off campus and took some pictures of her reading the Qur’an and drawing pictures of her family. She did not want her face shown in any of the photographs so we experimented with hiding her face behind books and drawings, taking pictures of hands, and from the back. We scheduled another photography session at the university library the following week. Though S. did not participate as actively as the others, we have remained in contact.

**Facebook.** After each session, I sorted the photographs, deleted those out of focus, uploaded the rest to our Facebook page, and asked everyone to choose their top ten favorites. From there, we chose photographs for the exhibition.

We also used the Facebook page to decide on a title. After talking with a young Somali woman in Boston who Hoda referred me to, I emailed Hoda about a phrase used in our conversation: “Women are the backbone of the community” (November 12, 2012, personal communication recorded in research journal). She warned me that it was a strong statement to make. Instead of using “Somali women, the backbone of community”

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70Many of the participants described Somali women, and more specifically Somali mothers, in that way – Somali women hold the community upright (Qorsho, DSVU, 2014); she is strength (Zam Zam, DSVU, 2014); and Somali women…carry their family on their back (Bahja, project interview, October 28, 2013a) among others.
I experimented with different elements of the phrase in Somali and in English, including “Somali Women” (*Dumarka Soomaaliyeed*), because language was identified as one of the major challenges of retaining or losing culture. Although I was uncomfortable with the phrase “Voices Unveiled” because of the political and feminist discourse surrounding veiling in Western cultures, I offered it to the women as an option since discussing the nuances and complexities of veiling became such an important topic among them. I emailed several title ideas and posted them to Facebook, and all agreed, *Dumarka Soomaaliyeed Voices Unveiled* “fits” (December 2, 2012, personal communication recorded in research journal).

The Facebook page was instrumental in allowing our conversation about the narratives, the project, and the photos continue. In addition to facilitating conversation, Facebook enabled me to refer back to our decisions, conversations, and the history of our interactions together.

**Exhibition**

The first exhibit was initially installed in three locations as part of the Schweitzer Fellowship – Columbus Metropolitan Library (CML) Main, Westerville Public Library, and CML Northern Lights (CMLNL) – from February through April 2013. It was later installed at CML Hilltop from October to December 2013. Estimates from library staff at each exhibition site state that anywhere from 100 to 250 individuals actively viewed the exhibit during the month it was on display. The work was organized into five groupings and arranged to mimic the family pictures hanging in my living room – a cluster indicating intimacy and everyday life. The books hung with each grouping of photographs so that a viewer could look at one woman’s pictures and read her stories simultaneously [Appendix C includes a compilation of the five books]. Because of the size of the book (half page) and the length of the string from which it hung, the viewer was restricted in their viewing proximity, also inviting intimacy. The groupings were arranged by participant: Hoda, Nasra, S., Qorsho, and Muna. Due to spatial configurations at each venue, the first three groupings hung on one wall [Figure 7] and the last two on a second wall [Figure 8]. Small 4x6 photographs were also used in some
of the locations in a display case with the books open to an exemplar such as Hoda’s description of being Muslim or S. talking about *hijab* [Figure 9]. There was no opening event; only participatory photography workshops that I facilitated for preteens at CML Main and Westerville.

Figure 7: Main *DSVUOSU* exhibit wall at CML Northern Lights, April 2013
Figure 8: Back *DSVUOSU* exhibit wall at CML Main, February 2013

Figure 9: *DSVUOSU* exhibit case at Westerville Public Library, March 2013
The transition from collaborating with the women to displaying our work in public presented mixed feelings for me.

Installing the exhibit comes with both relief and letdown. The pictures are hung, the booklets are printed and now they are just out there for others to make of what they wish. More accurately, it is a letdown and it is also terrifying. What if they are misinterpreted? What if I reinforce stereotypes rather than complicate them? What if I have misrepresented the girls? What if we have misrepresented the community? What if no one even looks at these images?

I did receive feedback via the comment book, but feel much less engaged with the work. The women and I have exchanged emails every now and then, but I don’t get a chance to see them as often as I would like. (Schweitzer Monthly Report, March 2013)

Overall, I have experienced quite a bit of affirmation about the work we chose to display and the project as a whole. It seems like what we have done over the past six months has laid a good foundation for continuing this project. While I was only able to work with five girls (and my initial goal was 15!), I feel like we were able to spend the time together to really talk about not only their part in the project – their stories, their photographs:

*For me, it is the fact that I get to share my story with many individuals who may or may not know the Somali culture well enough. It’s the part where I break stereotypes, like the idea that we’re oppressed, by giving my reasons for covering up. I’ve learned that we all have different interpretations of the hijab and multi-faceted roles in our families, and communities but we are still united under our major values and principles. We can’t be defined or labeled in a specific category because people choose to ignorant. We have to reach out, if we want to be understood. (Qorsho, January 8, 2013, Facebook)*

*Giving a voice to our stories, and having the opportunity to express the different roles that we play in our community. People are under the impression that we’re all the "same" and have identical perspectives on things, so I enjoyed*
being able to say this is how "Nasra" sees things and this is "her" story (Nasra, January 22, 2013, Facebook)

– but also the process as a whole:

   My favorite piece in all this was you personally taking the pictures, because I felt you understood all our stories in this, as well as our concerns. (Nasra, March 2, 2013, Facebook)

   Ditto what Nasra has said – the pictures were the most personal/intimate parts of the project that I think said as much about the person as their interview did. It would be great to expand this and get snapshots of other Somali communities in America. I think the pictures and the interview worked well; maybe incorporating a sit-down event where the women discuss amongst themselves different topics of interest (Hoda, March 3, 2013, Facebook).

   (Schweitzer Monthly Report, February 2013)

I began exploring the possibility of research, asking the women what they thought about the project and how they would feel about writing my dissertation about it.

   My Role My Questions

I decided sometime in the past couple of months to use the expansion of this project as the site of my dissertation research. I’ve been really cautious about it, thinking about the possible ethical issues, and how it will affect the relationships developed through this project. (Schweitzer Monthly Report, November 2012)

Although there is a clear temporal break between the end of DSVUOSU and the start of DSVUNL, there is no such clarity in the transition from project to research. A few months into DSVUOSU, I could not ignore the research aspect of our work together (an integral aspect of participatory action research). I struggled with moving past my conflicts as a researcher with SWCA; the director’s reaction to my work rang in my ears anytime the potential for disagreement joined my work with the women of DSVU. So when the question of DSVU as research persisted, I started talking to some of the women about this work, if they thought it was a good idea, and what issues might arise with me facilitating the project and writing about it. Qorsho said to me in response:
Sometimes the good outweighs the bad and in this project, it is so overwhelmingly positive what we (collectively) are trying to do, if issues come up about “position of power” between researcher and participants, they will be overshadowed by the impact of the project. (Schweitzer Monthly Report, November 2012)

Qorsho’s permission unlocked research as a possibility for me.

I began thinking much more intentionally about my role in the ensuing project – am I researcher? Friend? Artist? Concerned citizen? How much do I participate? Where do I step in and help shape the direction of the project? Whose ideas count the most? Who is making decisions, and what kinds? When do I choose my role, or is it chosen for me? I focused on what Tillman-Healy (2003) describes as friendship as a method, reconsidering a relational ethics where one does as Ellis (2007) states, “what is necessary to be true to one’s character and responsible for one’s actions and their consequences on others” (p. 4). I recognized the role my relationship with each of the participants played in shaping the research, and our conversations helped me confront my own complacency in my perceptions of Somalis in a productive way.

Roble and Rutledge’s (2008) assertion that “documenting Somali people always begins with making new friends” (p. ix) permeated my approach and echoed Tillman-Healy (2003) and Ellis (2007)’s emphasis on relationship with participants. This stance was reiterated in meetings with members of the SDP at the beginning of the project, when Tarey asked me think about how I can help those with whom I was seeking to work.

Be a friend. Give rides, write recommendation letters, bring the kinds of snacks that they like, offer my assistance in any way that I can. Listen, and respect their wishes in the project and also in our personal relationship. Check in to see how they are doing. Ask about their lives. Those small acts preserve our relationship between monthly meetings.

Facilitate. I do not want to come into a meeting with my ideas set. Rather, I offer ideas of what we have done in previous sessions as well as other ideas, ask for theirs, and help make their vision a reality by putting deadlines, offering directions, and compiling all the data (stories, photographs) on Facebook, in print, and in the exhibition. One
important aspect is the element of change. I often bring examples, and am the one to install the exhibition. Yet, participants know that they can tell me if they want to change something and I will do it. For example, at the *DSVUNL* exhibition opening at CMLNL in January 2014, two women requested changes to their stories and photographs that I complied.

*Researcher.* While I requested and heeded the women’s suggestions for which photographs and stories to include and edit, I organized the exhibit materials into categories (keeping in mind their suggestions, our conversations, and what they said was most important to them). I posted pictures of the arrangements on Facebook ahead of time so they could provide feedback, but ultimately I took responsibility for categorizing the selections. I made sense of our work together for viewers. I installed the exhibit, and I am the one writing and analyzing the work for this dissertation. While we certainly worked together to make meaning and interpret the stories and photographs in our meetings and online, I finalized the analysis.

I have come to no conclusions about my role, but negotiate the ever shifting nature of being a participant, building relationships, and also doing research and making art. I am comfortable in this indeterminate position, but it causes tension. Where do my loyalties lie? There are often examples of conflict that disturb this question.

For example, a few days before the *DSVUNL* exhibit opening, one of the women sent edits of her stories, which I had requested weeks earlier. I recorded the event in my field notes:

I got everything printed today. The books, the photos. Most of the images are framed. I spent a few hours arranging the exhibit on the office floor, grouping by grouping. Mapping it out, trying to think about transitions, representation, which things are large and small, which are in the main room, and which are in the meeting room. I don’t want to only address dress for instance in the main room, but I also want people to see what the women have to say about it. Size is important. Arrangement is important. Order, and placement. These things matter.
I checked my email just before putting my son to bed. I got two emails from Zam Zam. First, her story edits. She wrote, “I thought I sent this in... I checked my sent and it was not in it 0_0 I edited my transcription.” Ok. I took a look at the edits. It is down to two essays. One about honorifics and the other about her parents/family. I am having a slight heart attack. I am simultaneously mad and frustrated and panicking that I am going to take advantage of these girls. I am mad because she just deleted all the things that I believe people actually want to read. Things that are interesting and funny and personal. I am panicking because I don’t want to include things that she isn’t comfortable sharing, but I already got the books printed. It wasn’t cheap. Do I reprint them and take everything she said out? The writing she sent is fine, but it’s not all that meaningful. It reads like an info sheet on cultural norms. The stories they told, the details about school and family and all that, those are the things that people can relate to. Do I tell her that? I just did.

“Hey Zam Zam, A question for you. I noticed you took out most of the stories you told during our interviews. They were really great! I know they're pretty informal, but the details and humor (you especially had such a great way of describing things!) and the personal nature of the stories really helped me connect to the topics we were discussing. Why did you decide to take them out? Would you consider keeping some of them in? Ruth”

I feel so torn between wanting to do what Zam Zam wants, thinking about the money I just spent printing the books and how much it will cost to reprint them, and then what would be missing if we just took everything out that she wants me to take out…I don’t even know. I want to be participatory, but I also want to make something that looks good that will connect with people outside their group, and that honors the girls. So what do I do? Use everything, follow everything they want? Where do I come in? Where is my role? Am I just the facilitator – providing the framework and tools and letting them do what they want? Am I the finalizer – taking everything and putting it together? Am I a
researcher? Do I have final say? Do they? Is it alright that I am checking with
curation on Facebook, having the girls “like” the photos they want, using those,
but ultimately deciding how big and in what order? Is it alright that I take the
writing that they send, have them view the transcripts edited down to stories,
arrange them and print them myself? Am I the curator despite the member
checking? Is it ok if I am? Would it get done if I wasn’t? (January 14, 2014 –
Field Notes: Panic attack and dilemma)

The next day, I followed up:

It has been a rough two days. I ended up deciding to make the changes
Zam Zam requested, but kept in a couple of her stories verbatim. She called
today. It was a good conversation. She was upbeat, and not too concerned about
the stories. She answered my question about why she took things out. Because of
all the likes and ums. I explained to her my thoughts about the books – that it was
a nice mix of formal and informal, and that I did clean up some of the likes and
ums. I told her I kept a couple of stories in but made the changes she requested.
She asked about the bullying stories. I told her I took them out and she said
‘Good,’ that she didn’t want people to think she was troubled because she’d been
bullied, since it’s such a hot topic right now. I understood. We talked a little more
about the exhibit…I feel one hundred times better about the exhibit and project
after talking to Zam Zam.

It wasn’t a big ethical dilemma, although it was for me. I was trying to
figure out what to do according to which worldview – artist (who has the vision of
the project), PAR (who wants to put the community partner first), and Christian
(who is acting to preserve the relationship). I suppose they all won out on this. It
seems like this happens quite frequently in my projects with the Somali
community (I know, I know a generalization) that there is a lot of stress leading
up to the opening or event, I worry and worry and then there is a conversation or
resolution the night or two before that releases my tension and anxiety and things
turn out ok, if not what was planned or expected. So there you go. (January 15, 2014 - Field Notes: Resolution and Relief)

This encounter, though similar in many ways to the misunderstandings about my previous project in the master’s thesis, resulted in very different outcomes. I was able to recognize the different roles I play, the values and limitations of each, and how these are stressed by conflict that puts different values in competition with one another. Although there are different subject positions at play, reflexivity made a huge difference in the way that I processed the conflict.

Transformation of Researcher and Goals of Research

This encounter also reaffirmed the shift in audience. As it evolved, the project became more about the women participating than for the audience who would be viewing the exhibit. When I originally proposed the project, I thought the benefits would be mostly for the viewers of the exhibition – non-Somalis. As it turned out, the project seemed to impact everyone involved. The exhibit helped facilitate a “border crossing” between communities, the women had an opportunity to express themselves and share their lives and experiences among one another and with others, and people outside the community were able to see a different aspect of the Somali community through the women’s photographs and stories.

Repositioning my thoughts about the project from a responsibility to the audience to a concern for the participants helped define DSVUNL. It was here that my research focus really shifted from how we were working together (methodology) to what we were doing together. In other words, the women’s stories became the focal point of my research. How do the women articulate what it means to be Somali, Muslim women and how do their stories interrupt (redefine, challenge) preconceptions (stereotypes, assumptions, expectations) of Somali women held by non-Somalis and other Somalis alike? I was interested in how theories of interruption (Nancy, 1991) could help explain and organize what was happening in the project and as a result of the project, and what other community arts educators can learn from this project and its theorization. So the project itself can exist and the research can exist and they overlap but I can step in and
out of each. Having done the project with five women gave me some confidence going into *DSVUNL*, but at the same time other challenges presented themselves with new leadership and participation.
CHAPTER 6: Presentation Part II: DSVUNL

DSVUNL: Redefining the Process

DSVUNL began with Zam Zam,\textsuperscript{71} a young woman who saw the DSVUOSU exhibit when it was at CMLNL in April 2013. While it took multiple emails and several months for us to connect, Zam Zam was enthusiastic and willing to take charge when we finally met in August 2013. I told her that I would love for her to have a leadership role and had some funds to pay her for her work. Moreover, I was in the process of moving out of state and told her while I can help move the project along, she would be primarily responsible for recruiting and working with the women between our meetings. We talked about DSVUOSU and what she wanted to do with this project. She had several women in mind to participate, discussion topics, and photography ideas.

First Meeting: CMLNL October 18, 2013

I arrived early for the first DSVUNL meeting. There were a number of people waiting outside the doors for the library to open: two African American men sitting on the bench facing the parking lot, one older white woman, another young woman, African American and uncovered, and me. Zam Zam called my name as she walked up behind me, greeting me with a handshake. We chatted as we walked into the library, checked in at the front desk, and settled ourselves into the small meeting room.

It was a small room – two sides were glass windows to the outside, one glass wall towards the library computers, and one drywall against which a small table and four chairs sat. We pulled out the table to fit the chairs around all sides and began talking about the project. Two sisters were coming at 10:30 am “if they come on American time” (October 28, 2013 – Field Notes: Session 1) - and two other girls later. We talked about research and consent forms and I began recording our meeting.

\textsuperscript{71}Zam Zam is employed at CMLNL, and my CML partner is her supervisor.
Bahja and Asha arrived not long past 10:30 am. While they do not look alike, within moments it was evident they are sisters.

Bahja: I don't look like anyone in my family. Or at least that's what I'm told. Maybe like my dad.

Zam Zam: You look like your dad.

Asha: If you squint, yeah.

…

Bahja: [Asha] looks just like my mom so they were saying if you were looking at them both you wouldn't know which was which.

Asha: This past summer when I stepped off the plane in Somalia, I never met these people before in my life. I never stepped on the continent of Africa. They didn't see my mom yet. I stepped off the plane. Fifty people went, "Oh I know your great-grandmother." "Oh, me and your dad used to go to high school together." "Oh, your uncle still owes me a pencil he took in high school." [Laughter] “I don't know you people, how do you know you're talking to the right person?” Five seconds letter they're bringing out baby pictures, I don't know where they got them from.

Bahja: It was weird. They had a baby picture of me that my mom thought that it wasn't even here. She lost all the pictures of us.

Asha: They were in denial.

Bahja: One of my brothers, there are no pictures of him because one of the houses that they moved out of when the war happened, everything was gone. And I guess somebody found a baby picture of my brother and they have it.


Asha: I'll never get over how I found this picture of [my mom and dad and I asked my mom], “Hey isn't that you and dad?” and my mom said, “No that's not us.” Even though it clearly them.

[Shows picture on phone]

Asha: I showed it to my mom and she was like, “That's not me.”
Bahja: And then I showed it to my dad and he was like, “That's not me.” And I was like...
Asha: He was in denial
Bahja:...that's the funniest thing ever. (Project interview, October 28, 2013a)

As soon as they begin finishing each other’s sentences and interrupting stories it is easy to see they are close. Zam Zam suggested talking about cultural expectations. I asked to step back a moment to tell the stories of how each came to Columbus.

**Bahja and Asha’s story: Coming to Columbus.**

*When we came here, we moved from Canada. My dad lived here and he went to school and worked here but we lived in Canada with my mom. We moved around a lot so do you want to start from where we began? (Bahja)*

*Go all the way back to Africa. (Asha)*

*After the Civil War my mom and my dad, well my dad moved to Yemen and then my mom followed. Then after I was born, my brother came to Yemen. (Bahja)*

*This past summer I went to Somalia, so I actually got to find out more. So what happened is a lot of my relatives well they first started, the war didn't start out of nowhere, and they heard that this is happening over there, and they were like, “Maybe it's not going to reach the capital city of Mogadishu?” And then when they started getting closer they were like, “It's not rumors. It's really happening.” They started saying, “Ok well what are we going to do?” So then, my mom and a lot of my relatives they didn't think it was going to get that bad so they left their houses with everything still in it thinking, “I'm going to go spend a year or two somewhere else and come back.” But then by the time they left, it got really bad to where the houses were getting destroyed or these people moved into the house like, “Well you abandoned your house so it's my house now. If you wanted it you should have never left it.” It's kind of hard to explain. (Asha)*
I know it was my grandma who told my mom to leave. She told her to go somewhere else and then my mom like was kind of reluctant. But then my dad got a job in Yemen and that’s why they fully left. (Bahja)

We were supposed to actually move to Holland but then Asha was born and that kind of messed up our visas and they couldn’t grant my mom another visa for her. So my mom had this professor at Yemen that could help her; he had a friend at the embassy so we got visas here instead. Then we found my mom's brother to sponsor us from Toronto so we came to Houston, stayed there for 10 days, and then took some kind of Greyhound, I'm assuming it was a Greyhound, all the way to Canada and we stayed there for a year before we moved to Minneapolis. Asha got really bad asthma and the weather was not helping so we moved back to Canada and my dad moved back here. (Bahja)

When I was six we moved to Ohio; I remember starting first grade when we moved to Columbus. We’ve been here since I was six and a half and now I’m eighteen so it's been at least eleven, eleven and a half years. (Asha)

Before we fully moved, when we weren't going to school here we spent time back in Canada. And then before my freshman year, we stopped going to Canada. (Bahja) (DSVU, 2014)

Zam Zam’s story: Coming to Columbus.

I'll start back in Africa. Both my parents were living a comfortable life I would say. My dad used to work hand in hand with the old dictator Siad Barre. He was actually Barre’s personal assistant. And my mom was in nursing school, she was learning how to be a nurse. Some of my siblings were born at that time. And when they heard rumors of the war breaking out, that it was coming up north...we were in Mogadishu at the time and my parents decided to kind of ignore it. They were like, “This is our city, we are staying no matter what, you know good or bad” type of thing. Although we’ve had so many relatives that were already leaving or already gone and they were telling us, "What are you guys doing? You have children. If you were wise enough you would leave." And my
parents, my family didn't leave until literally the war was brought to our doorstep. And I'm so serious, we had to escape and I've had several family members, my dad's family - some of his brothers, both of my parent's cousins, my grandparents - kind of die, passed in the whole escape. And in our culture grandparents are not just your parents' parents, they are kind of like parents' parents' siblings. You just call them grandmother or grandfather. There is not a great-aunt, great-uncle word for it. It's just grandmother. Grandfather. So a lot of people passed away.

Then we went to a border city between Somalia and Kenya, yeah and then we stayed there for a little bit. I wasn't born at the time, but my brother was born there. And the war came, followed us again and my parents were trying the best they could to stay in Somalia. I mean that's all they've really known all their lives, so they're trying their best but it just wouldn't work out. So we finally went to Kenya, where I was born.

I was born in a refugee camp. We were there for several years. It was well from what my parents tell me because I was really young at that time since I was born after the war broke out, it was really bad. I had a sibling that passed away. She was four years old. She passed away in the refugee camp and it was due to several things like malnutrition, something as very simple as diarrhea. So there was not the proper medication, or the food. Like my mom, she had to put water in the milk so that it could stretch for days and things like that. So I was born in the refugee camp and we were in Kenya for four years. And two of my siblings were born after me, my sister who is directly a year younger than me and then my brother who was born late '97 basically '98. And then afterwards, some of my mom's my dad's relatives and my mom's relatives were like, they heard of our, like what was going on and kind of say plights, so it was like things that they tell me it was really horrible. But they were sending money over so we could support ourselves. Both my parents were working but we were living in a refugee camp at that time no matter how much work you do, you have a large family, it never really cuts it. So that in the end one of my mom's cousins, he sponsored us
and we came to America and then we've been here ever since 1998, when I was four.

We first landed in New York, we were there for about a week. And then we went to Dallas, actually no we landed in Texas, and we were in Texas for a month. Then we went to New York for a week, and then we came to Columbus. So the whole entire travel time moving from different states was probably like 2 months and a half. By the time we came to Columbus, we stayed with relatives for 3 months or so, 2 months while my parents were looking for a place to live, looking for jobs etc. We lived in the west side of Columbus for a couple of months and then we moved to the north side in August. So we've been here, I was four then and I'm 19 now, so we've been in Columbus for 15 years. I started in pre-K onwards. And then I have four other siblings that were born here. Out of the 16 siblings, four were born here. (Zam Zam, project interview, October 28, 2013a)

We made our way through introductions and small talk, the awkwardness as Bahja described it, until we “warmed up” to each other (project interview, October 28, 2013a). I asked the first question, “Why don’t you tell me a little bit about cultural expectations of being a Somali woman. What being a Somali woman is supposed to be?” and from there we moved from topic to topic, telling story after story about poise, culture shock, diaspora, respect, dress and fashion, parental expectations, learning the boundaries, and language. Zam Zam’s phone rang an hour into our conversation; it was her cousin Miriam.

**Miriam.** Dressed in a scarf loosely draped around her head, a sweater and long skirt, Miriam sat down to my left at the head of the table and jumped right in talking about what it means to be a Somali woman and the interconnection between Somali culture and Islam. Like the others, Miriam is in the throes of transitioning from being viewed as an equal of students to now an equal of parents and teachers at the local charter school where she works while taking college classes and subsequently switching to
calling other women Sister Abbaaye rather than Auntie Eeddo. The conversation moved to the differences between expectations of boys and girls, figuring out the expectations of various members of the community, and the changing definitions of woman.

*I don’t know what it means to be a Somali woman... I don’t have like a certain definition for what it means to be a Somali woman. Like when I’m with let’s say a certain group of people, it usually changes my role as a Somali woman. Let’s say when I’m with my friends that are not Somali, they see me as...foreign. Or like....* (Zam Zam, project interview, October 28, 2013a)

After almost three hours of discussion, Asha’s mom called and she rushed out of the room to answer. Miriam realized the time and left for class. Before we all dispersed, we talked about what to do next. Zam Zam mentioned she wanted to talk more about parents’ experiences and how they shaped their lives. I suggested we send around some questions to write about before our next meeting, collected contact information, and gave Zam Zam two cameras to take with her.

A. Several hours later, I met with A. in the same room. A. was timid and alone with a stranger. I asked her what Zam Zam had told her about the project, and she said that Zam Zam told her that her perspective would be nice to include because she is one of the first generation of Somalis born in America, and was as a result more Americanized. Once her interest was established, she began describing her experiences as a young girl with the Somali community.

*When I was younger, there was a really big barrier between me and Somali people. ‘Cause I just wore regular American clothes. I wasn’t wearing a hijab or anything. So Somali people didn’t really like try to interact with me even though I was Somali. They thought that I thought I was better than them or whatever just*

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72 Spellings of Somali words vary across transcripts and essays. Moreover, Zam Zam explained that spellings also vary between regional dialects and depend on its pronunciation (post project interview, January 19, 2014). I used a variety of sources to confirm spellings of Somali terms used by the women. In cases where I found differing spellings, I used the ones provided by participants. I also used two online Somali-English dictionaries (http://qaamuus.so/dictionary/search/ & http://www.markacademy.net/main/portal/dictionary/index.php?page_id=2) and an information sheet, Somali Family (Kinship Terms), retrieved from http://www.somaliscsc.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Somali-Family-Kinship-Vocabulary.pdf.
because I seemed like wanting. Then, I started wearing the hijab this year... And Somali people were, were accepting I guess. They would talk to me more, just because of the way that I am dressed. Even though they don’t know what’s inside your heart, how you feel, your relationship with God, based on your outward appearance they’ll make judgment on you. So. I felt like I got along better with like American people? But yeah, now? Now I talk to a lot more Somali people. And they act a lot differently just because of the way I’m dressed basically.

(Project interview, October 18, 2013b)

After talking about her mom’s restaurant and as a result of working in a public space A.’s numerous encounters with Somali men, Zam Zam joined us and continued to talk for another hour. In total, we spent six hours that day talking about cultural expectations including dress, speaking Somali, clan, and modest behavior as well as what it means to be a Somali, Muslim woman in Columbus, Ohio.

Second meeting: Kayla’s House November 17, 2013

Our second meeting was framed as a work day. We met at Kayla’s house and the women arrived intermittently – Kayla, myself, Zam Zam, Zahra, A., Asha, and Miriam. Sitting on the floor and on the bed, we talked about the project, signed consent forms for those who did not already, and shared writing [Figure 10 and Figure 11]. Several of the girls read poetry or essays.
Figure 10: Miriam, A., Zam Zam, and Asha at Kayla's house

Figure 11: Working at Kayla's house
Zam Zam: So the title of this poem is called *Akou Amrikum*. Damn America.

[Laughter]

“Akou Amrikum

Some people believe [in Somali]

Where the men ball off their wife's paychecks
Yet belittle the one who keeps his gas tank full

Akou Amrikum

Where the woman, where the woman toil with condescending husbands
And disrespectful children
And scorn from neighbors.

Where before all her children truly treated her as if heaven was truly under her feet

But now they treat her like..."

I'm not done. But the point of this poem is um in the Somali community something that we always, like any single time when we like when just generally speaking anytime we come across a problem for example disrespectful children, the forgetting of the culture, etc. those types of things they always say, ‘Akou Amrikum’ as if America is the problem.

Why did we come here? As if why, what made us come here? You know now, before we thought we were going to come here and it was going to be really nice, but now we see that it is not. So that's what the beginning part of the poem is. But the second part I kind of wanted to shoot down those ideas, like you know shoot them down with a bullet because it's not really, it's not that America is. It's not the way it's supposed to be. It's not like it's America's fault [Asha: Yeah] because America does not have any blame. [Ruth: Yeah] It's really about...

Zahra: Your instilled values?

Zam Zam: Yeah it's how we lost our values along the way. Like we. And then.

Not only did we lose our values, but you know how we. I don’t know it's
like, it's like you know how there's a cause and effect and we reacted in a negative way. It's the environment we're in. Instead of you know thank you! You are completing my sentences! But instead of moving on, now that we are here, we make the best of what we have. Instead of moving forward we regret we regress. And the fact that we are regressing, we blame it on American instead of blaming it on ourselves. The disrespectful children, the losing of the culture, all that stuff is grassroots problems. It's not based on where you live, it's more based on how you react to things.

(project interview, November 17, 2013)

Once Zam Zam shared her writing, others did too.

Zahra: I wrote a poem.\(^{73}\)

Ruth: Ok.

Zahra: I don't know how I like as of right now. I like woke up and I, it was in my head so I wrote it down. Ok so. Ok so the name has her name [pointing to A.] but it wasn't like, I was just trying to pick typical Somali name. [Ruth: Ok.] No offense. But um.

“Queen A.

Her brilliant smile will warm up the eyes
Soothing broken skins and hearts
As her own is tormented by vultures and casted as carcass.
You're either with us or against us
[indiscernible phrase] and each one more...”

Um. What are? Your handwriting is terrible

[Zam Zam laughs]

Asha: Can't you identify what she wrote?

Zahra: I can't remember! I like typed it up as, she said she was going to write it down.

A.: Gees Zam Zam.

\(^{73}\)This is Zahra’s first draft of the African Queen poem texted to me via A.’s phone and included in the exhibit. See Appendix D.
Zam Zam: "."..one more lavish…”
Zahra:

“…one more lavish than the next
Social stigma dictating all actions sandwiched between
patriarchy and orientalism.
I am a woman.
But my body yet isn't free.”

Ruth: Mmmmm
Asha: Oh that's good.
A.: Wow
Asha: That's something Oprah would play.
Zahra: Do you guys like that?
Zam Zam: I like it.
Kayla: I really liked your poem too. I really liked the beginning bit and your whole idea. You know how between a mixture of society and how apparently the old heads are going to be like, “Damn you're going to go, because we came here and brought our kids on our backs you know we came here to give them a better life and give ourselves a better life. But then apparently our children have been poisoned by society you know.” And it's just, it’s sad to think about that but in reality that's how they think.
Asha: But to be honest, even over there they have social stigmas. They have like bad influences you know? Like I saw some girls trying to copy Beyoncé’s hair over there [in Somalia]. It happens here, it happens over there like it doesn't matter where you are, if you're going to copy something you're going to do it. (Project interview, November 17, 2013)

As each shared their writing, the others discussed the quality as well as what it meant, adding on their own experiences and stories. Poems were not the only writing shared; Asha read an essay and provided her own commentary throughout.
Asha: Ok, so um this starts off. “What does it mean to be Somali?”
Ruth: Oh ok.

Asha: To me I've always been asked that and I'm just saying to be from Somalia. And looking into it, "Somalia is the combination of two words: So and mal. So means like milk or meat in old Somali. And mal meaning to live off or to make grain from. So the word itself means one who lives off meat or grain and this describes early nomadic lifestyle that is still present today." And I think ironic that we're all like nomads because we're all living in different countries and stuff.

Zam Zam: What was the word again? I'm sorry, I didn't hear it.

Zahra: Somali.

Zam Zam: Oh Somali. Yeah.

[Laughter]

Asha: I'm not going to even say anything. "To be honest, I didn't even know I was Somali until the second or third grade." And that's true, I didn't even know. I thought I was normal, you know? I wasn't. [Laughs]. Um, "It wasn't until we were doing a class project about our ancestors that I realized I was different. Because I always identified as African American because I was African and I lived America. I remember not knowing where it was on the map. However that soon changed. When I got home that day, I talked to my mom and she said I was Somali and showed me where it was on the map. Once realizing it was in Africa, I started to believe the infomercials where, 'Every 60 seconds, a child in Africa dies' since they don't have the means to clean water or medicine." I don't know why I felt that was true. It wasn't true which I found out really soon. "So moving on to my middle school years, I knew that I was Somali. Yes, I had a few Somali friends, but I only saw them 20 minutes out of the day. However, high school was when I embraced my Somali background. We knew other Somalis in my school. It was definitely interesting. We had our ups and our downs. Although I never felt like I fit in, we shared a
background and they overlooked my addiction with One Direction [a British-based pop music “boy band”]. My sophomore year in high school, a friend came up with the idea of a Somali festival. As much of a disaster it was, we managed to pull it together and not let it crash and burn on stage. However, I still didn’t grasp the concept of what being Somali was. It wasn’t until this past summer in Somalia I realized that there was much more about being Somali than being from Somalia. Going to Somalia was the scariest but best decision I ever made. Although it was a culture shock for the most part, I never felt like a greater whole to something. It was there I realized that to be Somali meant being a part of a close-knit community where everyone is family even if you just met them that day. It is a culture driven by food, family, and friends. It is about the way we express ourselves by our work, our poems, and our stories passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. To be Somali is to be brave. While having the weight of the world and your family on your shoulders and still being able to have your echoes heard. Lastly, it is being a representation of your family and your country where people know she is Somali by the way that she acts.” (Project interview, November 17, 2013)

These poems and essay were foundational in shaping DSVUNL, and introduced new elements of storytelling into the project – poetry and essay.

We continued to tell stories. The conversation easily switched among stories of crossing boundaries, bullying, and clannism to One Direction, debating between depth of lyrics and catchiness of a tune, and favorite actors and movies. When the ratio of pop culture references exceeded the discussion of topics pertaining to the project, I suggested we go somewhere to take photographs. We drove to Easton, where I took pictures of the girls as they shopped, talked, and walked [Figures 12-14]. Later that week, I uploaded the pictures to our Facebook page and asked the women to do the same with their own work.
Figure 12: Bahja, Miriam, Zam Zam, and A. in front of American Girl

Figure 13: A., Asha, and Zam Zam shopping at Sephora
We had one last meeting scheduled for December 2013 to collect all the writing and talk about the photographs. The morning of our meeting, I cancelled the meeting due to illness. Amid the flurry of frantic texts, Facebook messages, and emails on my end, I received a phone call from Ladan, the only participant up to this point I had not met, disappointed about not having the opportunity to meet with the group. I told her I would call her once I was feeling better, and chalked the weekend up as a bust.

**Compiling the Exhibit Materials**

Because we only had two meetings together in the same geographic location (the third thwarted by winter illness), the bulk of our work happened geographically apart, but still collaboratively. Since all of the girls were friends, cousins, or sisters, they met frequently and talked about their work on the project. In a post-project interview, I asked Zam Zam to tell me about what went on between meetings.

Zam Zam: So we met at Tim Horton’s [to look at the pictures on Facebook] and a lot of the pictures we just kind of laughed at, not in a mean way [Ruth:
yeah, yeah], but because they were funny. Like, "Oh my gosh. Why was I making that facial expression? What was I doing?" "No, that one is not going up. I look really dumb." So most of the comments were like that. [Ruth: Yeah] And then I know Hawa\textsuperscript{74} was trying, she was trying to capture Somali family that day, but I don't think she like captured anything that she really liked. I know that she was going to the Global Mall. She went to my neighborhood and took pictures of people and things like that.

Ruth: Did I see all those pictures?
Zam Zam: I'm not sure. She took them on her phone. I don't know if she sent them to you. And Kayla's pictures? Um. Let me show you something. [Ruth: Yeah] [Zam Zam gets out camera]. These are pictures that she said you can use by the way.

Ruth: Oh. Perfect. (Zam Zam, post project interview, January 19, 2014)

We communicated primarily through email, Facebook, and text. I emailed transcripts of their stories and they edited them into the form presented in the book element of the exhibition [Appendix E]. The other work was posted to our Facebook page or texted to me. Because the girls often worked together, one woman would send all the information. For example, after posting the photographs from our Easton outing on Facebook, I asked everyone to “like” the pictures they wanted to include in the exhibition. When I made this request during DSVUOSU, each individual “liked” the photographs and commented on them. Through the critical mass of “likes” I was able to determine which photographs to include. This time around, Zam Zam was the only one to “like” most of the photographs. Rarely would others comment on or “like” the photographs. It was difficult to ascertain whether the subject of a particular photograph had actually seen and approved of its use. However, at one point Zam Zam posted that they had all met to look through the pictures together and chose their favorites. After that, I interpreted even one “like” to mean that all approved.

\textsuperscript{74} Zam Zam sometimes referred to Miriam as Hawa in conversation.
Many of the women posted their own photographs to Facebook. Miriam posted several pictures she either showed during our meetings or took of her daily life – a camel ride at Masjid\textsuperscript{75} Noor during the 2013 Eid festival, a row of scarves, and kids that she works with at school. Zam Zam and Zahra requested to use profile pictures, and posted pictures they took at the Global Mall and Easton. Bahja posted pictures of herself and her sister, Asha, as well as several pictures Asha took in Somalia.\textsuperscript{76} After Bahja posted Asha’s pictures from Somalia including a portrait of Asha wearing niqab,\textsuperscript{77} pictures of camels (referenced in her stories about her summer trip), and various scenery, I suggested that we take more pictures of places that they go in Columbus so as to compare the two. Zahra and Bahja each offered to take pictures, and sent dozens of images from Easton, mosques, and Somali malls.

I sorted through the pictures and whittled down their selections to thirty-five photographs for the exhibition. I compiled the poems, essays, and edited stories from the meetings into a book, arranging them according to topic area. These include: 1) coming to Columbus, 2) community events, 3) family and parents, 4) clan, citizenship and belonging, 4) women, culture and religion, 5) learning about cultural expectations, 6) dress, and 7) Asha’s trip to Somalia.

\textit{DSVU} is an ongoing project, so I combined the photographs from \textit{DSVUOSU} with those of \textit{DSVUNL}, a decision that pleasantly surprised Zam Zam (post project interview, January 19, 2014). \textit{DSVUOSU} was organized by an individual woman but much of the work in \textit{DSVUNL} was group oriented, so I decided to organize this exhibit by topic area – dress, religion, vocation, community (women interacting with the community and defining community), and culture (defining features of Somali culture such as family, traditions like Eid celebrations, the value of education, language, etc.). I chose at least one excerpt from each woman’s stories and writing, and organized those by topic area as well. As I put together the exhibit, I posted pictures on Facebook.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[75]\textit{Masjid} is the Arabic word for mosque.
\item[76]Asha visited Somalia summer 2013 and moved there in December 2013.
\item[77]\textit{Niqab} is a piece of cloth that covers the face. Some Muslim women wear it, though amongst the women of \textit{DSVU} it was a controversial topic. “Niqab is definitely not a must” (project interview, October 28, 2013a).
\end{footnotes}
There was quite a bit of tension on my part gathering all the materials for the exhibition. I set an exhibition opening date in the summer with my library partner and reiterated to the women each time we met that I needed at least a couple of weeks to get all the materials together. Missing the December meeting and having the girls email me their work rather than talking about it together threw a wrench in our/my plans. I viewed it as a problem, although none of the girls expressed any concern. I sent emails. I texted. I posted on Facebook relentlessly.

Finally made contact with Zam Zam. I saw both Zam Zam and her sister Zahra online on Facebook and messaged them both. I didn’t hear back from Zam Zam but Zahra messaged me back as I worked on Chapter 3 revisions. She was about to send me her writing. Later in the afternoon, just before my son woke up, a (614) number called which I didn’t recognize. Zam Zam! I about wept with joy. She apologized for not being in touch. She lost her phone around Christmas and her cousin signs into her Facebook account so she doesn’t always see the messages. That’s fine. She told me about another girl who wants to participate, her cousin in Toronto who apparently has some stuff to contribute. She said she’d email them to me. She sent me one of Kayla’s poems and told me she had a picture and two other poems that she wanted to submit, and perform at least one at the opening. She promised to email the rest of the photos tonight after work. She was going to stop by Kayla’s house, and said she had talked to Miriam and A., who had pictures…I told Zam Zam that I needed everything by tomorrow…She put Zahra on the phone, who asked if I had read her essays and wanted to know what I thought – was it too negative or positive? She wanted to make sure to balance the good and bad, but also acknowledge the different aspects of culture/community. I thought it was a nice balance, especially alongside of the other stories. She also has a handwritten poem – African Queen – which she was working on last time we met, that now focuses on the strength of Somali mothers and promised to type it up and send it this week.

Her cousin, Raamla, sent a poem (Stars.In.Africa) that was included in the exhibition and a profile picture I was unable to print due to the low resolution.
The communication (or lack of, or lateness of) has been frustrating…this is not the first time I’ve had this type of anxiety about the lateness of communication…[but] what is difficult for me to remember is that just because I don’t hear from them doesn’t mean nothing is happening. From what Zam Zam told me, the girls have been writing poems, taking pictures, writing essays. And they are talking about it. Perhaps one point of disjuncture is the form of communication. I’m not there and cannot stop by. Several of the girls use Twitter more than Facebook or email. I don’t use Twitter. I don’t have a phone with Apps, so I don’t use WhatsApp or things like that.

I have no idea how this exhibit is going to come together. I have so much more material and in different forms. And then trying to bring together two different initiatives. I don’t know. I just pray that photos and poems get posted by tomorrow like I asked. I need a little time to process it, find frames, print things. (January 6, 2014: Field Notes: Snowed in at home, Lafayette, IN)

One or two responded at a time until I had everyone’s work less than a week before the opening. Kayla was the only one who did not submit any work besides the spoken word poem she posted to YouTube prior to the project [Appendix E].

**Ladan.** One woman in particular, Ladan, was very responsive to my emails and texts and in fact initiated most calls. Ladan was unable to attend any of our meetings, though we were supposed to meet at the cancelled meeting in December 2013. She was very excited about the project, and we discussed ideas for her writing over the phone. Although she was uncomfortable taking photographs, she worked on a poem and accompanying essay, *The Bridge that brought us together* [full text in Appendix E]. We did not meet until the exhibit opening event, when she greeted me with a big hug and exclamations about the work and the project. We discussed doing an interview and continuing to write and take photographs.

**Exhibition and Opening Event**

On Friday, January 17, 2014, CMLNL hosted an opening event for the exhibition during the HHC Friday activities [Figure 15]. CMLNL provided food and set up the
meeting room, where half of the exhibit was installed (the other half hung in the main room of the library). After conferring with my library partner, we decided to put vocation, culture, and dress in the main exhibit area and community and religion in the meeting room. Rather than the distinct groupings of the first exhibit, each of the two walls had a solid stripe of text and photographs ranging in size from 5x7 to 16x20.

Figure 15: Viewers at DSVU exhibit opening, CMLNL January 17, 2014

Choosing which photographs to enlarge was determined by 1) the quality of the photo and 2) representation by and of the participants. Some photos, such as the profile pictures posted to Facebook were an insufficient resolution to enlarge. Also, I was conscious of how many of the photographs I took and how many of the women’s photographs were enlarged in order not to privilege my work. It was difficult because many participants took pictures on their phones, which did not bode well for enlargement. I added more frames holding three smaller photographs thus able to include
more of the women’s work. I also thought about what elements of Somali culture and identity were being highlighted because of the size and placement. For example, the photograph of Asha in niqab is an interesting photograph when compared to other portraits of the girls in a variety of headscarves and dress fashion. However, enlarging it would place emphasis on a type of dress that is controversial and not as common among Somali women in the United States.

Zam Zam, A., and Ladan attended the opening. Although participants from both initiatives were invited, several had work and two moved (Asha to Somalia and Kayla across the city). Each read their poetry (Zam Zam’s She is strength, A.’s point of view poem, and Ladan’s The bridge that brought us together), spoke about the project, and Zam Zam played the YouTube video of Kayla’s spoken word poem and read Raamla’s Stars.in.Africa [Figure 16]. About 30 people attended the event. I presented each of the girls with a thank you card, a copy of the book, a framed photograph from the exhibition, and a gift card. Bahja was able to send Asha’s gift with a family member who flew to Somalia later that week.

Figure 16: Zam Zam performing She is strength at exhibit opening
Reactions to the Exhibit

The initial goal of the project was to create an exhibit to educate non-Somalis about Somali culture in order to build bridges across cultures and challenge stereotypes about Somali women. Though the goal has shifted to include offering a space for women to tell stories, write, and take photographs and to discuss what it means to be a Somali, Muslim woman in the diaspora, the initial goals still permeate our work. When I first proposed the project, I set up several measures to document viewers’ reactions to the work and determine the exhibition’s impact including 1) a comment book, 2) evaluation sheets for the participatory photography workshops facilitated at several of the library locations, and 3) informal interviews with library staff members with whom I partnered.

There have been several types of reactions to the work gleaned from the comment book [Appendix F], emails to library staff members, and observation. These include affirmation, identification, and challenge.

Affirmation

The majority of comments about the exhibition have been words of affirmation regarding the aesthetics of the exhibition and its goals. These include some description of the exhibit such as “Beautiful Pictures Black frame white pictures great work” (CML Main, comment book, February 2013) as well as reflection on the choices made in presentation and the connection to the content:

The black and white detail of the photos adds a sense of isolation, journey, no begin-end. They take me to thoughts of the reality of the Somali population in Columbus (highest in the world after Somalia 5 years ago, not sure if its still the same): high population but only seen in certain areas of Columbus, high population but not strong influence on Columbus culture. (CML Main, comment book, February 2013)

The goal of the exhibition was also made clear for viewers, as one commenter affirms:

These are important stories to share. I was able to only briefly read the small books. Somali women are in Columbus to stay and more women’s organizations should seize the opportunity to learn from them! We of the non-Somali
community need to quit stereotyping and assuming when we see women in skirts and hijabs – SO much more than meets the eye. Backgrounds, language, family, aspirations, etc. vary so much behind the veils – please continue to allow these voices to be heard! (Westerville, comment book, March 2013)

These comments support the feedback received from library staff – that people overall enjoyed the exhibition.

**Identification**

A second type of response was identification with the stories and women featured in the exhibition ranging from reflections on past experiences with Somalis to making connections between the women in the exhibit and the viewer. For example, after viewing the exhibit, Mr. Williams wrote about his work with a mentoring program in the 1990s where he “encountered two Somali women who helped me understand many things in Somali culture. This was a wonderful thing to me!” (CML Main, comment book, February 2013). Several youth connected with the stories. “I have a kid like that in my class. Her name is Faduma” (Westerville, comment book, March 2013). The librarians at CMLNL shared with me a story from Storytime @ the Art Gallery

In storytime, we paraded past the Storytime Art Gallery (R2R board) and then paraded past the Somali Voices Art Gallery. (And then past the raffle basket.) When one girl said she thought they were Arab and I clarified they are Somali. She asked if they were Muslim and when I said yes, she said, “I'm Muslim.” I suggested she look at the pictures and see if she recognized what the girls were doing. Later she came back and said, “I looked at those pictures and I've done some of that.” (April 3, 2013, personal communication recorded in journal)

These connections are important examples of the ways in which viewers begin to shift their perception of the women portrayed, and Somali women in general.

**Challenge**

A final type of response to the exhibit includes challenge. The majority of these responses were shared through secondhand accounts from library staff, although two comments indicate a clear challenge to preconceptions:
(to me) these pics=a sense of longing, seeking, applying in the wake of an overcoming of minimalism or isolation, attribution of definition, a story retelling.

(CML Main, comment book, February 2013, emphasis added)

? Well I really don’t know yet (CMLNL, comment book, April 2013)

While responses to the exhibit were generally positive at CML Main and Westerville, there were two incidents in particular at CMLNL and CML Hilltop, where there are large Somali populations, which indicated challenge. During the first exhibit at CMLNL, Kristin wrote to me: “As expected, our customers are reacting to this exhibit. I've heard our Somali customers relate to AND disagree with some of the women in the exhibit. I really like that it's getting a thoughtful reaction!” (April 3, 2013, personal communication recorded in research journal). The disagreement primarily arose among Somali women who shared alternative stories of their experiences with men, a topic that was discussed and debated among DSVUNL participants. At CML Hilltop, one of the librarians shared with me an encounter she had with a woman who demanded, “Where are all the American kids?” (November 13, 2013 – Field Notes: Silence). While the email exchange between the librarian, her manager, and me described the disgust at this response and the bigoted attitude towards Somalis, it also indicates to me the way that these images and stories work to challenge viewers’ conceptions of who is “American” in addition to what it means to be a Somali woman. I am particularly interested in these examples, and the way that participants and viewers renegotiate, redefine, challenge, and interrupt their and others’ preconceptions.

Summary of DSVU Initiatives

Chapters 5 and 6 introduced each of the DSVU participants, described the project and the process of creating the work, which is presented in the following section, and discussed my role in and questions regarding this project. The first initiative, DSVUOSU, began as a result of the Schweitzer Fellowship and was not initially framed as research. Qorsho, Nasra, Hoda, Muna, and S. participated in this project. Their stories and photographs were created through individual oral history interviews and photography sessions in which I was the photographer. The work was displayed at four libraries –
CML Main (February 2013), Westerville (March 2013), CMLNL (April to May 2013),
and CML Hilltop (October to December 2013) – and organized into five individual

groupings, which included photographs and stories of each woman. The focus of this

initiative was community, tradition, religion, dress, and family.

The second initiative, *DSVUNL*, began after Zam Zam saw the *DSVUOSU* exhibit

at CMLNL. She recruited eight women to participate in the project – A., Asha, Bahja,

Kayla, Ladan, Miriam, Raamla, and Zahra. Through a series of group interviews, the

women told and wrote stories in the form of poetry and essays about cultural expectations

of Somali women, learning how to be Somali women, and the way that their parents’

experiences helped shape their lives. I took some photographs, but most of the writing

and photography occurred between our meetings by the women themselves and sent to

me via text, email, and Facebook. This work was added to the photographs and stories

from *DSVUOSU*, grouped by topic (vocation, culture, dress, community, and religion)

with no correspondence between individual photographs and stories; each contributed

different forms of narrative and perspectives of a single topic.

*DSVU Exhibition at CMLNL January 2014: A Photo-essay*

The following photo-essay contains the images and text of the second exhibit

(which includes work from both initiatives) as it would have been viewed at CMLNL in

January 2014. As in the exhibition, the photographs intentionally do not include

descriptive captions and there is no direct correlation between image and text. However,

there is a transition (though without distinct boundaries) from topic areas in the following

order: vocation, culture, dress, community, and religion.
This is a project in motion. What you see here is an ongoing collection of photographs, stories, and writing created by young Somali women. The women portrayed are individuals who represent a new face of the Somali community. Some were born in Somalia, others born in America or other places around the world. Yet, they all identify as Somali. They also identify as Muslim and some as American. Their role is invaluable as they become leaders in their families and community.

This is not a documentation of a group of people, but a collection of different perspectives on issues of importance to the women participating such as culture, community, religion, dress, and vocation. Through the process of participatory photography, we discussed these issues, told stories, wrote poems and essays, and took photographs. Our hope is to challenge stereotypes, bridge communities by increasing understanding of a different aspect of the Somali community, and address difficult questions through artmaking and this exhibit.
Figure 18: Exhibition image 2
Somalia

Broken and war torn,
Waiting on an opportunity to be reborn,
Once beautiful and majestic,
Now saddened and tragic,

Use to dream ‘bout the bright skies and warm ocean,
Now I dream about stopping this dreadful war in motion,

It’s time for a resurrection by a new generation,
Stability in Somalia in actuality well one day be reality,
Our land like a puzzle piece by piece is coming together,

Uniting in peace.

~Bahja
There’s a prominent Somali proverb that my mom has preached my entire life:

*Dhamman wixii dhalaala dheemman ma aha.*

This means that things that sparkle aren’t always going to be diamonds. As an American-Somali, I draw strength from my heritage. My parents’ ability to survive endless massacres has taught me anything is possible. My parents have stepped into the fire and created their diamonds, creating a pathway for my ten siblings and me to attend college, a privilege they weren’t afforded. Now it is my turn to forge my own diamond - my future.

~Zahra
I was born here as an American and was raised as a Somali. I am stuck between two worlds and sometimes I don’t fit well in either. To Somalis, I’m not Somali enough. To Americans, I’m not American enough. So I’ve created my own little identity.

~Qorsho
Figure 22: Exhibition image 6
What's unity when no one
   Sees it with you?
What's happiness when no one
   Feels it with you?
What's the truth when no one
   Speaks it with you?
Only focus on the negatives
When developing the perfect picture

Excerpt from *Stars. In. Africa.*

~Raamla
Figure 25: Exhibition image 9
I went to Somalia for a month. It was the biggest culture shock I ever faced. I could never do anything right. The word I heard the most was "outsider.” Diaspora, the outsider. The minute I stepped off the plane, there are two lines - the foreigner line and the naturalized citizen line. I thought, “I'm Somali. I'm in Somalia. I'm going to go in the right line.” As I'm walking through the line they said, “What are you doing here? You're a diaspora.”

“No, I'm Somali.”

“It doesn't matter if you're Somali, or you were born here. If you don't have the passport you can't stand in this line.”

“Oh, ok. Where do I go stand?”

And they were like “Go stand with the other foreigners.”

~Asha
What does it mean for me to be Somali? I don’t know the answer to that. Our culture is everything. Our culture ties a lot in with our religion. Our language is everything. It’s the way we think, it’s the way we act upon things. It is our mentality.

~Muna
Figure 28: Exhibition image 12
My sister, when she was sixteen one of our relatives from Minnesota came over and was like, "What is your tribe?" And she was sitting there thinking for ten whole minutes. She was like, "I know it starts with an M, but I'm not sure what it is." So then the guy was like, "Come on, you're going in the right direction." So she said, "Ok, I think my tribe is muxadaro." And the thing is muxadaro means lecture in Somali. There were so many extended relatives in that living room, they just burst out laughing. They were slapping their knees. There were tears running down their face. It was really funny. Then after all the laughing kind of quieted down, then they told her, “This is what you are.”

~Zam Zam
Figure 29: Exhibition image 13
Figure 30: Exhibition image 14
I don’t dress the part. I feel that I will wear *hijab* when I’m ready, when it comes from the heart and not just because I’m supposed to do it. There was a point in my life where I thought I was ready and I wore it for a year straight. One of my really good friends, she started wearing it. She uplifted me a little and I thought it’s time to grow up, so I put it on. I saw that friend switching back to her old ways and I thought that’s not cool, you know? I’ve realized since that I just wasn’t ready and I just jumped into it. In Islam, we call that having low *iman*, which is faith. That’s just what I went through at that period of time and I took it off and said, you know I’m just going to restart.

~Muna
Figure 31: Exhibition image 15
I was age 11 when I began to wear hijab. I started wearing it because I wanted to imitate my mom. I saw her wearing it and I decided to wear it for a while. Then I stopped wearing it for a year, around 9/11. My mom didn’t feel safe with us wearing it. She had an incident at work and she didn’t want us to be discriminated against. Then my grandmother came to stay with us for a while and her coming really changed my opinion on Islam. I learned more about it. I always had questions about it – why do I have to do this, or do that? I didn’t always feel I got the best answers from my mom, so I asked my grandmother and she gave me answers that I was really happy with. I started praying and wearing hijab. Not just hijab but also the skirt. Since then, I haven’t stopped wearing it.

~Hoda
When I was younger I had maybe a total of five Somali friends, and every time I went over to their houses their parents wouldn't approve of what I was wearing because I wasn't fully covered. So if I have wanted to go hang out with them they would tell me that I need to wear hijab. That really bothered me. They don't know my relationship with God.

I started wearing hijab this year. I started feeling naked without it. It was my protection. At first I thought it'd be a really big deal if I started wearing hijab, surprisingly a lot of people didn't care.

~A.

Figure 34: Exhibition image 18
I started wearing *hijab* when I was twenty. I wasn’t a practicing Muslim early on. When 9/11 happened, I had an existential crisis. For the first time I began thinking about big questions about life, the meaning of life, about mortality and things like this. I started looking into Islam. I started reading about prayer, about God, and *hijab*. I was reading passages that really spoke to me. Passages that talk about patience. Passages that talk about the experiences of the prophets and the things that they endured during their lives. Things that really spoke to me in my own experiences and my own situations. It not only improved my relationship with God, but it improved all my relationships as well. My perspectives on life, my outlook on life - everything was transformed because of this. Now many years later, I feel that *hijab* is like a second skin. It’s part of who I am.

~S.
Figure 35: Exhibition image 19
I think the hardest thing for me as a Somali woman is balancing the culture and the religion. Sometimes it clashes. Sometimes you don’t know where the boundary ends and there are moments when I can get away with culture but then I look back and I know what is wrong and right in the religion.

~Miriam
As a Muslim, I see myself as an ambassador for my religion, to personify Islam through my actions, through the ways that I interact with people. I think actions speak much louder than words. Every person that I interact may come to me with their own perceptions of Islam, but what if those perceptions can improve because of their interactions with me?

~S.
Figure 38: Exhibition image 22
Figure 39: Exhibition image 23
I am a Somali girl living in America. Being a Somali girl in the West is hard to balance. The kids at school would tease me often for being foreign. They would pick on my headscarf. I think I began to resent my ethnicity. I hated the fact that I was born Somali. I wished I could just be American. My attitude became unbearable even to me. But I started doing some more soul searching and reconnected with my religion. When I became more religiously devout it translated into my dealings with everyone at school and within myself. I began to accept my culture and appreciate who I am. In my home I became a better daughter and sister. I learned from Islam to be grateful for everything in my life. I also learned to treat my parents with the most kindness and respect. It gave me balance. Balance with my surroundings. It gave me understanding and made me more cautious of the world. So the bridge that brought my life together was Islam.

~Ladan
Figure 40: Exhibition image 24
Figure 41: Exhibition image 25
She stays strong resilience is her name
She moves forward
Never letting the situation put out her fiery flame
She is our mother, sister, daughter- a faceless dame
She is strength

Excerpt from *She is strength*
~Zam Zam

Figure 42: Exhibition image 26
The other day, this lady got into a bad accident. Everyone stopped their car, parked it, and rushed over to her. My perspective was a different than theirs. For me, I was thinking let the policemen do their thing. Give them some space. But they were more concerned about her and the situation. They just wanted to make sure that she was the priority.

The one nice thing about being a Somali in Columbus, if your car breaks down, it doesn't matter where you are, you don't have to call AAA. Every Somali car will stop. They will just look as they're driving past by, and once they identify you as Somali, they will turn back around and assist you.

~Miriam
Figure 43: Exhibition image 27
The queens of Africa go marching one by one – hurrah hurrah
They shield their children with their flesh – hurrah hurrah
The blood that runs through their veins
Is a withering connection of their genders’ pain,
And they all go marching down.

~Zahra

Figure 44: Exhibition image 28
There was a time when I had to go downtown to one of the government buildings to do something with my taxes. When I went through security, they asked me to take off the zippered sweatshirt I was wearing. It would not have been appropriate to take off my sweatshirt in such a public setting, so I tried to explain the situation and said I could not do this in the lobby. The security guard said I was not dressed like a Muslim, simply because I was not wearing jilbab. Because of this she would not give me “special treatment” and allow me to use a private room. I wear my hijab every day, but because I was wearing my work uniform, khakis and a sweatshirt, I was told I was not Muslim by someone who had a very narrow concept of my religion.

~Nasra
Here in Columbus, we are at a crossroads. People still don’t know what to make of us. They’ve gotten used to the fact that Somalis live here, but there is still a misunderstanding that inhibits any kind of progress as far as getting to know who Somalis are and what we’re all about.

~Qorsho
CHAPTER 7: Articulations and Interruptions of DSVU

Overview of Analytical Frameworks and Interpretive Strategy

The presentation of the project in Chapters 5 and 6 describe how, why, and by whom the stories of DSVU were created. In this chapter, I present the analysis of these stories as articulations and interruptions (Nancy, 1991; 1997; 2000), responding to the research questions:

- How do participants of Dumarka Soomaaliyeed Voices Unveiled (DSVU) articulate what it is to be a young Muslim Somali woman in Columbus, Ohio through visual, oral, and written narratives, and how do these stories interrupt perceptions of Somali women?
- What are the interruptions of DSVU?
- What perceptions and conceptions are the stories and photographs interrupting?

In the remainder of this chapter, I aim to achieve three goals. First, I describe my layered analytic process and interpretative strategy. Second, I define articulation and discuss two ways participants articulated being young Muslim Somali women in Columbus, Ohio. Lastly, I identify two ways that these stories interrupt perceptions of Somali women.

Layered Analysis: Culture, Narrative, Writing, and Theory

What is it about these stories and images that captured and sustained my attention? Muna taking off hijab, the photo of two women riding a camel at Eid festival, A.’s discussion about dhagaan celis, that Zam Zam was a project leader but did not tell her mom, going to the mosque with S. and Hoda, and Asha being asked to step into the foreigner’s line in the Mogadishu airport. Why are these stories important? These particular stories reflect the way my perceptions of Somali women have been challenged and interrupted, and how the stories connect to audiences Somali and non-Somali alike. Out of these important points, I categorized what the women were saying about
themselves in these stories and how these stories interrupted my, their, and others’ perceptions of what a Somali woman is supposed to be.

Although this method of analysis could be understood as grounded theory, in which theoretical ideas begin with the data (Schwandt, 2007, p. 131), I used layered analysis [see Figure 47] to determine articulations and interruptions in DSVU. Though the development of the exhibition is itself a form of participant driven analysis, for the purposes of this study, these layers include:

- **Juxtaposition of story within cultural categories** [Figure 48], drawing from Abu-Lughod (2008/1993);
- Frank’s (2010) *dialogic narrative analysis*, considering the different types of stories told and what they do and developing a typology of stories [Figure 49];
- *Writing as a method* of analysis (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) to draw out shared differences from field texts through writing analytic poems and narrative dramas (putting drama into narrative form) [Appendix G]; and
- Jackson and Mazzei’s (2012) *thinking with theory*.

The process and act of writing in particular was an important method to make connections across two project initiatives, interviews, and individual women, and to put the issues into dialogue textually parallel to the second exhibit’s curatorial process. I selected phrases and anecdotes that described what it is to be Somali women; found related comments and stories across two projects, different narrative forms (poem, essay, discussion, oral storytelling, and photography), and amongst participants; and placed ideas that were similar, in agreement, in disagreement, and/or different side by side. In many instances, preserving the rhythm of the conversation became important, particularly regarding repetition. Through writing, I began emphasizing the points of consensus or coming together and the instances when there were a variety of responses and experiences, affirming difference or as James (2006) describes it, “affirming singular plural being.” It is from this work that I identified themes of articulation and interruption.
Figure 47: Overview of layered analysis
Figure 48: First categorization according to broad identity categories
Figure 49: Typology of stories

STORIES (visual, oral, & written)
One thing happens in consequence of another; lived stories, retold and reconstrued

FORMAL
Intended non-Somali audience
Edited

ORAL HISTORY
INTERVIEWS: Hoda, Muna, Nasra, Qorshe, & S.

RE-EDITED TRANSCRIPTS:
Hoda, Muna, Nasra, Qorshe, S., A., & Zam Zam

PHOTO SESSIONS: Easton, Hoda, Muna, Nasra, Qorshe, & S.

POEMS & ESSAYS

PHOTOGRAPHS
Taken prior to project Selfies or of family

GROUP INTERVIEWS:

UNEDITED

INFORMAL
Unintended or forgotten audience, Somali and non-Somali
Minor editing

STORIES FROM
TRANSCRIPTS
Interpretative Strategy: Thinking with Community Theory

It is fruitful to revisit the discussion of how Nancy (1991, 1997, 2000) and Jackson and Mazzei (2012) inform this study and analysis. Reading theory with data involves identifying where the theory informs the questions. Thus, the questions are worded with consideration of articulation and interruption (Nancy, 1991; 1997). The concepts of being singular plural, myth and its interruption through literature, and cultural identity have informed the analysis and categorization of the stories. There are several major ideas from Nancy (1991, 1997, 2000) that informed my thinking about diasporic identity and narratives: myth, being singular plural, cultural identity, and interruption.

Myths for Nancy (1991) are the stories told by and for a community, which define the boundaries of its identity. Though myth is often used to describe an idea widely held but false, Nancy is concerned with myth as foundational narratives of community. Because of the difference between Nancy’s discussion of myth and the common definition of myth, especially concerning truth and what is deemed false, I aim to carefully align with Nancy’s focus on stories. The focus is on what stories are told, and how they define communities for its members and for those outside the community. Nancy describes how individuals, communities, and the stories we tell about ourselves and our communities co-expose, or appear together, so that each is inseparable from the other. Though there is great danger in fixing the identity of a community, the interruption of myth (or the identification of myth as myth) has to do with the process of identification in which singularities are entangling and disentangling themselves from each other and
subsequently the community so that community identity is fluid and as Frank (2010) describes \textit{enacting} truth rather than determining it.

This leads to two other points: \textit{relationship as integral to being} and \textit{cultural identity as fluid and in process}. Being singular plural makes the separation of individual from community impossible and negates the idea that community is based on sharing of the same; instead founding community on shared difference amongst singularities. \textit{Singularities} are not only individual human beings, but also cultures, communities, cities, etc. Therefore, different levels of relationship are considered integral to being singular plural.

As a result of these different levels of relationship, identity is a process, not a fixed concept (which would be mythical), of entanglement and disentanglement from other singularities (Morin, 2012). What this means is that identity has to do with what brings people together and what makes them different, accounting for the relation between individual and community. For example, what participants in \textit{DSVU} have in common with another Somali is the fact of not being the same Somali as him or her, and the fact that \textquotedblleft Somaliness\textquotedblright\textsuperscript{79} is never, nowhere, in no essence, in no figure, brought to completion (Nancy, 2000, p. 155). Moreover, cultural identity is always changing as it is confronted and as it confronts, transforms, develops, recomposes itself with different locations, times and influence, combines with host communities, and rechannels itself to accommodate differences (see Nancy, 2000, p. 152).

\textsuperscript{79}Somaliness in this chapter describes the collective cultural identity of Somalis (particularly in the diaspora), rather than soomaalinimo discussed in Chapter 2. For example, Hopkins (2010) describes language and dress as two important elements of staying Somali in the diaspora, thus dress and language are important aspects of Somaliness.
I am interested in what Nancy calls *interruption*: keeping community and myth in motion by identifying points of difference with what is given as the in-common, and the sharing and retelling of these experiences of the boundaries of community and culture where the community reforms itself through singularities touching (Nancy, 1991; 2000). In other words, this research is interested in the stories of how *DSVU* participants understand and practice their identity as Muslim, Somali women in Columbus, Ohio.

**Approach to the Presentation of Analysis**

The following sections are organized by articulations and interruptions. Many sections are introduced by a story or poem and each section is broken down into two or three main points engaging concepts from Nancy’s community theory (1991, 1997, 2000). Then, a brief interpretation is offered.

**Articulations of What It Is To Be a Muslim, Somali Woman in Columbus, Ohio**

*How do *DSVU* participants articulate what it is to be a young Muslim Somali woman in Columbus, Ohio through visual, oral, and written narratives?*

*DSVU* participants articulated what it is to be a young Muslim Somali woman in Columbus, Ohio in two ways, each with sub-themes: 1) They shared stories about (a) who they are told they are (Muslim and Somali) by their parents, other Somalis, and by non-Somalis; (b) how they identify themselves as a group of young women; and (c) how they identify themselves as individuals through their personal experiences of discovering what exactly these identities mean to them. 2) Although when asked specifically what being a Somali woman means to them the most common response was *I don’t know*, their stories suggested otherwise. What they did know was that being, acting, and looking Somali
changes depending on where they are and who they are with. See Figure 50 for overview of articulations.

Figure 50: Articulations of DSVU

**Defining Articulation**

Articulation is more than description. Within community theory (Nancy, 1991), articulation is concerned with the way that meaning is inscribed through stories (whether visual, written, or oral) so that meaning is “indefinitely and constitutively deferred” (p. 80). It is to identify the presupposition of its own identity (*who* has defined what that identity is and *what* that definition is) and what makes the most authentic practices and signifiers authentic (Nancy, 2000, p. 158). Articulation is, in other words, to identify myth as a myth (a foundational narrative) and to retell that narrative through sharing individual stories of coming into being Muslim, Somali women.
To articulate is to share specific experiences of identification, in which a singularity, in this case a young Somali woman is always in process of becoming and often identified by disentanglement from others (Morin, 2012, p. 37). As such, the women describe who they are told they are (Somali, Muslim) and what they should be (modest, poised strong, covered, oppressed, foreign, minority), to whom they ascribe as young women, and punctuate these claims with specific experiences of identification often in the context of conflict.

**First Articulation: You Are, We Are, I Am**

Through storytelling, writing, and photography the women of *DSVU* deconstructed broad descriptions of who they are supposed to be through “you are,” “we are,” and “I am” statements. These three different statements highlight the interplay of what the women are told they are, how they understand themselves within a collective, and how they see themselves as individuals. The use of these different positioning statements exemplifies the complexity of relating to community and culture on different levels and complicates the sharing of stories. Identifying what individual women are told they are supposed to be, how they relate to those foundational myths as a group, and
subsequently challenge them through specific stories of confrontation and conflict affirms the importance of shared difference.

**You are…: Assigning identity.**

She went, ‘You’re Somali. You’re Muslim. That's all you need to know. This is why we left our country, so I don’t want you to bring that stuff in my house.’ And then my dad was just like, ‘It doesn't hurt to tell them what they are. You are…’ And I was like ‘Oh ok.’ *(from Clan, Appendix G)*

“You are” assigns an identity and defines the actions and signifying practices associated with it. The women are told that they are Somali, Muslim, and members of their respective clan. They are told that Somali women are modest, poised, and strong by others in their community and through observation of their elders from a young age. Statements of cultural identity – intertwining religious identification with racial, ethnic, and familial identification – are meant to establish a common cord between Somalis, particularly in the diaspora. The collective narratives develop a discourse to teach youth about their culture and to describe Somalis to outsiders.*80* In addition, non-Somalis expect Somali women to be covered, foreign in background and language, and in many cases oppressed – yet another identity designation. Yet, many of the women told stories about encountering situations, often in school, where they were unable to respond to these claims because they did not know what it meant for themselves and found it difficult to clearly define.

**We are…: Where do I fit in?** The women position themselves within broad identity categories in relation to other young Somali women, as evident in “we are” statements. These collective statements of “we” are seen in particular when addressing non-Somalis, such as A.’s POV poem and the oral histories of the women of *DSVUOSU*, and when the women talk about experiences specific to young Somali women in the

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*80*The discourses aimed at outsiders and those directed at youth sometimes conflict as evident in discussions about clan where for example a unified ethnicity is perpetuated in a public context particularly amongst non-Somalis while distinctions between clans are still evident in social services, location of resettlement, and personal relationships. There is however a marked difference between the discourse of older Somalis and that of youth, who frequently denounce tribalism and using clan to divide while also acknowledging the benefits of clan such as social security/insurance and knowing their heritage (multiple project interviews).
diaspora. The transition from “you” statements to collective statements of “we” demonstrates a negotiation of belonging – either ascribing to or distinguishing from the predetermined boundaries of the named identity.

When singularities touch, whether a person or a culture, they coexpose as they disentangle and reentangle themselves. Ladan in particular describes her experience disentangling from Somali culture and becoming part of a unified community through Islam. While she shares her personal experience, it is a statement of “we are Muslim” as seen in the title of the piece, *The bridge that brought us together* (Ladan, DSVU, 2014, emphasis added). Other participants explored their religious practice in writing (Raamla’s poem, DSVU, 2014), story (Hoda, Qorsho, and S., DSVU, 2014), and photograph (Hoda and S. praying and reading the Qur’an and Zahra’s pictures of Noor mosque, see images in Chapter 6). Though all the women identified as Muslim, articulating the differences in what that means and how it is enacted for each individual affirmed that it is precisely the differences in a shared identity that make the women Somali and Muslim. Sharing differences is an affirmation of the “we are” and the positioning of self among the collective.

Formal writing especially shows its author positioning herself among conflicting understandings and experiences of being Somali from multiple perspectives including Somali, non-Somali, and diaspora Somali; a process that Ladan describes as “Trying to connect two opposing personalities/Living in America being Somali” (DSVU, 2014). Reflecting on what they are told they are, the women begin a process of claiming their identities and figuring out for themselves what it means and how it is practiced as evident in the poems, essays, and photographs.

**This is what I am.** “You are” and “we are” statements enable the women to describe, “This is what I am” (Bahja, project interview, October 28, 2013a). Circulating narratives of Somali women are necessary to make sense out of the specific understandings and experiences of being Somali women. Many of the women’s stories began with “we” before launching into stories specific of “I.” For example, Muna described the things that “we have” such as “our language, our religion, this mentality
(xishood)” before embarking on specific instances of how she affronts these claims by “not dressing the part” (Muna, project interview, October 27, 2012). Through her story of putting on and then taking off hijab, Muna offers a perceptive example of identifying the importance of hijab, her relation to the practice, and her experience coming to understand what it means in the context of her life, the communities to which she belongs, and the landscape in which she lives.

The women of DSVUNL initiated conversation about other definitional elements of Somali culture, acknowledging the narratives of Somaliness and young Somali women such as the culture gap between generations, clan, dress, gender roles, and religious and cultural knowledge. Discussion of how these narratives have informed their lives and sharing experiences learning about the boundaries exemplifies the symbiotic relationship between singularities. In addition to oral and written stories addressing individual experiences of these cultural narratives, offering different images of “I am” such as the portraits posted to Facebook [Figure 52] or the many images of religious practice, dress, and community present examples of the multiple ways that the women portray themselves to each other, others within the Somali community, and outsiders through an ongoing negotiation of boundaries, offering no single image or story of “I am.”

Figure 52: Pictures (L to R) of Raamla, Zahra, and Zam Zam from Facebook
**Interpretation: Punctuating you with I.** The transition from “You are” to “we are” to “I am” demonstrates the symbiotic relationship between individual, community, and cultural identity, and is not simply a break down towards specificity and fragmentation. Each point of view is necessary for individuals to make sense of their identities; and the individual experiences help make meaning out of abstract concepts like Somali, modesty, or Muslim. Each of these perspectives is needed to prevent easy closure of community and identity. The “you are” and “we are” narratives depict the expectations, assumptions, and perceptions of Somali women defined by and for the community that determine the boundaries of Somaliness and make it possible that specific experiences of Somaliness have meaning – punctuating the you with I.

The formal writings by the participants addressing Somalia and Somalis as a whole are countered by specific stories of experiences of difference often told in humor. Stories confronting expectations, stereotypes, and assumptions of what they are supposed to be are often dotted with laughter as the listeners identify with the experience, respond to the humorous way the story is told, or recognize conflicting values, behaviors, and beliefs resulting in misunderstandings and miscommunications familiar to the audience. The lighthearted rendering of past experiences demonstrates a playfulness used to make meaning, negotiate, and challenge serious issues such as dress (i.e. Muna’s story of taking off hijab; Appendix C, excerpts in Chapter 6), clan (i.e. Zam Zam’s story of Zahra forgetting the name of her clan; Appendix D, excerpt in Chapter 6), double standards regarding gender roles and modesty (i.e. Asha learning about appropriate dress in Somalia, Appendix D), loss of culture, and cultural expectations (i.e. Bahja and Mall of America or Asha’s cookie story in Appendix D). In these stories, led by acknowledgment of the “we” and punctuated with stories of “I” is found a juxtaposition of shared identity and shared difference – the definition of being singular plural and interruption.

**Second Articulation: I Don’t Know, But It Changes**

“I don’t know. It’s just, I don’t know how to say, because it’s just who I am”

(Muna, project interview, October 27, 2012).
When *DSVU* participants shared their individual experiences of being Somali women – whether in conflict with expectations and assumptions or affirming fundamental values, beliefs, and practices – specific descriptions were intermittently interspersed with statements of *I don’t know* and description of the changing nature of how they must act, appear, or be. While what it *means* to be Somali was not clearly defined, a fuller response to the question of what it *is* to be Muslim, Somali women in Columbus, Ohio for each woman emerged as the women told stories, wrote poems and essays, and took photographs. Being Somali women in a small Midwestern city is to be both visible and unknown minorities, dependent on expectations of who they were supposed be in different places, and because of this they continually negotiate the boundaries of their identities by actively choosing what elements of competing cultures to practice.

**Both visible and unknown: Developing a narrative for non-Somalis.** Young Somali women have many identities including Muslim, Somali, woman, student, social worker, researcher, nurse, teacher, American, sister, daughter, African, Diaspora. Though the desire to identify with many categories is not unique to this group of women, it is complicated by being children of refugees and immigrants (or refugees themselves) in a
small Midwestern city where they are multiple minorities. They are African and American, and they are visibly Muslim and Somali. As Qorsho explained,

After 9/11...even though my mom pressured my sister and I to take off the hijab just so that we wouldn’t experience any hardship we both were very much against that – we were both very much committed to wearing hijab and associating with Somali people and our Somali identity despite what had happened...You also have to think about skin color. When you are Arab, you are technically white. And you kind of look like the majority. But Somalis, even when we take off the hijab, we would still be considered outsiders, or minorities, African Americans. There would still be a stigma attached. (Project interview, October 3, 2012).

Yet despite this visibility, there is also an element of what Griffiths (2002) describes as economic and cultural invisibility. Though Griffiths (2002) discusses this invisibility in a larger, structural sense; at an individual level, it informs the way that non-Somalis relate to each of the women. Despite the large community of Somalis in Columbus, their relatively recent arrival and the tendency to stay within their own community perpetuate misunderstandings.

There are a lot of places I go where people will speak to me in very slow English thinking I don't know any at all. Or they treat me as if...there's not much that they know about us. We're kind of like a question mark for a lot of people. Although we're a question mark they like to come up with their own conceptions of how we are. (Zam Zam, post project interview, January 19, 2014).

As a result of the common misunderstandings regarding “who Somalis are and what we’re all about” (Qorsho, DSVU, 2014), a discourse for outsiders has developed and is seen in the participants’ writing, interviews, and photographs created specifically to address particular stereotypes and perceptions held by non-Somalis regarding dress, traditions, language, religion, culture, and role in the community. These stories position the storyteller as “ambassadors” for their culture and religion (S., DSVU, 2014) and put forth a narrative about unified Somali culture rooted in Islam and defined by its language, dress, and stories and about Somali women as strong, independent women who play an
active role in caring for their families, shaping the community through their religious and cultural practices and professional vocations, and redefining what it means to be Somali in the diaspora.

**Place-based stories.** The women’s understanding of their cultural identity is contingent on place and space. Ideas about family and community, for example, are not bounded by geographic location. Supporting family does not mean the people living in your home, but includes family members in Africa and other places across the world. If something happens such as a car accident, “You will get phone calls from Minnesota, Toronto, Africa. Everywhere” (Bahja, project interview, October 28, 2013a). Moreover, Somali identity differs between diaspora and home as Asha found in her travels to Somalia. Place does not just include different locales, but also different spaces (or named places), which are defined by its occupants and uses.\(^{81}\) The women are keenly aware of the relationship between identity, representation, and place; and move daily between spaces with often conflicting practices and expected representations of identity.

How the women represent themselves changes according to where the women are and who they are with. If they are in Somali spaces, such as the Global Mall, there is an expectation that young women dress in a skirt or *abaya* and *hijab* as well as act respectfully and modestly, which according to A. includes not drawing attention to oneself by laughing or talking too loud. For example, although Muna does not yet practice *hijab*, she does dress in a headscarf and dress at the Somali malls to avoid comments and questions from the older women. Miriam, too, echoes this concern: *Every step we take we have to consider what people are going to say. If I wore this shirt, what would they say? Especially if I’m going to a Somali mall, I have to be on top of it* (project interview, October 28, 2013). In Muslim spaces, there is a different set of expectations. In mosques less populated by Somalis, the dress code is relaxed while *masjids* in “Somali ground zero” (S., project interview, January 19, 2013) require full *hijab*. In public, non-Somali spaces, there is yet another set of expectations complicated by the perceptions

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\(^{81}\) As Rogoff (2000) writes, “The meaning of a named place is never its designated activities or physical properties but their interaction with far less obvious subjectivities and with the actions and signifying practices that elicit (or mask) these” (p. 23).
held by outsiders and the commitment elder Somalis demonstrate to making sure their youth are keeping their Somali identity first through what the women refer to as the *haram*\(^{82}\) police (project interview, November 17, 2013).

Rupture occurs when the women do not look or act like they are expected. For example, when Nasra went into a government building downtown Columbus and asked for a private space to take off her jacket, the security guard told her that she was not dressed like a Muslim and did not require special treatment (DSVU, 2014). Or when a (presumably white) woman asked where all the American kids were upon seeing the photographs at one library (November 13, 2013 – Field Notes: Silence). Or when Muna does not cover, and Somalis and non-Somalis alike question her ethnicity (Are you Somali?) and her religious practice (Are you Muslim?) (November 17, 2013 – Field Notes: CMLNL Project).

The movement in-between spaces offer an interesting case of intersecting and oftentimes conflicting expectations and perceptions of Somali woman. The bus is one place where women cross cultural boundaries as they physically move from Somali to non-Somali spaces and move between different sets of expectations regarding dress. Some Somali women change their dress – donning a scarf rather than a *hijab* or jeans rather than a skirt. While common practice, the participants were critical of it, calling those who practice this change – *transformers*.

Why can’t you be the same?
It’s because you’re doing it for God, right?
Why do you care?
We spend too much time
Worrying
About how others feel
About what we do
About what we’re wearing (from *On the bus*, Appendix G)

\(^{82}\)Arabic for *sinful*
How the women represent and understand themselves depends on place (what city they are in, whether they are in the diaspora or at home) and space (non-Somali or Somali public spaces, Muslim spaces, or private spaces with family or peers). They are aware of these differences, seen in the recognition of *transformers* and the weight that others’ expectations hold. While emphasis for the concern of loss of culture monitors these cultural codes are, the women identify these differences as they navigate these changing spaces and places.

**Interpretation: Negotiating boundaries of multiple identities and spaces.**

There's so much give and take.
There's a boundary. Ok.
That boundary is pretty clear when you come up against
Blurred lines…
So, that's the problem.
We don't know (from *Somali Girl Prob*, Appendix G)

Occupying multiple minority positions and navigating often conflicting expectations in the places they go, the women of *DSVU* negotiate the boundaries of these spaces. Examples such as *transformers* show that women are looking for values and beliefs that maintain the core of each of these identities – faith (*the bridge that brought us together*), community and family (remittances, car accident, religion) across geographies, equality and understanding (religion, cultural, gender roles, and vocation), and the valuing of heritage – while identifying aspects of what they are told, experience, and observe that fixes their culture as a particular practice or thing. This means negotiating the boundaries of cultural identities, “the borders upon which or along which singular beings are exposed” (Nancy, 1991, p. 33), where communication takes place at “the common limits where we are exposed and where it exposes us” (Nancy, 1991, p. 67). On the limit singularities, in this case individual women, make and unmake their own “figure and…example” (Nancy, 1991, p. 78).

Zam Zam offers one example of this limit when she saw a girl praying in the mosque:
It looked like she was really concentrated on her prayer. It was really long and everything. She came in and did everything, you know? She did the extra prayer and the augmentation. She did the obligatory one and then she did the extra one and in the end she was doing supplication…The only thing that was wrong was that her clothes were not proper. She was wearing a normal shuka. But a lady came to her and…she just kind of embarrassed the girl right in front of the whole in front of everyone who was sitting there. ‘Sister, sister, I know you were praying for a long time, Mash Allah, you know you took a long time…’ But it's not for her to say, it's not for her to judge. And even if she wanted to give sincere advice it's not the way to do it. (Zam Zam, project interview, November 17, 2013).

While the story itself is a commentary on how the women experience the limits of conflicting expectations and identities, the engagement with the story among the other participants demonstrates the active negotiation of their meaning. A. asked what exactly was said, what was considered to be wrong, and in response the others debated what is acceptable to wear to a mosque, which mosque, and why it is acceptable or not. Moreover, the way in which the woman in the story was addressed was also under discussion. Here, cultural norms and religious mandates, space, representation and identity were all in conflict; and through discussing the incident the women claimed certain aspects and asserted themselves. They practice hijab according to where they are and who they are with, but define it themselves according to their own study of the Qur’an, their relationship with God, and their own understanding of what it means to be modest. They cast off predetermined positions and instead come into being through specific experiences of their differences. There are many instances of sharing the limit, which Nancy (1991) writes “is not a place, but the sharing of places, their spacing.” (p. 73), and it is in sharing these stories – Zam Zam wearing a mini dress to a Somali wedding, Miriam riding a camel for the first time at an Eid celebration in a Columbus suburb, Bahja and Asha learning about practices of respect, among others – that the common limit is exposed.

83General East African term for something that covers the body (Akou, 2004).
While participants responded that they did not know what it meant to be Somali women, they demonstrated the process of identification taking place as they move between different minority positions, places and spaces, and negotiate the boundaries of often conflicting cultural expectations and practices as evident in their stories of coming into contact with the boundaries of these different identities.

**Interruptions of DSVU**

*How do these stories interrupt perceptions of Somali women? What are the interruptions of DSVU? What perceptions and conceptions are the stories and photographs interrupting?*

The stories of DSVU interrupt: 1) stereotypes and assumptions held by others (both Somali and non-Somali) through creating *points of empathy*, presenting *multiple viewpoints*, experiencing *affronting encounters*, and giving *attention to relationship*; and 2) participants’ perceptions by offering a space to share stories and consciously choose what to follow and what to leave behind. See Figure 54 for overview of interruptions.
Multiple Audiences for Interruption

The original audience of the exhibition was non-Somalis. However, by the conclusion of the second initiative, there were multiple audiences including other Somalis and the participants themselves. The shift in audience resulted from changes in methods used as the project developed. The first exhibit was created through individual interviews and photography sessions as I, a non-Somali, asked questions in order to develop an exhibit to help other non-Somalis learn about the culture. Though participants helped design the project, participation really began midway through the project with Qorsho and Nasra’s meeting to discuss the involvement of the male photographer. However, when Zam Zam approached me about starting another initiative, I emphasized ownership in participation and encouraged her to take a leadership role in the project. Her input and logistical considerations led to the facilitation of group interviews and photo sessions as
well as more individual work outside of an interview setting. These changes turned the project from the creation of educational stories/images for non-Somalis to an open dialogue amongst the participants, the work previously created, and the audience.

This shift was apparent in the topics chosen to discuss in each initiative: *DSVUOSU* focused on issues of role in the community, participation, dress, traditions, religion, and family while *DSVUNL* focused on cultural expectations, what it means to be a Somali woman, and how parents’ experiences shaped the women’s lives. The questions turned from outward communication to an inward sharing of experiences.

These changes were also evident in the curatorial changes between the first and second exhibitions. The first show was arranged by individual women, with stories and images clearly delineated. The second was arranged to encourage a dialogue between image and text, with no clear categories or associations amongst text, image, and woman. The second exhibition became an “indeterminate mêlée of photos and scribbles that resemble nothing, under which one would inscribe a proper name” (Nancy, 1997, p. 157); in other words, it became an articulation.

Though I did not collect much data regarding viewer response to the exhibit, particularly regarding viewer identity, participants identified points of interruption including stereotypes and assumptions held by others. In addition, some articulations became an interruption for participants by identifying the points of tension or disagreement with cultural expectations and concepts of cultural identity, and finding a way to discuss participants’ experiences and their work in *DSVU* in a way that prevents easy categorization and reforms perceptions of young Somali women.

**Interruption 1: Articulating “Somali Woman” for Others**

The stories of *DSVU* interrupt perceptions held by other Somalis and non-Somalis through 1) redefining stereotypes of Somali women and 2) affronting assumptions.
We are not all the same: Stereotypes.

We're not all the same.
We’re not this one thing.
We're not their image
We all come from the same background initially, but
We won’t fit into their box of what they want us to be. (We are, Appendix G)

Everybody has a stereotype that they fit into. So redefining that stereotype is exactly what is happening here. Even if one person reads all these stories that you put together, that one person understands that the way that they saw Somali people is not the way that they really are. So I feel like it doesn't matter the amount of people that see it, that one person that saw it has a totally different way of thinking now. Yeah. It’s redefining. (Muna, post project interview, November 15, 2013)

Somali women are largely visible minorities; their appearance is the basis of many stereotypes. Stereotypes present fixed and oversimplified perceptions of Somali women. Though most of the women participating in DSVU have lived the majority of their lives in the United States and are American citizens, they are still largely viewed as
outsiders, demonstrated by the reaction of one library patron who asked staff members upon seeing the photographs: “Where are all the American kids?” Moreover, visible differences from mainstream Americans make it easy to cast these women as “Other” and develop a homogenized misunderstanding in which Somali women are viewed as all the same and one single thing.

The women of DSVU identified stereotypes that they have encountered including dress, religion, and women’s perceived domestic role. These stereotypes formed the topics of discussion in the DSVUOSU interviews, which continued in the DSVUNL initiative. They told different stories of coming to hijab, what it means to them, and how they practice hijab. Stories also highlighted the women’s roles in the community, which extend far beyond the home. Photographs show women in different styles of dress, varying levels of physical modesty, studying, and working in the community challenging these singular ideas of what it is to be a Somali woman.

Though most frequently highlighted in encounters with non-Somalis in examples such as Nasra downtown, they also arise amongst other Somalis as well. For example, the inquiry of the young Somali girl who asked Muna if she was Muslim or even Somali simply because she was wearing jeans and no headscarf reinforces the stereotype that a Somali woman should wear a headscarf and skirt. Zam Zam described the many tweets describing a Somali woman’s place to be in the kitchen, mostly by Somali men but also the occasional woman. Through sharing different experiences of encountering stereotypes, the women not only challenge singular perceptions, but are as Muna describes redefining what it means to be Somali women. There are two ways that the stories and photographs work to redefine stereotypes: points of empathy and the sharing and exhibition of the multiple viewpoint.

**Points of empathy.** There were many points of empathy\(^4\) with the photographs and stories evident in what little viewer response I collected, shown in comments like, “I have a girl like that in my class” (Westerville, comment book, March 2013) and in an

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\(^4\) Rhetorical criticism calls this type of empathy identification, but because I use this term to describe identity in process, I choose to call points of identification between viewers and participants empathy. See Identification in Chapter 6 for more discussion of exhibit responses.
interaction at CML Hilltop where two young girls asked me about the image of Hoda praying:

“Is she from Arab---?” “No, she’s Somali. She speaks Somali, but she’s Muslim. The Qur’an is in Arabic, and her prayers are in Arabic.” Another girl stopped and asked me if the girl (Hoda again) used to live here. “No, she’s a friend of mine.” “I think I know her. I saw her here.” I didn’t respond, but told her about the project. (October 24, 2013 – Field Notes: Installing the exhibit at CML Hilltop)

Though there are differences between viewers and the women participants, those listening to the stories are able to share in the experiences through recognition of difference, humor, parallel experiences, and even unfamiliar imagery. In DSVU, empathy is the recognition of a shared difference and common experiences of disentangling from our respective communities. Empathy is “necessarily intertextual” (Mirzoeff, 2000, p. 8); extratextual information is needed to make sense of images, representations, and stories that overlap, particularly in the second exhibit.85

**Multiple viewpoint.** The second exhibition, displayed in Chapter 6, presents what Mirzoeff (2000) describes as the *multiple viewpoint*, which displays stories and images that overlap, shared and contested perspectives, and many different experiences of the same idea, value, or place and prevents easy categorization. While the first exhibit created clear boundaries between individual stories and images, the second blurs these lines, an important metaphor for these young Somali women. The second exhibition identifies points of contention such as dress, religion, vocation, community, and culture and deconstructs them by presenting these differing and oftentimes contested views, thus redefining stereotypes of Somali women and keeping definitions of identity in play.

**I could be wrong: Assumptions.** There are a number of assumptions that the stories of DSVU confronted, including assumptions regarding dress and belonging. Assumptions establish expectations of how the women are expected to act, behave, and

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85 Mirzoeff (2000) describes diasporic visual images as overlapping and “creating polyvalent symbols that are sometimes shared, sometimes contested. Diaspora moves like that, adjacently and in free-style” (p. 8). The overlap of images, representations, and stories in the second exhibition supports my conclusion that it is more diasporic and representative of the way the women of DSVU articulate their identities than the first.
be; things accepted as true without proof. Though many of these assumptions are held by non-Somalis because of already formed stereotypes and/or a lack of knowledge, they are also held by Somalis in the form of cultural expectations. Moreover, assumption also encompasses the action of taking power or responsibility for something. Interrupting assumptions in DSVU then involves participants identifying the assumptions made about Somali women and taking control of and responsibility for these perceptions. This reclaiming of assumptions facilitates affronting encounters for others and is a result of developing relationships through collaboration and an intimate exhibit setting.

**Affronting encounters.** I expected all Somali women to wear *hijab*. I assumed, despite working with Somali women for several years before beginning this project, that each of the women participating in this project would conform to this image. Each time I waited to meet new participants for the first time, I looked for what one young Somali girl told me years ago, “the black faces in the headscarf.” These assumptions positioned me very definitively as a non-Somali, an outsider.

Meeting Muna for the first time (see Chapter 5) was an *affronting encounter*. I was confronted with my own assumptions of what a Somali woman should look like or be, and it was uncomfortable and challenging. Though she was not wearing a headscarf, a visual reality, which in itself challenged my own position as intimate outsider, the development of a relationship where I could ask about these conflicting understandings and experiences that cultivated a space of interruption.

I was not the only one to experience an affronting encounter. The woman at CML Hilltop who asked “Where are all the American kids?” was also confronted with her own assumptions about belonging and what constitutes “American”; the images of young Somali women affronted her ideas. Sharing stories in which participants identify assumptions made about them and experiences offering a different way of being, looking, and acting to what is expected of them cultivates affronting encounters for those sustaining assumptions.

**Developing relationships.** Relationship is an important aspect of cultivating affronting encounters. For me, Muna and I developed a relationship in which I was
comfortable asking about conflicting understandings and experiences. I often asked for her perspective on a previous event or conversation that contributed to my ideas about Somalis at large. Working with young women as a young woman helped facilitate relationship building with participants. First, we are close in age and as a result, I was treated as a sister rather than an aunt. Though age proximity (and similarly same-genderedness) does not guarantee openness, in this case it was an important factor in our relationships. Second, establishing trust within individual relationships is much different than with organizational collaborations, where public accountability enters into the equation. The women were only responsible for the representation of themselves (and their families), and though there were instances of censorship (for example when Zam Zam and I were interviewing at Starbucks where many Somalis gathered, A.’s and S.’s family stories, the anonymous essay about hijab, and covering faces in photographs), by and large the women were open about their experiences. They felt it was important to offer new perspectives of Somali women, though the influence of elder women was certainly present in their poems and references to their mothers as models of being Somali women.

Developing a relationship between the participants and exhibition audience is a different, though parallel, process involving identifying common bonds, establishing intimacy, and encouraging dialogue. Identifying common bonds with the audience – like age, gender, and project goals in the case of my relationships with participants – is done through creating points of empathy in the content of the stories and images, as previously discussed. Establishing intimacy on the other hand has more to do with then presentation of stories. When curating the exhibit, the idea was to arrange the photographs and stories so viewers would have to stay in close proximity to both, engaging in the stories and images at the same time. Moreover, the complete set of stories was published in small, journal-sized books. Finally, the exhibition offered spaces for continued dialogue with the stories through comment books, project website, and minimal didactic materials so as to prevent easy closure in defining Somali woman. It was through two specific strategies: 1) establishing points of empathy, and 2) curatorial strategies for creating intimacy and
continuing dialogue that relationship with participants was developed with the viewer so as to facilitate the interruption of viewer held assumptions.

**Interruption 2: Articulating For Ourselves**

![Diagram](attachment:image.png)

Figure 56: Interruption 2: Articulation for ourselves

The stories of *DSVU* interrupt cultural expectations and perceptions of cultural identity by: 1) identifying different and often conflicting cultural expectations, 2) developing identity among confrontations, 3) sharing voices, 4) self-curation, and 5) keeping identity in play. Although we maintained the goal of a public exhibition, many questions and topics of discussion were directed towards participants rather than on what potential (non-Somali) viewers wanted to know or needed to hear to challenge assumptions and stereotypes. These were questions asked solely by participants, rather than developed with my input. For example, when we met the first time about starting a second initiative at CMLNL, Zam Zam wanted to ask participants about cultural expectations. During our second group meeting, Miriam told us about a recent
conversation with her aunt about the project, followed by a question for the group: What are your experiences with clan? From these questions emerged points of interruptions, articulating participants’ responses to cultural expectations and identity.

#SomaliGirlProb: Cultural expectations.

“So I have a certain group of friends that what I’m saying would be perfectly relevant to them because they call it the Somali Girl Prob...If they say it’s a Somali Girl Prob they already know what we’re talking about” (Zam Zam, post project interview, January 19, 2014).

It is a girl thing, the problem of boundaries. (#SomaliGirlProb, Appendix G)

Though many young adults struggle with finding their identities separate from their parents, young Somali women who lived the majority of their lives in the West have a unique experience developing identity. There are expectations from parents who want to recreate how life was in Somalia; the Somali community, who watches out for its youth in an effort to preserve cultural practices and values; and the larger American community who expects these women to both fulfill narrow stereotypes associated with “traditional” Muslim dress as well as being female in the context of women’s rights and gender equality. Acts as common as eye contact present complex sites of negotiating conflicting cultural expectations of how to act, look, believe, and be.

While parents and elders seek to preserve a system of values and practices that some may argue do not exist even in Somalia, the women of DSVU approach culture as a fluid, temporal concept, dependent on time and place. Many stories were told regarding the cultural expectations regarding dress (what to wear where and when), modest behavior (xishood), and knowledge (language and clan).

Many of the women describe the struggle among doing what their parents desire them to do and be, figuring out what it means to be Somali, and doing what they want. Although not uncommon among others their age, this struggle is compounded for these women by the differences of cultures as well as the involvement of the rest of the Somali

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86 At home, eye contact with parents is read as disrespect and seen as a challenge to authority while at school, the women are expected to make eye contact to be seen as confident women.
87 This is solely based on the perspective of the women in DSVU (the daughters); no interviews – informal, formal, or otherwise – were conducted with older Somalis or parents.
community. As Zam Zam demonstrated in our post project interview, sharing her story is not an individual act.

So one of the things is. [Stops and looks around behind her] Sorry I'm checking for Somalis because I don't want to see if someone is watching and listening, there are other women here. Sorry. But for me personally…it's like I cut my life into two pieces. Like I don't let any other part of it basically seep into another. Otherwise everything would just go you know go downhill. Like for example, I go to school. My parents want me to go to school. I'm very happy about my education...I want to do something with my life. But then their expectation is that I go to school and school only and nothing else and nothing more. I go to school. I come home with the family. I go to school. I go to family. If I want to work? No shame. Work. But they want my life to be a little circle where they can control everything...So I let them believe that that's what my life is. School. Work. Home. But then at the same time...if that's how my life was, I'd go insane...I'm doing other things, but they just don't know. And if I would just tell them, it would be really hard because back in Somalia, that's how everyone lived their life...It was just the norm...But then here ...it's just different. (Post project interview, January 19, 2014)

It is a complex relationship between individual and community. Members of the community such as the haram police and older siblings monitor behavior and appearance of youth, particularly females. As the women personally experience this monitoring, they critique its purpose.

Because the young women live on the boundaries of multiple identities, they are in a position to identify with, as well as separate themselves from, particular issues or aspects of Somali culture (such as FGM or cultural versus religious definitions of dress). This is an example of identity in process, identification, and of entanglement and disentanglement from others and community. The problems arising as a result of this positionality – the differences highlighted by parents’ efforts to hold on to their culture so as not to lose themselves and the large gap between “two whole entirely different worlds”
(Zam Zam, post project interview, January 19, 2014) – are #SomaliGirlProbs. By identifying different cultural expectations and through their confrontations, young Somali women are developing a unique identity defined by their multiple positions.

**Sharing voices.** The discussion of #SomaliGirlProbs is an important element of interrupting cultural expectations, by addressing defining narratives and the women’s experiences of the limits of these narratives. In addition by sharing of voices evident in the hashtag (it is a common and binding experience for many young Somali women) and the plethora of stories told about crossing boundaries and figuring out cultural expectations, the women are recomposing the boundaries of what it is to be young, Somali women and developing new narratives.

**It’s not my place: Choosing what to follow and what to leave behind.**
And they say that's a woman's job, a woman's work,
A woman is to cook and clean.
But I wasn't born to do this.
I learned.
So if you give it effort and time, you might learn it.
But no, they don't want it.
They're like, it's not my place.
It's not my place. (from Religion and culture: Blurred lines, Appendix G)
I am picking and choosing, and stuck between two worlds.
I am too Somali for my American friends and too American for my Somali friends.
They told me I am not Somali.
I am still finding my culture, you know? (from I am, Appendix G)

As evident in the poems, Blurred lines and I am, and discussed in articulations of DSVU, participants negotiate the boundaries of the cultures and communities in which they position themselves. This is probably most evident in the often conflated practices of Islam and Somali culture. The poem Blurred lines shows how women negotiate different ideas about gender roles and discussions about FGM, modesty in behavior, respect, and
dress offer other examples. As the women discuss different experiences learning about the boundaries, they identify and often choose what elements of each identifier are important. For example, language emerged as an important element of Somali culture, because it helps establish a connection between family members in different generations and locales as well as between the diaspora and home. On the other hand, clan is a contested idea – some identify with it while others (like A. who does not respond when another Somali asks, “What is your qabiil?”) refuse to be defined by it. They are well aware of the harms of clan – tribalism is blamed for the Civil War and ongoing conflicts in Somalia – yet its many benefits such as insurance and the extensive connections spanning continents remain a vital part of their experience of the Somali diasporic community. The community connection – the fact that if you have car trouble or need a ride another Somali will always come to your assistance – also presents challenges with regard to gossip (see Car Accident, Appendix G). Justifications for these practices, especially dress and gender roles, are deconstructed as the women separate what is actually rooted in religion and what is based in cultural tradition. The presentation of multiple stories of these issues, and the conscious reflection on the origins and practices of the beliefs, values, and concepts in question, shows awareness of “myth as a myth” (Nancy, 1991) and leads to agency in choosing what to follow and what to leave behind.88

**Exhibiting identification rather than identity.** The stories and photographs demonstrate a redefining of Somali woman, identity in process, among the women and as a result recomposes definitions of Somali woman through their exhibition. Choosing what to photograph and include in the exhibit also points to a selection process guided by consideration of re-presentation as well as aesthetic preferences. The women submitted many pictures of Somali women not wearing hijab. However, after seeing one such picture on display, Zam Zam requested that hers be replaced with another image. Though this may be partially due to a concern for monitoring amongst older Somalis (modesty is important, and while the reasons for practicing it are debated, the fact remains that this is

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88Agency in picking and choosing what to follow and what not to follow in home and host communities is an important element of participation, as discussed by Roble and Rutledge (2008).

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an important aspect of their identity and experience), it nevertheless indicates reflection on and choice of how the women want to be represented as well as a continual process of negotiating identities.

The project itself offered a space for the women to discuss these issues and in some cases initiated reflection on identification. For example, Muna had not thought specifically about what being Somali means to her prior to participating in the project. In her post project interview, she described class projects she did on Somalia at the same time as working with DSVU: “I think it made me realize what it really does mean to be Somali...Like I just know that’s who I am. I never really took it in... ‘til after” (Muna, post project interview, November 15, 2013). The process of raising questions, or offering up poems and essay exploring issues pertinent to being young Somali women – heritage, unity, what it means to be Somali, dress, clan, cultural expectations, etc. – and then discussing them and responding to the work of the previous initiatives keeps identity in process and as such interrupts fixed perceptions of Somali women.

**Summary of Articulations and Interruptions**

In this chapter the analysis of articulations and interruptions in the stories of DSVU were presented, including interpretations of each. These include:

1. Through the use of you are, we are, and I am statements, the women of DSVU articulated different levels of relationships between individuals, individual and community, and between cultural communities. The specific stories of “I am” punctuate the more abstract concepts of Muslim and Somali, giving different examples of specific practices.

2. While the women say they don’t know what it means to be Somali, they have a clear understanding that it changes depending on their position as minorities with the spaces/places they inhabit. Because they occupy multiple identity positions and spaces, they constantly negotiate the boundaries of their identities.

3. Articulations for others interrupt stereotypes by sharing multiple viewpoints and creating points of empathy and assumptions through facilitating affronting encounters and developing relationships.
4. Articulations for ourselves interrupt cultural expectations through the sharing of voices, and initiated a process of “picking and choosing” by creating a space of identification, discussion and redefinition through written, visual, and oral stories.
CHAPTER 8: Implications for Community Arts Educators and Somali Studies

Presenting the Implications

In the final chapter, I discuss the implications of this research for community arts educators by responding to the final research question – How does conceptualizing the action of Dumarka Soomaaliyeed Voices Unveiled (DSVU) as interruption inform participatory action research (PAR) and community arts practice? First, I review the purpose of this research and summarize the findings presented in Chapter 7. Next, I offer implications for the fields of Somali Studies and Community Arts. Finally, I conclude with recommendations for future research.

Revisiting the Purpose of Research

As discussed in Chapter 1, DSVU is an arts-based PAR study with young Somali women that intersects the fields of Somali Studies and Community Arts. Within the field of Somali Studies, despite expansive literature on the diversity of the Somali diaspora, more stories of women’s actual experiences of resettlement and diasporic identity are needed for at least two reasons: 1) to answer Crosby (2006) and Freedman’s (2013) calls for more women’s narratives in Somali Studies, and 2) for cross-cultural learning (Ali, 2009) through public education directed towards American (and other host) communities (Schaid & Grossman, 2007). DSVU is an answer to both these calls by 1) attending to young women’s narratives, and 2) exhibiting these stories framed as community arts education in an effort to challenge fixed perceptions of Somali women in the form of stereotypes, assumptions, and expectations.

Within the field of Community Arts, the action of artmaking has been conceptualized in many different ways, including transformation (Bastos, 2010; Darts, 2006; Dewhurst, 2010; 2011), intervention (Duncum, 2010; Desai et al., 2003; Richardson, 2010; Williams & Taylor, 2004), encounter (Albers, 1999; Hutzel & Resler,
2010; O’Sullivan, 2006; Pearlman, n.d.), and disruption (Gooding-Brown, 2000). The continued theorization of action, a central concept in social justice art education as well as PAR (one methodology employed within community arts education research) helps to think through “the enabling aporias” (Lather, 2007, p. 96) of our practice that are often taken for granted or undertheorized. Examining the articulations and interruptions of DSVU using Nancy’s theory (1991, 1997, 2000) offers another conceptualization of the action of PAR and Community Arts, which addresses different levels of relationships among individuals, community, cultures and identities.

Summary of Findings

Chapters 5 and 6 present the process of creating and exhibiting the stories of DSVU and while their focus is presenting field texts, writing as a method blurs the designation of what is presentation and what is analysis. Thus there are several findings drawn from the presentation chapters.

- Facebook became an integral part of carrying out this project and offered an alternative space for dialogue, collaboration, and relationship building.
- Relationships between participants and researcher informed the research design.
- As a result of the project, several women have continued the work of DSVU in other cities and/or began individual projects involving writing and photography with explicit educative or social justice intents.

These three findings from Chapters 5 and 6 also inform the findings revealed in Chapter 7, which takes up the analysis of the stories and photographs and the way narrative participatory photography articulates and interrupts perceptions of Somali women. These interrupted perceptions are presented as identity in process through identification, multiple viewpoints, and examples of empowering women to identify, reflect upon, assess, and choose elements of the multiple communities to which they identity and belong. In the following sections, I reflect on the implications of this work for Somali studies and art education, specifically PAR and Community Arts.
Implications for Somali Studies

The attention to narrative and theorization of stories in this study have two main implications for Somali Studies. *DSVU* 1) presents narratives of Somali women’s experiences of diasporic identity in Columbus, Ohio and 2) offers a theoretical lens for considering these stories within the body of literature regarding diasporic identity. Following the presentation of these two implications, a brief explanation of what these implications mean for Art Education is provided.

Narratives of Somali Women’s Experiences of Diasporic Identity

The women involved in *DSVU* have lived the majority of their lives in the United States. As such, most of their experiences have been as resettled Somalis, who grew up negotiating bicultural identity as Somali at home, and American at school. Though there have been many studies addressing this generation, that research has primarily focused on experiences in school (Kapteijns & Arman, 2004; Omar, 2008; 2009), parent-child conflicts (Mohamed & Yusuf, 2011), and identity of youth (Fangen, 2007; Kleist, 2010; Van Liempt, 2011). Moreover, studies focused specifically on women’s experiences of resettlement primarily addressed women’s roles in the preservation of Somali cultural and religious practices (Berns-McGown, 2007; Crosby, 2006; Isotalo, 2007; Predelli, 2004), thus exploring a very different perception of diasporic identity and resettlement than the experiences shared in *DSVU*. The stories of *DSVU* offer the perspective of a group of young women who play an active role in efforts to participate, preserve, and reform their community and culture. Especially because the women are 1.5-2nd generation Somali Americans, the process of participation (Roble & Rutledge, 2008) and the identification process that accompanies it are emphasized. With different identifiers available to the women – namely Muslim, Somali, American – there is a conscious consideration of the foundational values and practices of each as evident in the many discussions of clan, gender roles, and religious justification for cultural practices among others.

Though Crosby’s (2006) call for more women’s narratives was given almost ten years ago, there have been few narrative studies of women in the diaspora (Hopkins,
DSVU is the first study of young Somali women’s narratives in Columbus, Ohio. As the women pointed out, understanding and practicing culture, identity, and religion varies according to locations across the diaspora in addition to generation, socioeconomic status, and migration history. While many of their stories support findings of other studies regarding religious practice and identification in the diaspora (Berns-McGown, 1999); changing gender and family roles (Al-Shamarni, 2011; Kusow, 2007; Predelli, 2004); contra-identification according to order of arrival (Fangen, 2007); the key elements of Somaliness amongst Somali refugees in London (Griffiths, 2002), Netherlands (Kleist, 2007), and Cairo (Al-Sharmani, 2007); and the challenges of resettling in small town America (Leitner, 2004; Schaid & Grossman, 2007; Waters, 2012) – they also offer a unique perspective as a result of the frequent movement between Columbus and the large Somali communities in Minneapolis and Toronto, the age of the participants, and their experiences being Somali in a small Midwestern city. What DSVU offers to this body of literature are specific examples of young Somali women in the identification process, defining for themselves what it is to be Somali women, and putting the experiences of multiple women in relationship with one another through their presentation in a public exhibition. Future studies would do well to put these narrative studies in dialogue with one another in order to garner a more comprehensive understanding of Somali women’s experiences and identity in the diaspora.

A Lens for Positioning Women’s Narratives within Somali Studies Discourse

This study also offers a theoretical lens for positioning women’s narratives within discussions of gender and racial constructions, citizenship and belonging, changing family structures and transnational connections, and diasporic and cultural identity formation. Theories of interruption, being singular plural and inoperable community (Nancy, 1991, 2000) and DSVU 1) offer a reconsideration of cultural identity as multiple and fluid informed by the relationship between singularities (a human being, a culture, a community, a place) and 2) emphasize the importance of punctuation, or sharing specific
experience of identification, in order to make sense of generalizable community narratives.

**In-common and shared difference.** The dialogue between individuals’ narratives and cultural narratives coexposes a diasporic identity specific to place that punctuates the larger body of generalized research. The breakdown of grand narratives, however, makes it difficult to make any sort of claims regarding what the women say they are; rather the focus is on how they are becoming (hence the focus on articulations and interruption). Is this representative of how the women see themselves? Perhaps not. After all, every woman in some form or another stated, “I am Somali,” not, “I am becoming Somali.” However, by exploring and representing how individuals identify themselves in relationship to a) the cultures with which they identify, b) the group of young women they are working with in this project, and c) projected audiences, the stories are put into play and individual experiences are not seen as isolated but in relationship with one another establishing both the in-common and shared difference.

**The Meaning of These Implications for Somali Studies for Art Education**

Consideration of women’s narratives within the larger body of Somali Studies literature and the theoretical lens that attends to the coexposure of identity within the diaspora has several implications for the field of Art Education. First, particularly for community art educators engaged with issues of identity and/or working with refugees and immigrants, this study calls for a reconsideration of identity as a process of *identification* based in a difference that does not cast some as “Others” but is shared precisely because we are all different. This theorization recasts multiculturalism as one that considers every culture multicultural because a) every culture is composed of singularities that share difference and b) it views culture as an active process that recomposes, transforms, affronts, combines, rechannels, diverts, develops, and confronts (Nancy, 2000, p. 152). Moreover, this study offers an example of using art making and PAR across disciplines. Finally, further consideration of arts initiatives within the Somali diaspora such as *DSVU* offers resources for educators (both school and community) to

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89 See *Eulogy for the mêlée* (Nancy, 2000, pp. 145-158) for an essay on multiculturalism and cultural identity.
engage students and communities in identity issues pertaining to Somalis and other immigrant and refugee groups, an increasingly relevant topic.

**DSVU and Implications for Art Education**

*How does conceptualizing the action of this project as interruption impact PAR and community arts practice?*

Interruption in *DSVU* entails 1) identifying stereotypes, assumptions, and expectations regarding Somali women and 2) telling stories about encounters with these fixed perceptions. Through sharing stories with each other and with others, participants interrupt these perceptions by claiming and redefining them (Rogoff, 2000). Interruption in *DSVU* has important implications for PAR and community arts, particularly with regard to:

- A new model of participatory photography I am calling *narrative participatory photography*
- Relationship in PAR and Community Arts
- Conceptualizing the political action of artmaking

**A Narrative Participatory Photography Process**

This research presents the documentation of a narrative participatory photography project and offers another framework for working with community members through photography and storytelling. The participatory photography process developed in *DSVU* places emphasis on storytelling in conjunction with photography to explore community issues. While it is a politically oriented project dealing with identity, voice, and marginalized groups, *DSVU* did not explicitly engage policymakers in the process of creating and displaying the exhibition of photographs and stories separating it from conventional photovoice methods (Wang, 1999). In addition, we drew inspiration from participatory photographers such as Wing Young Huie as well as diaspora arts initiatives such as SDP and Nadia Faragaab. From these foundations, *DSVU* developed a unique process for participatory photography, which I assert as *narrative participatory photography* (Smith, 2014a), emphasizing:

- collaborative artmaking, which includes storytelling;
• relationship, community, and research;
• curation as a form of analysis; and
• the consideration of multiple audiences and modes of presentation.

**Collaborative artmaking, including storytelling.** Taking photographs and telling stories together is a political act engaging issues of identity and community. The practice of literature (which I argue also includes artmaking such as photography) affirms the experiences of difference that form community and cultural identity (Nancy, 1991). As Kaplan et al. (2011) and Prins (2010) warn, participatory photography is not inherently empowering and in fact raises many ethical issues regarding power and surveillance. However, intentional collaboration throughout the development of the project and exhibition can provide important member checks. Collaboration in this project meant working together to define, discuss, create, and exhibit our artwork.

**Relationship, community, and research.** Consider different levels of relationships (explicated further in the next section) and let the project grow out the relationships between the researcher and participants, the relationships between participants, and those between participants and their community, by what I call community invitation. In addition, community artist-educator-researchers should attend to the various types of relationships they develop and their subsequent roles in the project including: friend, facilitator, researcher, and artist.

Similarly, define community in different ways in order to prevent oversimplified responses to community issues identified. This entails considering temporal communities such as the community developed amongst participants within DSVU, participants’ association with different types of communities (religious, cultural, place-based, shared interest, etc.), and alternative work spaces such as Facebook and other forms of social media.

Framing DSVU explicitly as research (rather than as a straightforward participatory photography project) with the start of the second initiative was an important aspect of affirming the importance of relationships, community, and artmaking. It provided further affirmation of the value of the stories and photographs, and offered a
framework for participants to carry out their own projects. Within PAR, an important factor in understanding our role and work as researchers is recognizing that the action of participatory photography extends beyond the immediate project. Therefore, we should enter into a project with awareness that this may be the start of something bigger and with explicit intent to provide participants support and tools for continuing to research, advocate, and act through collaborative artmaking, storytelling, and participatory photography projects.

**Curation as a form of analysis.** Involving participants in curation as collaborators and discussing the process is an important method of narrative participatory photography. In *DSVU*, *co-curation* was implemented by making decisions together with participants about what (and what not) to display, how the work should be framed (literally and conceptually) and presented, and where to display the work. Co-curation attends to issues of representation and re-presentation and involves participants in the analysis of the data by developing categories, themes, and findings.

**Consideration of multiple audiences and modes of presentation.** Interdisciplinary and participant driven projects motivate researchers to consider multiple audiences and modes of presentation. Mohamud Mumin (n.d.) and Wing Young Huie (2000) offer useful examples for thinking through different ways of presenting artwork and research beyond the traditional gallery setting and academic publications. For example, exhibiting at public libraries attended to multiple audiences including Somali and non-Somali adults and youth as well as offered opportunities to facilitate participatory photography workshops. In addition to the exhibition, we created a project website where online visitors can contribute their stories and photographs.

**Narrative participatory photography.** Drawing from photovoice, exemplars of participatory photography, and narrative inquiry, narrative participatory photography is a PAR method that engages community members in collaborative photography and storytelling. Its explicit political and educational aim emphasizes collaborative artmaking and storytelling; relationship, community, and research; curation as a form of analysis; and the consideration of multiple audiences and modes of presentation.
Levels of Relationship Considered within Community Arts and PAR

Nancy’s being singular plural offers a different consideration of relationship with implications for Community Arts and PAR practice. Rather than thinking about relationship as the connection between individuals, a feeling, or familiar ties, Nancy (1991) offers the idea of singularities touching. An implication of this conceptualization for Community Arts and PAR is the reconsideration of relationship on many different levels: between individuals, between individual and community, between culture and community, community and individual, individual and culture, culture and place, community and place, individual and place, and among participants’ artwork among others.

Relationships among participants’ artwork. Placing singularities and their relationship on an equal plane poses the risk of reducing intersubjectivity to a relation of reciprocity where, as Critchley (1991) describes it, I “stand shoulder to shoulder with the other, but where I do not face him” (p. 251). In DSVU, what this meant was a danger of isolating individual experiences and voices despite our efforts to collaborate, particularly evident in the exhibitions. Though participants of the first initiative were overall happy with the first exhibition, the second exhibition was more effective with placing stories and photographs into relationship with one another, rather than simply placing different experiences side by side. The second exhibition moved into the presentation of affirmation of the relationship between initiatives, communities, individuals and identity categories, etc., and became a more just articulation of what it is to be Somali women, precisely because of the inability to clearly define it. PAR researchers and community arts educators should then work to put participants’ work into dynamic relationships with each other, with larger questions and topics, and with community in the making, discussion, and exhibition stages of the project.

Affirmation of multiplicity of singularities as political act. The dialogue between texts, and the relationship between participants, can be understood as touching, in which shared difference forms the basis of relationship between singularities and thus community. The work of DSVU became the affirmation of the multiplicity of
singularities, voices, and experiences of the limits where singularities touch. Telling stories of these experiences in order to form ties or relationships is a political act because it eliminates the possibility of deeming any one singularity or relationship self-sufficient. In such a politics, it is impossible to speak of the identity of a community or individual, but rather the imperative is to speak of, affirm, and write of *multiple viewpoints*: the multiplicity of singularities (being singular plural), the multiplicity of voices, and the multiplicities of the experiences of the limit (the interruptions). Although this was a study with Somali women, *DSVU* did not speak of the identity of Somali women but rather aimed to consider the multiplicity of these experiences and how these different experiences form relationships.

Understanding relationship as a political act of affirmation gives further support for Ellis’s (2007) friendship as a method and supplements Chatterton et al.’s (2007) discussion of relationship in PAR beyond participation, McIntyre’s (2008) definition of relationship in PAR as building alliances between researcher and participants, and hunter et al.’s (2013) emphasis on relationship building personally and collectively daily enacting the changes envisioned. For PAR researchers in particular, understanding the primacy of the relationship itself rather than to whom or what you are relating – the ties between singularities – fundamentally changes the way that individuals work together by looking to the movement between people rather than their positions as the source of the relationship.

**Political Action as Interruption**

The courage of interruption consists rather in daring to be silent, or rather, to put is less summarily, it consists in *allowing to be said* something that no one – no individual, no representative – could ever say: a voice that could never be the voice of any subject, a speech that could never by the conviction of any understanding and that is merely the voice and the thought of community in the interruption of myth. At once an interrupted voice, and the voiceless interruption of ever general or particular voice. (Nancy, 1991, p. 80)
Resistance and intervention. There have been many conceptualizations of action in PAR (see hunter et al., 2013 and Chatterton et al., 2007) and in community arts, the action of artmaking has drawn on a variety of philosophical foundations and has been described as transformation (Bastos, 2010; Darts, 2006; Dewhurst, 2010; 2011), encounter (Albers, 1999; Hutzel & Resler, 2010; O’Sullivan, 2006; Pearlman, n.d.), intervention (Duncum, 2010; Desai et al., 2003; Richardson, 2010; Williams & Taylor, 2004), and disruption (Gooding-Brown, 2000). Each offers significant contributions to understanding how artmaking and art education operates as a method and means of political action. Given the purposes and goals of DSVU, Nancy’s concept of interruption offers an alternative perspective of the capacities of art making (including storytelling) and community arts education as political action. Based on the analysis of stories in DSVU, I suggest an additional conception of artmaking as interruption (Nancy, 1991).

Up to this point, the engagement with Nancy in the field of art education has been focused on the emergent and dynamic nature of community and its implications for meaning making (Illeris, 2013, 2014; Pente, 2008; Springgay et al., 2008); however, considering the methods Nancy proposes for enacting social justice offers another understanding of how artmaking can work towards social change, the goal of both community arts and PAR. Nancy describes social justice as working against totalizing thinking and being that limits people’s lives and identities to narrowly defined parameters and creating a genuine place for everyone where things can genuinely take place (Nancy, 2007) through the affirmation of the “singular plurality of being” (James, 2006) or shared difference. Nancy (1991) proposes that this is done through literary communism, or writing to find a shared difference. I suggest that artmaking, particularly community arts methods such as narrative participatory photography (Smith, 2014a), offers another productive site of resistance and intervention in an effort to interrupt fixed perceptions of cultural identity and community.

An ideal. Interruption however is an ideal, like PAR, to create an open community, in which each is equal in its difference. For DSVU, the move away from showcasing individual voices in the first exhibit, towards a textually dialogic presentation
of photos and stories that are at once similar and different and unable to correspond directly between individual and project is a move towards interruption. The ideal political action of *DSVU* is the affirmation of being singular plural (shared difference; the symbiotic relationship between individual, community, culture, and identity; and the inherent necessity of relationship for being) and the interruption of community and myth through the sharing of voices.

**Empowering spaces affirming shared difference.** I propose that theorizing the action of PAR as interruption is to create empowering spaces of dialogue in which participants “communicate not the meaning of community but an infinite reserve of common and singular meanings” (Nancy, 1991, p. 79) in an effort to affirm shared difference. In *DSVU* this meant that we used storytelling and photography to share experiences of coming to the limits of the multiple identities and communities to which the women belong through the recognition of common experiences of difference. We focused on individual stories of what it is to be Muslim, Somali women rather than what it means.

The following two findings regarding political action of artmaking as interruption illustrate implications for its potential in articulating a common space and its role in identifying fixed perceptions:

- **Political action of artmaking as interruption happens by identifying fixed perceptions and points of conflict between cultural identities and practices and then deconstructing these stereotypes, assumptions, and expectations by sharing experiences of individuals, cultures, communities, places, and identities touching.** This action is a form of *resistance* against totalizing ways of thinking and being. I have given numerous examples of how the women of *DSVU* interrupt perceptions of Somali women through their stories, writing, and photographs. As a result of identifying these ideas as myth (foundational narratives) and then putting them into play with juxtaposition, humor, opposition, affrontation, and confrontation; the participants and their stories articulate what it is to be Somali women without fixing a singular identity or reforming stereotypes. Artmaking and storytelling
then offers another site in which the need to ‘write’ despite the threat of signification works to intervene in an effort to transform relations, community, and the way that cultural and diasporic identity is understood.

- **Political action of artmaking as interruption has the potential to articulate “a ‘common’ space** that, while existing only by these articulations, remains nevertheless the articulation of a ‘between’ that joins them and defines them (even as they define it)” (Nancy, 2007, p. xxiv). *DSVU* utilized photography as one method of artmaking. Discussing and then exhibiting photographs of different experiences of the same idea side by side puts focus on the relationship between the differences rather than the commonalities. Moreover, the presentation of images and stories that do not directly correspond and choosing not to identify each photograph by its creator blurs the distinction between individual works and eliminates the ability to focus on individual participants. In fact, it was impossible for me to identify the photographer in many of the photographs because they were submitted en mass by one or two participants regardless of authorship. Shifting focus from individual works to the relationship between them undertakes sharing voices of the community in politically effective language, which act “not as an instrument or means for the communication of some signified content, but rather as a kind of *intervention* [by which the essence] itself is brought into play” (Fynsk, 1991, p. 28, emphasis added).

**Spaces of openness through exposure.** Community theory (Nancy, 1991) suggests that interruption of myth and community is in fact the work of community arts, so artmaking with communities towards social justice should work to affirm the singular plurality of being. The action of community arts conceptualized as interruption means that artmaking works towards genuine space of openness by exposing shared difference as the basis of community, sharing the experiences of being singular plural, and interrupting fixed perceptions of identity and community. This implies that community arts educators may be concerned with:
1) Attending to different levels of relationship, particularly how individuals, communities, cultures, and identities interact with and inform each other.

2) Considering community arts acts as political acts of love, which address truth and sense as well as the particular and the collective. Consideration of both truth and sense offers a way to initiate action out of relationship and vice versa so that working together is an expression of being-with as well as being-in-common. While certainly relationship or political action is often emphasized above the other, for Nancy they coexist and are coexposed.

3) Viewing artmaking and storytelling as forms of resistance and intervention in order to interrupt fixed perceptions of identity and community and affirm shared difference.

**Further Research and Questions**

There are a number of avenues to pursue in future research. First, I address possible extensions of *DSVU* through future project initiatives and offshoot projects. Second, possible topics of investigation through narrative participatory photography and further considerations of methodology are offered.

**Extending *DSVU* and Offshoot Projects**

*DSVU* was designed to be an ongoing project. As such, there have been photographs and writings collected since the exhibit opening in January 2014, which marked the end of data collection for this study. In addition, I have been in conversation with several of the participants about starting initiatives in other cities including San Diego, California; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and Toronto, Canada. Two participants in particular have expressed interest in co-authoring articles and working as formal co-researchers in future projects. In addition to expanding *DSVU*, Nasra has begun a blog, Diasporic Steps,\(^9\) in which she takes photographs of her feet in her daily life. We have discussed doing a more in-depth oral history project alongside her photography to develop an offshoot exhibition.

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\(^9\)Retrieved from diasporicstep.tumblr.com
The initiative of participants to continue research through photography and storytelling either within the parameters of DSVU in other locations (Zam Zam and Muna) or in their own framework (Nasra) is a testament to the participatory nature of the exhibit as well as its empowerment. The women felt enough ownership to pursue their own avenues of inquiry, utilizing the methods we developed together. Affirming the value of these stories is a vital part of the work we do together, and its continuation is encouraging.

**Future Research Foci**

There are a number of topics worth exploring further in future narrative participatory photography projects within the Somali diaspora, including:

- The relationship between culture and religion, particularly regarding the choosing of values and practices to continue;
- The relationship between men and women. No male perspectives have been sought up to this point, although several of the women asked if young men were able to participate in the project. Focus on gender roles and gendered experience would augment DSVU (an initiative focused on young women) and Dhallinyarada/The Youth (an initiative focused on young men) (Mumin, n.d.);
- More specific explorations of the different types of connections to “back home” including the practices of remittances and its effects on youth, experiences travelling around the diaspora and back to East Africa, and the experience and effects of family members (or selves) moving back to Somalia;
- The spaces where young women learn about Islam and how to be a Muslim woman;
- The influence of migration history and parents’ experiences; and
- Perceptions of citizenship and belonging.

In addition, there are a number of avenues related to methodology worth pursuing as part of this research, including the expansion of the narrative participatory photography method introduced in this study (Smith, 2014a). First, the emphasis on co-curation could benefit from an examination of Cherry’s (2008) symbolic curation. Also,
considering the limitations and implications of this method within the fields of Art Education, Community Arts, and Somali Studies and among PAR researchers offers many productive possibilities for future research. Moreover, providing more examples of narrative participatory photography and positioning them among other narrative and arts-based research studies will serve to strengthen the method as well as its contributions to its respective fields.

**Conclusion**

*DSVU* was a community response to a community issue providing a platform for young Somali women to explore issues of identity and challenge the stereotypes, assumptions, and expectations placed on them through narrative participatory photography. *DSVU* offers an example of using art as a vehicle for social justice through community education and research. Moreover, further attention to crossing disciplinary boundaries in order to better understand the communities with which we work and to engage others in our work goes both ways; the arts help engage groups that may not traditionally participate in academic knowledge creation and arts-based researchers have much to learn from the theories and methodologies employed in fields such as Somali Studies to better engage community members in issues of identity.

Most importantly though, this research offers strategies for community arts educators interested in working with refugee and immigrant communities by offering the new method of narrative participatory photography (Smith, 2014a) and retheorizing fundamental values of community arts and PAR including relationship, community and political action. The engagement with the community theory of Nancy (1991) and the stories of *DSVU* put forth processes of identification, the multiple viewpoint, and an emphasis on curatorial strategies and exhibition, points of empathy, affronting encounters, developing relationships with participants and viewers, and sharing voices. In addition, I suggest that educators:

1) Forefront narratives and individual experiences, while considering how these individual stories fit into, inform, are shaped by, and change the understanding of larger structural issues and identity categories. On a personal level, for a
viewer who is largely unfamiliar with Somali culture and Islamic practices, individual stories of coming to wear *hijab* has a profound impact by putting into new perspective the circulating ideas about what the veil means and represents. A handful of stories may not eliminate these ideas, but they do fundamentally change them.

2) Reconsider identity as identification, particularly with regard to those who have migrated as small children or are the children of immigrants and refugees.

Attention to identity as process and individual narratives within the context of community narratives alters the approach that educators take towards understanding those with whom they work.

In communities facing challenges related to immigration and refugee resettlement, an increasingly relevant issue in many small cities and towns across the United States, art educators and especially community arts educators concerned with social justice have a responsibility to facilitate arts initiatives that work towards a more just society. I believe that this means giving more attention to complex processes of identification and participation, engaging community members in community education that addresses cultural education as well as cross-cultural learning and public education, and utilizing artmaking and storytelling to affirm the differences that can ultimately bring us together.
References


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Appendix A: A Brief Introduction to the Somali Diaspora and Somali Studies

Somalia gained independence from British and Italian colonial rule in 1960 and the two territories – British Somaliland and Italian Somaliland – united to form the Somali Republic. The new government and constitution were short lived. Siad Barre and the Supreme Revolutionary Council (SRC) seized control of Somalia in 1969 in a military coup. The Barre regime established many large-scale public works programs including an urban and rural literacy campaign, important legislation that improved women’s rights, and an official written script. In 1976, the SRC disbanded and reformed the Somali Revolutionary Socialist Party (SRSP) combining socialism and Islam. The Ogaden War with Ethiopia in 1977 sought to reunite the pan-Somali territory, during which time Somalia switched alliances from the Soviet Union to the United States (US). In 1980, SRSP disbanded and the SRC reformed in its place. By this time, the moral authority of the Barre government had collapsed. Resistance movements, both militant and nonviolent, rose up. Some had encouragement from Ethiopia and many of these movements were clan based. The Barre regime sought retaliation, particularly on the Majerteen (a sub-clan of the Darood clan) and Isaaq clans. The political oppression in the late 1980s led to the official start of the civil war with the fall of the Barre regime in 1991, launching a movement of Somali refugees around the world. One million of the 7-9 million Somalis dispersed to refugee camps across the Kenyan and Ethiopian borders and to countries in the Middle East, Africa, Europe, North America, and Australia. In addition, over two million Somalis fled violence within the borders of Somalia as internally displaced peoples (IDPs). The United Nations (UN), led by the US, attempted to intervene in 1992, but withdrew its forces by 1995. Decentralized governments took over Somalia. While a transitional federal government operated from 2001 to 2012, ongoing violence and drought in many parts of the country has continued the humanitarian crisis in Somalia. After more than twenty years of civil war and numerous attempts at forming a central government, the Somali parliament held its inaugural session in August 2012 and Somalia elected a president in October 2012. Despite fighting with Kenya and attacks by Al-Shabab, the government continues to operate.

91Three strands of governance have competed in Somalia since the civil war: civil law as was found in Puntland and Somaliland in the north, sharia law (which Al-Shabab imposed on most of southern Somalia by 2006), and customary law (xeer) employed by clan-based warlords
Appendix B: Interview Questions

**DSVUOSU Project Questions:**

- When did you come to Columbus, and how did you come here?
- How would you describe the community you belong to? What community do you identify with?
- What does your religion mean to you?
- How did you come to wear *hijab*? What does it mean to you? How do you think your dress helps define the community?
- Traditions. What are some of the ways that you retain your culture being Somali in the US? Which ones to you are the most important?
- Describe your family.
- Thinking about your role in the community, from the vocational standpoint, what would you describe that role to be now and what you want it to be?
- Is there anything else that you think would be important to talk about, or that you would want people to know?

**DSVUNL Project Questions:**

- When did you come to Columbus, and how did you come here?
- What does it mean to be a Muslim, Somali woman?
- How did you come to wear *hijab* (or not)?
- What are some of the cultural expectations of being a Somali woman? How did you learn about these expectations?
- Tell me about a time when you crossed “the line.”
- How have your parents’ experiences shaped your life?

**DSVUOSU Follow Up Interview Questions:**

- Describe your experience in the *Dumarka Soomaaliyeed* project – where did you hear about it, why did you decide to participate, what did you do as a participant?
- How did this project impact you? How do you think it impacted others? Describe any specific experiences that illustrate these points.
• One of the ideas that I am considering for my research is “interruption,” especially since our project had a lot to do with challenging stereotypes and misconceptions about Somali culture. Interruption has to do with disrupting fixed perceptions of identity and community. How do you feel about explaining our project and the stories you told in terms of interruption? What examples of interruption did you find in the stories/images of the project (your own or other participants’ stories)?
• How were your own preconceptions [of what it means to be a Somali woman in Columbus, Ohio] interrupted (or not) as a result of participating in this project?
• I know we’ve talked about this quite a bit in our interviews and conversations about the project, but describe again what it means to be a Muslim, Somali woman in the diaspora?
• In the initiative we have going at Northern Lights, the women have been interested in talking about cultural expectations (what are the expectations within the Somali community about being a Somali woman, and how do they differ from your own experiences and understandings) and the experiences of your parents that have shaped your life. How would you respond to those two topics?
• Last question. I’m curious to know which pictures and stories were most meaningful to you, and why. Feel free to visit the project website for a refresher (dumarkasoomaaliyeedvoicesunveile.weebly.com), or our Facebook page.

DSVUNL Follow Up Interview Questions:

• Describe your experience in the Dumarka Soomaaliyeed project – where did you hear about it, why did you decide to participate, what did you do as a participant?
• How did this project impact you? How do you think it impacted others? Describe any specific experiences that illustrate these points.
• One of the ideas that I am considering for my research is “interruption,” especially since our project had a lot to do with challenging stereotypes and misconceptions about Somali culture. Interruption has to do with disrupting fixed perceptions of identity and community. How do you feel about explaining our project and the stories you told in terms of interruption? What examples of interruption did you find in the stories/images of the project (your own or other participants’ stories)?
• How were your own preconceptions [of what it means to be a Somali woman in Columbus, Ohio] interrupted (or not) as a result of participating in this project?
• I know we’ve talked about this quite a bit in our interviews and conversations about the project, but describe again what it means to be a Muslim, Somali woman in the diaspora?
• Last question. I’m curious to know which pictures and stories were most meaningful to you, and why. Feel free to visit the project website for a refresher (dumarkasoomaaliyeedvoicesunveile.weebly.com), or our Facebook page.
Appendix C: *DSVUOSU* Exhibit Book

*Dusmarka Soomaaliyeed Voices Unveiled:*
*Community through the Eyes of Young Women*

By Hoda, Muna, Nasra, Qorsho, & S. with Ruth Smith

**Hoda**

We’re different from other Somali families – we’re a small family. For most of my life, my family has been my mother and she’s often worked a couple of jobs, and my sister Qorsho. Because we’re just my sister and I, we’re really close. Sometimes when I see other families, I am surprised when the siblings aren’t close because Qorsho and I are so close, but I’m just used to that. Also, my mom stressed education when we were younger, probably because she didn’t get a chance to finish her own. So rather than learning how to cook or that kind of thing, she really pushed us to take AP classes and even going out of state to college, which wasn’t really common among Somalis. I went to the University of Chicago and studied anthropology and was pre-med. Now I’m working in a lab researching infectious diseases and applying for medical school. I’ve always been really interested in different cultures and different groups of people.

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We had to move from Canada because my dad passed away. My mom didn’t know any English, and had little education. My sister and I didn’t start speaking English until we were seven or eight. We were at home and my mom was always speaking Somali, so that’s what we knew how to speak. We went to ESL classes, even though I had been born here. The transition to Columbus was much smoother. When we first came in 2000, there weren’t many Somalis at all in Hilliard and Columbus. Over the past few years, there’s been a pretty large expansion of the Somali community both from overseas and from other parts of the U.S. I get along better with those who had been in America for longer – I can understand them better. Even though I am fluent in Somali, the cultural differences made it difficult for me to interact with a lot of them who have come to the US more recently. I think in Columbus in particular since there’s a larger refugee population here than in other cities, it makes the community more fragmented. The work is just beginning, you have to learn English and do all these different things. The Somalis that I went to school with in Hilliard, I guess you could say were more sophisticated – they had either been here for a while, or were from Canada, or were born here. So it’s a little easier assimilating to culture. A lot of things are easier when your family is settled in. There are a lot of obstacles that Somali refugees face when they settle here, but now they are
starting to come together; there are more places where they can get the services they need and for people to come together.

The community is changing. I feel like I haven’t been in one place long enough, except when we lived in Hilliard, to really have a community because I went away for college for four years and came back. When we were in Hilliard, the community was pretty well established for the few families that were there. We would help each other and support each other with whatever we needed. If you had a problem, some sort of monetary issue, there was a haven that you belonged to. For example, our neighbors were a Somali family and the father had a stroke and ended up going to the hospital. They weren’t able to fully pay the bills so all of the Somali families who were in Hilliard at the time pitched in and covered the costs. If there is a death in the family, you will see a coming together of Somalis. It’s really common to see 20 or 30 Somalis in a patient’s room in the hospital because it’s so important to see that family and for them to know they aren’t alone if there is a death in the family, that there are people willing to help them. We live now in a part of Columbus that isn’t very safe, so I don’t think of it as having that kind of community anymore. There are so many more Somalis, and I suppose you could find it, but it doesn’t have the same sort of dependability as it used to have.

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Back in Somalia, there are a larger number of women from here who are strong in politics. There is a famous singer from Minnesota, Sado Ali Warsame, who was a member of the congress that recently elected the new president of Somalia. There are quite a few instances of Somali women who have risen to power, from entertainment or some other area, who have gone back to join the government. It’s sometimes hard to tell because Somalis are Muslims and you might think that men have a stronger position and they do – especially in the government you can see that they’re the ones making decisions. But at the same time what distinguishes Somalis from Arabs is that the elder women do have a lot of power, even in Somalia.

In America, I think it is easier for a woman to come over with her children than a man to come with her. I also think is that it is easier for women to adapt to American culture and to fit in. The men aren’t seen, from what I know, as hard working. They’ll go to Starbucks and drink coffee all day, while women are the breadwinners and take care of the children. Another reason might be that it is actually easier to receive government aid as a single woman with a lot of children versus having a man there. There are a lot of incentives but at the same time it is a cultural shift.

I really think it’s because a lot of the Somali women, even if they have eight or three children, are working full time jobs and interacting with other Americans and picking up different things from them. I know of one Somali woman who came over about a year ago, and since then she’s been working at a shoe factory. When I first met her, she didn’t speak English very well and some of her mannerisms were different. I noticed a pretty drastic difference in her when I saw her a few months ago. I guess you could say she
seemed more American. Her English is better. She used to wear the *niqab*, which is like the veil but you’re also covering your face with a smaller veil, and she’s not wearing that anymore. She has two daughters, one in high school and one in middle school, and when they first came, they weren’t really allowed to join in afterschool activities. Now, one of them plays an afterschool sport and the other is in some sort of book club. So I don’t know if that is more American, but she’s allowing her children to partake in school activities. Somali women are taking their children to school, having meetings with their teachers, and those kinds of things. They are out in public more than they’re used to back in Somalia, where they were at home most of the time, and it is giving them more opportunity to branch out and learn more about American culture.

For me personally, it’s easy to think of Somalis as the ones you see around in America. But there is a larger population in Somalia and Kenya. In order to really understand them and speak to them, you have to speak Somali. I’m not saying that they don’t speak English, but their command of Somali is so much better and if you’re able to communicate with them at that level then your conversations will be that much more meaningful. So you’re not there, you’re in a different country and one thing that can tie you back to that home is your language. At home, my mom almost always speaks in Somali. When I’m talking with her, I’ll speak Somali. But if my sister is in the room, I’ll speak with her in English. If my mom asks me a question, I’ll have to think for a minute and be like “Ok, I’m going back to Somali now, I’ll respond in Somali.” In public, if I’m out with my mom and my sister, we usually speak in Somali. With my friends, we’ll usually speak in English, unless there’s something that we don’t want others to hear. Then we speak in Somali. There is a fear that the children of those who have come over will not be able to speak Somali anymore. That’s the biggest problem we have – not being able to speak Somali.

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I was age 11 when I began to wear *hijab*. I started wearing it because I wanted to imitate my mom. I saw her wearing it and I decided to wear it for a while. I wore pants and everything else was the same, just the top part was different. Then I stopped wearing it for a year, around 9/11. My mom didn’t feel safe with us wearing it. She had an incident at work and she didn’t want us to be discriminated against. She worked at a grocery store bakery. She never really told me the full story but from what I gathered she was intimidated by someone at work. Maybe violently, I don’t know if the person was wielding a knife, but they blamed her for what had happened. That really scared her. She ended up quitting and it spurred her to make us look less Muslim. Then my grandmother came to stay with us for a while and her coming really changed my opinion on Islam. I learned more about it. I always had questions about it – why do I have to do this, or do that? I didn’t always feel I got the best answers from my mom, so I asked my grandmother and she gave me answers that I was really happy with. I started praying and wearing *hijab*. Not just *hijab* but also the skirt. Since then, I haven’t stopped wearing it. I had questions about the scarf. My question was why is important for women to be modest? Why don’t I see men doing the same thing? And my mom’s answer was that it
was something that God wanted and I understood that but I wasn’t happy with that. What I saw was a difference between the two. If men could do whatever they want, why do we have be covered? My grandmother answered that you can’t think of it as they have something that you don’t. Men also have to be modest with how they dress; they have to wear a beard and they have to pray. She was also really good at explaining that biologically and in many other ways we are different than men, not the same. Her explanation and teaching me the Qur’an helped me to understand more. My mom never finished reading the Qur’an and unlike many other Somali parents she didn’t know much about it. My grandmother did and she was able to explain to me more specifically why. Within the Somali community, hijab isn’t just your scarf. It’s about the rest of the clothes you’re wearing – are you wearing jeans or a skirt? Are your clothes baggy enough so that you can’t really tell the shape of your body? Are you modest in your speech? Do you hang out with guys all the time? It’s not just necessarily what you look like. It’s your mannerisms, your speech, your character. It’s how you treat people. I feel like people think Somalis might seem more extreme, the way the women dress and the men dress. A lot of the older women you’ll see wearing long cloaks and the men wear long beards and they’re dyed. And they might think it’s a little strange and they practice Islam stricter than Arabs. I feel like Somalis are more careful about how they dress. There are a lot more young Somali females that wear hijab than don’t but if you don’t wear it then it’s not something you should judge or force them. I think it’s a personal choice and it’s something between that person and God and I don’t think anybody else should have that influence.

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I would identify more American than Somali. I personally think that I can be both Muslim and American. I’ve always identified as American and more recently, I identify more as a Muslim. I feel like the two can be used in the same sentence. I feel like it’s gotten more difficult though. I don’t think that the perception of Muslims has really changed. I don’t think that there’s been an effort both on the part of the media and in people in general to define Islam without including the extreme forms of Islam. So I don’t think that it’s gotten any easier, but for me personally, I’ve been able to work that out. Being Muslim is trying to adhere to the teachings of all the prophets - from Abraham to Jesus to Mohammed, peace be upon him. It is following the Qur’an to the best of my ability. Being a good person and trying to show people through my actions that I’m just like them. Islam is a very peaceful religion and I try to display that to others. Wearing the hijab, you’re automatically identified as a Muslim. If you don’t or if you’re a guy and you don’t have a beard, then people don’t really know. So I feel like there’s an added responsibility on my behalf to show, to represent Islam in a good light. I think in the Somali community, being Muslim is probably the most important thing. A lot of activities are surrounded around Islam. So activities at the mosque are really held in high regard. Tribalism and culture might be stronger in some parts of Somalia, but the Somali-American community in particular holds Islam to a very high level. It’s important to be involved at a mosque. My mom is part of a haliqa, which is a group of women that come together every week and go over the Qur’an or some other part of Islamic doctrine.
So having that link to Islam is very crucial to identifying yourself as a Somali. Most Somali families are quite religious and attend mosque. The men who are supposed to attend Friday prayers and are encouraged to go to early morning prayers if they live near a mosque. Woman can send their children to weekly Qur’an classes. I went to one when I was younger for a little while, and was involved in youth activities. Learning Arabic, which is a completely different language than Somali, is important; you have to learn it if you want to really understand the Qur’an. And then also funerals - there is a whole ritual associated with that. My mom is a part of a group of women who are in charge of one of the mosques and they wash the body of the person who has recently passed away. They bury that person. They read the Qur’an with the family. I think those are the most common things.

A lot of our traditions are Muslim traditions. Other Somali traditions are associated with celebration. So poetry is a big thing in Somalia and storytelling is very important. There are stories that my mom and grandmother have told me, that I’ve either remembered, or I’ve heard so many times that I’ve memorized them so that I can tell my children and they can tell their children. Like Dhegdheer, the woman with the long ears. I’ve heard more stories since I’ve come here to Columbus because there are a lot more Somalis. They come from different parts of Somalia, so they’ll tell you a folktale. That’s something I didn’t appreciate as much when I was younger and now I’m trying to learn more about. I was more into Somali music when I was younger. Traditional, classical, older Somali music. I’ve moved away from that, especially now where we’re living is more religious and music isn’t something that is seen as being something you should be involved in or listen to all the time.

**Muna**

I came to Columbus in 2001. We lived with my dad’s side of the family in Minneapolis before that. After he died, all his sisters branched out. One moved to Columbus and we went to live with her and we just stayed here ever since. In Minneapolis, there were more Somalis. It was a really good atmosphere. We were allowed to go outside and play whenever we wanted because we were around people we knew. Coming here, there weren’t as many Somali people as there are now. It was a whole new environment. We were sheltered in because we didn’t know anyone and we had to learn our way around. It was just completely different.

My aunts tell me stories about when they were growing up. My mom’s family and my dad’s family were really close and all their brothers and sisters were really close. If one left then one or two of them would go too. When the war was starting and they had to leave, my aunt left to Italy, and then my other aunts went over there with her. One got married and then the others got married so they branched out from there. That’s how they got out of Somalia.
When my mom married my dad, they moved to Dubai, which is where I was born. One of my aunts moved in with my mom to help raise me, but then she got married and left. I was about 5 or 4 when we went to Minneapolis. They did not give me citizenship in Dubai. Most of my dad’s family lived in Minneapolis, and they told him, “Move over here. The kids can go to school and we can take care of things and help you settle.” And that’s what they did.

Since my dad passed away, my brother took on the father role. He’s the one who makes sure that we’re on the right path. He’s in medical school so we don’t see him much but when he does have breaks, he comes home. I also have two sisters. We all live under one roof – me, my mom, my sisters, my nephew and my niece. My brother is in and out. And then we’re essentially under the same roof.

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I belong to the Somali community. I don’t say that I’m American because I don’t think I am. I mean I grew up here, but I don’t have American blood in me. I have Somali blood in me. That’s who my family is, that’s what my culture is. It’s what I grew up in. Somalia is home. My mom is from there. My whole family is from there. My siblings were born there. When somebody asks where I’m from, it’s only right to say that it’s my home. Everyone is the same and understands one another. It’s not possible until I see it for myself. I’ve never been to Somalia. I would love to go sometime before I die. My mom is going to Mogadishu to visit her sisters. We have land and a house over there, so she’s going to go check on it after almost twenty years.

What does it mean for me to be Somali? I don’t know the answer to that. Our culture is everything. Our culture ties a lot in with our religion. We grew up knowing the basics – don’t drink, don’t smoke, because it harms your body. Don’t have premarital sex. Even though we all sin, if you do end up doing those sinful actions, we keep it to ourselves. We don’t want people knowing. We don’t say, “Hey! Guess what I did last night?” Even if you bump into someone else who’s Somali at the bar, you hide your drink. That’s how it is. Regardless if you follow what you’re supposed to or not, our religion is a huge part of who we are.

Our language is everything. It’s the way we think, it’s the way we act upon things. It’s just different than the way that Americans would do it. It is our mentality. We have this thing call xishood, which basically means to be modest. Not physically, but in a mannerly way. We have this mentality that we don’t want to ruin our names, our family names, our reputation with the Somali community because word gets around fast. So we’re always watching our back when it comes to our reputation because we don’t want to embarrass anyone’s names, especially our own family.

Xishood. Say for example you’re a girl and you decide, “Listen I never get to do anything with my friends. So all of my friends are going to go out to the club tonight and I’m going to go with them.” And you run into your brother’s best friend. You’re in the Somali
community and your brother better not see you doing anything he does not want to see you do. His friends will most likely tell that they see you there where you’re not supposed to be. I don’t want him to see because it will just start trouble. So I leave. It happens a lot more with girls than boys. When it comes to boys, I feel like as long as they’re providing, if they’re protecting their younger siblings or helping out their single mother, they get a pass. In most cases, guys are more of the provider, their mentality is very prideful. They will not sleep unless their family is taken care of. Girls are more focused on their school work and getting out. Men would rather work, work, work and provide for their family.

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I don’t dress the part. I feel that I will wear hijab when I’m ready, when it comes from the heart and not just because I’m supposed to do it. Although, for example, I would never walk into a Somali mall dressed the way that I am right now, just for the mere fact that people, especially the older people, would lecture you in front of everyone. Why would you dress that way? Why won’t you wear a hijab? You’re a girl. And they keep going. I’d rather just go there covered. There was a point when my mom told me I had to put it on. I told her that I’d either wear it to make you happy and when I leave the house, I’ll just take it off, which I don’t want to do, or I will do it on my own. She realized that it was better that she knows what I’m wearing when I walk out of the house. My older sister wears it because she’s married. Once you’re married, you kind of have to. My other sister, she just now recently started wearing it. She’s not super religious, but she’s trying it out and staying committed to it.

There was a point in my life where I thought I was ready and I wore it for a year straight. I still wore jeans and stuff, but I tried to cover my hair. It was about 2 years ago, my freshman year at Ohio State. One of my really good friends, she started wearing it. She uplifted me a little and I thought it’s time to grow up. So I put it on. I saw that friend switching back to her old ways and I kind of looked at it like that’s not cool, you know? She was talking a big game about it and I respected her a lot for putting it on. For me to see that she was turning back to her old ways and even becoming worse, I thought maybe I just did it in the heat of the moment. I’ve realized since that I just wasn’t ready and I just jumped into it. In Islam, we call that having low iman, which is faith. That’s just what I went through at that period of time and I took it off and said, you know I’m just going to restart. I feel like dress is so important. If it wasn’t so important I would just cover up because I’m supposed to. But you know dressing the part has a lot to do with your modesty. I just I’m still young. I don’t want to be kind of caged into doing something that I’m not proud of, that is not coming from the heart.

Taking it off was not as hard as putting it on. Taking it off was the easy part because you just took it off when you walk out of the house. Putting it on was hard because people see you without it all the time, so what are they going to think of me having it on? Most of my friends are Somali and they are Muslim, so they were happy to see me with it on because it was a big step. They didn’t say anything when I took it off. A big part of being
Muslim is not judging anyone. Anything you do is between you and God. People don’t say anything when you’re doing something wrong, but when you’re doing something right they always congratulate you and respect you and are proud of it.

I’m still not ready to wear it. Hopefully one day soon. I need to become more dedicated to my religion. It has to do with me uplifting my iman. I just feel that right now I’m busy with school and work, that I don’t have the time to sit down at the mosque to listen to a lecture. So it just has to do with me working on it.

My friend doesn’t wear it anymore. We’re not friends anymore. She graduated from high school and her parents let her move to Cincinnati. She started doing things she wouldn’t do when she lived here. That’s the big thing. Most parents don’t allow you to move out because if you leave you’re going to wild out. You don’t have anyone on your back, telling you to come home or to do something at a certain time. You’re on your own completely. That plays a major role. It probably has something to do with why there are such big Somali communities places. We like to be around Somali people, we help each other out even if we don’t know each other. We have our faith. It’s just the idea of being around people that are the same as you.

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I feel like I need to step up when it comes to our community, especially back home. Our generation is the future, so simply doing things like the Somali Student Association (SSA) or just helping out at the Somali masjids (mosques) are important. With SSA, our main goal is to get the Somali community active, whether it’s through donations or simply coming out to our events. We’re supporting our own people and working with other cultural organizations. We have fun events, like the poetry slam. We had a canned food drive in November and are having a benefit next semester with the Habesha Student Organization. We’re having a discussion coming up next month about the clans back in Somalia. Things like that. Basically giving back. With the mosque, they have youth groups. They have conferences. Just going and cleaning up after duqsi, which is Arabic Saturday school. It is the simple things that are all it really takes.

Right now, I’m studying international studies. When I graduate, I want to go into either international or immigration law. My specialty in international studies is development. Somalia is an underdeveloped country and we’re just now getting up on our feet. With my degree and especially with my law degree I can put in a lot more work.

Nasra

I identify with the Somali community in Columbus. We moved to Columbus eleven years ago, in 2000, so I grew up here. It is the most familiar and it feels like home. I consider this my home. Even when I moved to Pittsburgh for graduate school, I still felt like I was a part of the community in Columbus.
I also identify with the Muslim community. When I became a student at Ohio State, I became more involved and interacted with people of my community. I was the community service chair for the Muslim Student Association (MSA) and the Somali Representative in the Diversity Coalition of the American Red Cross. Participating in these organizations introduced me to people of my own age group that I could relate to. We were all connected, even though there were differences in language and in culture—but one thing we had in common was we were Muslim.

Living in Pittsburgh for two years and away from my community had an impact on me. Great things were happening in Columbus and I would have loved the opportunity to have been more involved with them. Youth and young adults were more active and began quickly working together to help those devastated by the famine in Somalia. I was inspired to help as much as I could. In Pittsburgh, my friend Jamaad and I decided to host a fundraising event at our school and donate the funds to an orphanage in Somalia. With the help of a few student organizations, our event was a success. Pittsburgh does not have a large Somali community, so many people did not even know about the famine at the time, it was a great way of spreading awareness while helping those in need. Since moving back to Columbus, I have been focusing on building my career and networking. I plan to work with Somali youth in education and feel like there is a lot that can be done here. I’ve been a little out of the loop since going to Pittsburgh, but I’m making contacts through volunteering in schools and getting to know the Somali community from the outside. My peers dispersed, moving to other cities, so now I have to create more of a network.

I’d like to go back to Somalia, and visit when things are more stable. I was born in Mogadishu, but I wouldn’t recognize it today. A lot has happened to that city in the past two decades. I love collecting pictures of Somalia. I have many old pictures that are beautiful, from before the war. I also have images of what happened to those very same places post-war.

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I am a social worker. I want to offer services to Somali students in public education because of my own experiences navigating the school system. In the public school system, Somali students are generalized and a lot of assumptions are made. In high school, I remember being called to the guidance office and was offered an ESL dictionary for testing just because of my name. There have been other similar instances where I’ve been offered a translator at a doctor’s office as soon as I walked in. People have assumptions when they see my name about my English skills and capabilities. Obviously, I don’t have any trouble speaking English.

This stereotype about our ability to speak English is an exception, not a rule, although it’s different for those newly arrived. You have adult immigrants having to learn a new language, when they might already know two or three. The accent stigmatizes, and shuts people down. If I could tell people one thing, have the patience to listen. I think
sometimes people don’t take the time to really get to know someone before making assumptions. Some people hear an accent and refuse to listen. They just tell the other person they can’t understand them—because they don’t have the patience. Even among Somalis, there is a stigma surrounding accents. I have an English accent when I speak in Somali, and that’s difficult sometimes because of the comments that are made. Language is important, and a big part of your culture. If you don’t know your language, you lose culture. It’s something that my generation and the generations to come will struggle with, maintaining their native tongue.

The women in my life disprove stereotypes. They are role models – they are educated, strong, intelligent, and they work hard. They showed me there are a lot of opportunities for women.

I started wearing a scarf in 2006, when I came to OSU. I was ready to express my identity as a Muslim and wanted people to see the aspect of my life that was so important to me. The hijab is all about being modest and having self-respect.

There’s a stereotype that all Muslim women dress the same but we all dress differently. There was a time when I had to go downtown to one of the government buildings to do something with my taxes. When I went through security, they asked me to take off the zippered sweatshirt I was wearing. It was part of my uniform for work at the RPAC. It would not have been appropriate to take off my sweatshirt in such a public setting, so I tried to explain the situation and said I could not do this in the lobby. The security guard said I was not dressed like a Muslim, simply because I was not wearing jilbab – a big scarf – so obviously I was not Muslim. Because of this she would not give me “special treatment” and allow me to use a private room. I wear my hijab every day, but because I was wearing my work uniform, khakis and a sweatshirt, I was told I was not Muslim by someone who had a very narrow concept of my religion. You cannot generalize the entire community, especially based on appearance. I am not more or less Muslim because of my dress. There are many aspects of being Muslim. Being Muslim means that you pray five times a day. Being Muslim also means being kind to others. It means being a good person.

The majority of Somalis are Muslim, so the Somali culture is strongly connected to Islam. It’s the only country that is practically 100% Muslim. Now they say it’s 99.9% but I don’t know any Somali who isn’t Muslim. So it’s hard to separate our culture from religion. My family observes Ramadan and celebrates Eid. This was the first time in two years that I spent Ramadan with my immediate family. For us, it is family time. We cook together before breaking our fast. And Eid is a whole day of celebration for us, including even more family time.
I am the second oldest. I have three younger siblings. The girls outnumber the boys in our family. The only boy is also the youngest, so my sisters and I did stuff together all the time. We’re close. We don’t have any cousins or aunts and uncles here. We take of each other. There is a shared responsibility to take care of the younger siblings. Although since moving back from Pittsburgh, my role has changed – I am more of a caretaker. I have more responsibilities. I think it’s the same for other Somalis. We tend to be a collective society. Our family is valued over the individual.

Qorsho

Here in Columbus, we are at a crossroads. People still don’t know what to make of us. They’ve gotten used to the fact that Somalis live here, but there is still a misunderstanding that inhibits any kind of progress as far as getting to know who Somalis are and what we’re all about.

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I was born here as an American and was raised as a Somali. I am stuck between two worlds and sometimes I don’t fit well in either. To Somalis, I’m not Somali enough. To Americans, I’m not American enough. So I’ve created my own little identity. Being Somali American means finding a new home here in America, coming together, supporting each other, helping to identify problems within our community such as tribal issues and even gender related issues.

As a community we are growing accustomed to the fact that Somalia might never get better so we are creating our own little group here, our support system, and I feel that that is what keeps Somalis together. For example, I ride COTA a lot and countless times Somali men and women and families that have stopped and literally told me, “You’re not riding that bus. We’re taking you home.” They may not know me or my family, and they don’t care about my tribe. It’s about helping each other out and giving back. We’re also very tied to the religion and that helps with understanding one another and having patience when we go through trials and tribulations. As a community, whether we are here or anywhere else, we’ve gone through a lot of difficulty and struggle and one of the things that I feel is true marker of how we’ve gotten so far and why we continue to give back is our faith. That’s one of the binding characteristics of being Somali.

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In general, Somali women hold the community upright. They have a lot of responsibilities from rearing children, working, paying bills, to cooking and cleaning, to dealing with Section 8 and Job and Family Services. One of the things that almost sets us back is the way we dress because people assume that we don’t speak English and don’t know how to interact with males. A lot of negative assumptions are made when we’re looked at. To me, it’s completely the opposite because our dress means so much more than people perceive. It’s not about covering us up and hiding our beauty. It’s more about our devotion to God and our willingness to let our words, personality, and intellect speak
more than our looks. That is often misconstrued as being oppressed and not doing what we want to do.

I believe that what makes us Somali is our commitment to our faith and in many ways we go against the norm. It’s a marker of strength because we’re able to do so much in such a strong way; that we can tell American society that we’re not going to change. That we’ll do some things – we’ll learn English we’ll do this or that, we’ll adhere by the laws of America – but we are going to choose to wear what we wear because it’s important to us. Dress blurs the line between culture and religion. I don’t like mixing religion and culture but I am a product of it. The Somali culture is heavily based on Islam. There are so many traditions that we adhere to because Islam – marriage, family, finances - but Somalis now have created a code that Islam and Somali are synonymous. Culture and religion are two different concepts. They blend well together sometimes, but sometimes they do not. And personally, I would go towards the route of Islam rather than our culture, because the first thing I am is Muslim and then I am Somali. They can blend, but are not the same thing. Culture has flaws, but religion should be perfect.

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My family is very small. It’s also more maternal than paternal. My mother came here on a student visa in 1986, where she met and married my father. He passed away in 1994 and my mother went into survival mode. Even though my uncle served as a father figure to my sister and I, my mother ran the show. She is the superhero in my story. She made sure that we were raised properly, had a very smooth upbringing and sent money back home. There are a lot of Somali youth that can relate to that – their mothers have taken on multifaceted roles and changed the balance in the U.S. Back at home, men were the breadwinners but here, women are taking on more leadership roles. My dad passed away abruptly and since then, what I’ve seen in my family are the strength of the women. My mother has been working nonstop since 1993, usually low paying jobs because of her skills. But she would work to support not just us but also our family in Somalia and Kenya. An important characteristic of Somali community is helping out your family. And by family I mean your entire family, not just the immediate, nuclear family. You could be the poorest member of your family and still be obligated to send money back to your mother or father or your family back in Somalia. So my mother felt the burden of that as well as raising her kids singlehandedly. Her strength surprises me to this day. She’s still in that survival mode of making sure that we’re ok, that everyone besides herself is ok. She’s very community minded. Now she doesn’t work anymore. She hasn’t for the past 5 years because she’s been diagnosed with diabetes. She worked two jobs for a lot of points in my life and had stress and now she is resting and watching us grow up.

My sister and I are now supporting the family. I am sending money back home and raising funds for my mother to go back to Kenya shortly and my sister is paying the bills and worrying about her student loans. We’re still at that point, we could be off government assistance, but we still send money back home. That’s what moves us from
lower middle class to the upper poverty bracket. This goes for a lot of Somali community members; we’re in the same boat. There are people who disagree with that trait of Somalis that we give back so much. They assume that we’re poor because we choose to be and see this as a bad trait, that if we didn’t give away so much we wouldn’t be such a strain on the American economy. But I don’t know, if they didn’t send money back, they probably wouldn’t be able to sleep at night.

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In the imminent future, I will be an English Teaching Assistant for the Fulbright Program in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia but my dream is to assist Somalis, particularly youth, in assimilation. I’ve been in various situations where I’ve helped Somalis understand English or American law or some abstract idea. I think a lot of that has to do with how I’ve been involved in the community in the past years. When I was 18, I started interpreting for Somali Bantu, whether it was going to the school and having a talk with their children’s teachers or going to the doctor’s with them. In college, I interned with the Somali Women & Children’s Alliance, assisting Somali refugees in the central Columbus area. I feel like I’ve been a tool with helping them to assimilate, to understand and want to participate in American culture. In the future I want to be an educator. I want to be the voice of reason and engaged Somali youth to increase their want to go to college and decrease deviance and negligence. The Somalis that I went to high school with work and go to school; imagine working 30 hours a week and going to school for 8 hours. That’s a lot of hours doing a lot of work. I want to let them know that they can do it and give them a support system, as well as educating the older generation that we need to be more inclusive. This is the only way that we can progress and become stronger.

S.

I was born in New York City, but Canada was my home for most of my life. My family began moving to Ohio in 2003. My father decided that Ohio was the best place. There was a Somali community close by, cost of living was relatively cheap, traffic was good, real estate was relatively affordable, and he did look at the schools. He moved to Ohio in 2003 and so 2003 onwards my family started moving to Ohio. I myself came back to the US in 2007 to pursue my master’s degree in Boston with the idea to eventually move to be with my family. So in 2009, I moved to Ohio.

When I came here in 2009, I was working with Somali families. I noticed, and was informed by community members, that many Somali children were struggling in school, particularly where literacy was concerned. Young children were coming into the schools with attention problems and there were cultural clashes happening with teachers. It was alarming. I met with many people to try to find out more and decided that the best way to make an impact was to do research in this area, which led to the idea of doing my doctorate. So in 2010 I began taking classes towards my doctorate and formally became a student in 2012 in Ohio State University’s School of Teaching and Learning with a specialization in Language, Education and Society.
I would like my role in the community to be a backseat driver; somebody who is helping to improve the community but not in a visible way. I see myself as a behind the scenes, community advocate. I hope to be able to do that with my research. I am still trying to figure out what ways to do that which will have the most impact, but I see myself as somebody who is helping behind the scenes. And I prefer it that way. In Islam the best deeds, the best acts of charity are those that nobody knows about. It’s from a hadith, sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. The hadith basically says the best act of charity is the act of charity in which the left hand doesn’t know what the right hand is doing. The idea is that you’re not doing it for other people. You’re not doing it so people can say, “She’s so awesome. She’s done this and this.” Rather, you’re doing it for a higher purpose – you’re doing it for God’s pleasure. You’re helping people solely for the sake of improving your relationship with God and helping people and not so that people will you know your name and talk about you.

As a Muslim, I see myself as an ambassador for my religion. I don’t mean ambassador in the sense that I go up to every random person saying, “This is what Islam actually is.” But it really is to personify Islam through my actions, through the ways that I interact with people. I think actions speak much louder than words. The Prophet, peace be upon him, when he was spreading religion in Arabia, more people came based on his actions, his good deeds, his ability to connect with people, his kindness, his gentleness with strangers, that’s what they connected with more so than, “This is what Islam is.” It’s so profound. So that’s what I try to do. Every person that I interact may come to me with their own perceptions of Islam, but what if those perceptions can improve because of their interactions with me?

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I started wearing hijab when I was twenty. My mom never said, “You have to do this, you have to do that, you have to wear this” so I came to it on my own. I wasn’t a practicing Muslim early on. I was interested in what all adolescents are – having a social life, clothes, shopping, that kind of stuff. When 9/11 happened, I had an existential crisis. For the first time I began thinking about big questions about life, the meaning of life, about mortality and things like this. And for me, practicing Islam was something that I was going to do in the future. Wearing hijab was something that I was going to do when I was older. I had so much time, I was young. But I started looking into Islam. I didn’t know much about it except what I had learned from my family. I had studied the Qur’an when I was a kid in Canada. I went to a number of weekend schools with different teachers to learn the text of the Qur’an and the fundamentals of Islam as all Somalis do, but it was mostly Arabic memorization of the text and learning the basics of the religion (i.e. prayer, fasting, testifying that there is no God but God and Muhammad is his prophet).

I started reading about prayer, about God, and hijab. This was the first time I actually paid attention to the words in the English translation of the Qur’an, which had a

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transformative effect on my life. I was reading passages that really spoke to me, as someone who was just coming from adolescence and who had dealt with a lot of angst and identity issues. Passages that talk about patience. Passages that talk about the experiences of the prophets and the things that they endured during their lives. Things that really spoke to me in my own experiences and my own situations. I was able to see Islam as more than a doctrine. I was able to connect and understand the religion more spiritually. It not only improved my relationship with God, but it improved all my relationships as well. My perspectives on life, my outlook on life - everything was transformed because of this. I was striving to learn at a more spiritual level and not so much as something I have to do to be a good Muslim. It can quickly become rules and rules and rules. Islam in many ways is much more than that. It’s a way of life. The Qur’an is a guidebook for your life. And I think a lot of my misperceptions of Muslims fell by the wayside. By the time I started wearing hijab, I understood that it was for modesty. It was a commandment from God, first and foremost. And in a society where women are often portrayed as sexual objects, you want people to see you for your intellect and for how you are going to contribute to your community not your body. Now many years later, I feel that hijab is like a second skin. It’s part of who I am. I feel more comfortable wearing hijab than I did when I wasn’t. Early on, I would think, “What would it be like without it?” But after that, I’ve never thought about what it would be like without it. I think it has to do with the ease of my life. I’ve never had discrimination hurled at me because of my headscarf. I know that there are Muslim women who have and that has influenced their decision to wear it or not to wear it, but I’ve never had those experiences. In fact, before I wore it, people would talk about all of these things that would make extremely uncomfortable. Now that doesn’t happen anymore. There’s a certain amount of respect that is afforded to you because of your appearance, which is nice.

I talk to women who don’t cover and they definitely understand why I wear it. They agree with me that we have become a visual society and in many unfortunate ways the image of women has been degraded, especially with popular media. For non-Muslim women, they find it refreshing that somebody would not ascribe to those beauty ideals. There is a lot of pressure for everybody to have the perfect body, to have the perfect face and features. A lot of my friends are not Muslim, and they might not be wearing headscarves, but they understand the whole issue of modesty. It is not just a matter of dress, but also of character and how you carry yourself.

I also have friends who are Muslim and don’t cover. We have conversations about hijab. For some Muslim women they have lots of pressure: Should I do it, should I not? Am I going to be profiled from the community to cover? And I just tell them, “Your time will come. Don’t rush it.” I was somebody who didn’t rush it. I wore the headscarf late - twenty is considered late – and for me it was doing my own research and coming to the decision on my own. So I tell them my story and remind them that there are other ways to display modesty. That’s what I advise them to do.

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I don’t understand Arabic, but have learned Arabic and the Qur’an since I was young. When the English translation was introduced there was an instant connection with it because I finally understood what these words mean. Immediately the Qur’an became accessible to me in a way that it hadn’t been with the purely Arabic text. Everybody who understands Arabic tells you that the poetry of the Qur’an, the beauty of the Qur’an, that intense connection comes across in a way in Arabic that it doesn’t in other languages. Other languages don’t do justice to the rhythm, the way that the words rhyme, the nature of these verses and everything. Arabic is a very poetic language. It’s a very beautiful language. And a lot of that comes across in the language. Unfortunately for those of us who don’t understand Arabic, we’re not able to access that. There are a lot of beautiful translations, including English translations, but again, there is something about the book in its original language and its original text that just has this immense beauty that people talk about that other translations just don’t. Learning Arabic is the goal for I would say most practicing Muslims. You do really want to connect with the Qur’an the way that those who understand Arabic are able to connect with it. When we pray, for example, we’re supposed to recite a number of chapters of the Qur’an and to be able to understand what those words actually mean would transform your relationship with God because you would be able to really understand those prayers.

I am not fluent in Somali. I would say that my expressive Somali is better than it was, but it is not perfect. I pretty much understand all Somali, but expressively is where I get caught. I don’t speak Somali at home. When I was young, my parents tried to enforce a Somali-only zone at home. Unfortunately that failed. But the good news is that my parents always spoke to us in Somali so our comprehension is fine. It’s my expressive Somali – when we responded to my parents, we responded in English. I should say that, I understand colloquial Somali. If you were to put a Somali news program on, if you were to play Somali poetry, I would probably understand very little of what was being said. Especially poetic Somali, it’s a higher level of Somali, unfortunately I don’t have access to and most young Somalis cannot understand Somali poetry, because they are speaking a traditional Somali we don’t know. It might as well be a foreign language.

It’s something that I really want to work on because language is a huge part of Somali identity. I think it has to do with the fact that Somalis have a very oral culture. The Somali language was not written until 1972 so there is a huge emphasis on poetry, on proverbs, on orality in general. So when you are Somali American, or Somali British person, or whatever it may be, all these different hyphenations, and you don’t speak your mother tongue you are looked at different unfortunately. So it’s a goal of mine to learn Somali better. What I do is take every opportunity to practice my Somali, to read Somali texts, to do translations just to learn Somali better.

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I have a very big family. And for me, definitions of family are completely different – my family spans multiple continents and multiple countries. I don’t make a distinction between my nuclear family and what in the West would be considered my extended
family. I think that until last year, although I knew the Somali definition of family is much broader than Western definitions, I acted as if my nuclear family was it. I’ve always had a very close relationship with my nuclear family, so that’s never changed, but when I went to Kenya last year, I met other family. I met my dad’s brothers and sisters and their children and I had an instant connection with them. I treated my cousins like my brothers and sisters and I had the same obligations and responsibilities to them as the older sister in my family. I have this tremendous love and this tremendous connection with them, my family. Fortunately now there are apps (WhatsApp) that allows us to stay in touch with them easily so I have conversations daily with cousins in the UK, in Canada, in Kenya, so much easier than I would have in the past.

I went to Kenya because I got an internship. A really great coincidence was that my dad had family in Nairobi. I had seen some of my aunts and uncles in the eighties when I was a child, but some of them I had never met. And the kids I had never met before. It’s an experience when you’re trying to make a connection with teenagers. It took a while for us to get each other. The first two months were a lot of pleasantries, a lot of “How’s it going?” But at Ramadan, the month of fasting, I broke almost every fast with them. And it’s funny because we connected over humor. My uncle would basically spend every opportunity, every breaking of the fast, to make fun of my cousins – his kids and nephews. And it was hilarious! It was a great, great bonding time. I got to see a different side of my uncle and I got to see the kids in a different light. And once I got to see a sense of humor, we had a different connection.
Appendix D: DSVUNL Exhibit Book

_Dumarka Soomaaliyeed Voices Unveiled: Stories, Poems, and Essays_

By A., Asha, Bahja, Kayla, Ladan, Miriam, Raamla, Zahra, & Zam Zam

with Ruth Smith

**Coming to Columbus**

**Zam Zam: Coming to Columbus.** Before the war broke out in Somalia, my family was well off and led a comfortable lifestyle. My father worked for the president, Siad Barre, and my mother was studying to be a nurse. Whispers of a war began trickling into the city; people were packing their bags and fleeing before they could experience any of it. My parents disregarded these whispers to be mere rumors and nothing more; refusing to leave a city they called their home. My family did not leave until the war was brought right to our doorstep, forcing us to flee in the middle of the night. Some family members died later in crossfires and others due to indirect effects of war: starvation and diarrhea from unclean water. First we escaped to Kismayo, a city south of Mogadishu. Sooner than later, the war reached us there also. This time we were forced to leave the country altogether and go to the neighboring country, Kenya.

I was born in a refugee camp in Kenya along with some of my other siblings. My parents were trying for many years now to come to America. Each time, we would fail the process for one reason or another. My parents were trying so hard because they wanted us to have a proper education. One of my parent’s priorities for their children always has been making sure we receive the best education. Living in a refugee camp there were not many options for it. I had an uncle here in America that helped us and because of him we were able to come to America. He helped us with the application process and paid for our flights. Paying for a family of 9 on his meager paycheck then was not easy. He worked many odd jobs just to save up enough money to bring us over. He did this not only with my family, but almost 50 other families. He is a hero.

We did not directly arrive in Columbus. For the first month or so we were travelling between states looking for a place to live and completing more paperwork. In this time, we stayed with extended family members who helped us get on our feet. It has been almost 16 years since we came to America and we’ve lived in Columbus since.

**Bahja and Asha: Coming to Columbus.** When we came here, we moved from Canada. My dad lived here and he went to school and worked here but we lived in Canada with my mom. We moved around a lot so do you want to start from where we began? (Bahja)
Go all the way back to Africa. (Asha)

After the Civil War my mom and my dad, well my dad moved to Yemen and then my mom followed. Then after I was born, my brother came to Yemen. (Bahja)

This past summer I went to Somalia, so I actually got to find out more. So what happened is a lot of my relatives well they first started, the war didn't start out of nowhere, and they heard that this is happening over there, and they were like “Maybe it's not going to reach the capital city of Mogadishu” and then when they started getting closer they were like “It's not rumors it's really happening.” They started saying, “Ok well what are we going to do?” So then, my mom and a lot of my relatives they didn't think it was going to get that bad so they left their houses with everything still in it thinking, “I'm going to go spend a year or two somewhere else and come back.” But then by the time they left, it got really bad to where the houses were getting destroyed or these people moved into the house like “Well you abandoned your house so it's my house now. If you wanted it you should have never left it.” It's kind of hard to explain. (Asha)

I know it was my grandma who told my mom to leave. She told her to go somewhere else and then my mom like was kind of reluctant. But then my dad got a job in Yemen and that's why they fully left. (Bahja)

We were supposed to actually move to Holland but then Asha was born and that kind of messed up our visas and they couldn't grant my mom another visa for her. So my mom had this professor at Yemen that could help her; he had a friend at the embassy so we got visas here instead. Then we found my mom's brother to sponsor us from Toronto so we came to Houston, stayed there for 10 days, and then took some kind of Greyhound, I'm assuming it was a Greyhound, all the way to Canada and we stayed there for a year before we moved to Minneapolis. Asha got really bad asthma and the weather was not helping so we moved back to Canada and my dad moved back here. (Bahja)

When I was six we moved to Ohio; I remember starting first grade when we moved to Columbus. We've been here since I was six and a half and now I'm eighteen so it's been at least eleven, eleven and a half years. (Asha)

Before we fully moved, when we weren't going to school here we spent time back in Canada. And then before my freshman year, we stopped going to Canada. (Bahja)


I came here as a young child
So I was basically born here
But I can hear the struggle and
The hurt from the horn here
My people dying every day
So we torn here
And if I can show you my heart
I swear to god you'd be shown tears
But we stars tho
No red carpet needed ... But ...
when it comes to hurting ourselves
Guilty is how we pleaded
   Even in hard times
Joyful is how I see it
And don't just pray for change
   First you got to be it
In peace and harmony
It hurts not to go see my motherland
The only memory I have is a picture holding my Mothers hand ...
   And a great leader
Is one who sees no bias
   He keep his heart clean
And please be Righteous
Because yesterday's mistakes
Can't be tomorrow's greater living
I mean.. Own up to your mistakes
Then plan for a greater living
   Only Allah can judge
So leave it to him, the most forgiving
   I'm just saying .. No STAR
Should be existing in the conditions they live in ...
   Violence is never necessary
So please bring the bloodshed to an end
   The same brother you just killed
Man, You once called your friend
The loss of a loved one destroys the heart...
   So no way it can mend
I'm talking real life scenarios
   And they still live in pretend
But who are we to judge and classify
   Our own by their tribe?
Brothers and sisters
   Put your differences aside
Lets move forward
And leave our differences behind
   Fast forward to the good part
And never ever let the sadness rewind
But everything happens for a reason
   Allah made us different purposely
So we can show each other
Love, honor and common courtesy
   One shot to the chest
But they ain't lucky as Curtis be
And Honestly, the lack of love
   Is what's really hurting me

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So please don't feed the hate
To the younger offsprings
Once that sets in their hearts
They won't be able to bounce back
.. Like soft springs
With our country hurting
We’re hit with a drought
So now tell me ...
What's the fussing and fighting really about?
Religion should be the foundations
Of our culture
Instead we're being preyed on
By these known vultures
Forcefully being molded into
Something we're not ... Sculptures
We should be the chiefs of our
Own figures... Sculptors
But what's unity when no one
Sees it with you?
What's happiness when no one
Feels it with you?
What's the truth when no one
Speaks it with you?
Only focus on the negatives
When developing the perfect picture
So pride,
let my people go
I want to let my people know
That the struggle will sometimes slow
And in the dark,
The struggle will sometimes glow
Look back a couple of years
And we had this ..
Fast forward a couple more ..
And in Sha Allah we have this!
Just keep your flag up,
Horn of Africa
This is dedicated to the

(Raamla)
Community Events

Miriam’s first community event. The other day, I was going on Innis Road and this lady got into a bad accident. She was going in the right lane and everything; it wasn't even her fault. The minute that you see that this girl is Somali, Muslim, whatever you want to say, everyone blocked off the road with their cars. And the furniture store - it's like a park and practice for like new cars - everyone was parking their car there. I didn't even turn off my car. I left my keys in there just to rush and see, because it was a shocking moment. Like I just want to help this person. It's helping but it's a large community, and sometimes when something happens they all come out. And the police come over and he wants a translator because the lady is like shocked and he's like “What's her name?” And everyone is talking at the same time trying to give him information. And he goes, “Ok. If you're not family then get away like. I need space.” And he's trying to put her on the jumpsuit or whatever so like lay her on the car and everything. And everyone's like, “I know her!” And then they're trying to like recognize her face. And I’m like are you kidding me? Let him do his job. But in a way it's like comforting for that person for them to be there. So. It’s like. I've never seen like. That was my first community event. But it was the first time seeing it. Like wow. They really come. Everyone stopped their car, parked it and rushed. “What's happened? Are you ok? Can you move?” My perspective was a different perspective than theirs. For me I was thinking let the policemen do their thing. Give her some space. That kind of thing. But they were more concerned about her per say and the situation. So the police officer and their job. Nothing. They just wanted to do this and make sure that she was the priority. Yeah, and I was like the opposite I guess. The one nice thing about being a Somali in Columbus, if your car breaks down, it doesn't matter where you are, you don't have to call AAA. Every Somali car will stop. They will just look as they're driving past by, and once they identify you as Somali, they will turn back around and assist you.

Bahja’s car accident. I got into an accident like down the street. I was stuck in my car cause this guy tried to turn and then he hit me and then my car spun into other ones and then they hit me back into my lane. But I'm good, like I got stuck in my car and surprisingly I woke up early that day, and I never wake up early. I was like “Ok I woke up early, I'm going to go to Tim Horton's, I'm not going to be late to class. I'm going to take my time.” So then like when I got out of the car, I was literally so sore. I don't really remember the car accident. And this Somali guy helped me. I don't know where he came from, honest to God. I think he just parked his car next to me. And he like helped me get out of the car and we couldn't get me fully out so we just waited until the police came, and then they broke the door. And then he stayed with me until my mom came, and I play tricks on my mom. "Hey I got into a car accident.” She didn't believe me. She was like, “Wait until you get home. Bahja stop joking around, it's not funny, one day it's going to happen." And she hung up.

I was with my mom and was like, "You know, Hooyo, she's crying. She doesn't normally cry, you know?" And five seconds later we get like twelve phone calls. "Your daughter's dead on the side of the road." (Asha)
Asha goes, "Mom, I don't think she's lying." The police were trying to take me away and I was like, "No! I'm not going with you guys. I want my mom." And they said something about St. Anne's and there's this horrible joke that St. Anne's kills. So I was like, “I'm not going to St. Anne's. Leave me alone!” And they were like, Ma'am you do have go.” And I'm literally I'm like all bruised up and I needed stitches because the back of my ear was bleeding. So I was like not listening to them and I looked so disoriented in the pictures. But yeah, he really helped me. He stayed the whole entire time. And he talked to the police for me because I couldn't stop crying. And I don't even know what his name was. But he knew my mom cause my mom has that store. And he knew my dad. And he recognized my car because my dad used to take my car sometimes. I was like, ok. That’s really nice.

**She Is Strength**

Here is Halima
She watched her son grow
She raised him to be a wonderful man
One that any mother would be proud to call her own.
Halima sent this boy to fetch water one day.
Only thing is that he never came back.
A bullet straight to the head
Shot by some warlord’s lackey
In a fatal attack.
Her mind would always roam.
Roam trying to make sense of the tragedy
a tragedy marked with cruelty
Cruelty that warlords wreck the lives of mothers with
They take their young to kill them
and then leave their bodies lying in a ditch

Halimo can either stay so
she can properly mourn the loss of her eldest
and watch her other children succumb
to the harshness of their reality
living in a brutality the requires certain lack of mentality
Or to move on and divest
The warlords of more victims
and stay strong for her other children before they
Sooner or later go on a mindless quest
To avenge their brother’s death.
She stays strong resilience is her name
She moves forward
Never letting the situation put out her fiery flame
She is our mother, sister, daughter- a faceless dame

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She is strength

Here is Nadiifo
She fell in love at a young age
Consequently getting married at a young age
She had yet to discover the meaning of being independent
She went straight from one household to another
Always being dependent

Before she wed
her husband filled her head with sweet nothings
cajoling and promising
about sweet loving
she thought she found heaven on earth
completely trusting
this man,
This man that she is only beginning to learn
Only if she knew he was bluffing

He beat her black and blue
wiping out the youth
taking away from her
her stable innocence and instead giving her a bloody tooth
she had no one to turn to
No one to help her through
Because after all,
She was the one who brought him home to marry
The not knowing it would be her innocent mistake
That would rock her world askew.
Her family does not want her back
she is damaged goods.
Yet she cannot return to a house
where she is constantly misunderstood

What is Nadiifo left to do?
feeling weak and subdued
She contemplates ending her misery by ending her life
deep down she knows that is a sin of no return
That she does not want to give up without a fair fight

She ventures out into a male dominated society alone
Knowing in the blink of an eye anything could go wrong
But what more does she have to lose
She is sick and tired of the black and blue

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That discolors her skin.
Now that she has lost everything, all that is left is to win.

She stays strong resilience is her name
She moves forward
Never letting the situation put out her fiery flame
She is our mother, sister, daughter- a faceless dame
She is strength

(Family and Parents)

Every Somali woman I’ve met, I don't know if it’s because the war changed them, they're definitely strong. Most of them carry their family on their back. Because like we, I don't know if you guys noticed this, but the girls, the moms do the work. I work at a school, Focus Learning Academy, and you see the moms always, always worried about it. They would come, they are always there. Like she said, there's the one who carries all the baggage. The guys? They don't care. All they would have done is bring home the money I guess? They, they're not very involved with the child, the growth, anything. There's just no involvement. (Miriam)

I know in our family, my dad is heavily involved. Especially when it came to school, oh my god. He would be in our school every single day. I would get a B and he would think I'm on drugs. So he would go to the school and be like “Either she not paying attention in class” and I'd be like “I am paying attention in class. A B is not the end of the world.” (Bahja)

Totally opposite of what I got. So for me, it was me motivating myself, but in most families it's the mom who pushes us. She sees this, she's going to call the school. She's coming to the school. She’s going to talk to the teachers. Wondering about what's up with the kid. Any attitude or behavior. Like seriously, if we have a problem with a kid, we don't call the dad. We call the mom because that's who shows up. We have access to both numbers but who actually comes out or comes through; it is the mom always. (Miriam)

I remember when I was younger, whenever I was scared I would yell out, "Allah hooyo" and that means, it's like, it's like saying "Oh God" about the first person or the first thing that jumps into mind. It was always, hooyo, my mom. So it was like a second nature type of thing. It's like “Allah hooyo.” So the first person you think of, it's your mom. Something good? Mom. Bad? Mom. You're in trouble? Mom. You need to be broken out of jail? Mom. Now that didn't happen to me. But seriously it's just like the mother's the first person that always comes to mind. Even if the father is willing to do the work, we just naturally think of our mother first. (Zam Zam)

I think ours, when we moved here it was like that. But when we were in Canada, my mom was more like that. I haven't had a dad for a long time. He worked doing trucking and he went to school and stuff so when he would come he would bring
presents. And he would come every few months and so we would think he was Santa Claus. In a matter of 24 hours he would show up while we were sleeping and when we were awake he'd probably be sleeping. So we would see him passing by the door, and I'm like, “Oh look there's more gifts!” I never registered that it's my dad. And I was like ok. He had this little weird snake and that's how we would know he was home. He would leave it on the bottom of the stairs. So we wake up and we'd be all tripping over each other thinking it was a real snake. And then we got used to it after a while. I think they switched places when we were there. Here my mom went to school and my dad already got his degree so that's why they switched roles, but I got used to asking my mom for everything when I was younger. Now my mom won’t even be in the house and my dad would be two feet away, and I would call my mom, "Hey can you get this for me?" She's like, "Your dad's like in the same room." I don't know force of habit. She'd be like, "You know you have a father right?" And I'd be like, "I know." We got so used to every little thing, "Hooyo can you do this for me? Can you do that for me?" And she would get so frustrated at us sometimes. (Bahja and Asha)

A’s family story. When my father met my mother he thought she was really beautiful and was like, "Oh I really need to marry this woman." So they got married, and then he brought her to America. She was 19 at that time, and my dad was 35. Anyways, I'm their firstborn child.

Zam Zam’s parents. Both my parents joined the workforce right away. My father began working at a car cleaning company that he still holds, and my mother as cleaning service for hotels. My parents did not have time to go to school and learn English. As busy as they were with work, they made a point in taking part in of our lives, not just supporting us. I remember when I was younger my father would help me with homework. Although my father did not know any English then except for basic words, he helped me with my math. Math is a language that does not require words in order to understand it. Every evening I would sit in the same spot in our living room for homework time. These are one of the moments I cherish most from my childhood.

My mother ended up quitting her job to start a clothing store business. Because her hours were flexible, my mother was able to spend more time with us. She went to parent teacher conferences, she enrolled my siblings and I for tutoring, she was the one who took us to our doctor visits, classmate’s birthday parties etc. Because my mother interacted with English speaking people more than my father did, she picked up the language faster just from daily interactions. Over the years my mother’s English has improved dramatically. Before, my older siblings would read the mail to my parents. Now she does her own reading. My father took a longer time to learn English, but sooner or later, he too was able to understand it. My father likes to force me to translate for him although he understands English, just so I do not forget how to speak Somali. (Zam Zam)

The Bridge that Brought Us Together

The Bridge that brought us together
Feels like I’ve been on this bridge forever
Trying to connect two opposing personalities
Living in America being Somali
The struggle can be tiring
Exhausting, harsh and draining
But I found the key to unlocking my identity
It was through my Religion that I could be me
Yes indeed
I found what I need
It was through Islam that I could be free
The Bridge that brought us together
Feels like I’ve been on this bridge forever
You and me mom didn’t always have the best relationship
Cause when puberty hit
I thought I needed companionship
Peer pressure started to kick in
I didn’t know where I fit in
Questions lingered for some time
Kids would often tease
It was very hard to appease
Until I came to peace
It was when I reconnected with my religion
That I found what I have been missing
I learned to appreciation from the holy text
I learned to have confidence with myself
From my lifestyle to the way I dress
The bridge brought it all together
It will last forever

(Ladan)
This poem was inspired by my life. I am a Somali girl living in America. Growing up I had a great relationship with both of my parents. They loved me deeply. I remember the phrases they would me by. “My beautiful daughter” is what they would say. A lot of things changed when I entered middle school. I began to search for who I am as many people do at this age. Being a Somali girl living in the West was hard to balance. The kids at school would tease me often for being foreign. They would pick on my headscarf. It was a very rough time. I think I began to resent my ethnicity. I hated the fact that I was born Somali. I wished I could just be American. The kids at school seemed to have better lives than me. So my confusion and frustration changed my personality with my parents. Especially with my mother. We began to argue so much more and I was the cause of most of it.

My attitude became unbearable even to me. But I started doing some more soul searching and reconnected with my religion. When I became more religiously devout it translated into my dealings with everyone. At school and within my self. I began to accept my culture and appreciate who I am. In my home I became a better daughter and sister. I learned from Islam to be grateful for everything in my life. I also learned to treat my parents with the most kindness and respect. It gave me balance. Balance with my surroundings. It gave me understanding and made me more cautious of the world. So the bridge that brought my life together was Islam.

(Ladan)

School

A. translates in school. One day there was a parent teacher conference, and this one teacher asked me if I could help translate. I mean they couldn't really find a better person to interpret at the time. I would interpret but when I tried to speak to the Somali mother, I mixed some Somali words with some English words. So the mother was just like, "Oh, who does this girl think she is? Does she not know where her parents are from? Does she not know where her roots are? Why is she speaking to me like this? She doesn't even know Somali and she is not even speaking proper English, what is she?" I was in fourth grade at the time.

When I was younger I had very few Somali friends. I was always told that I need dhagaan celis. I have a lot more Somali friends now but I still get (in a teasing way) mocked by them for being different. I mean, they act like I don't try. I try to speak Somali all the time but every time I do I get made fun of for it so what do I do?

Diamond in the Rough

Baraap barraaap. One gunshot grazed the sky while the other meets its mark in the longitudinal fissure between the two lobes of the brain. Once again this decimates the silence as people run for cover, many of the unfortunate victims falling to agonizing deaths. Panic ensues. Chaos erupts. Aunts and uncles and other family members run together as a herd, but quickly it seemed, our numbers dwindled down one by one as each relative drops after being hit by another shot. My mother, nine months pregnant at the
time, grasped for any survival stratagems, ducking and covering, and ducking again as she lead her children away from the massacre.

Despite their start, my family has persevered. Our will forged in fire, and risen from the ashes. We now are Americans, but we remain tied to our homeland, which continues to be a torn apart by strife.

Somalia is one of the top 10 nations whose citizens are departing en masse due to an influx of radical psychopaths as well as inter- and intra-clan wars lead by militant tribal heads whose one priority is to win land even at the cost of many lives. The stench of turmoil and difficulty lies behind such obstacles the people must overcome. But when I think about the horn of Africa, I think of me.

There’s a prominent Somali proverb that my mom has preached to me my entire life: “Dhamman wixii dhalaala dheemman ma aha.” This means that things that sparkle aren’t always going to be diamonds. The sparkling golden doors referred to by Emma Lazarus may be open to immigrants, but after entering, people often have to submit themselves to more years of hardships. Many believe that arriving in America is the end to all their troubles, that it is the commencement of ease and tranquility. Like diamonds, the end beauty is only an option after many trials and tribulations.

As an American-Somali, I draw strength from my heritage. My parents’ ability to survive endless massacres has taught me anything is possible. With a post-secondary education, reaching prosperity is a higher possibility for both me and those in Somalia. My parents have stepped into the fire and created their diamonds, creating a pathway for my 10 siblings and me to attend college, a privilege they weren’t afforded. Now it is my turn to forge my own diamond - my future.

(Zahra)

Clan

**Bahja learning about her clan.** I didn't know what that meant for a long time. For me, I went through a complete culture shock. Like I didn't really learn to speak Somali until I went to Westerville South. Earlier I went to Westerville Central. All my friends were White, we literally spoke English all the time. I barely did Somali things except for at home. I didn’t even wear a *baati* to go to sleep, I would wear shorts and a t-shirt. And then I went to South and all of my friends were Somali. Every single one of my friends were Somali. There were some kids that I went to middle school with but we got different and felt like I had to choose Somali friends or my American friends but I ended up choosing my Somali friends and I started learning things like what tribe I was. I did not know that before. I got into a fight with this kid one day because he tried to say my tribe started the war and I was like really mad because I didn't know who my tribe was. So I went home and my mom, my mom is really against tribalism. She went “You're Somali, you're Muslim. That's all you need to know. This is why we left our country, so I don’t want you to bring that stuff in my house.” And then my dad was just like “It doesn't hurt to tell them what they are.” And I was like “Oh ok.” And then I went to school and I was like “Yeah, in your face. This is what I am. I didn't start anything.” And then he was like, “It started in the south and your tribe is from the south.” I was like,
“Ok but you can't put two and two together and accuse me.” Then my cousin, she knew what she was and she knew what I was, but she wasn't at my lunch, she was in a different lunch. She got really mad at this kid and she looked really, really mad and just attacked him.

A. finds out her tribe. I found out my gabiil the year I spent living in Canada. I was moving back to Ohio and on the way back we, my aunt and I, were staying at somebody’s house that I had never met before. She told him, “This girl is Issaq- Habar Yonis.” The man excitedly goes, “Oh my gosh. That's what I am! That's what I am! You guys can stay as long as you want!” And I was just so confused. I asked her what she told him. She then explained that she told him my tribe (gabiil). I only half understood what she told me and I still had no idea why the man got so excited. (A.)

Yeah, that happened with my sister she went to Djibouti for one summer and there was like there was this Merexaan lady. There were no other Merexaan in the area that she lived in so as soon as she heard there was another Merexaan in the city she went, she picked her up, she hosted her for the whole entire day. She had a lavish lunch and dinner and she took her shopping. My sister tried to be like, "No no no" but this lady was very persistent she's like "I'm probably not going to see another Merexaan for like a long time. So just let me do this for you." (Zam Zam)

Learning about tribe. My sister, when she was sixteen one of our relatives from Minnesota came over and asked, "What is your tribe?" And she was sitting there thinking for ten whole minutes. "I know it starts with an M, but I'm not sure what it is." So then the guy was like, "Come on, you're going in the right direction." So she said, "Ok, I think my tribe is muxadaro" and the thing is muxadaro means lecture in Somali. It doesn't not mean anything. Our tribe is Merexaan, it kind of sounds close to muxadaro but she was just guessing "I know it starts with an M? So you know what, I'm going to go with the word muxadaro." There were so many extended relatives in that living room, they just burst out laughing. They were slapping their knees. There were tears running down their face. It was really funny. The whole entire house, cause everyone was waiting for her answer. Everyone who knew the answer was laughing from upstairs, downstairs, everywhere. And then after all the laughing kind of quieted down, then they told her, “This is what you are.” And they told the rest of my siblings. And even now, if I asked them, they most likely forgot.

A. I don't really disclose my tribe. I don't know I'm just not comfortable giving it out. A lot of people may know my father, and they can find out that way. But if they ask, "What are you?" then I don't answer. If they ask "What's your qabiil?" I'll be like, "I don't know." I just don't like them asking because some people may be like, "Oh you're this, so you're that." I mean there could also be a lot of positives like how the one man let me stay at his house because we were the same tribe, but overall I avoid it.

What Comes to Mind When You Think Of Somalia?

3rd pov: From what I know its oppression, the people are suffering in the hands of warlords tyranny, loud cries echo of starving kids echo and helpless parents lower their gaze and turn ears deaf in defeat. Somalia is a broken government and collapsed
economy. Gray clouds hang above the land. They seek the earth for food but it reeks of
death and Al-shabab. They look over the horizon and the ocean is filled with blood and

1st pov: What comes to mind you ask? The fire that burns in the people’s eyes day and
night to survive in a war torn country. You speak of loud cries but have you forgotten
silent cries made by mothers during labor who push and push to bring their children into
the world? Do you think the very same person suffered so much just to put their hands in
the air in defeat? Nay! They’ll walk for miles to ensure their children’s health. If the
economy has hit rock bottom what’s left but to go up? After gray clouds there’s a
guarantee for blue skies and Mother Nature has suffered far worse than mere Al-shabab
and pirates to not be able to replenish its soils. The question is not how but when. The
ocean is filled with an abundance of water that drops of blood won’t change its color.
From what I know the battle is not over and Somalia is on its way to rebuilding itself as a
nation.

Poem by A.

Community

Moving from one nation to another is often a painful and difficult journey. The
difficulty of the journey is magnified if the migrants don’t know the language or don’t
have a translator to aid them in their adjustments. In order to overcome these challenges,
many Somali immigrants create close knit ethnic communities as earlier immigrants’ help
the newer ones adjust by creating a familiar setting. The key goal for the creation of these
cultural cohesive groups is to ease the pain of migrating and to preserve and reinforce
cultural values from their previous societies. As more immigrants come, a widening
generation and cultural gap is obvious as the assimilated youth conflict with the
traditional valuing elders. Valuable cultural principles and identities are lost in the
movement from native lands to America.

Although Somali communities try to keep cultural values alive, the elders have to
fight the immigrant youths’ desire to conform. These new arrivals come with
romanticized notions of the typical American lifestyle and eventually become “true”
Americans. New arrivals try hard to rid themselves of products from their old culture
while trying even harder to become Americanized. The generations after are even more
likely to try to assimilate completely into the American culture and view those that kept
their old ways with disgust, including parents and other family. Instead of trying to assist
newer immigrants in becoming accustomed to the new land, many Somali youth evade
them and even classify them as “reff.” Reff is shortened from refugee. When used, it
identifies a person as an ignorant individual who lacks knowledge of prominent pop
culture and style. The word has a negative connotation and is used as an insult. Instead of
valuing those recent immigrants for their attachment to their motherland and native
tongue, more and more younger generation Somalis look down upon them.

Assimilation is a must for both the immigrants and their surrounding societies.
The immigrants need to learn English. Employees insist that workers speak English.
Although the ethnic groups try their best to create a familiar setting, the immigrants will change their clothing style because their traditional ones are less accessible. Stores mainly sell American products and food forcing them to adapt their diets as well. These are reasonable changes that are necessary. But what is not reasonable is for many of us, the earlier migrants or children of these earlier migrants, to look down upon newer immigrants. That is not acceptable. Let us change for the better so we as a community have a better survival chance; let us not lose our identities in a chase after false romanticized notions as we scorn our Somali brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles who need our support.

(Zahra)

**Learning about Cultural Expectations**

**Learning Somali dialects.** I speak Somali with the northern accent/dialect. Most people around here speak the Southern dialect and sometimes they'll say a sentence to me and I'll literally understand one word. I just look at them so confused, and they don’t understand that I don't understand. It's embarrassing to say, "I don't understand you." They'll say, "Why don't you understand me?" so I just don't say anything. Or like I'll say, "Ha," which means yeah. It will basically get you out of every situation.

Something funny happened with that one time. My friend's father was talking to my brother and he goes off on this rant because my brother was wearing all red. He said, “Why are you wearing all red, do you want to be associated with a gang? Are you trying to get shot?” And my brother kept saying “Ha” the whole conversation, which means yes. So the conversation goes, "You want to be associated with a gang?"

"Yes."
"You want to get shot?"
"Yes."
Like he would have just kept saying yes. "Are you stupid?"
"Yes."
"What are you doing?"
"Yes."

And after a while her dad just walked away and my brother goes, "What did he just say to me?" (A.)

**Bahja at the wedding.** My dad's sister is hilarious. I think she's the funniest person I ever met. So we went to this wedding and at first we got dressed and everything that morning, helped decorate. And then my dad's sister was just looking at us like, "I don't know why you guys are getting super pretty and stuff. You're her sister, you're going to be working all day." And I was like, "Working? No I just came, I just drove nine hours so I could party not so I could work." And so we pretty much like served everybody, socialized, helped her. In Somali weddings the bride's side, her family are the servers. Because we usually don't hire caterers, we usually go to like restaurants and say we want, this amount of people are coming. So let's say 400 people are coming we're going to order food for 400 and 50 or 500 cause you always have your party crashers. Somali weddings are like community events, I mean it's like everyone comes.
Everyone and their mother come. So then the bride's relatives, her sisters, her cousins, and her aunts because there is no official caterer, they're the ones who pass out the food and do all the catering stuff. Although they don't want to.

That whole entire morning we were fighting each other for the bathroom because there were 18 of us teenage girls and like 20-something-year-olds trying to get ready in that house. And the bride was downstairs; she had her make up getting done and everything. It was really nice. And then when me and my cousin (she's from Toronto, she’s the one I am closest to), we went to the venue and we were wondering why we were there so early and then they were like “Why are you guys just standing around? Get to work.”

I was like “Are you being serious?” So I put my stuff down and helped. So the wedding finally started. Half way through we sat down and my dad's sister was just looking at us like, “You guys are so funny. Why are you guys just sitting there like dustpans? Why don’t you get up and do something?”

And I was like “Oh, ok.” She would only see us every time we sat down so she would assume we were just sitting there all day. And then, So it was like a, so she married this guy and his family doesn't speak Somali, they only speak English, so the whole entire time my aunts and stuff were looking at me and her and my cousin Camilla and they were just like "We don't understand them, they don’t understand us. We can't just sit there and smile at each other all day, so you guys just sit there and start talking to them."

We're like “What are we going to talk about?” So we sat. They literally brought chairs over next them and were like, "Make conversation. We don't want them to think we're a bad family."

We were like, “Oh ok.” So we're sitting there just throwing stuff out, telling them about our life stories, trying to talk to them and they made us sit there for all six hours. The whole entire time. They were like “Don't stop talking to them! We don't want them to think we're disrespectful.” So we literally ran out of stuff to the point that we started saying, "Nice shoes! Nice hair! Um, oh look that's some nice food right there." We struggled coming up with things. So his mom wanted to meet her mom and her mom speaks English so we were thankful for that. So we literally tried to hide in the little kitchen thing so we wouldn't be put to work anymore. It was really nice. And then we took pictures with her whole family.

So my dad's sister, she understands if you're speaking to her in English but she can't like speak it back to you very well. So all day she kept sitting there and she would turn around smile at them and say one thing and then she would turn back to us and say, “What did I just say?” So we would have to translate what they just said to her and what she said to them, so we were just trying to help her and it was not working at all. She was not pronouncing things the way that they should come out so it sounded garbled.

Asha and the cookies. So if you came to someone's house – and even if you just came from McDonald's and you just ate food and are full beyond capacity – if they give you something to eat, you still have to eat it. Or at least try to eat it. And if you can't finish all of it, it's like saying that your food is not good enough, so you have to take what's given to you.
Or if a guest comes over and your mom is like, “Go get them something.” And they're like “I just want a little.” If you bring a little that's the worst thing you could possibly do. Or if they say “I don't want anything,” and you bring them nothing, you always have to translate it as, “I'm starving bring me food.”

One time my mom was like, “Bring them some cookies.”
I was like “How much is some?”
“I don't know 3 or 4.”
The cookies were really big, and I literally brought 3 or 4. My mom looked at me like “What are you doing?” She was whispering “What are you doing?”
“I brought 3 or 4.”
“Well go get more.”
So I brought the entire kitchen. And she was like “Are you trying to kill them?”
The lady was like “Oh, are you trying to make me fat?”
And my mom is just like, “You better take all of this back.”
It really made no sense.

**Bahja and Mall of America.** I went to Minnesota and we were going to Mall of America and I was waiting for Asha and my cousin to get dressed. I was waiting downstairs and my uncle asked “Where are you guys going?”
“Oh we're going to go to Mall of America.”
I had a hundred dollars. I was rich. I was going to go buy everything. So he comes up to me and hands me 500 dollars and I was like, “No no no no what am I going to do with all of this? I'm good, thank you.” And I gave it back to him. And like the look on his face was priceless. He was like “Excuse me?” By not accepting it, it means like if I offer you a dollar, it's like saying no, it's like saying “You're too poor keep the dollar yourself. You need it more than I do.” Like it's not good enough. So I stepped outside cause I was just like “Oh, I think I might have just made him mad.”

And I get a call from my dad in Ohio, this was like two seconds. "Why didn't you take the 500?"
"I have 100 dollars."
"No! What are you trying to do? Are you trying to embarrass me?"
I was like, "What?"
"It was so disrespectful. I didn't raise you like this!"
It was just 500 dollars. And I went back inside, "I'll take it."

**Somali Honorifics: Aunt or Sister?** In Somali culture, one can never be too respectful in tone, mannerism, and speech when speaking with others. We refer to each other using honorifics. Using honorifics is a way of showing respect, and being respectful is a highly valued trait amongst us. When I am speaking with an older person I will refer to them as aunt/uncle or grandfather/grandmother depending on how old they appear to be. I must refer to them as such even if I do not have any relations with them. When I am speaking with a person closer to my age, I refer to them as brother or sister. The only time informal speech is accepted as a norm is when I am talking to my friends. In that environment it is a given that it is always relaxed and we can speak to each other however we want. Usually with siblings informal speech is acceptable. But that can easily change with the mood and if there is an age gap amongst other things.
There is always that blurred line for which title I should use when speaking with others. I know that I should use honorifics when speaking with certain people, but which terms should I use? That question always plays in my head before I began talking with another person. There are people who are only five years older than me so they naturally acquire the brother/sister title, but prefer to be called aunt/uncle. Then there are those that are 30 years older, but wish to be called sister/brother. If I call them what I thought would be appropriate, I’d end up unintentionally insulting them. These awkward interactions taught me to wait and let others address me so I know how they’d like to be addressed.

Sometimes honorifics come in handy when I cannot remember someone’s name. It saves me the embarrassment of always forgetting names. One term for all is easier to remember than remembering every person I interact with. (Zam Zam)

The school that I work in, I used to volunteer there since high school, but now that I graduated and a substitute teacher they're like habiya and I'm so surprised. What?! I'm not that old. And then the parents come in, the parents are calling me abaaaya. When they call the school I don't know whether to call them ado, habiya. So I have to like get used to calling everyone abaaay, abaaay, abaaay. It's awful with the guys because he could be my dad but I still don't call them aboowe and it's awkward. Like. Ok. So I don’t really call the guys. It's kind of. It's hard. My tongue is used to it. So it's like I just don't, I'm like "Hi, Mister." That's when I refer to the English, because there's no way of pleasing them. (Miriam)

In the meantime I think the sister thing works for my benefit cause it's like if I go to a mosque, I know that they are all my sisters so I can call them that. Or other than that, almost all of them I call my aayo for respect. But it's really helpful cause like you meet so many people you don't remember their names. You're like ado, ado, ado. It's a very safe word. Say for example Zam Zam is like "Abaaya, you're whatever" and then if she remembers my name, yeah I should just stick with abaaya. If she doesn't, you catch the flow. We don't remember each other but we know each other. So we go with that. (Asha)

**Relationship between men and women, A.'s encounters.** I'll tell you another story of something that happened. I was at a mosque during Ramadan and this older man kept calling for me. I thought that we're at a mosque and it’s Ramadan, I'll see what he wants. I really didn't think that much into it and then I go out there and he tries to flirt with me. He flat out asked me for my number. This is at a mosque! I was so shocked. I ran back inside. People say I'm too naive but how was I to know what he wanted? I just think that they tend to lack respect for their own women. You can't really say things like that. There are some serious double standards between the two sexes. Basically if anything happens, it's the girls fault. They'll be like, “What was that girl doing with that guy in the first place, what is she doing? Apparently you brought attention to yourself, that's why he noticed you.

**Boundaries and concerts.** That boundary is pretty clear when you kind of come up against it, but it’s a blurred line. You don't know how far, but maybe if I ask for more, I'll get more. Or no, I gave you that much I’m going to put the boundary back a little like. And you don't know how much is too much. So you, you're going to get like, um, the thing is, they never told you the line until after you cross and they start yelling and doing
like they're waiting for you on the other side. Waiting for you to cross that line. So, that's the problem. We don't know, it's just like we kind of know it's not what we're supposed to do but there's not given like set so you do it. They're right there....

I've crossed it a lot. Where do I begin? (Asha)

She went to the One Direction concert. Told my mom. My mom she felt bad for her because she sat on the ground crying... (Bahja)

I literally spent over a year and half trying to get these tickets, right? And then I finally got them. I told my dad I was like, I'm like over here crying, like "Oh my gosh. This is really happening" and my dad's just over there like, “That's girls just crying again. Ok, whatever, please leave kind of thing.”

She did a drive by. "I'm going to the concert Dad" and she walked away from him. And he's like on the computer listening to Hiiraan, which is like the BBC news of Somalia so he was not paying attention at all. He was like, “Ok whatever.” He just saw her walk by and ask something and he just nodded. She went to the concert and it was like 9, 10, 11 o'clock and my dad was like “Where's your sister?”

“Oh she went to the One Direction concert.”

“She went to a concert?!” (Bahja)

Like literally. It wasn't until like midnight until they got me. I'm covered in sweat. I'm crying. I looked a mess and they're over here like, “Did you go to a concert or a funeral?” And then I come out and I got home at like one something? (Asha)

I don't know but I got in trouble. My dad was just like, "How did you let her go? Why didn't you go with her?”

"Because I don't like One Direction." (Bahja)

Another time I crossed the line was a few weeks ago, my parents were. My dad came back from Somalia last night. My mom's still there, so I was like this concert is coming up. We have to go. Oh my gosh. So I dragged my sister with me, like “You going to love it. It's The Neighborhood.” So we went to the Newport Music Center. We waited in line for six hours. (Asha)

I waited in line and you went to Chipotle. (Bahja)

I sat down for a good half hour ok? My feet were killing me. So I called my brother. My brother's like, “Ok don't do anything crazy. Remember there's a line, like don't cross the line.” Give and take, you know? So when we come out of the concert,

I was trying to walk back to the car, and she goes and stands next to the tour bus, like she's not going anywhere that day. (Bahja)

So then after a while I'm like “you know what? I probably shouldn't cross the line, my brother's giving us some leeway, you know? Um so let's just go home.” So I knew where the line was that night. I did not stay until one a.m. to get a picture. I crossed, I was like, "It's 11:45 I am going home." You see, I have the respect for the line that night. (Asha)

It's like little things for me. Like going over to a friend’s house, or not knowing how long I can stay. Or like knowing if I can sleep over or not. Like that kind of thing. And it happens and then I’m like “You knew I was at a friend's house; you know I didn't go anywhere else, where else would I go?”

They'd be like “Ok so why didn't you let us know, or like why?”
And I’d be like “I didn't know it was a big deal because you let me go to the house the first time. Why is it now?”

It's like little things for me. It's not like going to a concert. I know for me, there are certain things that I KNOW I should not do. Going to a concert, definitely not. (Miriam)

My dad's family is so close together. When something happens, like the other day, my dad was in Somalia. He called us to tell us, “I'm landing at this time meet me at the airport, blah, blah, blah.” And while my brother was on the phone to them, my dad's sister called me. And I guess something happened in Toronto. So they get in a group conference and figure out what they're going to do. One of my cousins got arrested because this kid talked about his mom and his mom had passed away and that like sends him over the edge so he got arrested for that. And everyone in our family knew because they literally get on the phone and go like “Do you have a better lawyer than I have? What are we going to do?” Stuff like that. (Bahja)

Essay by A.

The Somali flag is blue in color with a white star. The five points of the white star represent the five regions inhabited by Somali people. Italian Somali land, British Somali land, Djibouti, NFD and Ogadenia. It symbolizes the unity of the Somalis despite location and cultural deviation. Originally this symbolization of unity was cherished and preserved, but currently this union is replaced with a lust for power and revenge that dominates the hearts of many. This star still symbolizes my country and it culture.

As I grew up in a predominantly American culture, I’ve always compared and contrasted both nations. America has open doors for education, a possibility to strive in this economy, and functioning government, all the things that Somalia fails to compete with. Yet, Somalia’s culture is like a fire torch that burns fiercely in the hearts of its people; even when the people are helpless and hopeless, they fight back. It amazes me the hospitality and generosity people are able to give even when they don’t have much to offer. It’s custom to be given a cup of shaax at any house that is visited, along with xalwa and biscuit. I’ve seen homes being opened up to others, jobs being provided and du’as being made. In addition, I was given rides on countless occasions solely on the fact that I was Somali. Knowing nothing else about me, they would make sure that I got where I need to be, making my life easier without benefiting them. I was dumbfounded by this because in American customs you do not give rides to strangers. Even after relocating in a new country, Somali unity is still prominent. Even though many were struggling, my Somali people always made sure to give back when times were tough. This is where their strength derives from; it is the fire within the people.

Even miles away from home we still keep that close kinship. Similar to our star, we are somewhat divided, but that is what makes us united. The lands we once knew have perished but we still have hope. So, yes from the human eye my nation is in ruins but at first hand you’ll see accomplishment that has been achieved from years of hard work. Remember the meaning of the flag, united despite differences. We are a torch of flame and we won’t quit, we’ll strive for better days.
Dress

I think the hardest thing for me as a Somali woman is balancing the culture and the religion. Sometimes it clashes. Sometimes you never know where the boundary ends and there are moments when I can get away with culture but then I look back and I know what is wrong and right in the religion. Like if I would a dirac, it’s a see through dress. It's ok if I wear it to a Somali wedding, but it's wrong in the religion. The dirac is culturally acceptable but if I were to wear like a formal dress of the same coverage? That's a no no. I mean, what's the difference? (Miriam)

We used to be able to wear jeans and stuff. When we got here like I don’t remember if it's this lady's comment I have no idea but my mom she was just like “No, you're getting older. Maybe scarfs are the way to go.” But she never said I cannot wear jeans. It's more like a watch where you wear it to. So school and stuff was ok. But I would never walk into the Somali mall with jeans. That's just asking to move to another city. So it really is fueled by other people's thoughts. (Bahja)

I wear a scarf here. Back home they wear hijab, but it's more like a fashion statement. It isn't for religion. And my dad was like, “Ok, uh you're going to wear it, wear hijab.”

I'm like “No, Dad, it's not a must. This is a choice, right? I can do it and God's the one judging me. Why do I care?”

“People are watching you and they're going to talk about you.”

“Ok, so you just want me to wear it not for God's purpose but to please others...”

“Yeah. Do it.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“That's what you gotta do.”

So it's like. It’s like fueled by what people think. And we have to consider their perception. Every step we take we have to consider what people are going to say. (Miriam)

I remember I wore something exactly like this in Somalia and they were like, “Who brought this naked girl to our village?” Do you see anything showing? Like, they were freaking out. And then one day I was like, “I’m going to dress up like my cousins to see what it’s like.” The only day I was considered to be dressed appropriately was when I went outside like that. They were like, we were like dying. It wasn't even just that. You have to wear sweatpants or leggings. Then a skirt. Then a tank top or a shirt. Then you have to wear this underskirt. Then you have to wear this dress thingy. Then you have to wear that. Then you have to wear this other thing. And I'm like “I’m dying with just what I’m wearing. How are you guys wearing that many layers?” And they're like “You just do it because it's expected of you.” That's what's considered full hijab. The niqab? That is not a must. It's definitely not a must, but it's becoming like a fashion thing in Somalia in the moment. And that's what bothers me. If people are wearing it for the sake of God as it’s supposed to be done, I'd be like go for it. You practice the way you want to. But if you're doing it because of cultural standards that's what you're expected to do then I'm really against it. (Asha)
Sometimes it's just too much. Like the clothes that you pick out, what would they say? If I wore this shirt, what would they say? Especially if I'm going to a Somali mall, I have to be on top of it. Like the other day, my dad was saying wear the hijab and he was like, “Wear it to the place you work at the whatever Somali school and you can wear it to the Banadir Mall whatever, but when you go to school you can wear your other scarf.” But wouldn't you look like a hypocrite? If they catch me off guard, if they see you, especially if they see you, they'll be like, “Transformer.” That's what they call it. Transformer. My aunt used to be suspicious of me. She used to be like “What do you do?” She was like, she would always say that, “So when you go to school, do you wear jeans?” Like seriously? And I'm like, “Why would I?” It doesn't matter to me. And she would ask my cousin, “Did you see what Miriam was wearing today? Was she wearing jeans? Was she wearing a t-shirt?” I'm like “No she was wearing her normal clothes.”

The way our parents did it was like, “Ok you can wear jeans but then if you're going to wear jeans there's no reason to wear like a skin tight top. Just think about it, balance it out. I understand the fashion. If you're going to wear skirts you guys wear a slightly more form fitting top. Just be able to breathe you know? I don't want to see your rib cages moving.” We were living with a lot of Pakistani people in Canada so they would wear jeans but they would have those shirts that have long sleeves and it covers up to your thigh, and then maybe boots with that. It’s covered up and stuff. And then we came here and it was like, whoa. It was not working out. “I swear I'm covered.” Some places like school? Yeah. Other places, no. (Bahja and Asha)

A.'s hijab story. I started wearing the hijab this year. When I was younger I had maybe a total of five Somali friends, and every time I went over to their houses their parents wouldn't approve of what I was wearing because I wasn't fully covered. So if I have wanted to go hang out with them they would tell me that I need to wear my hijab. That really bothered me, I thought they don't know my relationship with God. I didn't start wearing hijab until this year and I just felt like I wanted to. I started feeling naked without it. It was my protection. After I started wearing hijab Somali people were very accepting. They would talk to me more, just because of the change in my attire. I have a lot more Somali friends now. It's like a big judgment thing basically. Even though they don't know what's inside your heart, how you feel, or your relationship with God, based on your outward appearance they'll make judgment on you. So I felt like I got along better with American people. They were basically the only friends I had my entire life. At first I thought it'd be a really big deal if I started wearing hijab because I never really wore it to school before and I grew up with all the people I went to school with so I thought they would think it was a big deal, I was kind of afraid of how they'd react but then I was like I really don't care how they react. And then surprisingly a lot of people didn't care. It's kind of awkward now I feel like I'm too Somali for my American friends and I'm too American for my Somali friends.
Somalia

Somalia
Broken and war torn,
Waiting on an opportunity to be reborn,
Once beautiful and majestic,
Now saddened and tragic,
Use to dream about the bright skies and warm ocean,
Now I dream about stopping this dreadful war in motion,
It's time for a resurrection by a new generation,
Stability in Somalia in actuality well one day be reality,
Our land like a puzzle piece by piece is coming together,
Uniting in peace.

(Bahja)

Asha’s Trip to Somalia

I was gone roughly about a month. It was the biggest culture shock I ever faced. I could never do anything right. I wouldn't even talk and they knew I was an outsider. They literally (the rural people really didn't care) but the city people, the word I heard the most was "outsider." Diaspora, the outsider. And I'm like, “Ok don't say anything, don't say anything.” And then it's like they want to get something out of the "outsider.” It was like the most annoying thing ever.

The minute I stepped off the plane, you go to the airport. So there are two lines. The foreigner line and then there's the naturalized citizen line. So I got into the wrong line. I was like, “I'm Somali. I'm in Somalia. I'm going to go in the right line.” And then I'm walking through the line and they were like, “What are you doing here? You're a diaspora.” That's the first time I've ever heard that in my life. And I was like, “No, I'm Somali.” They're like, "It doesn't matter if you're Somali, or you were born here. If you don't have the passport you can't stand in this line." And then, I was like, "Oh ok."

Ouch.
"Oh, ok. Where do I go stand?"
And they were like "Go stand with the other foreigners."
So I'm like, "We're both Somali! What do you mean other foreigners?"
I was like so confused, I was like, “Oh my gosh.” So a lot of people from here, they have the Somali passport and dual citizenship. I was like “Ok, I'll just go stand in that line.” And then for like the hour I was in line, all I heard was, "Did you see what that one outsider did? She got in our line." And I was like, “Ahhh.” They don't try to hide it. They'll point you out and have you step out of the line. "That's her!" I was like "Oh my gosh, why did you do that?" I felt so bad. I'm never going through customs again in Africa, it was so bad. That was the most, that was the thing that most people. I can't speak Somali very well, but I can understand a lot. So it was like, yes I hear diaspora a lot. But it got to the point, people here they call them Flight 13, they call them F.O.B. Ref. Fresh
off the boat. People can call them that here, just suck it up, deal with it, you know? It's only for a month. I remember for the first week and a half I was like this close to being “Bahja buy me a plane ticket, I'm not staying here.”

It was so much: It was the culture shock, the food was different. They put subug in everything (Subug is butter made from goat fat. They use subug a lot because they don't really have vegetable oil) and I'd be like, “Ok, I'm going to go to these restaurants that are owned by American and European people and they wouldn't do this to me.” So I'm like, "OK um could I get my spaghetti with no subug in it? I want it plain, like straight up pasta cooked in water nothing else. You can skip the salt I don't care. I want something right now." So they would add subug and I would sit here and be like, "Why?" I told him like “I don't want any spice.” I had the guy take it back and try to wash it off with water. I got desperate. It was crazy.

But I found a lot of stuff I did know. I found pizza. I found Nutella. Snickers. I found Pringles. Special K. I found everything. I was really thankful my cousins from Minnesota and their friend, some mutual friend of ours from Europe. They are in the same city at the same time. So we would call each other and be like, “Yo, I found pizza at this restaurant and it's like somebody from Minnesota. Go there, it's really good.” And then that was essentially how I survived for the month. It was like, “Yo, there's Snickers at the store.” I sent Bahja pictures of food that I found. "You wouldn't believe I found this here."

I would go out buy like 50 tubes of Pringles and keep that in my room. And they would be like “Come out for dinner” and I'd be like “I'm so full up.” But they'd be like “No, come out we are not going to give you that much this time” and there'd be like literally 5 or 6 of those huge silver plates, where everyone sits down around them. So they brought like 5 or 6 of those for me alone and I was like “You guys. I’m so not hungry.” But they were watching me. They were sitting around watching me eat. “We can’t have you going back to America looking like you're malnutritioned. We don’t want your dad to think we didn’t feed you.”

My mom she was staying with her mother maybe two blocks away. I was staying with my grandmother. I was like “You guys, what am I going to do?” And then my cousin from Holland, he was like 25? But he was the one I related the most to in that house. He was like, “You think that's bad? I spent a year in the middle of nowhere.” It’s not even rural; I'm talking like you couldn't get any Blackberry connection at all. There wasn't Wi-Fi or nothing. And then he was like “When I first came to Somalia, they spent a week and a half just bringing food to my door. No stay there, sleep, eat. I gained 25 pounds in like a week.” And I was ok, so they're going to have to roll me down the stairs to get out of the house from now on. I guess weight is not something you joke about over there. "Oh I'm going to get fat" and they're like, "Is there a problem with that?" So they don't want to be malnutritioned. They believe if you're not, not heavy but if you’re not eating you're on some ultimate diet where you're going to starve to death. So it's like “So you're trying to diet aren't you?” “No I just ate like 50 Snickers” and they're like, “That's not food.” They called it qashiin-qashiin. Which is junk, junk. So they were like “She doesn't eat.” Even the local corner store, whenever I would go there they'd be like, “Are you here for your qashiin-qashiin?”
I think the most fun that I had was sitting there watching Harry Potter DVDS. We were there huddled around this tiny computer, a 15 inch Mac, laughing for like hours over Harry Potter even though we’ve seen like every single movie. But it was just like a culture shock. Everything I did was never right. I would. It's like, one of the culture shocks was like, there if you're opening a door, if you hold it open for someone they might think, and “Can I not open the door myself?” Or if you hold it open for an elderly, "Are you trying to say I'm handicapped, that I can't hold it myself? Are you trying to make me older than I am?" The old women were like, "Are you saying I can't do it myself? Oh, so now you're better than me. Oh, ok. So now I'm too old to do it myself. Did you hear what this girl said to me?"

It was my first time meeting my cousins and there's like nine of them. And they ranged in age from being a year, like a year in a half older than me to being two years old. When I met them at first I was like, “Oh my gosh they don't speak English very well, I don't speak Somali. What are we going to do?” And we come to a terms of agreement where they told us this one thing they had in Kenya when they were there. And I was like “Oh my gosh I love this right?” And it was peanut butter. And it took me two days to find out what they were talking about. Peanut butter?! And they would terrorize me with jokes. One night I was like “You guys I hear something weird” and they were like, “Oh you're just imagining it.” The next morning I woke up with a bat on top of me, a real bat clawing through the malaria net, on top of me. And they thought it was the funniest thing ever, and they chased me around with the little garden snakes and with whatever really they could find. And the cats the neighbor they would bring it into the room and scare me. So when I found out what that they liked peanut butter, I would go out and buy the jumbo, like the how many ounces was that jar? It was huge, right? I would bring it and be like, “Oh who's not going to bother me today?”

“Oh, me, me!”

So I would give them spoonfuls of peanut butter. I got them addicted to like chocolate. I would go out and buy so much chocolate and we would be like “Ok you guys who is not going to throw cats at me today?”

“Oh, me, me.”

“Here's some for you.”

Or when I brought pizza to them, they were like "What is this thing? It's cardboard, it doesn't have any flavor." And by all means it was nothing like Papa Johns, but it was the closest thing to American food that I could find, so I was over the moon. And two days later, they were like “Oh, are you going to finish the cardboard?”

“Oh, probably not.”

“It's nasty stuff, don't eat it.”

I was like, “Ok” and put it down. I come back 20 minutes later and it was gone. All evidence of it was gone. The cardboard and everything. I was like, “Guys what happened?” One of them reminds me of my sister when she was younger. He was like seven. He had cheese and pizza sauce everywhere and was like, “I think the cats took it.”

The older ones actually act a lot like we do. I tried talking to them for the first time, breaking the ice. I’d be like, “Yeah, you guys One Direction.” They were like,
“What's One Direction?” And I’m like obsessed, right? Ask, I'm beyond obsessed. And I'm like “Oh god.” They were like, “Who are these guys you're talking about?”

“Oh, well what do you like to do?”
“Um, so and so's getting married.”
“Oh my gosh, what's she going to wear?”

I can talk about clothes, ok. “Um, what about this?” And they would be like “What are you talking about?” It was like we could never find anything common. It was like “Oh so and so's getting married. So and so took who's phone and dialed so and so's mom, your daughter was at the beach the other day. She was talking to some weird people. So and so bought this new bag.”

“She did not buy the bag!”
“Yes she bought the bag.”
“Oh my gosh I bought that bag last week.”

It was like we had some stuff in common but other stuff it was like I don't know where they were going with the conversation. I was like “Yeah, uh huh.”

“Do you know what we're talking about?”
“No.”

It was like, and the slang they would use would be stuff I never heard. Some Swahili, some Arabic and I'm over here like, “Mhm.” And they would be like “I feel bad we're leaving you out” and I'd be over here, “One Direction, Twitter, um Beyoncé, the Kardashians I missed last week. I got a phone call about it.” And they'd be like, “Who are the Kardashians?” And I'd be like, “Oh you know Kim, Khloe, on and on.” And they'd be like [silence]. It was so bad.

Honestly, I feel like Somali is a lot harder to learn than English cause like every word has like a different dialect. I was at a restaurant one time and I was like can I have mallaay, fish right? There's kalun, there's all these other words. But mallaay also means worms in some areas. So in Somalia my dad speaks a different dialect, so kalun means the little worms after it rains. Not the deep south, but southern Mogadishu. And then the north, that means fish to them. They don’t know the word mallaay. And that's for fish right. When I went to my dad's family, in straight up rural Somalia. You drive for 13 hours through not even rural, you’re going through straight up desert. It's supposed to take 2 hours. It was 13 hours give or take in a car, not even a really car. It was like a van, with no chairs. There were not seatbelts. I was looking for a seatbelt for like 20 minutes. There wasn't one. Then there's someone's sitting on the top of the car, two people. And then somehow everyone in there going along was supposed to sit inside of there and I didn't know how that was going to work. So then, I was sitting there like “Ok. I'm going to wear my sweatpants I'm good.” My mom saw me walk through the door. “You're not wearing sweatpants” and I'm like, “Why?”

She's like, “You're going to be in public.”
“No we're going to be in the car.”

“You don't know if we're going to get out of the car, you're wearing this.”

So she put me in jilbab, no burqa, the one that’s all attached. I was like “Oh my gosh it's not even thin material.” It's really heavy right? And then, when I'm trying to leave in that
after all, “Well you're not taking the girl, right?” My uncle was like “It's not safe for her to drive.”

“Oh, why not?”

“Well first, you need to go change into like the world's heaviest material in the heat.”

And my mom was like, “It's too short.”
It was literally at my ankles. And I was like “I'm already getting heat stroke, it's so hot. I'm already going to be in the car, there's no air conditioning. What are you trying to do?”

And then finally after they go back and forth they were like she can just go even though everyone was opposed to it like, “You're going to put her in the middle of nowhere.” Both sides were like “Don't take her.”

My mom was like “She's only in Africa this one time. I don't know if she's ever going back after this. She seems a bit put off of all of Africa. She's having some bad experiences. She's here she's going to meet her grandmother.”

So after all that, I get there and use that same word I learned in central Somalia for fish. And they're looking at me, “What are you feeding this girl? She's asking for worms.” I didn't even know that's what I said. You know? I felt like a hot shot, like I'm using some words I learned. There were so funny.

"You know she wants worms. She wants worms. I'm not giving her worms. Are you going to give her worms? That's what she's asking for."

And then they came back 20 minutes later like, "Uh, we don't think it's good for your health." I'm like “I just wanted some fish.”

“No, you wanted worms. You said worms.”

I'm like, "Hooyo mom, what did I just say?"


“And you didn't stop me? You're here for a good 20 minutes hearing my dialogue. I thought you would have realized that.”

It was so bad.

I would look people in the eyes and smile and wave. I love to say hi to everyone. And they would be like “Who is this girl and what does she think she's doing?” And then I made the mistake of trying to order my own food at the restaurant. So I asked the waiter, I was like “Can I have a menu?” And they were looking at me like I just smacked the waiter. And my uncle was like, he understands a lot, in the seventies he was at Oklahoma University or Oklahoma State on a basketball scholarship. I don't know how they found him in Africa, but literally, he's like seven foot tall nine inches. Like he's tall. He was like, “Oh you don't make eye contact.”

“Oh ok, can I order my own food?”

“Oh, that's disrespectful to all the guys at the table. We're all for independence and everything, don't get me wrong but it's not like I go to a clothing store like wear this. No, you pick out my clothes and I order your food.”

So it was just like so. They would say my order, everyone would try to order for me, and it was like “No that's not what I wanted.” And then like five different plates came to the table and you can't say “No I don't want to eat that” because that would be rude to the
person who ordered it for me. So you sit there for a good six hours trying to eat everything.

We were over there we would always be trying to find hills to climb and they'd be like “Why are you trying to climb hills?”

“Oh you know we don't really have these big hills and mountains, you know back where we are.”

So we're there freaking out when we're driving down the road, and there's a goat.

“Shoot, there's a goat. Let's take a picture. Let's Instagram this. Add a filter. No don't use that filter. What filter, what are we doing?”

Both of us we were instagramming everything.

“You guys, I just saw…”

Let's say, I just saw a nomad in the middle of nowhere. I just saw a hut in this rural area and everyone's like “Why are you guys stopping the car to take a picture?”

And we're like “You don't understand.”

And they're like “We don't want to understand you guys are weird.” And we're like “You don't understand, we don't have this you know?”

Or this time I almost fell in the little river thingy because I was trying to take a selfie with a camel. It didn’t turn out so good cause I still fell but I got a picture of the camel. Everyone was so confused as to why this girl was freaking out about camels but you don’t see them roaming around Ohio.

Or the time we went to the beach. I stood out. Everyone, everyone was in neutral eye colors and here I am in eye shadow, and lip gloss, and shining. Surprisingly because it was Eid I didn't stand out that much. Everybody was dressed like they were going to the VMAs so I kind of blended in. But compared to the group I was with. People were like “Oh, I lost you but then I saw the reddish pink jacket that's her.”

And I was like “I’m sorry I’m wearing bright colors?”

But they were like, “You just don't do that here.” I was like “ok.”

Honestly? I feel as though the people over there now they are more accepting to the change than the ones here. Because I remember one day I was thinking “You know what? Maybe they're giving me strange looks because I’m being weird.” So literally one day I had my cousins (trust me I didn't speak the entire day) everything they did I followed. And it was like ok. At first it was strange but as soon as I realized they were adapting more to the environments they were from. People were bringing back bits of Europe and the States and it was like every little bit they brought back, Somalis incorporated into their culture. As opposed to over here, if someone brought something hard core Somali I doubt that they would be one hundred percent open to adapt that, you know? It might take like awhile but I feel like for them it's either change with it or be stuck in old ways. And then like here, it's like there's nothing wrong with what we were doing before, so let's just keep it.
Asha’s Essay

What does it mean to be Somali? To me I've always been asked that and I'm just saying to be from Somalia. And looking into it, Somalia is the combination of two words: So and mal. So means like milk or meat in old Somali. And mal meaning to live off or to make grain from. So the word itself means one who lives off meat or grain and this describes early nomadic lifestyle that is still present today. To be honest, I didn't even know I was Somali until the second or third grade. It wasn't until we were doing a class project about our ancestors that I realized I was different. Because I always identified as African American because I was African and I lived America. I remember not knowing where it was on the map. However that soon changed. When I got home that day, I talked to my mom and she said I was Somali and showed me where it was on the map. Once realizing it was in Africa, I started to believe the infomercials where, ‘Every 60 seconds, a child in Africa dies’ since they don't have the means to clean water or medicine.’ I don't know why I felt that was true. It wasn't true, which I found out really soon.

So moving on to my middle school years, I knew that I was Somali. Yes, I had a few Somali friends, but I only saw them 20 minutes out of the day. However, high school was when I embraced my Somali background. We knew other Somalis in my school. It was definitely interesting. We had our ups and our downs. Although I never felt like I fit in, we shared a background and they overlooked my addiction with One Direction. My sophomore year in high school, a friend came up with the idea of a Somali festival. As much of a disaster it was, we managed to pull it together and not let it crash and burn on stage. However, I still didn't grasp the concept of what being Somali was. It wasn't until this past summer in Somalia I realized that there was much more about being Somali than being from Somalia.

Going to Somalia was the scariest but best decision I ever made. Although it was a culture shock for the most part, I never felt like a greater whole to something. It was there I realized that to be Somali meant being a part of a close-knit community where everyone is family even if you just met them that day. It is a culture driven by food, family, and friends. It is about the way we express ourselves by our work, our poems, and our stories passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. To be Somali is to be brave. While having the weight of the world and your family on your shoulders and still being able to have your echoes heard. Lastly, it is being a representation of your family and your country where people know she is Somali by the way that she acts. (project interview, November 17, 2013)
Somali Poem (Kayla, 2012)

Published on Mar 22, 2012
Spoken Word by Kayla a Somali student
Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SYYLf8Lt1L8
1:14
Transcribed by Ruth Smith

Pause at end of thought (.) and new line
Pause between phrases in one thought – new line
Long pause for emphasis between phrases in one thought (-) and new line
Stanza = one idea and space between indicates pause
No punctuation between new lines is continuous flow

We are together and we are one.
    I look at the same path
    I walk the same land
    But you still say we can’t join hands.

My rights are equal -
But after one tragic event you define me as evil.
    You put a sign on us that said -
    “We are not a part of your people.”

You see -
The world today it seems like you mainly just need an excuse.
    Something happens and you have blame someone
        Or something
        And state it as a truth.
While beyond all the stereotypical ideas and thoughts of Islam
    Through all the hate we receive
    We still remain calm.

We sing along to The Star Spangled Banner
    It too is also my favorite song.
We pledge of allegiance to the United States of America
    The thirteen original colonies
        And the fifty stars on the flag.

So they ask me where I’m from -
    I was born in the land of the free.
My mom was born on the other side of the sea
    Raised in Somalia
    And they say America is from sea to sea.
At least that’s what it says in manifest destiny.

I am a Muslim.
You are Christian.
He or she may be Jewish or any other religion
But I still treat them the same
As a human being.
So listen -
Hear my message and script it.

I’m trying to tell you that we should become humanity
Instead of diversing ourselves over religion
Because we live together
And we die together.
So if you didn’t already know this life isn’t forever
So join my hand and let us walk this road
Peacefully.

Anonymous Essay

I began wearing hijab at a young age. My parents wanted me early on to learn how it feels to wear the hijab so that later on in life I would have no difficulty in wearing it; it would become like second nature. What they failed to do was teach me the meaning of Hijab. Why do I wear it? What is its purpose? Was it a must or just an option? Growing up I had these questions and many more swirling around in my head.

In elementary school I never questioned it. I did not like it. But I did not really question it. There were several occasions when I tried to take it off only to get grounded. I then learned it was bad to take it off, but I did not know why. My peers would always ask me "Hey Ismimo, why do you wear that?" It became a reflex to reply by saying "it is my religion." A religion I did not know much about. By the time I got to middle school, I disliked wearing it a bit more and was more curious as to why I was even wearing it. To me, I viewed the hijab as a hindrance. I had nice hair I wanted to show off. I wanted to prove to my classmates that in fact I was not bald! But by then I knew that if I took it off, no good would come out of it. But still, I did not know why. Although I had this budding curiosity within me, I did not bother to explore the reasons behind the hijab.

By my freshman year in high school I was not only questioning the hijab, but I was also questioning Islam altogether. Like I said, my parents never taught me much as to why we did the things we did. They only told us that we must or else. I began questioning Islam so much that I then discovered it was not for me. I still wore the hijab and acted like a Muslim when with my family or in the Somali community for appearance's sake, when I was not with them I decided to lose the hijab. Although I did not wear the hijab, my parent's strict upbringing and values they taught me kept me from doing anything else. For about two years I walked a road of confusion. I began looking
into other faiths to make some sort of sense of my existence. My personal road to enlightenment eventually brought me right back to Islam, and then to accepting the hijab.

At this point I was a junior in high school. Although I came to the conclusion that Islam is the right religion, I still had difficulty with the hijab. My parents wanted me to wear the abaya and hijab. What I wanted to do was to take it slowly. Quick to climb the tree, quick to fall off of it. But my respect for my parent's wishes overrode my own. So I continued wearing the hijab. I had difficulty with it every day. There are days when I just want to wear jeans with my hijab; it is a constant struggle. One of the beauties in Islam I discovered is being rewarded by Allah for this struggle. This is what jihad is for your average Muslim. Not the jihad propagated in the media. A struggle. A struggle that I fight with myself every step of the way to overcome. A struggle, with the right intentions, is rewarded tremendously. Whereas before I did not like nor understand the concept of hijab; now I understand it, I just have yet to successfully execute it with ease. To me, I consider the story of my hijab to be a 'to be continued' one.

**Background Info**- Islam then in my family was more of a cultural thing. We did Islamic things because it was the cultural norm. Because of this, there was a strong lack of Islamic knowledge being taught to us. We were dropped off at Duqsi, a place of Islamic education. But all that was taught to us was memorizing the Qur’an. Because of this lack of Islamic education, I never understood hijab until I went looking for answers in my teens. Alhamdulillah Allah got me through that journey.
Appendix F: *DSVU* Exhibit Comment Book

**DSVUOSU Exhibit**

**CML Main (February 2013)**

I loved all the pictures and bio that you have showered Columbus with./Nasre you look gorgous!/love, Leanna Yacalb

I liked it but why are you [doing] this?

Anonomous/Great!

Move/I loved the graphics

Wow! Really creative –Steven

Beautiful Pictures Black frame white pictures great work

Hi! Greetings This Day To All./ I really enjoyed all of the pictures. Great Photography./I also enjoyed the stories (information) shared. It opened my eyes to a lot of things that I didn’t understand before./I was a part of a mentoring program in the 1990’s. I encountered two Somali women who helped me understand many things in Somali Culture. This was a wonderful thing to me!/*The information shared (given) was very good also and quite informative./Have a Blessed Day!/Mr. Williams CSCC staff

-these stills are amazing/-the black and white detail of the photos adds a sense of/-isolation/-journey/-no begin-end/-takes me to thoughts of the reality of the Somali pop. in Cols (highest in the world after Somalia 5 years ago, not sure if its still the same)/-hih pop but only seen in certain areas of Cols/-high pop but not strong influence on Cols culture/-the pic of the woman in her hajab (sp?) and glasses gazing down AMAZING/-pic w/woman walking down hall with her back to the viewer, AMAZing!/(to me) these pics = a sense of longing, seeking, applying in the wake of an overcoming of minimalism or isolation, attribution or definition, a story retelling./Great job/Tracy Parks

**Westerville Public Library (March 2013)**

Nora Huhl Marh 2013/I have a kid like that in my class./Her name is faduma.
Thank you for your work. The photos are lovely. I enjoyed reading the experiences of the young women. Continued success to you. Are you familiar with Abdi Roble? He is also a documentary photographer and good friend of mine. Continued success to you. Thank you for sharing your work./Karen Washington

March 24/These are important stories to share. I was able to only briefly read the small books. Somali women are in Columbus to stay and more women’s organizations should seize the opportunity to learn from them! We of the non-Somali community need to quit stereotyping and assuming when we see women in skirts and hijabs – SO much more than meets the eye. Backgrounds, language, family, aspirations, etc. vary so much behind the veils – please continue to allow these voices to be heard! Miss B.
March 28, 2013/Beautiful!/-Tamara

CML Northern Lights (April – May 2013)
The picture looked ok and I liked how they put the booklets there for us to see what people are like.

?/Well I really don’t know yet

I love the photo’s/Beautiful <3/Nice work!

CML Hilltop (October 2013 – December 2013)
Nice story

Love the Books

10/28-MONDAY/THE PHOTOS AND BOOKS ARE GREAT! I ALMOST WANT TO SEE THE BOOKS HANGING ON HOOKS NEAR EACH SET OF PHOTOS TO MAKE IT MORE IMMEDIATELY INTERACTIVE! I DIDN’T NOTICE THE BOOKS ON THE DESK UNTIL MUCH LATER…THE STORIES ARE A VERY IMPORTANT PART OF THIS PRESENTATION AND I WOULD HATE FOR ANYONE TO MISS OUT ON THAT PART DUE TO LAKE OF PROXIMITY 😊

Jaysha Galcrease/Jay Jay/was here!

DSVUOSU and DSVUNL Exhibit

CML Northern Lights (January – April 2014)
Figure 57: Viewer comment “Somalia/don’t hate!!”
Appendix G: Analytic Poems and Narrative Dramas

We are
We're not all the same.
We’re not this one thing.
We're not their image
We all come from the same background initially, but
We won't fit into their box of what they want us to be.

Clan
The women of DSVU are expected to know their lineage, and clan shapes their experiences relating to other Somalis – for example, Asha’s story about a time when she was in Minnesota visiting family and a woman came to the door. Her uncle asked what clan she belonged to. Apparently it was not the right answer because he shut the door in her face. The elders were called in to mitigate. However, clan creates a connection between members of the same clan across the diaspora and provides a social security system from offering a place to stay to saving lives, as was the case with Asha’s grandmother who claimed clan membership on her dad’s side, swearing up and down that she belonged to his clan and not her mother’s, which saved her live during the war. She told Asha, “They did not touch me. It was about knowing what to say where.” Knowing one’s heritage is key, but as Miriam said, not for leverage or used as a weapon. Zam Zam talked about how back in Somalia, every clan was known for something. For example, one clan were shepherds, it was their role in society. Asha described this as stereotypes of each clan, but I think it is something more. It is their role in society. “But now in America, all of us in Somalia were something, but in America all were starting from scratch, all poor, all taking aid. For our generation it doesn’t matter” (Zam Zam, November 17, 2013 – Field Notes: CMLNL Project). The Anti-Tribalism Movement (ATM) in the United Kingdom, where there are a lot of movements “because the Somalis are more forward thinking” is helping reshape Somali culture by educating Somalis about tribalism and clan issues and awareness of the detriments of clan. It was reiterated to me over and over, most young Somalis disagree with tribalism. But as Asha asked, “How do you do that? Come home and say I’m not [fill in your tribe] anymore?”

Where the women learned about clan was more elusive. Zam Zam shared that she didn’t learn about clans from her parents but from Google or extended family. Many of the women did not remember talking about clan at home, and as Miriam shared, no one

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92Project interview, October 28, 2013a; Qorsho, project interview, October 3, 2012; Zam Zam, post project interview, January 19, 2014
talked about it growing up in her family, because they were refugees and had moved to different countries. However, when relatives came to visit from rural places, they told her, “You have to know who you are” and to watch out who you marry.

“Like honestly? I didn't know what that meant for a long time. For me, I went through a complete culture shock. Like I didn't really learn to speak Somali until I went to Westerville South. Earlier I went to Westerville Central. All my friends were White; we literally spoke English all the time. I barely did Somali things except for at home. I didn’t even wear a baati to go to sleep. I would wear shorts and a t-shirt. And then I went to South and all of my friends were Somali. Every single one of my friends were Somali. There were some kids that I went to middle school with but we got different and felt like I had to choose Somali friends or my American friends but I ended up choosing my Somali friends and I started learning things like what tribe I was. And I did not know that before. Cause I got into a fight with this kid one day because he tried to say my tribe started the war and I was like really mad because I didn't know who my tribe was. So I went home and my mom, my mom is really against tribalism...”

Asha interrupts her sister, “She hates that. I didn’t know anything about clan until my older brother was in his twenties.”

“She went, ‘You’re Somali. You’re Muslim. That's all you need to know. This is why we left our country, so I don’t want you to bring that stuff in my house.’ And then my dad was just like, ‘It doesn't hurt to tell them what they are. You are...’ And I was like ‘Oh ok.’ And then I went to school and I was like, ‘Yeah, in your face. This is what I am. I didn't start anything.’ And then he was like, ‘It started in the south and your tribe is from the south.’ I was like, ‘Ok but you can't put two and two together and accuse me.’”

As Zam Zam taps the table, A. says, “I don't really disclose my tribe.” The tapping stops.

“You don’t? So if someone of your own?” To me, “Sorry, I'm just curious.”

“If they know my father, I'll say that's my father. But...”

Zam Zam interrupts, “If they know your father they obviously know your tribe.”

“But if they ask, ‘What are you?’ then I don't answer. If they ask, ‘What's your qabilt?’ I'll be like, ‘I don't know.’ I just don't like them asking that because then they're going to like. It can be used in a good way, but then it can also be used for a bad way. They'll be like, ‘Oh you're this, so you're that.’ So I just don't give it out.”

“I feel it. That's interesting. I personally could care.” After several attempts to respond to A., Zam Zam turns her attention to me. “So here's the thing. A lot of people my age don't like, a LOT of people my age do not like the way tribes, just simply being asked the question, ‘What is your tribe?’ because the civil war had a lot to do with tribalism. It was one tribe attacking another, that tribe retaliating, attacking each other. It was all over the place, it was a hot mess. It was just, it was a tribal war the way I see it. So people my age, they, they saw the downfall of the tribe. They don't see the benefits of it. They only see the negatives, and the negatives,” Zam Zam laughs, “and the negatives. So they don't like it at all. To me I feel like, I can, I think I can compare it to Facebook. I like Facebook. Facebook can be used for many different things and it’s not that Facebook is a negative thing it's just that some people may use it in a negative way but that doesn't mean you have to have the government shut down Facebook, no more Facebook usage,
It's a horrible website because I feel like that would be taking it to an extreme. It's not that Facebook is a problem; it's just how certain people are using it. So that's how I see tribes. I feel like it's a good way to know your lineage, to know who you are. And sometimes you can use it like insurance kind of. Like let's say you go to a different country. A Somali person will ask you, and it's actually used like this, a Somali person will ask you, ‘Hey, what's your tribe?’ and you tell them, they will take you to that tribe.” Zam Zam taps the table for emphasis. “And it keeps going down sub-clan.” Tap. “Sub-clan.” Tap. “Sub-clan.” Tap. “And who knows? You might end up with your second cousin, family who you didn't know was in this city and they will help you, you know, get situated and they will help you out. So it can be used in positive ways.”

A. returns to the issue of disclosing tribe. “Well maybe mostly why I don't give it out is cause there's not very many people of my tribe so every time I tell them what I am it always starts into an argument about Somaliland and what I believe and everything. And I’m always like I don't have anything to say about this because I don't know how I feel about that.”

“But it's like you're hiding your identity, you're sweeping your identity under the carpet. You shouldn't be ashamed…”

“Why? They shouldn't know my tribe before they get to know me as a person.”

“But you shouldn't be ashamed.”

“I’m not ashamed. I just don't want the argument because every single time I tell somebody, ‘Oh, Issaq.’ And remembering that I may not know what she is talking about, A. tells me, “Those are the people from the North part, and do you know about the Somaliland Somalia thing?”

I did.

“They'll be like, ‘How do you feel about that?’ Or they'll go off on me, ‘Why do you try to leave your country?’ and I'm like ‘I don't have any political views on it at all!’ I really don't. Because there are people from my dad’s family who are like, ‘Oh be proud of this. Be proud of that.’ And then my mom's not that either. So I'm just like, ‘I don't know.’ I don't really see it as a whole separate country by itself. I kind of just see it just as a section of Somalia. I just, the political debate’s not for me.”

Zam Zam agrees, and returns to the issue of clan as a concept. “Yeah, but most people see it as a negative thing. Whereas I understand where you’re coming from, the people who see it as a negative thing I just feel like they shouldn't see it that way because it's not. It's just how the older generation uses it and we should kind of be, we should change the way we, they use it and change it into a better thing so the generations after us will not neglect it or see it as something negative like kind of revolutionize the way that things are view. Because one thing kind of leads to another so you can't. Ignoring a problem is not the way to solve it because that problem will sooner or later get bigger in a different form.”

“I mean it's not like I don't give it out but it's not the first thing it that's what you ask me. I'm not going to give it to you” as A. laughs.

“Yeah, I, I understand. I feel it.”

Although throughout this exchange, I offer periodic “yeahs” or “mhms,” most of the conversation is between A. and Zam Zam. Only when topics circulating within the
Somali community emerge, such as the Somaliland debate, or inside stories that they need to contextualize for me to understand do they address me directly.

“I don't even think you knew what I was until like last year,” A. remarked.
“No girl. I didn't know until you told me. I don't even know how the conversation came up.”

“See cause,” A. turns to me, “and I've known Zam Zam for a long time, so it's not like it's not something that I that I want people to know about me right away...”

“I think I asked you. I'm not sure.”

Feelings about clan and experiences of resettlement are intertwined. A. was born in the United States, and from what she saw growing up, clan did not have a place in her day to day life. Visiting relatives brought clan into her life, and any discussion of her tribe resulted in disputes over issues far removed from her life in Columbus. I told A. that I understood her not wanting to tell people her tribe, “Especially I think growing up here and why would that be....”

Zam Zam interjects, “Yeah, I didn't even know what I was until I was fifteen though.”

Zam Zam also grew up in the United States, although her family came to Columbus when she was four, after living in a refugee camp in Kenya where Zam Zam was born. I asked where they learned about their clan. “Did you ask your parents, or did you?”

“I mean my dad took me to Somaliland parties but I'm kind of a blonde,” A. confesses. I had not heard of Somaliland parties, which A. likened to Independence Day. Zam Zam elaborated, “It's like, if you go to Somaliland party it's almost a hundred percent chance you are of that tribe because usually only that tribe represents like...”

A. jumps in, “It's basically like oh, basically like when Somaliland tried to separate from Somalia, and they're like, "oh they're separate" it's celebrating their independence from that. But I didn't really know anything about it cause I used to go to it when I was really young and I was like, ‘What the heck is Somaliland?’”

Zam Zam is not from Somaliland. “I will try to be as unbiased, Somaliland…” she laughs. “Somaliland they celebrate their own Independence Day because they believe that they are a different entity, a different country from Somalia and they're trying to actually, as of now, get globally recognized as their own country.” I did know that, but asked what day and year they considered Independence Day

“It's like May 18th or something. 1990? 1991, I think? I think it has to do with when the war broke out. It’s somewhere in the nineties.”

I remembered my first exposure to Somaliland outside of articles and books. I was at SCRI, talking with Dirios, when a friend of his came into the room. We were introduced, and he told me about his work as a documentary photographer. He was currently following a man from Somaliland. Dirios and him began talking about Somaliland, most of which I did not understand as they switched between English and Somali. But he turned to me and told me, “Just wait, he’ll come in and I’m going to make him say something about Somaliland to this guy because it really gets him going.” I shared this memory with A. and Zam Zam.

“That is so messed up,” is all Zam Zam had to say.

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“Well, yeah.” I suppose it was not as funny to them as I remembered it. It seemed harmless at the time, but after tiptoeing around some of the deep seeded issues regarding clan, I can see how that particular incident is an example of the problems.

“My dad's not really like that though,” A. responded. “It's more like my uncles that are all like, ‘Yeah, Somaliland.'”

“Her parents, yeah. Her parents are really I would say chill in terms of clan. And so are my parents. Actually I don’t, my parents never taught me my tribe and we really don’t talk about tribe. The only time tribes are mentioned and anything like that is when extended family members come to our house and talk about it in our house. Like our parents never really exposed us to it and it's really funny because my sister she is now, she'll be turning eighteen soon. Typically in the community, you're expected to know your tribe and everything by the time, like you're just expected to know.”

“Like memorizing the Qur’an,” I interject, remembering Zam Zam’s story about lying to a man who asked her as a child how far she had memorized.

“Yeah like memorizing the Qur’an,” she laughs. “Like you should know. So when an elder Somali person asks you, ‘Oh who are you?’ or ‘Give me your abtiriis.’ Your abtiriis would be like your name is...”

A. fills in the blank, “…’My name is Zam Zam Mohamed...’”

“…’Farah Hibsi Inna Abdullah.’ Just giving your whole entire name. So you're supposed to know those types of things. But my sister, when she was sixteen one of our relatives from Minnesota came over and was like, ‘What is your tribe?’ And she was sitting there thinking for ten whole minutes. She was like, ‘I know it starts with an M.’”

“‘But I'm not sure what it is.’ That just shows our parents never really taught us. So then the guy was like, ‘Come on, you're going in the right direction.’ She was like, ‘Ok, I think my tribe is muxadaro’ and the thing is muxadaro means lecture in Somali.”

The irony of Zahra’s response rouses laughter from all of us. Zam Zam continues, “It doesn't not mean anything. It does not. Like our tribe is Merexaan, it kind of sounds close to muxadaro but she was just guessing. ‘I know it starts with an M? So you know what, I'm going to go with the word muxadaro.’” The laughter continues.

I hardly needed to point out the pun, “I bet she got a lecture after that didn't she?”

“Oh,” Zam Zam responds, “First of all, there were so many extended relatives in that living room, they just burst out laughing. They were slapping their knees. There were tears running down their face. It was really funny. The whole entire house was waiting for her answer and everyone who knew the answer was laughing from upstairs, downstairs, everywhere. And then after all the laughing kind of quieted down, they told her, ‘This is what you are.’ And they told the rest of my siblings. And even now, if I asked them, they most likely forgot. Yeah, they most likely forgot.”

Afterwards, A. embarks on her own story. “I found out when, when I was, when I was in kindergarten. I was coming back to America and I was staying at somebody's house. My uncle's wife was with us and we were staying at someone's house I never met before but she goes, ‘This girl is Issaq-Habar Yonis’ and the other guys goes, ‘Oh my gosh. That's what I am! That's what I am!’ And I was just so confused. I was like, ‘What did you just tell him?’ And she goes, ‘I just told him your tribe. You're Issaq-Habar...’
Yonis.’ And he goes, ‘Oh!’ and got excited again. ‘That's what I am! That's what I am!’ He's like, ‘You guys can stay as long as you want!’ And I was like, ‘What is going on?’"

We laugh, because despite the gravity of the issues connected to clan, there are many endearing qualities as well. To underscore her point that clan affiliation is not all bad, Zam Zam tells A., “You see he said you guys can stay as long as you want because he does share the same tribe, right? That's like the insurance thing.”

A. continues to laugh, “He was seriously so excited, but I was like ‘What did you just tell him?’”

“Yeah, that happened with my sister she went to Djibouti for one summer. There was this Merexaan lady and, there was no other Merexaan in the area that she lived in so she was just, as soon as she heard there was another Merexaan in the city she went, she picked her up, she hosted her for the whole entire day. You can ask Zahra about her, she had a lavish lunch and dinner and she kind of took her shopping. My sister tried to be like, ‘No, no, no’ but this lady was very persistent. She's like, ‘I'm probably not going to see another Merexaan for like a long time, so just let me do this for you.’ So. So. I would say those are like the positives. The negatives are when people start to you know dissing each other like you're known for this, or you're known for that.” (from project interview, October 28, 2013a&b)

**Language**

Language is important if you are Somali American, or whatever it may be

In a way if you are Somali American, or Somali British, or whatever it may be
And you don’t speak your language?
You are looked at different.
It’s easy to think of Somalis as the ones you see around living in America,
But there is a larger population in Somalia and Kenya.
To really understand
And converse fully
You have to speak to them in Somali.
You’re not there,
You’re not in Somalia,
You're in a different country and one thing that can tie you back to that home
Whether or not you were born there is that language.
So it’s a goal of mine to learn Somali better than I have.
There is a fear that the children of those who came over will not be able to speak Somali as well
That's the biggest thing
When I was young, my parents tried to enforce a Somali only zone at home.
Unfortunately that failed.

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93 from Hoda, project interview, November 9, 2012; Qorsho, project interview, October 3, 2012; S., project interview, January 19, 2013
But the good news is that my parents have always spoken to us in Somali. So our comprehension is fine. But when we responded to my parents, we responded in English, which really impacted our expressive Somali. What I do is take every opportunity to practice my Somali, To read Somali texts, To try to do some translation – Just to learn Somali better.

Car Accidents

Bahja begins telling me, “Zam Zam and her sister got into an accident almost two years ago. I was in the car with a friend and her mom and I remember one of them gets a call, because that's her cousins. ‘She got into an accident.’ The lady next to her picks up her phone, ‘She got into an accident. She broke both her legs.’ The lady behind us picks up her phone. ‘She got into an accident. She's in critical care. Her sister died.’ When we heard that we just looked at each other.”

Her sister, Asha, also heard about the accident. “I was in a different car. I heard the car accident story not even five minutes after you were at the hospital. I heard you were in critical condition. Her kidney gave out. Her sister has a brain injury. I heard all that and they're over here crying, ‘Oh my gosh, Zam Zam!’ That was like the scariest thing ever cause every minute it's like you weren't getting actually updates, but you were getting updates. Yeah, like literally I heard she died like twelve times that afternoon. Her heart monitor stopped. This happened. It literally got to the point where after the fourth or fifth time, I was like, ‘You know what? Until Zam Zam's ghost comes to tell me she's dead I'm not believing anyone.’”

Bahja continues, “And then when we got to the hospital, we just see Zam Zam and not her sister. Zam Zam was like, ‘Get me out of here!’ And saying random things and I was like, ‘Ok Zam Zam. You look ok. We're just going to see you later.’ Then we left.”

Zam Zam interrupts, filling in the details. “Me and my sister were at two different hospitals. Everyone was visiting my sister because apparently they were told she died. So they were going to visit her.” Laughter interrupts Zam Zam as Bahja continues, “The whole lobby was filled with Somali people. It was like a reunion.”

“They keep asking everybody, ‘If you’re not family...’”
“…”Leave,’ right?”
“And they're saying, ‘I am family!’ Three cousins removed or something.”
Everyone laughs because the scene is so familiar. Miriam sums up the sentiments, “Crazy moment. But that's what makes us Somali, right? The connection. What's really neat is that there is strong community.”

And Asha finalizes the thought, “Whether you want it or not.”

That connection defines the community. Miriam told about another car accident, a Somali woman she did not know, but everyone who saw the accident including Miriam blocked off the road with their cars, and rushed to the scene. “It was like a shocking moment. Like I just want to help this person. Like it's helping but it's a large community, and sometimes when something happens they all come out. And the police come over and he wants a translator because the lady is shocked and he needs to know her name. Everyone is talking at the same time trying to give him information, and he goes, ‘Ok. If you're not family then get away. I need space.’ But everyone's like, ‘I know her!’ And then they're trying to recognize her face. I’m like, ‘Are you kidding me? Let him do his job.’ But in a way it's comforting for that person for them to be there. So. It’s like. I've never seen like. That was my first community event.”

Everyone laughs at this as Miriam exclaims, “It was the first time seeing it. Like wow! They really come! Everyone stopped their car like parked it and like rushing. ‘What's happened? Are you ok? Can you move?’ And I was like, ‘Can you just ask her one question at a time?’ I was so surprised. My perspective was a different perspective than like theirs. For me I was thinking let the policemen do their thing. Give her some space. That kind of thing. But they were more concerned about her per say and the situation. So the police officer and their job. Nothing. They just wanted to make sure that she was ok, that she was the priority.”

“That is the nice thing about being a Somali in Columbus,” Zam Zam concludes. “If your car breaks down, it doesn't matter where you are, you don't have to call AAA. Every Somali car will stop. They will just look as they're driving past by, they tend to stare a lot, and once they identify you as Somali, they will turn back around and assist you.”

Everyone has a car story. “We get into a lot of car accidents. We're not bad drivers, I swear!” Bahja said. She was at the receiving end of that assistance. “I got into an accident like down the street. I was stuck in my car because this guy tried to turn and then he hit me and then my car spun into other ones and then they hit me back into my lane. I don't really remember the car accident, but this Somali guy helped me. I don't know where he came from, honest to God. I think he just parked his car next to me and helped me get out of the car. We couldn't get me fully out so we just waited until the police came. And then he stayed with me until my mom came. He stayed the whole entire time. And he talked to the police for me because I couldn't stop crying. And I don't even know what his name was. But he knew my mom and dad, and he recognized my car because my dad used to take my car sometimes.”

“Everyone, especially the adults, they know everyone. And like random people will come to you, ‘Oh aren't you that lady's daughter?’ I'm like, ‘Yes. Who are you?’ And
they're like, ‘Oh I'm your aunt.’ Everyone's your aunt. If you see an adult, that's automatically your aunt. Everyone is Eeddo, Abti, or whatever.”

“You know what's really weird about the whole everyone is your aunt type of thing?” Zam Zam asks. “Do I call her aunt or do I call her sister? Now that we're in our late teens or early twenties, we're not sure. Even if this person is old enough to give birth to you, and thereby deserve the aunt status. Or even if they are just ten years older than you and you're not sure if they would want to be called an aunt or your sister. You don't know which they'll feel insulted by or which they'd prefer. Because I have people that are older than my mother but they insist that I call them sister, abbaaye, and it feels really awkward.”

“In the meantime I think the sister thing works for my benefit cause it's like if I go to a mosque, I know that they are all my sisters so I can call them that. Or other than that, almost all of them I call my Ayeeyo for respect.”

As more of the young women begin working in educational settings, such as the library or schools, and are in positions of authority for children that they grew up with, these lines are further blurred. “Working here, kids bring the mothers when they bring their children, and usually outside, the kids they'd call me sister, but because they see their parents insisting I call them sister, they are call me aunt and it's really funny. I'm only like a couple years older than some of them.”

“That's what I'm saying. The school that I work in, I used to volunteer there and I was like a little kid to them. But now that I graduated and I'm a substitute teacher they call me aunt and I'm so surprised. ‘What?! I'm not that old.’ And then the parents come in, the parents are calling me sister and I don't know whether to call them aunt or sister. So I have to like get used to calling everyone abbaaye, abbaaye, abbaaye. It's awful with the guys because he could be my dad. It's hard. My tongue is used to calling them uncle. So I just say, ‘Hi, Mister.’ That's when I refer to the English, because there's no way of pleasing them.”

“Yeah, I just kind of wait to take the signal from them. If they call me sister, ok we're going to go with the sister now. But if they Auntie, then I'm going to call them Auntie. It's kind of weird how we refer to each other. Let's say Asha would be the auntie. When she's talking to me she would call me auntie and I’d be like, ‘Auntie, yes yes,’ but I'm not calling you auntie. It's like, it's like teacher. No it's like trainer and trainee so you're calling me trainer, and you're calling me trainee. But it's like the same word.”

I step in, trying to understand the complexities of kinship terms that vary with age and relationship, “So you’re like affirming their position?”

“Yes.”

“You know what I just realized though? It's really helpful cause like you meet so many people you don't remember their names. You're like Auntie, Auntie, Auntie. It's like a very safe word. It's like Abbaaye. If you don't know their name, and then if she remembers my name, yeah I should just stick with Abaayo. If she doesn't, it's like you

95 Aunt 96 Uncle 97 Sister, Abbaaye and Abbaayo 98 Grandmother
catch the flow we don't remember each other but we know each other. Like, we go with that.”

All I can say amidst the laughter is, “That's helpful.”

On the bus
If they catch you off guard
Wouldn’t you look like a hypocrite?
And if they see you
Especially if they see you
They’ll be like transformer
That’s what they call it
Transformer
Why can’t you be the same?
It’s because you’re doing it for God, right?
Why do you care?
We spend too much time
Worrying
About how others feel
About what we do
About what we’re wearing

Modesty
“Did I tell you what I dressed up in for Halloween at the library when everyone was dressing up?” Zam Zam asks as Kayla brings a pizza into our meeting.
“What did you dress up as, an old head?” Asha is the only to respond as the others busy themselves with food.
“No. An army officer.” Zam Zam’s response garners Miriam’s attention. “What?”
“Legit. I had everything. One of my co-workers used to be in the Army so I used his. I was going to dress up as a princess. But then I was like the Army thing was going to be cooler. I was always interested in joining the army. I wore it and you know how they wear those pants? A little girl pulled me aside at the library and said, "What are you doing sister, why are you wearing pants? Pants are only for boys." Uh, no.”
Miriam, who has been raptly listening, comments, “And you don’t want to flat out be rude and say, ‘Get out of my face.’”
“Exactly. I thought it was nice. Let's say I sincerely needed advice. You know how most people when they give you advice they do it in a humiliating manner and tell you in front of people?”
“Instead of pulling you aside?” Asha adds.
“Yeah, so I thought it was adorable how she thought I needed advice and pulled me aside to do it. That I thought was adorable. But what she was saying? I just said,
‘Thank you for showing concern,’ but I was surprised that it was a little girl. I wouldn't be surprised if it was someone older.”

Kayla, who up to this point had been more attentive to the radio then the conversation, said, “No girl. I remember I was working at this phone shop over down there next to. Over by where that other Somali market, not Global Mall but it's down there next to, it's like the Hollywood one.” Asha identifies it as the Shabelle market. “Yeah. And I was over there running the shop and anyways. I'm over here with my hair out. I got my jeans on, my shirt on. I was looking fly. And this older guy, this old, someone who was really religious he came in and was like, ‘Oh, you're this is really bad kid. Look at your friend.’ I had a friend of mine, she was covered. She had a scarf on. She had a skirt on. He was like, ‘Look at this girl. She is good.’”

“I hate that,” Miriam interjects. She’s been very vocal throughout the project about how much she dislikes the double standards surrounding dress and gender, and especially the way that these standards often conflate culture and religion.

As the girls respond in agreement, Kayla continues. “She's got all this on. And I'm like I understand. I understand all of this that he was basically trying to tell me wearing a headscarf is good. You know cover yourself. But then I was just like, I was like ‘Well did you know you're not supposed to call out.’ Not embarrass someone but tell it like, you put the person's like bad, not bad, you put their stuff out there like in public, you know? That's wrong. And I was just like. Even though I stand there and just nod my head like ok you know cause with these heads, but I told him though you know you're supposed to pull someone to the side if you're going to…”

Kayla is cut off as Miriam and Zam Zam simultaneously respond. Zam Zam’s voice rises above the rest, “And a lot of people don't do that. I was just surprised that the little six year old girl would do it.”

“Yeah!” Kayla exclaims as she returns to her own experience, “And then he was just like, ‘Oh I’m not trying to be like, you know I'm not trying to be mean.’ And I was just like, ‘It's alright.’”

Zam Zam recollects another example of calling out someone because of their dress. “It kind of reminds of this one day this girl was praying in the mosque. It looked like she was really concentrated on her prayer. It was really long and everything. She came in and did everything, you know? She did the extra prayer. Supplementary. She did the obligatory prayer and then she did the extra one and in the end she was doing supplication. She supplicated. It looked like she had a really high, her faith was way out there. The only thing that was wrong was that she wasn't wearing the full....” Zam Zam didn’t complete the sentence before the women interrupted with exclamations of disbelief. “Like her clothes were not proper. I'm not going to get into detail. Like she was wearing a normal shuka. But a lady came.”

“What wasn't right about that?” Kayla asked.

“Nothing. That's the thing. Nothing. Nothing’s wrong with it. You cannot please everyone. A lady came to her and instead of, instead of. Even if you wanted to advise her,
she could have at least, she could have at least done it in a private setting. But she went and she just kind of embarrassed the girl right in front of the whole in front of everyone who was sitting there. ‘Sister, sister, I know you were praying for a long time but...’”

“What?!”

“Literally. literally, she was like, 'Mashallah', you know you took a long time...”

“But it's not for her.”

“I know, I know. It's not for her to say, it's not for her to judge. And even if she wanted to give sincere advice.”

“It's not the way to do it.”

“It's not the way to do it. There is a way to go about it. So I don't know. Some people are just really judgmental.”

Though Kayla already asked, A. inquired again, “What was wrong with what she was doing?” A. just started wearing hijab in the past year, and is often questioning the others about what Somali words and phrases mean and about Somali appropriate behavior.

“Nothing!” Miria asserted. Zam Zam affirmed, “Nothing.”

“So what did the girl say to her?”

“Just smiled.”

“What did the girl do wrong? What did the other girl say?” A. continued to ask, trying to determine the exact parameters of the situation.

“She said that her clothes were not proper. Although in my opinion...”

“Did she say what was not proper?”

“She did. She said that it showed her shape. And once again, it showed no shape.”

“Wow.”

“As much as a fitted shuka shows shape.”

“It shows no shape though. I don't understand.”

“It was slightly fitted. You know the really fitted ones? It wasn't like the really, the ones that dress like. It was loose but it was still kind of fitted. But the point was, you know it was still acceptable to me.”

Asha summarizes the feelings of the group, “I feel some people just overreact because they have nothing better to do. I know some ladies who literally will trollop around Easton and Polaris to pull people aside and say you know what you're doing is wrong. There's this lady. They call her the haram police. I swear to you. She will stop you at the gas station. At Wal-Mart.”

Zam Zam adds amidst the laughter, “You know what's even funnier? Apparently there's a, I'm not going to I'm not going to say who told me this, but someone told me there's a group of old heads, you know older guys, who stand in front of clubs and shisha bars to see if a Somali person is going to walk out or walk in.”

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102 “God has willed it.” Used to show appreciation, thankfulness, and serve as a reminder of Allah’s will in all good news. Used to ward off the evil eye, or as protection against jealousy, envy, and ill intention.

103 sinful
“You know what the mothers do on High Street? They park their cars. If they see someone they recognize, or they don’t even recognize, they call all the moms. They conjugate and crowd the street and call them on the spot. ‘We found your child.’ They call their parents.” The laughter drowns out the attempts to top examples of regulation among elders. Despite the joking, there is a serious undertone to their lively discussion as secondhand stories become personal examples.

“There are a lot of Somali taxi drivers warning parents, especially on High Street. I was at the Gallery Hop” Zam Zam says. “You were with me. We were together that day. There was a Somali taxi driver and I swear he drove past us five times. And each time, each time he drove past he would slow really down and break his neck. If he wants to see our face, just park the car. Who cares? It’s just the gallery hop. He went up and he went down. He went up and he went down. The times were way too close to each other. And each time he was breaking his neck.”

“Nothing's worse than this one time when I went out. I call him the snitch because you could be doing nothing wrong. You could be with your mother at Easton and he'd be like, two days later, he'd be over here like, ‘I saw your daughter at this place.’ I testify being with her and like…” Asha cannot continue because of the laughter, before A. jumps in. “People will do that! I was with my brother at the mall one day and I got home and my mom said, ‘I heard you were at the mall with a dude.’ And I was like, ‘I was with my brother.’ And she said, ‘No they said it was a dude.’” Well obviously they couldn’t tell it was my brother.”

Miriam concludes the discussion, “In a way it's kind of assuring that they have a constant concern for you,” she laughs. “But then it's none of their business. Like come on get a life.” However, it was Zam Zam who left the most critical note, “And they don't do it for their wellbeing. They just like to talk.”

**Religion and Culture: Blurred Lines**

Oh religion?
In our culture in our community, there’s a blurred line.
Religion and culture go hand in hand,
But they don’t always agree
And some people tend to choose culture over religion.
Or they say the culture is the religion.
They develop strategies to resist the loss of tradition.
Justification.
Like boys being judged less harshly or saying we can’t.
That's culture.
That's culture but some people will try to play it off as religion.
The Qur'an clearly states that we’re equal and if anything we have the upper hand.
It says, “Heaven's under your mother's foot.”

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104 from Asha, Bahja, Miriam, and Zam Zam, project interview, October 28, 2013a; Hoda, project interview, November 9, 2012; Tiilikainen, 2007
105 Although the women attributed this saying to a Surah, in my research I found that it comes from a hadith recorded by Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal in his Musnad is related by Mu`awiyah bin Jahima al-Sulami in
And the Prophet, As-Salaam ‘Alaykom\textsuperscript{106}, he said, “A warning, a little advice: Be nice to your women, your daughters, your mothers, your sisters. We wouldn’t exist without them.”

Exactly.

But then they tried to say guys have higher status.

They try to belittle our status although so much is expected from us.

There are a lot of women that carry their families on their backs.

They are the breadwinners and take care of the children.

It is a cultural shift.

But the men don’t see that

And they don’t appreciate us so they just try to belittle us.

And they say that’s a woman’s job, a woman’s work,

A woman is to cook and clean.

But I wasn’t born to do this.

I learned.

So if you give it effort and time, you might learn it.

But no, they don’t want it.

They’re like, it’s not my place.

It’s not my place.

**Religious knowledge\textsuperscript{107}**

On Saturday and Sunday, most moms drop their kids off.

Mom will wake up, prepare food or whatever, come to duqsi.

She drops you off.

You stay there a couple or three hours.

You recite the Qur’an.

So there are passages in chapters - Surahs.

You get a passage.

You memorize this.

You pass it to the teacher and he gives you a new passage to memorize.

It’s that kind of thing.

And when it comes to behavior, the duqsi is the backup enforcer.

They also have halaqa. It just means circle of knowledge.

It’s like everyone knows a little bit of something.

\textsuperscript{106}Arabic for “Peace and blessings be on him.”

\textsuperscript{107}from Muna, project interview, October 27, 2012; project interview, October 28, 2013a; S., project interview, January 19, 2013; Zam Zam, DSVU, 2014
So when you're sitting in that circle and share that little bit of knowledge that you know even if it's just a single verse, and then everyone adds on to it. So the sharing is really informal.

And then there are actual classes, where it's structured. Where there's like the sole teacher, the scholar who knows what they're talking about. You take notes, you take tests. It's like school for anyone, any age. You can start whenever. Like maybe you weren't religious when you were younger and maybe you are fifty-something now you can go to the class.

When I was younger, I studied the Qur’an as all Somalis do, but it was mostly Arabic memorization of the text. The first time I actually paid attention to the words was in an English translation. It had a transformative effect. I was reading Passages that really spoke to me as somebody just coming from adolescence and who had dealt with a lot of angst and identity issues and everything. Passages that talk about patience. Passages that talk about the experiences of the prophets. And really finding a text that spoke to me in my own experiences and my own situations. So really, the Qur’an and other texts about Islam and the five pillars were fundamental.

But you know how the religion is practiced by many different people and cultures? In our Somali community you're expected to know these things by a certain age. I remember when I was ten years old, an old man came - My mom used to have one of those little stores I was holding down the store for her and he came in - He asked, “Hey what chapter, how far have you memorized?” And I kind of felt embarrassed because I didn't memorize much at that time. And for some reason I felt like lying to him because I knew that he wouldn't be happy with the real answer. So I said that I memorized up to Surah Ya Sin. I remember the specific chapter I had told him. And the chapter Ya Sin is very, in my opinion, very well progressed. Like if we had memorized that amount by the age ten, two claps. You're a prodigy, that's my opinion. But to this old man, Although I gave him that high chapter He looked at me as if it were not enough. He said, “Only Chapter Ya Sin?” “What have your parents been doing?” “Why have you not memorized more?” And in my head I'm thinking:
If only he knew the truth of how much I really memorized.

That's so true.

I remember this past summer -
So one of my cousins, he's eight. He finished the entire Qur’an, he has it memorized. And I can't even get past the very beginning. We'll leave it at that.
- So I'm over in Somalia like, “I'm in college, I graduated high school a year early."
“How far are you in the Qur’an?”
“Well, we don’t talk about that in public.”
And they were like, “Uh Sophia what have you been teaching your daughter?”
“Uh you know, um, she knows a lot.”
“How far is she?”
“We don’t talk about that.”

But yeah.

Between work and school it's hard to find to find the time.
I think it just has to do with me becoming more dedicated to my religion.
It has to do with me uplifting, lifting my iman.
Let's say that.

I just feel that right now I’m just busy with school and work and stuff, that I just don’t have the time to like sit down at the mosque and just listen to a lecture, you know? So it just has to do with me working on it.

And I know it's not a good enough answer
But I try to find time if there is something happening at the masjid.
But I'm not going to lie; I memorize One Direction lyrics faster than my Qur’an.
You can ask me who sang what solo but you can't ask me what chapter in the Qur’an it is.
It's not going to work out too good.

I am
I don't know what it means to be a Somali woman.
Ask me again in ten years and I might have an answer for you.

I am a girl
I am a woman.

I am not that old.

108From DSVU, 2014; Hoda, project interview, November 9, 2012; Muna, project interview, October 27, 2012; Muna, post project interview, November 15, 2013; project interview, October 28, 2013a&amp;b; project interview, November 17, 2013; Qorsho, project interview, October 3, 2012; S. project interview, January 19, 2013; Zam Zam, post project interview, January 19, 2014
I am eighteen, nineteen, twenty.
I am from Africa, but I am Somali;
The only Somali person that checks the Black box.
I am Somali, but I am Somali American.
A Somali girl living in America.
I am Somali, but I was born here.
I grew up here, but I don’t have American blood in me. I have Somali blood in me.
That’s who my family is, that’s what my culture is, that’s what I grew up in.

I am Somali.
Not only am I Somali, I’m Muslim

I am open.
I am here so I’m going to learn what I need to learn to get by.
I am here to get my education.
I am in college right now, nursing school, finishing in a year.
I am going to go spend a year somewhere else and come back.
I am working all the time, sending money back home.
I am still trying to figure out what will have the most impact.
I am not very involved;
I am not staying here.

I am not sure,
I am really confused.
I am picking and choosing, and stuck between two worlds.
I am too Somali for my American friends and too American for my Somali friends.
They told me I am not Somali.
I am still finding my culture, you know?

I am fluent in Somali
I am trying to speak Somali
I am just looking at them, and they don’t understand that I don't understand.
I am not fluent.

I am kind of a blonde.
I am always smiling at people,
I am a very rational thinker and I can be very blunt and not care.
Extremely liberal.
I am over here with my hair out, my jeans on, my shirt on.
I am wearing bright colors. You just don’t do that here.
I am going to put the boundary back a little.
I am covered. It's expected of you, it’s part of who I am.
I am like “This is a choice, right?”
I am like, why?
Why would I?
Why can't you be the same?
Why can't I laugh too loud or dance in public?
I am not believing anyone.
I am really against it, totally against this.
If I am talking about the things I want to talk about,
I am only showing it to some people.

I love knowing who I am
I am not going to hide.
I am sure...
I’m not done.

I still don't know.
I really don't, I honestly don't know.

**Somali Girl Prob**¹⁰⁹

“So my dad is more we're going to hold on to the language like an iron grip type of thing. And my mom is like, ‘I'm open. I'm here so I'm going to learn what I need to learn to get by.’”

I was surprised to hear this because from everything that I had read, women and mothers in particular were the ones passing on the traditions, the religion and things. I told Zam Zam so, and before I could pose a question, she continued.

“In the department of culture, yes they are. They are the teachers. I mean in my family, and I can't speak for everyone, in my family my dad is like language, he teaches us manners, instructs from the Qur’an, proverbs, Somali traditional stories and etc. That's like traditional Somali knowledge. Whereas how you actually act, how you carry yourself, and how you behave. That would be the mother teaching you all of that stuff.”

Agreements fill the air, and Miriam interjects comments punctuating or elaborating on Zam Zam’s points, “Especially girls.”

“But then that’s within the family, within the Somali community and culture. But when you're outside and have to interact with people who are not Somali, it is the mother who is more…”

“Open to it.”

“…open to learning. But then the father is more ok we have to keep, be. Is the word inclusive? Or is it exclusive? I don't know, where you have to keep it within your hubs.”

This results in much boundary crossing. The youth are the first not to grow up in a Somali environment and when they are seen as losing their culture either through bad

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¹⁰⁹from Muna, project interview, October 27, 2012; project interview, October 28, 2013a&b; Zam Zam, post project interview, January 19, 2014
behavior or lack of knowledge, they are “sent back to Africa.” A., who was born and raised in the United States, has come into conflict with newcomers who view her as a threat to their children for not dressing modest enough (not wearing a hijab); for being too liberal, too outspoken, too outgoing for a girl; and for not speaking her language.

“I moved to Columbus when I was like five or six. Before that I lived in Connecticut, New York, and Minnesota. I think I only knew one Somali family that lived in our neighborhood. But there were not as many as there are now. I was in second or third grade when a lot of them started to move in. I was like one of the only Somali people there so I had, was sent to translate. My Somali,” A. laughs, “Well I can understand it, but my speaking’s kind of pretty bad. And I get made fun of it all the time. Like I speak the language, but with an American accent. So people have difficulty trying to understand me. So automatically all the kids like kind of isolated me when they first came, like ‘This girl she thinks she's better than us. She can't even speak her language properly.’ My Somali's better now, but,” A. laughs, “but that American accent’s still kind of there.

“Well one day was a parent teacher conference, and the one teacher told me, ‘Hey, can you help us translate?’ because the kid had just come from Somalia and his mom just came from Somalia so they both didn't know English. And so I was there to interpret. I mean they couldn't really find a better person to interpret I guess at that time. So I was there. And the lady was speaking to me. I would tell them what she was saying, but when I try to speak to her I mixed some of the words with Somali with some of the words with English, forgetting that she didn’t know any English at all. So the lady was just like, ‘Oh, who does this girl think she is? Does she not know where her parents are from? Does she not know where her roots are from? Why is she speaking to me like this? She doesn't even know Somali, and she's not even speaking English.’ She said that to me, and I was in second grade at that time.

“When I was younger like especially like I only have like I had like two Somali friends in elementary school and they both lived in my neighborhood and whenever I'd go to their house, their parents speaking in Somali and whenever I'd reply they could obviously tell that I had difficulties just speaking back to them. And they would just be like, ‘Oh. You need dhagaan celis.’ It literally means like dhagaan is like having culture. And then celis is go back. Like you need to go back to your country and you need to learn the language of your parents, and stuff like that. And it's just like constant thing. For some reason.

“A lot more of more people are more accepting now because I guess I look more Somali but I mean my personality is the same. I still have different views than most people. I have a lot more Somali friends now but I still get, it's like a teasing way but I still get mocked by them for like kind of being different than them. Like Zam Zam introduces me as her friend that her ten year old brother can speak better Somali than me.” We laugh together.

“The younger kids are a lot less judgmental; it's the parents or the older kids who are like 15 or something when they first came to America who will be like, ‘What are you doing? This is unacceptable. You need to be more cultured and stuff.’ I mean, they act
like I don't try. I try to speak Somali all the time but every time I do I get made fun of for it,” A. laughs, “So what do I do?”

Parents blame these problems on the new culture, as Zam Zam explored in her poem, *Akou Amrikum*. As much as the parents are trying to figure out how to parent in a new culture, their children are trying to figure out how to be Somali in the place where they’ve grown up. Parents are trying to establish and enforce boundaries to help children maintain their cultural values and behaviors, but as Zam Zam described, “Culture changes with time and place so it's not something that's permanent, it's not something that's always going to stay the same. In my opinion, it's relative to where you live. You can have, for example, a few generations living in the same area, but because they are two different generations they may not understand each other and that is the exactly the Somali culture. The difference seems like such an even bigger gap between the two generations because the previous generation was in Somalia. And then now we're here in the Western society. It doesn't matter if it's here, or Europe, or Australia, it doesn't matter where it is. It's like two whole entirely different worlds. So there's going to be even like a larger gap. So a lot of times there's things that you know the kids may or may not do or may or may not want to do and the parents cannot understand it no matter how hard they try. Even the most understanding ones at times just scratch their heads like, ‘Why?’ So one of the things is…”

Zam Zam stops and looks around behind her. We were sitting at a coffee shop where I often meet and there are always other Somalis studying or meeting. “Sorry I'm checking for Somalis because I don't want to see if someone is watching and listening, there are other women here. Sorry.” She continues her illustration of living between her parents’ world and her world, negotiating the expectations and values of each. “For me personally I have a home life. And then I have my personal life. Not personal life; my home life is my personal life. But it's like I cut my life into two pieces. Like I don't let any other part of it seep into another. Otherwise everything would just go you know go downhill. Like for example, I go to school. My parents want me to go to school. I'm very happy about my education. I'm very happy about it, I want to know. I want to do something with my life. But then their expectation is that I go to school and school only and nothing else and nothing more. I go to school. I come home with the family. I go to school. I go to family. If I want to work? No shame. But they want my life to be a little circle where they can control. Everything. So I let them believe that that's what my life is. School. Work. Home. But then at the same time, if that's how my life was, I'd go insane. I'd go crazy. I'd go up the wall. I can't do just school and work and then just the home. So I’m in a lot of activities. I would love to tell my parents about it, but I feel like it would just mess things up. Most kids, their parents would want their children to know to have that kind of life; but with mine, it's just they feel uncomfortable not knowing and that you can be easily influenced. ‘You can do this. You can do X, Y, or Z. We'd rather have you in sight, in mind. We'd rather see you so we know what you're doing.’ Like I'm involved with a student organization at school, I'm doing this [DSVU]110, I’m doing other things;

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110 In case you're wondering, I asked Zam Zam what she told her parents about this project, especially since they would be able to see that she was involved if they went to the library where it was exhibited. She told
but they just don’t know. And if I would just tell them, it would be really hard. So then the parents' role is just, cause back in Somalia? That’s how everyone lived their life. If they don't go to school, then they would just help the family. It was just the norm. But then here? It’s just different.”

Zam Zam calls this the Somali Girl Prob. For some, including most of the participants of DSVU, if they say it’s a Somali Girl Prob, they already know what they’re talking about. These issues would be perfectly relevant to them because they share the experiences of having parents from Somalia, but grew up and live in the diaspora.

One time she could be okay with certain things
But then she holds back.
So there's like a boundary that she's watching.
There's so much give and take.
There's a boundary. Ok.
That boundary is pretty clear when you come up against
Blurred lines.
It's a blurred line
You don't know how far.
And you don't know how much is too much.
Maybe if I ask for more, I'll get more.
Or no.
I gave you that much I’m going to put the boundary back a little.
The thing is, they never told you the line until after you cross and they start yelling
It’s like they're waiting for you on the other side.
Waiting for you to cross that line.
[Laughter]
They're waiting for you to step out.
So, that's the problem.
We don't know
We kind of know it's not what we're supposed to do but there's not given like set so you do it. They're right there....

I asked the women if they had examples of a time when they did something “you didn’t know you weren’t supposed to do.” Asha was the first to respond as the girls just laughed.

“Oh my gosh. I do. I've crossed it a lot. Where do I begin?”

me, “I kept it to a bare minimum. Basically my mom's perspective is, whatever you do you have to be benefiting from it like don't, don't put all your time and effort into something that you're not benefiting from. So. I don't know, I just sort of see it benefiting my college application. that's how I explained it to her. And I said, you should go see it. And she said, ‘Ok, ok.’ She was working when I told her, so she didn't really question me much about it.” (post project interview, January 19, 2014)
Ever the big sister, Bahja volunteered a place to start. “She went to the One Direction concert. Told my mom. My mom she felt bad for her because she sat on the ground crying...”

In true form, Asha interrupted with details and corrections to her sister’s memory. “I literally spent over a year and half trying to get these tickets, right? And then I finally got them. And I told my dad I was like, I'm like over here crying, like ‘Oh my gosh. This is really happening’ and my dad's just over there like, ‘That girl’s just crying again. Ok, whatever, please leave’ kind of thing.”

Bahja continues, “She did a drive by. ‘I'm going to the concert Dad’ and she walked away from him. And he's like on the computer listening to Heron, which is like the BBC news of Somalia so he was not paying attention at all. He just saw her walk by and ask something and he just nodded. She went to the concert and it was like 9, 10, 11 o'clock and my dad was like, ‘Where's your sister?’ ‘Oh she went to the One Direction concert.’ ‘She went to a concert??’”

Asha jumps in, “Like literally. It wasn't until like midnight until they got me. I'm covered in sweat. I'm crying. I looked a mess and they're over here like, ‘Did you go to a concert or a funeral?’ And then I come out and I got home at like one something?”

“I don't know but I got in trouble. She didn't get in trouble. My dad was just like, ‘How did you let her go? Why didn't you go with her?’ ‘Because I don't like One Direction.’”

These instances of pushing and crossing boundaries are as much about learning family responsibility as it is individual decorum. Asha starts to give another example.

“Or another time I crossed the line was a few weeks ago. My dad came back from Somalia last night. My mom's still there, so I was like this concert is coming up. We have to go. Oh my gosh. So I dragged my sister with me, like ‘You going to love it. It's The Neighborhood.’ So we went to the Newport Music Center. We waited in line for six hours.

“I waited in line and you went to Chipotle.”

“I sat down for a half hour ok? My feet were killing me. So I called my brother. My brother's like, ‘Ok don't do anything crazy. Remember there's a line, like don't cross the line.’ Give and take, you know? So when we come out of the concert, it is. What time was it?”

“I don't know. I was trying to walk back to the car, and she goes and stands next to the tour bus, like she's not going anywhere that day.”

Asha laughs as she picks back up the story, “So then after a while I'm like, ‘You know what? I probably shouldn't cross the line, my brother's giving us some leeway, you know? Um so let's just go home.’ So I knew where the line was that night. I did not stay until one a.m. to get a picture. I crossed, I was like, ‘It's 11:45 I am going home.’ You see, I have the respect for the line that night.”

“She took the time to book the concert ticket. It was like the day after my dad left, she got the concert tickets. How convenient of her.”

Miriam turns the conversation from concerts to more daily examples. “It's little things for me. Like going over to a friend’s house, or not knowing how long I can stay. Or like knowing if I can sleep over or not. Like that kind of thing. And it happens and
I’m like, ‘You knew I was at a friend’s house. You know I didn't go anywhere else, where else would I go?’ They’d be like, ‘Ok so why didn't you not let us know, or like why?’ And I’d be like, ‘I didn't know it was a big deal because you let me go to the house the first time. Why is it like?’ It's like little things for me, it's not like going to a concert. I know for me, there are certain things that I know I should not do. Going to a concert? Definitely not.”

Bahja explains that Asha is the youngest. “She can get away with anything at my house. But for sleepovers, I don't know how it is for you guys, but my parents think that people can sleep over at my house, but I can't sleep over at their house. I tell them it's a two way street, but that doesn't really work out unless it's like first-cousins and stuff, not just like cousins, but first-cousins. I can sleep over at their house, but all my first-cousins live in Toronto or Minneapolis so I don't feel I'm going to sleep over anywhere anytime soon.”

Zam Zam and Miriam both identify strongly with this example. Zam Zam adds, “I had one of my close friends sleep over at our house and they're also from an immigrant family, but a different culture. Syrian. So we kind of have the same, I would say similarities. The girl sleeping over somewhere else, it's not really considered a good thing in their culture also. So then their mother really trusts me, trusts my family and what not so she let her sleep over at my house. And then the mother wanted you know, my friend she invited me over to her house and was like, ‘Hey, I had a sleepover at your house, let's have a sleepover at my house.’ And I was excited. My friend was excited. My friend's mother was excited. And then my mother,” Zam Zam laughs, “She was just like, ‘I'm sorry, you let your daughter sleep here. That was your choice. I didn't force her here. I'm not going to let my daughter sleep anywhere I can't be with her the whole entire time.’ So it was really embarrassing because her mother took it personally. She didn't take it as a culture thing, she took it personally. Like, ‘You don't want her at my house.’ So I don't know. It took a lot of reconciliation. Is that the word? A lot of talking to the mother to explain.”

It is a girl thing, the problem of boundaries. Miriam clearly identifies the double standard regarding boys and girls, what she describes as the “whole stereotyping thing. I'm just letting you know out there, I hate the whole girls can't do this, you gotta be in this little bubble. And guys you're free to do whatever you want to do.” And she is not alone in these feelings. Each of the women add their own descriptions of this problem.

“When we were younger,” Bahja starts, “my brother could sleep over. We’re judged more harshly than they are.”

“Yeah,” her sister Asha agrees.

“Because, ok. Apparently a girl’s mistake is not invisible. It's like out there. The thing that they're most worried about is pregnancy. Like for them that's the most shame. Like, so if you're taking little steps. Going over to a friend's house, sleeping over. Next time it will be like ...” Miriam fishes for an example.

“Going to a club,” Asha offers.

Muna jumps in with an example. “Say for example you’re a girl and you decide listen I never get to do anything with my friends. So all of my friends are going to go out to the club or whatever tonight and I’m going to go with them. And you run into your
brother’s best friend there. Which, in the Somali community, your brother better not see you doing anything he does not want to see you do or else he’ll handle it. And his friends will most likely tell him if they see you there that you’re not supposed to be. ‘Oh my god, my brother’s friend’s there.’ And I’m not going to go because I see him in the line trying to get in so I'm not going to step foot in that place because I don’t want my brother to be, have a bad name with his friends or anyone else and I don’t want to have a bad name and I don't want my family to have a bad name. Because if he sees me, it will just start trouble.”

“Yeah, going to a club is bringing you; each step is bringing you closer to getting pregnant. That’s what they think. So but the guy. He does it. There’s not visible mistake on him. Just like water under the river. But for a girl, it's visible. Everyone knows. You’re bringing shame to your parents. Your family. The whole community.”

“I think the only thing worse than that actually happening,” Asha adds, “is the rumors getting out. But they’ll be like medical stuff. She could have just hit it. Or like, the rumors being out there. You will get phone calls from Minnesota. Toronto. Africa....”

“Everywhere,” Miriam laughs.

”. . I heard what your daughter did last weekend.”

“Yeah, it never stops,” Miriam affirms.

“Especially in our family,” Bahja continues. “Like my dad's family is so close together. When something happens, like the other day. My dad was in Somalia. He called us to tell us, ‘I'm landing at this time meet me at the airport, blah, blah, blah.’ And while my brother was on the phone to them, my dad's sister called me. I guess something happened in Toronto, and they truly get in a group conference and figure out what they're going to do. I guess my cousin did something and like I don't know. I know one of my cousins got arrested because this kid talked about his mom and his mom had passed away and that like sends him over the edge so he got arrested for that. And everyone in our family knew because they literally get on the phone and go like, ‘Do you have a better lawyer than I have? What are we going to do?’ Stuff like that.”

I have heard of the way that news spreads across the diaspora. A Somali taxi driver in Seattle knew of the mural that our department did in Columbus the summer before, because his nephew participated in the program. The connection between family members is evident and the responsibility felt is equally so. As many of the women have reiterated though, there is both positive and negative qualities of these connections.

“News spreads like fast in the community,” Miriam states.

“People like to add and make it more wild than it is,” Zam Zam adds pointedly, referencing to the time when she was in a car accident with her sister and she heard that she caused the accident intentionally to kill her sister, because her sister was in more critical condition.

“I don’t know what they benefit from it though. It’s like. It's, is it bringing shame into you? And they also like try to feed off of other people’s problems and hide their own problems.”

“It’s really annoying, like the football night, was it Friday night or Saturday night?”
“Saturday night,” I add. It’s hard to miss football Saturdays when you live near campus.

“Yeah, me and my mom and my two aunts and my sister were bridal shopping the entire day. So we were tired. We were like, ‘Ok, let's go to Buffalo Wild Wings’ and we were there for I think two hours and as we were finishing our dinner, some lady comes. And the whole entire day was really nice. It was a happy day. It was a peaceful day. We weren't talking about anybody's problems. We weren't talking about who said what, who did what. We were just too concerned and too focused about what she was going to wear, what the bridesmaids are going to wear etcetera, etcetera. But as soon as this lady comes in, she was only with us for like I think 30 minutes, but in that 30 minutes I felt like we collected the whole entire city's garbage because she was like, she just kept on talking and talking and talking about everybody's problems. It was just. And they do that a lot. I don't know.”