

The Spirit and Strength of Somali Youth in America

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Jill M. Leet-Otley

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Timothy J. Lensmire, Adviser; Bic Ngo, Co-Adviser

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“You don’t know how strong you are until strength is the last thing you have.”

(Safia, October 1, 2012)

Abstract

Somali youth experience significant amounts of racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia in our schools and communities. In addition, Somali girls are seen as being monolithically oppressed by their culture and religion. My dissertation research demonstrates the spirit and strength of Somali youth as they respond to these marginalizing discourses. My year-long ethnographic study took place at a K–8 charter school that was founded by the Somali community in order to meet the academic, cultural, and religious needs of Somali students. I was primarily interested in how fifth and sixth grade Somali youth experience racialization, and how Somali girls make sense of Somali and American gender norms.

Findings reveal that racialization was highly gendered. Somali boys took up some Black cultural discourses, such as listening to rap music and speaking in Black stylized English, but resisted identifying as Black. Instead they created hybrid Somali American identities. At the same time, parents and elders worried about Somali boys “sagging their pants” and “acting like African Americans.” African American youth culture became synonymous with the negative aspects of American youth culture such as drugs, gangs, and violence. Meanwhile, fewer girls engaged with Black cultural discourses. The greater concern within this community was that Somali girls who wore pants or tight clothes would start ‘acting like White girls.’ The concern with ‘acting like a White girl’ was a trope for being sexually promiscuous; in other words, for not being Muslim. Experiences with racialization were necessarily bound up with hegemonic notions of White masculinity and femininity.

Although the hijab is often seen as a symbol of oppression in the West, I show how the girls embraced the veil and subverted the discrimination they experienced, insisting that they are equal to boys. Wearing the veil allowed the girls to challenge some gender norms while remaining connected to their families, their faith, and their community. My research shows how the girls wove together American, Somali, and Muslim gender discourses based on their homegrown experiences and unique desires and interests. The most significant way in which the girls embraced gender equity was in the high academic and professional goals they had set for themselves.

Very little research exists on immigrant youth of this age and almost no research is available on second generation Somali American youth. My research breaks new ground, both in terms of my participants, and in the ways in which I attend to their creativity and strength, and their determination to succeed in America.

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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction and Literature Review

The borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy. (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 25)

I have a memory of my childhood that is foggy at best, but nonetheless significant as I reflect on my upbringing and what motivated me to become involved in education and social justice. I was raised in a very small town in upstate New York. There were more cows than people we liked to say, and everyone knew everyone. So it was definitely unusual to find a stranger knocking at our door one day. He was elderly and disheveled, perhaps homeless or just disoriented. Regardless, my father, who has an enormous heart, let the man in, settled him into a chair in our living room and talked gently with him. I sat in the living room watching, perhaps a little afraid of this unkempt man and what he might do. After what seemed like a really long time the police came and guided the man out the door, presumably to help him find his way home. I hadn't thought about this incident in years, but my father taught me, with that seemingly inconsequential act of kindness extended to a stranger, that understanding starts by opening your door and letting 'strangers' in.

And so I am grateful to the Somali community, the sixth grade class of Future Academy,¹ and their unflappable teacher Ms. Z. for taking a chance and letting me into their lives. In return I hope that my work will crack open some doors in Charlestown where I currently reside and where this story continues.

* * * *

¹ Future Academy is a pseudonym as are all the names and places used in my research.

The first incident happened over ten years ago. A Somali boy was beaten in a park not far from where I lived by white men wielding bats. The second incident was even more brutal – a Somali man beaten and killed by two white men in an alley downtown. Other less tragic but equally hateful incidents followed – swastikas painted on the mailboxes, driveways, and garages of Somali families who lived in predominately White neighborhoods. Eventually the number of hate crimes in Charlestown rose to a level that triggered an inquiry by the FBI. My own children told me of the racism and animosity directed towards the Somali students in their schools. It seemed as though the influx of Somali refugees in this conservative, White, Midwestern city was challenging latent discourses of xenophobia, racism/White privilege, and Islamophobia.

My commitment to social justice compelled me to take action. I began volunteering one day a week at Future Academy, a charter school launched by the Somali community in 2005. I felt a special tug towards the community, as I had spent a semester during college in neighboring Kenya, home to many Somali refugees. There, I lived for a short while with a nomadic family and experienced first-hand the hospitality and generous spirit of East African people. In contrast, my own community was displaying flashes of open hostility.

As I spent time at the school and got to know the students, the idea of doing an ethnography for my dissertation research began to take shape. At first I was wary, not wanting to recreate the colonial story of a White, well-meaning but dysconsciously racist (King, 1997) person out to ‘save the poor African.’ Rather, I wanted to learn more about what it is like for Somali boys and girls living in Charlestown in the hope that their stories could teach us a thing or two about creating a more just and humane community.

What follows is my interpretation and retelling of their stories. In this first chapter I set the stage for my research and review the existing literature. In chapter two I explain my methodology, how I went about gathering, analyzing, and writing about the data, and how I responded to the myriad ethical dilemmas that arose, as they inevitably do in cross-race and cross-cultural research with youth. In chapter three I address how Somali youth take up aspects of Black youth culture, yet resist the process of racialization. In chapter four I explore the practice of wearing the hijab from the perspectives of the Somali girls. In chapter five I take a look at the creative ways in which Somali girls weave together Somali, Muslim, and American gender discourses, sometimes challenging and sometimes defending traditional Somali gender norms. Finally, in chapter six I conclude with some thoughts on the significance and implications of my research.

The Somali Diaspora

Since the outbreak of the civil war in 1991 hundreds of thousands of Somali refugees have been involuntarily displaced across the globe forming what scholars call the Somali Diaspora (Bigelow, 2010; Berns McGown, 1999). The concept of the diaspora is useful because it signifies “an attachment to a geographically distant, yet psychologically and emotionally proximate space” (Tettey & Puplampu, 2005, p. 157). Many Somali immigrants remain strongly connected to and invested in their homeland through kinship, economic, religious, and political ties. As a corollary, many Somalis maintain a trans-national outlook. For example, they may wish to obtain American citizenship, while actively retaining their Somaliness (Leitner, 2004). Maintaining multiple allegiances is not difficult in this global age, but it challenges hegemonic thinking about what it means to be a U.S. citizen. Leitner’s (2004) research in a rural

town in Minnesota reveals the “profound and debilitating ways” (p. 60) in which White residents’ attitudes towards Somali immigrants impact their daily lives and ultimately their “disposition toward the U.S. and U.S. citizenship” (p. 60). In other words, there is a dialectical relationship between the ways in which Somali immigrants are treated by White residents and the attitudes towards the United States that they develop. We cannot expect them to ‘assimilate,’ if we continually treat them as though they do not belong.

It is estimated that as many as 60,000 Somalis live in Minnesota, roughly one in three Somalis in the United States. This represents one of the largest refugee populations in recent U.S. history (Abdi, 2011; Darboe, 2003; Dickson, 2011). While the majority of Somalis live in the Twin Cities area, a handful of smaller Minnesota cities, with the lure of less crime and good schools, have attracted Somali communities of their own - including Charlestown where my research took place.

The New Immigration

Somali immigrants and refugees are part of the latest wave of the *new immigration*, the post-1965 influx of immigrants from Asia, Latin America, and Africa. While assimilation worked well for the mostly European immigrants of the past, its promises ring hollow for many of today’s diverse immigrants. In fact, research reveals that for recent immigrant groups, length of residency in the United States is associated with declining health, school achievement, and aspirations (C. Suarez-Orozco, 2005; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Although many Americans hold fast to the idea that immigrants should shed their native culture at the Statue of Liberty, scholars have determined that assimilation is a chimera (Leitner, 2004).

Portes & Zhou (1993), in their landmark study of ‘the new second generation,’ put forth a theory of segmented assimilation to explain the three main paths of assimilation that immigrants generally take. Their theory of segmented assimilation challenged the hegemony of straight-line assimilation, and continues to influence how we think about immigration in the 21st century. The first of the three paths leads to gradual acculturation and integration into the White middle-class. “A second path leads straight in the opposite direction to permanent poverty and assimilation into the underclass; still a third associates economic advancement with deliberate preservation of the immigrant community’s values and tight solidarity” (Portes & Zhou, 1983, p. 82).

Later research with immigrant youth confirms the trend “toward a more militant reaffirmation of the immigrant identity for some groups...and toward panethnic minority-group identities for others” (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001, p. 157). In fact, immigrants who maintain aspects of their ethnic identity and *selectively* adapt to American society achieve greater academic success, and are healthier and more productive than those who abandon their ethnicity in an often futile quest for full assimilation (Gibson, 1988; Sarroub, 2005; Lee, 2005; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, & Qin, 2005).

My Research

Virtually all ethnographic research conducted on immigrant youth focuses on high school students; there is almost no research that explores the lives and experiences of younger immigrant children. As a former elementary school teacher, I was interested in conducting research with the fifth and sixth grade students of Future Academy. I find youth of that age to be full of energy, mischief, and playfulness; yet articulate,

opinionated, and passionate about many things. It is also an age at which gender begins to take on new salience. As such, I was interested in exploring how Somali children negotiate and contest the various cultural, racial, religious, and gender discourses of American and Somali culture. Knowing that 1.5 and second-generation Somali youth face many cultural, racial, and religious barriers in school and the society at large, I was curious about the following:

1. What is the process of racialization like for Somali boys and girls? Some researchers have pointed to Somali youth being identified as Black in America - how do they experience and make sense of this process? How does American pop culture figure into this process? In what ways do they embrace and resist the process of racialization?

2. How do Somali girls make sense of Somali and American gender norms? What does gender equity look like to these girls? How do they negotiate their Muslim identities in a predominately Judeo-Christian nation? Researchers have pointed to a rise in Islamophobia in the United States. Have they personally experienced discrimination?

My Theoretical Framework

My ethnography is informed by critical, feminist, and post-colonial theoretical lenses. Whereas “conventional ethnography describes what is; critical ethnography asks what could be” (Thomas, in Noblit, Flores & Murillo, 2004, p.4). As a critical ethnographer, I am interested in excavating the ways in which latent discourses in the host society, such as racism/White privilege, sexism, and Islamophobia, impact the emerging identities and aspirations of 1.5 and second generation Somali immigrant youth. Adopting a critical perspective means staying alert to these often under-theorized discourses (Madison, 2005; Noblit, Flores, & Murillo, 2004).

Adopting a feminist framework means paying attention to the ways in which gender shapes the lives and experiences of Somali youth. It also means being concerned with issues of reciprocity and voice as I conduct my research. Feminist ethnographers, not wanting to engage in “the indignity of speaking for others” (Foucault, in Lather, 1991, p.99), struggle to find ways to let their subjects speak for themselves (Lather, 1991; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000; Fine, 1994). I am inspired to that end by Lather (1991) who asks, “How can we position ourselves as less masters of truth and justice and more as creators of a space where those directly involved can act and speak on their own behalf?” (p. 137).

Finally, the post-colonial lens is significant in at least three ways. First, it allows me to think about the cultures and identities of immigrant students outside of Western dichotomies such as traditional/modern, Somali/American, and Black/White. Instead, it allows me to think about identities and cultures in terms of fluidity, hybridity, and ambivalence (Ngo, 2008; Bhabha, 1994). Second, postcolonial research involves opening up a space in which the subaltern, the formerly colonized, the ‘third world woman’ – has a chance to speak for herself (Spivak, 1988; Lather, 1991). And finally, a postcolonial lens pushes me - a White, upper-class female doing research with/in a Somali refugee community - to continually interrogate my own complicity in the hegemonic discourses that marginalize the very community I am studying (Trinh, 1989; Twine & Warren, 2000).

Review of the Research

Due to the recentness of their arrival, the research on Somali immigrants is still in its infancy (Kapteijns & Arman, 2004). My review of the research is therefore best

understood by integrating the Somali literature into three broader bodies of work: research on Black immigrant identity, Muslim immigrant identity, and the gendered identities of the new immigration.

Black Immigrant Identity

Despite the explosion of research in the past twenty years on Asian and Latino immigrant youth, there has been a noticeable dearth of research on Black immigrant children (Rong & Fitchett, 2008; Rong & Brown, 2001, 2002; Akiba, 2007). What little research there is focuses primarily on Caribbean Blacks (Waters, 1994; Woldemikael, 1989; Rong & Fitchett, 2008; Lopez, 2003). Black immigrants from Africa receive far less attention despite the fact that their numbers have risen sharply since the 1990s (Bigelow, 2008; Rong & Brown, 2001, 2002; Rong & Preissle, 2009; Falola & Afolabi, 2008). Currently, immigrants from Africa account for one-third of all foreign-born Blacks in the United States (Abdi, 2011).

In order to understand the school experiences and identity negotiations of Black immigrant youth, we need to foreground the process of racialization. Racialization can be defined as “a socially constructed process where race becomes the predominant way of defining oneself or being defined by others” (Bigelow, 2008, p. 28). As Lewis (2003) describes it, “Racialization... involves the assignment of bodies to racial categories. Opportunities and resources are then distributed along racial lines as people are included in or excluded from a range of institutions, activities, or opportunities because of their categorization” (p. 152). At first, newcomer students identify themselves by national, linguistic, and religious labels. According to Olsen’s (1997) ethnographic study of the process of racialization at an urban high school, immigrant youth often resist U.S. racial

labels, “despite being treated by others *as if they were already racialized into categories of black, brown, or Asian*” (Olsen, 1997, p. 109, emphasis mine). As Olsen (1997) powerfully describes:

For a brief moment, the status of immigrant newcomers allows for a kind of non-racialized identity. But the pressure to align, to be defined racially within the American system of racial categories creates an unsettling persistent force. To not be racially ghettoized is to not enter into American society. (p. 108)

The process of racialization is often a lengthy and painful one. Rong & Brown (2002) emphasize that, “No one should expect racial immigrant minorities to accept a group membership of lower status quickly, willingly, or voluntarily” (p. 258).

According to Water’s (1994) landmark two year study, which consisted of over 200 in-depth interviews, Caribbean youth form their identities based largely on their perceptions and understandings of race relations and racism in America. Interviews with Caribbean parents confirmed that tension exists between immigrant Blacks and American-born Blacks (Rong & Fitchett, 2008). Caribbean adults tended to believe the negative stereotypes of American-born Blacks that circulate in popular discourse (that they are lazy, have poor child-rearing practices, and lack respect for education). They believed that their status as foreign born Blacks made them less susceptible to disdain from White Americans and encouraged their children to identify as immigrant Blacks to distinguish themselves from American Blacks.

The ethnic and racial identification patterns of Caribbean youth took a somewhat different turn from their parents and can be classified in three distinct patterns (Waters, 1994). The first and largest group of second generation Caribbean youth, representing 42% of the sample, identified as Black Americans. Unlike their parents, they did not see

their ethnic identity as important to their self-image, and they disagreed with the stereotypes of American Blacks. They spoke African American Vernacular English, listened to rap music, and socialized with American Black friends. They felt pressure to avoid acting White and were beginning to develop oppositional attitudes toward school as they began to realize their own limited opportunities for social mobility (Rong & Brown, 2002; Rong & Fitchett, 2008).

In other words, Black immigrant youth were assimilating into Black American youth culture as their prospects for an American Dream diminished. They recognized that they were considered 'Black' in America, and tailored their behavior accordingly. Interestingly, they became racialized as Black, despite recognizing that the larger society held negative views towards Blacks. Most of the American identified youth were from lower socio-economic families and attended inner-city schools that were 100% minority students (Waters, 1994).

A second group of Caribbean youth, representing 30% of the sample, identified themselves ethnically and distanced themselves from American Blacks. It was important to them that White Americans recognize that they are different from American Blacks. They considered West Indian Blacks to be superior to American Blacks in their behaviors and attitudes. Many of these teens came from middle-class families and attended integrated, middle-class schools. These students recognized that White Americans tend to see them simply as 'Black,' and thus went out of their way to signal their ethnicity as Haitians or West Indians (Waters, 1994).

Finally, the third group of Caribbean youth was comprised of recent immigrants who identified with an immigrant attitude. They were clearly distinguishable as

immigrants, and did not try to fit into the American racial landscape. Based on prior research, we can assume that these students will eventually end up embracing either a strong ethnic self-identity, or a Black American identity (Waters, 1994; Rong & Fitchett, 2008; Rong & Brown, 2002). Furthermore, based on the insidious ways that schools racialize students, the identities that they take up may well determine their future chances for educational and economic success (Lopez, 2003; Rong & Brown, 2002).

Ibrahim's (1999) seminal research with African Blacks in an Ontario high school sheds light on African immigrant experiences with *becoming black*. Ibrahim (1999) found that, much like the Caribbean youth in Lopez's study, African teenagers entered "a discursive space in which they are already imagined, constructed, and thus treated as Blacks by hegemonic discourses and groups" (p. 349). Drawing on Butler's (1990) work, Ibrahim (1999) articulates how African immigrants perform their desires and identifications with Black America by taking up Black cultural discourses. They adopt Black English, engage in hip-hop culture and fashion, and listen to rap music. That they do so "is by no means a coincidence. On the contrary, these actions are articulations of the youths' desire to belong to a location, a politics, a memory, a history, and hence a representation" (Ibrahim, 1999, p. 353).

Forman's (2001) research with Somali teenagers in Canadian and U.S. high schools echoes that of Ibrahim. Forman finds that Somali teens "encounter the hegemonic authority of hip-hop culture" and "gradually adopt the mantle of blackness" (p. 51). In contrast, Shepard (2008) finds that Somali youth are drawn to Black cultural expressions, but that they distance themselves from a Black racial identity. With Islam as their anchor, they are 'acting Black' without 'becoming Black.' Shepard discusses a gendered

dimension to her findings in that boys felt quite confident that they could ‘act Black’ - in part to avoid being taunted by their peers - but that it did not jeopardize their identities as Somali and Muslim. Girls, however, were more restricted in how much they could perform Black youth culture or American youth culture without being ostracized by their community. Similarly, Omar (2011) found that Somali girls in Minneapolis were far less likely than Somali boys to imitate African American youth culture.

Bigelow’s (2008) research with Somali youth reveals how powerful and often devastating the effects of racialization can be on immigrant youth. Somali youth talked at length about experiences with racial profiling and discrimination in school and in their communities. Bigelow (2008) argues that Somali youth are racialized not only by White society, but by Somali elders who worry when they see Somali youth “acting Black” (p. 29). They might not think it is possible for Somali youth to be Muslim and to ‘sag their pants’ or dress in hip-hop clothing.² Bigelow (2008) argues, however, that “Somali youth are reconstructing national and religious identities that challenge traditional versions of what it means to be a Somali Muslim teen” (p. 29). At the same time, they are not letting go of their Somali identity. They actively resist being labeled racially as Black, preferring to identify themselves as both *Somali* and *Muslim*.

Some research suggests that Somali youth deliberately foreground their religious identity in order to avoid being racialized (Ajrouch & Kusow, 2007). What is clear is that Somali youth perform complex identity negotiations around race, ethnicity, religion, and gender that make their experiences unique compared to other Black immigrant youth.

² This concern with ‘sagging pants’ comes up over and over in the research with Somali youth and points to the importance of clothing both in youth culture and in Muslim cultures.

This is particularly true for veiled Somali girls who make a visible statement about their religion and their ethnicity (particularly in places like Minnesota where the vast majority of veiled Muslim women are Somali) that distinguishes them from African Americans (Bigelow, 2008; De Voe, 2002).

Finally, we must highlight that Black immigrants are subjected to significant amounts of racism as well as xenophobia (discrimination against foreigners) (Rong & Fitchett, 2008). In comparison to other immigrants, “Black immigrants report facing the highest levels of discrimination while shopping, interacting with police, looking for work, and even while working” (Rong & Preissle, 2009, p. 203). Caribbean Blacks report being subjected to ridicule, mistrust, and violence because of their accents and their looks. Furthermore, research reveals that Black immigrant youth tend to isolate themselves in school and refrain from talking in order to avoid ridicule and humiliation (Rong & Preissle, 2009). The degree of harassment and discrimination that Black immigrant youth encounter in school should be cause for alarm. Meanwhile, as Muslims, Somali youth face the triple barriers of racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia (Bigelow, 2010).

Muslim Immigrant Identity

The majority of research on Muslim immigrant students originates in Great Britain and Canada, but is applicable to the United States. Scant research explores the lives of Muslim immigrant students within the United States (Sarroub, 2001, 2005; Ajrouch & Kusow, 2007; Abu El-Haj, 2007; Sirin & Fine, 2008). The concept of a Muslim American identity is itself socially constructed and historically bound. Following the political fall-out from 9/11, there has been a trend away from national origin identification (Pakistani, Arab, Lebanese, etc.) and towards a pan-ethnic Muslim

identification. In other words, immigrants from Muslim countries who were previously identified by nationality and ethnicity are now identified and identifying by religion (Sirin & Fine, 2008). According to Ajrouch & Kusow (2007), “those who are Muslim in North America must engage in identity work to ensure legitimate recognition” (p.75).

Research confirms that Islam has taken on increased salience for Somali immigrants in the diaspora as well (Bigelow, 2010; Abdi, 2007; Berns McGown, 1999). In fact, it is nearly impossible to disentangle what it means to be Somali from what it means to be Muslim, so closely are these identities intertwined (Bigelow, 2010; Collet, 2007; Berns McGown, 1999).

Research highlights that religious discrimination against Muslim students in North American schools occurs on a frequent basis and can lead to widespread feelings of marginalization and alienation (Sirin & Fine, 2008). Many Muslim students report being subjected to recurring taunts and accusations. Boys are accused of being terrorists, sexist, and un-American. Muslim girls are stereotyped as being “monolithically oppressed,” the veil becoming a trope for subjugation (Asher, 2008, p. 13). Many Muslim students report feeling under a constant state of surveillance (McBrien, 2005; Ajrouch & Kusow, 2007; Sirin & Fine, 2008; Abu El-Haj, 2007; Zine, 2006). Consequently, Muslim communities have a long history of dissatisfaction with public schools in Canada and the United States (Collet, 2007).

It is not surprising then that Somali charter schools have been springing up in Somali communities throughout the United States as a way to better meet the needs of Somali Muslim students (Hussein, 2011; Basford, 2008). This is a rather striking accomplishment, however, for such a recent group of immigrants, especially considering

that the vast majority are refugees who escaped with very little in the way of assets. Somali people are known for their entrepreneurial spirit and their reliance on pooling resources to accomplish community-wide goals. The formation of Somali charter schools illustrates the strategic use of social and cultural capital, and exemplifies the idea of accommodation without assimilation (Kaptejns & Arman, 2004; Gibson, 1988).

It is important to point out that Muslim students engage in acts of resistance to the discrimination they experience. There seems to be a gendered dimension to the resistance, however, as young women often respond by challenging stereotypes and educating the people who discriminate against them. Young men, on the other hand, find instances of discrimination to be dangerous and annihilating; they generally do not respond, but suffer in silence (Sirin & Fine, 2008). Sirin & Fine (2008) worry that Muslim males are increasingly alienated and are developing an “ingrained pessimism” about their futures in America. Likewise, a government report concluded that Somali youth in Maryland are less than hopeful about their futures in America because they do not see members of their community progressing (Omar, 2009). More research is clearly needed that focuses on the experiences of Muslim boys and young men, including Somali boys.

To the Western gaze, the veiled Muslim girl is the quintessential marker of Islamic fundamentalism. An abundance of research, however, complicates the notion that the veil is a form of oppression (Zine, 2006; Bigelow, 2008; De Voe, 2002; Bartels, 2005). In many Muslim countries veiling is not required. Some Muslim women in the United States take up wearing the veil as a way to maintain or reassert a cultural and religious connection with a *nostalgic past* (Maira, 2002). For others, wearing the veil is a

sign of resistance to Western imperialism; it becomes a symbol of Islamic solidarity in a sometimes hostile world (Bigelow, 2008; Zine, 2006). For others, choosing to wear hijab is a personal choice; the scarf becomes a symbol of individuality and agency (Bartels, 2005). Critical research on Muslim girls allows us to see them “as actors who at times reinforce traditional norms and at other times act in ways that begin to redefine the terrain of gender, faith, and identity” (Zine, 2006, p. 250).

Importantly, critical research challenges the notion that Muslim girls have restricted choices in higher education and career opportunities solely because of the sexist nature of Islam. In fact, critical researchers argue that we must examine institutional barriers that limit and deny Muslim girls educational and employment opportunities (Archer, 2002; Basit, 1997; Zine, 2001, 2006). The Muslim girls in Basit’s (1997) study, for instance, framed their restriction from pursuing higher education and certain employment options in terms of protection from the racism, sexism, and corrosive elements of American society. While we may assume that a lack of Muslim girls in higher education is due to the inherent sexism in Islam, Muslim girls say they are avoiding the violence and sexism in the mainstream culture. In a similar vein, research suggests that Somali families are reluctant to send their sons and daughters to campuses outside their immediate communities for security reasons. They fear the violence that stems from racial and religious discrimination (Huisman et al., 2011). I am reminded that there are multiple ways to read what is occurring in the interstices between cultures.

Despite prevailing discourses that question whether Islam is compatible with American style democracy, the research points to the ways in which exclusionary policies and practices frequently position Muslim immigrants as less than full citizens (Abu El-

Haj, 2007). Despite this, Sirin et al. (2008) determined that the majority of Muslim young adults exhibit highly “integrated” Muslim American identities. Contrary to hegemonic discourses that see Islamic culture and American culture as mutually exclusive, the vast majority of Muslim American young adults “develop strong commitments to both their Muslim identities and their American identities” (p. 149). That they do so in spite of rampant Islamophobia by non-Muslim Americans is indeed remarkable.

Finally, although Muslims are often portrayed in homogenous ways in the mainstream media, much of the recent research attends to the complexity and diversity that exists within Muslim communities (McMichael, 2002; Berns McGown, 1999). Somali teens for example, are forging new diasporic identities that disrupt binaries that position Muslims as traditional and conservative. Many of the teens that Collet (2007) interviewed, for instance, were not against sex education. According to Berns McGown (1999), Somali youth are transforming the practice of Islam and in the process becoming Western Muslims. Teens are determining on an individual basis what constitutes appropriate behavior for a Muslim around issues such as dating, dancing, wearing hijab, and praying. Importantly, although they are redefining acceptable Muslim behaviors in the West, they still strongly identify as Muslim. This trend of redefining appropriate behavior, of becoming ‘Western Muslims,’ stands in sharp contrast to the research of Abdi (2007) and De Voe (2002) who conclude that gender norms are becoming more restrictive for Somali girls in the diaspora due to the rise in influence of the Islamists, a more conservative branch of Islam.

Gendered Identities of the New Immigration

In general, immigrant cultures are seen as more traditional and patriarchal than mainstream American culture. Many immigrant girls find, therefore, that American culture offers greater opportunities for gender equity than their native cultures (Olsen, 1997; Lopez, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999; Bettie, 2003). Schools often “serve as liberating spaces for girls to explore aspects of life that tightly controlled community contexts do not permit” (Stritikus & Nguyen, 2007, p. 855).

Opportunities for gender equity, however, do not usually extend to the home. In fact, much of the research on gender norms and expectations reveals that immigrant girls have many more responsibilities in the home than boys, including cooking, cleaning, and taking care of siblings. Help in the home is needed when both parents have to work in order to support the family. Oftentimes these extra responsibilities get in the way of schoolwork and extracurricular activities (Valenzuela, 1999; Olsen, 1997; Lopez, 2003; Bettie, 2003; Ngo, 2006). Importantly, however, immigrant families and communities maintain high educational expectations for girls as well as boys. In fact, immigrant girls tend to have good relationships with their teachers and maintain high GPA's. It should be noted, however, that they are often placed in low academic tracks and attend overwhelmingly underfunded schools (Lopez, 2003; Lee, 2005; Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, & Qin, 2005).

In general, immigrant parents tend to be much stricter with their daughters than with their sons, maintaining tight control over their activities and whereabouts (Valenzuela, 1999; Olsen, 1997; Bettie, 2003; Lopez, 2003; Ngo, 2002). Feminist researchers have argued that “female bodies are often used to represent national identity

or ethnic loyalty” (Maira, 2002, p. 14). Immigrant females in particular become a trope for ethnic purity and ethnic preservation. Maira (2002) argues that “the chastity of daughters becomes emblematic not just of the family’s reputation but also, in the context of the diaspora, of the purity of tradition and ethnic identity, a defense against the promiscuity of ‘American influences’” (p. 49).

Many immigrant parents worry about the negative aspects of American teen culture including sexual promiscuity, drugs, gangs, and violence. Their strict control of girls’ bodies, therefore, is not merely an articulation of traditional cultural norms; it is in actuality a re-articulation of cultural practices in response to the promiscuity in American culture (Ngo, 2002; Lee, 1997). Despite the strict surveillance, some girls are finding ways to circumvent their parents’ strict control. They meet and chat on the internet, have boyfriends, and go on dates all without their parents’ knowledge (Lee, 2005; Maira, 2002; Olsen, 1997). Immigrant girls are resisting and negotiating traditional gendered norms around dating, clothing, make-up, and sexuality, even as they abide by most of their parents’ rules, help out in the home, and perform relatively well in school (Lee, 2005; Lopez, 2003; Olsen, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999; Bettie, 2003; Ngo, 2002).

What little research has been done that looks at the gendered experiences of Somali girls closely parallels the existing research (Shepard, 2008; Omar, 2011, 2009). As pointed out previously, however, some researchers have concluded that gender norms in Somali communities are becoming more restrictive for Somali girls rather than more equitable in the diaspora (Abdi, 2007; De Voe, 2002).

In contrast, immigrant boys are given much more latitude in their homes and communities, have fewer household responsibilities, and are given greater freedom to

socialize outside of school. In fact, Lopez (2003) argues that immigrant males occupy a marginalized place in their homes, and therefore seek alternative spaces in which to establish a sense of masculine identity - such as in the streets or playing sports. With greater freedom, immigrant boys have more opportunities to engage with American peer cultures. They must develop a sense of their own masculinity within the context of hegemonic cultural and racial discourses that depict boys of color as inherently dangerous (Lee, 2005; Lopez, 2003).

Immigrant boys experience school in far more negative ways than immigrant girls. In general, they perceive the school environment to be hostile and racist. They do not have positive social networks or positive relationships with their teachers. In fact, many teachers, the majority of whom are White females, find immigrant boys to be intimidating, even menacing (Lopez, 2003). When teachers encourage immigrant girls to adopt more egalitarian norms, it further marginalizes immigrant boys who perceive this as a threat to their cultural status and power. Without the support of caring teachers and mentors, boys tend to assimilate into oppositional school subcultures (Valenzuela, 1999; Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, & Qin, 2005; Lopez, 2003; Lee, 2005). Their low academic achievement can be seen as a consequence of their egregious mistreatment in school (Lopez, 2003).

Significantly, immigrant boys also report frequent and pervasive experiences with ethnic teasing. Because they perceive ethnic teasing as an assault on their masculinity, they engage in fights and are frequently expelled from school (Lopez, 2003). Overall, immigrant boys have lower GPA's and higher drop-out rates than immigrant girls. In addition, they engage in high-risk behaviors inside and outside of school that frequently

lead to delinquency. Ironically then, the freedom immigrant boys receive from their parents, the very freedom many immigrant girls seem to envy, often leads to negative academic and social outcomes (Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, & Qin, 2005; Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). The paucity of research that exists on Somali boys echoes the extant research on immigrant boys (Bigelow, 2010; Omar, 2011, 2009; Shepard, 2008).

In summary, while immigrant girls find increased power, status, and success in American schools, immigrant boys find their status, power, and success diminished. The gains in gender equity that immigrant girls experience seem to come to some extent at the expense of immigrant boys. The ways that schools gender and race immigrant youth have a profound impact on their emerging identities and their future potential for engaged, productive citizenship.

Gaps in the Research

As we examine the vast body of literature on immigrant youth, there is a noticeable gap in research pertaining to elementary-aged children. Although the research is skewed towards high school students, I think there is a great deal to learn from the candor and confidence of the childhood years. In addition, as we look across the extant research on Black and Muslim immigrant youth, there is a dearth of research that specifically focuses on Somali youth in the United States. Finally, there continues to be a need for research that takes a critical stance; that interrogates hegemonic discourses such as Islamophobia and White privilege rather than merely recreates the status quo. As Kapteijns & Arman (2004) so eloquently state:

In spite of the good intentions of the authors, who often have the best interests of

immigrant youth at heart, this literature is often so negative that immigrant status itself is presented as pathological – a disease – further exacerbated by being “visible,” that is to say, non-White. Second, whether qualitative or quantitative, these writings have provided few in-depth studies of the perceptions and experiences of immigrant youth themselves or of the resilience and creativity of these youth and their positive contributions to their new environments (rather than the problems that they cause (p. 37).

It is my intention in this ethnography to provide an in-depth look at the experiences of the youth of Future Academy and to show their resilience and creativity. Because, in the absence of concerted efforts to foster understanding between cultures, preconceived prejudices gain strength and misunderstandings flourish, especially in places previously lacking in diversity, places such as Charlestown, Minnesota.

CHAPTER TWO: Doing Ethnography Otherwise

Today is May 30, 2012. The day my sixth grade research participants are due to graduate from eighth grade. I would not miss this for the world. It is a big milestone in their lives and one I wish to share with them. It has been over a year since I coached the volleyball team and almost 2 years since I was at school collecting data, but I remain involved in the community through my work on the board of the adjacent STEM school. I pull into the parking lot, hop out of my Prius, and pull a light cardigan over my sleeve-less top. Although it is hot, I dress modestly when I am at school. The kids, in their bright blue caps and gowns, are just lining up outside the door of the auditorium as I walk toward the building. They call out my name. Can't believe I came. We exchange quick hugs and fist bumps.

I find a spot in the front of the auditorium amidst the mothers, babies, and small children (who consequently shy away from me). I am especially excited to hear the speeches. This year eight students were selected to give speeches – twice the usual number. This does not surprise me, knowing this class as well as I do – or at least did. Back then they were known as a ‘terrible class,’ always arguing and getting into trouble, exasperating their teachers. But I never saw them that way (since I never had to keep order!). To me they were a lively, intelligent, outspoken crew who challenged the system (another worksheet?!) and the patience of every teacher. I was lucky though as I came to be seen by the kids as a sort of benevolent figure, always tagging along wherever they went, having no real authority, no real job to do besides watching their antics, joining in the occasional floor hockey match (boys against the girls!), and providing an unending supply of pencils (more about that later).

I listen to their speeches; some make me laugh, others elicit a few tears. Mostly I am incredibly impressed with their poise and their prose. Seven of the eight speakers are girls. Safia says this school helped her to be proud of her race - which is Somali. Ayan gives her speech in Arabic. Kowsar, always a quiet student, says not to underestimate her, she may surprise you. Then the principal gets up to announce a special award for a volunteer who has done so much for this class. As I listen I begin to realize he is talking about me. I usually do not like attention, but I find myself bounding to the stage, giving the kids two thumbs up and even blowing them kisses. They are cheering wildly. To me the award is less about me and more a testament to the special bond we have formed – across culture, class, religion, race, gender, and even age – a bond of friendship, trust,

and affection. I am humbled. The principal hands me the microphone, but I cannot speak. (FN, 5/30/12)

Doing Ethnography

The anthropologist, as we already know, does not *find* things; s/he *makes* them. And makes them up. (Trinh, 1989, p.141, italics in original)

Traditional ethnography is thought of as the descriptive study of another culture, another way of life. Ethnography has been part and parcel of the enlightenment project - the will to know, label, and categorize the entire world, all from the standpoint of the White, Western scientist. Inevitably, the will to know quickly morphed into the will to conquer - religiously, culturally, and economically (Willinsky, 1998). In fact, the word ethnography derives from the Greek ‘ethnikos’ meaning heathen (Jordan & Yeomans, 1995, p. 391). There is something inevitably troubling about a research methodology founded on the objectification of the Other when that other is assumed to be various shades of brown or black, non-Christian, and poor; and the researcher is assumed to be various shades of white, Christian, and wealthy. The rather sinister role of Christianity in the Colonial and Imperial project is often elided, but is important to foreground given the rise of Islamophobia in the United States (Sirin & Fine, 2008).

Undergirding traditional ethnography is a positivist epistemology and a belief in objective reality. Thus the objective ethnographer could observe and record human behaviors and interactions, and translate these fieldnotes into a factual account of the Truth. “The predominate metaphors in anthropological research have been participant-observation, data collection, and cultural description, all of which presuppose a standpoint outside - looking at, objectifying, or, somewhat closer, ‘reading,’ a given reality” (Clifford & Marcus, 1986, p. 11).

In the 1970s the field of ethnography entered a new era with the publication of Geertz's (1973) *The Interpretations of Cultures*, in which he posited that all ethnographic writings were only interpretations of interpretations. "Right down at the factual base, the hard rock, insofar as there is any, of the whole enterprise, we are already explicating: and worse, explicating explications. Winks upon winks upon winks" (Geertz, 1973, p. 9). In the 1980s the foundations of traditional ethnography further cracked with the publication of the seminal work, *Writing Culture: The Politics and Poetics of Ethnography* (Clifford & Markus, 1986). In the introduction the authors state:

There is no longer any place of overview (mountaintop) from which to map human ways of life, no Archimedean point from which to represent the world. Mountains are in constant motion. So are islands: for one cannot occupy, unambiguously, a bounded cultural world from which to journey out and analyze other cultures. Human ways of life increasingly influence, dominate, parody, translate, and subvert one another. Cultural analysis is always enmeshed in global movements of difference and power. (p. 22)

Although the book was critiqued by feminists for its dismissal of the contributions of feminist ethnographers, its publication is credited with launching ethnography into the postmodern era (Behar & Gordon, 1995). Ethnographies were now to be viewed as "true fictions" (Clifford & Marcus, 1986, p. 6); "ethnographic truths [as] inherently *partial*" (Clifford & Marcus, p. 7, emphasis in original). The collection of essays addresses the complexities of writing about other cultures when re-presentation is no longer deemed possible. Feminist and post-structuralist Britzman (2000) points the field in a new direction:

Ethnographic narratives should trace how power circulates and surprises, theorize how subjects spring from the discourses that incite them, and question the belief in representation even as one must practice representation as a way to intervene critically in the constitutive constraints of discourses. (p. 38)

‘Trace how power circulates and surprises.’ ‘Theorize how subjects spring from the discourses that incite them.’ This is ethnography to aspire to.

Utilizing post-colonial, feminist, and critical lenses, I employed the conventional tools of ethnography to collect data, including: participant-observation, fieldnotes, interviews, single-sex discussion groups, and the collection of artifacts such as newspaper clippings and school memos.³ In addition, I gave the students disposable cameras to take pictures of their lives outside of school. My intention was to use the photographs in the discussion groups to generate topics of conversation that were germane to their lives. I utilized the conventional tools of ethnography with the knowledge that my understanding, and hence my rendering of the data, was always already biased and partial; inevitably influenced by my privilege and prejudices. I actively gathered data from September of 2009 through June 2010, but remained involved in the community - coaching volleyball and serving on the board of the adjacent high school. Both of these experiences continued to inform my research.

My Research Setting: Future Academy

Future Academy was founded by the Somali community in 2005 and served approximately two hundred students in kindergarten through eighth grade. As a charter school it was publically funded and was open to any student in the Charlestown area. The school itself was in an old converted church building and had fewer amenities than the other public elementary and middle schools in Charlestown. For example, there was a library, but very few books; a small gym that doubled as a cafeteria; small classrooms

³ In fact there was almost no paper communication between the school and families. Almost all communication occurred over the phone, through the two local Somali television stations, and by word of mouth.

tightly packed with desks; and one small set of restrooms. The students sometimes complained that the school was ‘poor.’ The student body was 100% Muslim-identified and virtually 100% Somali-identified.⁴ According to the principal, the enrollment at Future Academy represented less than 10% of the Somali student population in Charlestown. In addition, the school was over 95% free and reduced lunch. The school curriculum was traditional and Euro-centric (math, language arts, science, social studies, physical education, and computer literacy) with a focus on achieving proficiency on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment tests (MCAs). The main exception was the inclusion of Arabic in the curriculum, and the absence of music and art.⁵ School norms were a hybrid of American and Somali cultural norms. English was the official language of the school, but Somali was the de facto language. Research suggests that those who speak a language other than English at home are more likely to attend a place of worship and have more conservative attitudes towards social and sexual behavior than other North American youth (Okeke-Ihejirika & Spitzer, 2005, p. 212). Research also suggests that one of the main reasons Somali parents send their children to charter schools is to preserve Somali culture (Hussein, 2011).

All of the classroom teachers were White American men and women except for the Nigerian math teacher. The two Arabic teachers and the Computer Literacy teacher were Somali men, as was the principal (also referred to as the director) and the assistant principal. The support staff consisted of approximately ten Somali women and two

⁴ I complicate this in chapter three.

⁵ Western music and art forms and mixed-gender physical education classes are discouraged in some conservative Muslim communities. Physical education classes were mixed gender at Future Academy, however, girls and boys often separated when given a choice of activities.

Somali men. The principal referred to them as “ambassadors” to the community and considered them a vital link in the school’s ability to meet the students’ cultural, academic, religious, and linguistic needs. All of the Somali support staff were parents or relatives of the students. In addition, five or six Somali elders (all men in their sixties and seventies) volunteered in the school through a local foster grandparent program to provide mentoring and disciplinary support. They could frequently be found in the time-out area – a cluster of tables and chairs in the hallway - where teachers would send students who were having discipline issues in the classroom.

* * * *

Almost every day a group of elders comes to the cafeteria for lunch. I imagine the free meal helps. No one pays for lunches (except the teachers) since the whole school is free and reduced lunch. Mr. Norris, Ms. Z., and I were talking about this. They complained that they sometimes run out of lunches for the younger grades because the elders eat them. Mr. Norris said, “We feed the whole Somali community here. Our tax dollars at work.” Meanwhile he had to pay a buck for a cold corn dog. I could tell he thought it wasn’t fair, and of course he has a point. (FN, 4/14/10)

* * * *

It wasn’t until the last day of the school year when I met the woman who coordinates the foster grandparent program that I discovered that the program provides money for the elders’ lunches. Some of the teachers erroneously assumed that the elders were freeloading. I erroneously attributed the ‘free lunches’ to the inherent generosity of Somali culture. We were both wrong. My point is this – even though the teachers were

there every day of the week and I was there three or four days a week, there was much that we, as cultural and linguistic outsiders, misinterpreted. This is inevitable in any ethnographic undertaking. However, the potential to misinterpret was especially high given the multiplicity of differences I attempted to navigate at Future Academy, not the least of which was the prevalence of the use of Somali, particularly among the administration, the elders, the support staff, and most visitors and parents.

Negotiating Entry and Finding Participants

How education research is conducted may be just as important as *what* is actually discovered in a study. (Milner, 2007, p. 397)

Establishing trust and rapport with the students, teachers, and staff began in 2007 when I volunteered in the reading classroom and the fourth grade classroom every Wednesday afternoon. I found that I had an easy connection with many of the students, an intimacy partly built on years of experience teaching elementary school and the fact that I had children the same age, but also on my experience living in Kenya. Many of the students had either lived in one of the refugee camps in Kenya or they had parents and family who lived there. It seemed to matter to many in the community that I had lived in East Africa and even spoke a little Swahili. I believe it helped to break down some barriers and establish trust.

Even so, a year had lapsed between when I volunteered and when I was hoping to do my research. The summer before I wanted to begin my study I asked the reading teacher, Mrs. Ball, a White woman with whom I had established a good relationship, if she would help me set up a meeting with the principal, Siyad, to discuss the possibility of doing an ethnographic study at the school. I was nervous that he would have a lot of

questions and concerns (perhaps I was projecting my own self-doubts about the recolonizing tendencies of my research), but I received a quick and almost instant reply from her that we did not need to meet to discuss the research, he simply said yes. I was pleasantly surprised as I had worried that the community would be reticent to allow an outsider to do research. I found out later that the principal was also working on his Ph.D. in education and was doing a qualitative study of charter schools. He understood instantly the nature of the research and relayed to the reading teacher that he trusted me. I did not know the principal well at the time, but I felt an enormous sense of gratitude. This was quickly followed by a sense of responsibility towards the community to be sure something meaningful came of the research.

Once I had Siyad's permission to do research at the school, I asked if it would be possible to take about 15 minutes to explain my research at one of the staff orientation days in August just before school began. The research would not be possible without the help of at least one teacher willing to let me into her/his classroom on a daily basis. Having been a classroom teacher myself, I consider it an enormous favor to ask to repeatedly intrude on the sanctity of the classroom; most teachers are used to interacting with students without any other adults present. This was also much easier than I expected. I did a short power point presentation explaining my research and my hopes of working with fourth through sixth grade students. I explained that I would mostly be an observer or a participant-observer taking notes rather than helping the teacher with tasks or directly helping students. I also explained that I would like to interview students, parents, and teachers. Over the first several days of school, each of the teachers in the upper wing of the school (third through eighth grade) said that I was welcome to observe in their

classrooms. My plan was to observe in all the rooms, get to know the students and the teachers and find a good fit – somewhere I would feel comfortable spending a lot of time observing kids.

As it turned out, I didn't so much as choose a class as we chose each other. I went to Ms. Z.'s sixth grade language arts class on the first day of my research, excited to see whether I would remember any of the boys and girls from fourth grade. It turns out that I remembered many of the kids and they remembered me. Almost every day after that, they would ask if I was going to their class. Ms. Z. (their language arts and homeroom teacher) was willing to participate in the research, thus it seemed like the natural place to settle in. Over the course of the year I spent the bulk of my time observing this class - following them to language arts, recess, lunch, P.E., and science class. In order to 'cast my net' more broadly (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) I also observed the fifth grade class several times a week, most often during science class, recess, and lunch. Ms. Z. and Mr. Norris, the science teacher, became my main teacher informants.

In Ms. Z.'s class I was strictly an observer, sitting in the back row making jottings in my ever-present black and white Composition notebook. At first the students would occasionally ask for my help with an assignment since they were used to me as a classroom helper. In fact, I worried about how I would make the transition from volunteer to researcher. Ms. Z. was adamant, however, that she did not want me to assist the students; she believed the students needed to do their seatwork independently. This made my transition from volunteer to researcher much easier, although I sometimes felt badly that I could not help a student who was obviously struggling with an assignment. In Mr. Norris's class I was more of a participant-observer. Although I mostly sat in the back row

making jottings, Mr. Norris seemed to appreciate any help I was willing to give when the students were struggling with seatwork or studying for a quiz.

In early November, once I had settled into a routine, I asked for some time during sixth grade homeroom to explain my research more formally to the students so I could begin to find some participants. I tried to explain that I was interested in doing research with/about them to find out what it is like for Somali immigrant youth going to school and living in Charlestown. Right away Safia pointed out that she is not an immigrant – she was born here. I found myself feeling self-conscious, not quite able to articulate my research concerns without sounding like a colonizer. Finally, one boy blurted out with some excitement, “You mean we will help you get your Ph. D.?” “Yes!” I said with some relief as this seemed to put a positive spin on things. I explained that I wanted to observe them and interview them but that it was completely voluntary. I also told them about the discussion groups – one for boys and one for girls - which would include sending them home with disposable cameras to take photographs that we would use to talk about topics of interest to them. I told them that this would be a way to actively involve them in the research. Some of the students seemed especially excited about the cameras. In fact, I worried that a few of them were participating simply to get to take home a camera.

I repeatedly emphasized that participation was voluntary and that I needed their consent as well as their parent’s permission to participate. Eventually I ended up with twelve primary participants. Eight girls and four boys agreed to participate in the observations, the interviews, and the discussion groups. Five of the students were second generation, which means they were born in the U.S. to immigrant parents. Seven of the students were 1.5 generation, which means they arrived in the United States as children.

Four additional students chose to participate in the discussion groups but did not want to be interviewed. Thirteen of the participants were from the sixth grade class; three were from the fifth grade class. Many of the students who participated had parents who worked at the school. This certainly made it more convenient for the students to get their consent forms signed and made me feel better about the transparency of the informed consent process.⁶

I did not formally solicit participants from the fifth grade class, but there were three students (two girls and one boy) that I got to know well so I invited them to participate. Looking back I realize that they were somewhat marginalized from their peers. The boy, Zakaria, was significantly shorter than everyone else and was not interested in sports like many of the other boys. He was very intelligent and loved to converse with adults. He told me that this was his best year of school ever because I was there, even though the other boys teased him because he hung around me so much. The girls, Sara and Haweya, who you will learn more about in the next few chapters, were teased a lot because of their skin color. I seemed to have attracted the fifth graders who did not quite fit in with the rest of the class. Interestingly, the same cannot be said for my sixth grade participants who represented a cross-section of the class.

Collecting Data

Fieldwork

The essence of ethnographic research is of course the fieldwork, spending time in the setting, getting close in. I spent about three hours a day, three to four days a week at

⁶ All of the information about the research, consent forms, etc. were written in English and Somali as stipulated in my IRB.

the school. I limited myself to three hours in the field knowing that “every hour spent observing requires an additional hour to write up” the fieldnotes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 39). I took jottings in the field in my ubiquitous Composition notebook when I was sitting in classes. I wrote jottings as soon as possible after observing on the playground and in the cafeteria, often immediately afterwards as I sat in my car. My jottings consisted of short descriptions, interesting dialogue, seating charts, noteworthy interactions, clothes students were wearing, what people were doing, etc. As mentioned previously, I primarily observed in language arts, science, recess, and lunch. I also attended staff meetings, a basketball game, open house, graduation, and numerous half-day and full-day fieldtrips with the fifth and sixth graders, including trips to the bowling alley, the zoo, and underground caves. In addition, I went with the eighth grade class on a tour of the local community college.

The point of jotting notes is to produce a written account of what we see, hear, and experience in the field. During class time I was open about the fact that I was taking notes as I did not want to deceive the students, but I did feel somewhat self-conscious about it. However, I did not bring out my notebook during lunch and recess as those occasions were more interactive. It would have been too intrusive to write down things the kids were saying and doing while they were sitting right beside me. Sometimes as I wrote during class, the students would look back and ask me what I was writing. Very rarely a student would ask if I was writing something bad (sometimes I was – like if they had just gotten their name on the board for a detention). I was never quite sure how to respond to these inquiries because I often felt conflicted about what I was doing. I took

comfort in the fact that feelings of ambivalence and alienation are well-documented in the work of ethnographers and anthropologists (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

As often as possible I turned my jottings into fieldnotes within twenty four hours; most often I did them the same afternoon or evening. Life as a busy mother with four busy teenagers sometimes interfered with my plans. If I started to get behind in my fieldnotes I skipped going in to school so that I could spend the time writing. The writing up of fieldnotes is a crucial part of the ethnographic undertaking especially considering my postmodern stance - that I am not retelling what occurred on any given day, but creating a partial account of what I noticed and what I thought was important based on my own vested interests and hidden desires (Ellsworth, 1989). I am not merely ‘inscribing’ (putting into words) what occurred, but transcribing and translating all at the same time. According to Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995), “This often ‘invisible’ work – *writing ethnographic fieldnotes* – is the primordial textualization that creates a world on the page and ultimately shapes the final ethnographic, published text (p. 16). The writing up of the fieldnotes was an essential part of the research. By the time the year was over I had close to five hundred pages of field notes.

Interviewing Adults

For the most part I felt accepted into the school-wide community in the role of researcher. Teachers and staff members were very accommodating in allowing me to observe in their classrooms and to take students from their classes for the interviews and discussion groups. Teachers spoke candidly (it seemed to me) about their successes and their frustrations working with Somali youth and the Somali administration. I tried to lend a sympathetic ear when they struggled and to celebrate along with them when they

experienced success. My main allegiance, however, was to the students, and I was careful not to ally myself too closely with the teachers. About half way through the year as I got to know the teachers better, I invited several of them to interview. Eventually I was able to interview four teachers. One of the elders in the community (a former judge and lawyer in Somalia) sought me out in December to see if I needed any help with my research. I told him I would be happy to interview him. In addition, I interviewed the principal and three parents (two mothers, one father) who worked at the school. All of the interviews took place at the school except one which took place in the family's home.

The interviews with the adults were semi-structured and generally lasted anywhere from one hour to an hour and a half. All of the interviews were recorded with the exception of the community elder who did not want to be taped. During his interviews⁷ I took notes and then wrote up fieldnotes later in the day. I always brought along coffee or tea and some treats to show my appreciation and to put the interviewee at ease. The interviews with the teachers gave me greater empathy for how hard they were working to meet the needs of their students. The interviews with the Somali adults provided valuable insights into what it was like to live in Somalia and in the refugee camps, as well as the fortitude and resilience it takes to make a life in the United States. All the interviews were a source of triangulation for my data. However, the students were the focus of my research and their stories remain central to the ethnographic account.

⁷ I interviewed him twice.

Interviewing Students

The process of finding participants and getting all the forms back took a considerable amount of time. Many students lost the forms and needed more copies to bring home. In addition, setting up interviews was complicated by the changing rhythms of any given day. Students were sometimes late getting to school; on several occasions I had an interview arranged only to find out that the student was absent due to illness or suspension. Also, there was no 'free space' in the school in which to conduct the interviews. Oftentimes I resorted to using the table and chairs in the 'time-out' area as it was the only space available. This was not a high-traffic area, but it was in the hallway and was adjacent to the gym so there were inevitable interruptions. If the elders were congregated there, they always offered to move to accommodate me. Occasionally Siyad would let me use his office if he was not using it. Sometimes I would find a spare classroom if the teacher had a planning period. More often than not, the student and I would be wandering around the school looking for a semi-quiet space in which to conduct the interview. Sometimes the interviews took place in two shorter sessions; on average they lasted anywhere from forty-five minutes to an hour. They were semi-structured; most of the students preferred that I ask questions rather than leave the interview open-ended. I always provided juice and cookies or fruit snacks so that it felt more like an occasion to talk than an interrogation.

All but one of the students allowed me to tape the interviews. I reminded the students frequently that they did not have to answer any questions that made them uncomfortable and that we could stop the interview at any time and/ or turn off the digital recorder at any time. The students seemed very comfortable answering my questions and

often remarked at the end of the interview that it was fun. Warda did request numerous times to “skip that question” when I asked things like, “Do you have any cousins here?” or “Why do you think your parents want you to attend a Somali school?”⁸ I am glad that she felt empowered to skip questions that made her uncomfortable.

I am not so naïve as to think that the students were totally forthcoming in the responses that they did give, nor would I expect them to be. The students have agency in the interview process and are not simply pawns in our research. Mohamed is a perfect example. He told me that he was born in Virginia and had a brother just a few months younger than him. He told me that they looked too much alike and his parents did not want people to get them confused, so they sent them to different schools. This did not seem far-fetched to me as many families have become blended as a result of the war. For example, an uncle might take in the children of a deceased brother and raise them as his own. Alternatively, I thought it possible that this was a brother with the same father and a different mother because I know the father has two wives. Towards the end of the year I interviewed the father and discovered that Mohamed was actually born in Somalia and did not have a brother the same age.⁹ I did not tell his father about the deception, but it made me realize that the students have agency and can share with me what they choose to about their lives, omitting or embellishing facts if they wish.

A couple of noteworthy incidents occurred during the discussion groups that further reveal the agency that the youth had in the research process. In addition, the

⁸ Almost everyone in the community referred to Future Academy as a ‘Somali school.’

⁹ The father’s version of Mohamed’s birthplace was later confirmed by the principal.

second incident that I relay below made me aware that I was not (apparently) as trustworthy as I thought.

Discussion Groups

My chick bad. My chick hood. My chick do stuff dat ya chick wish she could.
(Lyrics from the song, My Chick Bad, Ludacris, The Battle of the Sexes)

On Tuesday May 5th, I began to get ready for the boys' discussion group. I eagerly spread out the blue and white checkered tablecloth I had brought from home, and readied the pizzas and cans of soda that I had purchased. Finally the boys came bursting into the library where I had arranged to meet them. They were excited to see the photographs they had taken that I developed in time for the discussion group. They were also excited for the pizza and pop. It took a while for them to settle in, but eventually we had a discussion. At the time I was afraid that it was too chaotic to be of any benefit, but when I listened to the tape a few times I realized that they had brought up a few important topics. It was difficult, however, to keep them seated as they were constantly asking to go to the bathroom or get a drink of water; they were walking around the room, interrupting each other, and speaking more than usual in Somali.

On several occasions Ali and Hamud asked if anyone else would listen to the tape. I reassured them that I would be the only one to listen to it. I thought they were worried about sharing their opinions on tape. I didn't really pay much attention at the time, but interspersed throughout the tape are random outbursts of Ludicris' lyrics to "My Chick Bad." One of the boys would lean into the recorder and rap, "My chick bad. My chick hood," and so on. Later it dawned on me - that was the reason they were asking if anyone else would listen. What they were really wondering was if *someone who spoke*

Somali would listen to the tape. They wanted to mess around a little and get away with saying bad words in Somali that I wouldn't understand.

Towards the end of the tape, one boy raps, "My chick bad. My chick sexy. My chick has big *nass*."¹⁰ As I turn the recorder off you can hear me reply with just a hint of amusement, "Oh gosh I have no idea what you just said!" After listening to the recording a few times, it dawned on me that they must have been talking about big boobs. Putting aside for a moment the blatant sexism embedded in the lyrics, I found their antics rather clever. They made use of the quintessential Black discourse of rap embellished with a splash of Somali, to poke fun at my research and turn the power dynamic on its head.

Another interesting exchange occurred in a small discussion group¹¹ that I had with Ayan and Fatima. Each of them had interviewed separately, and then asked if they could do a second interview together. They seemed interested in teaching me more about their culture and their religion. This was a much more student directed discussion as we carried on a conversation about topics of their choosing (Wolf, 1996). During the conversation, Ayan told me about all the people her mother takes care of at home and how hard her mother works. She mentioned that her mother did not have her citizenship card. Fatima then asked how long her mother had lived in the United States, adding that she needed her citizenship card within fourteen years if she wanted to stay here. At that point Ayan interrupted her to say, "She's getting it!" Several minutes later, as I was busy looking for my cell phone to check the time, Ayan began whispering vehemently to Fatima, "Why did you do that – talk about my mother?! She doesn't only have 14 years

¹⁰ I am not sure if they were saying *nass* or *naso*.

¹¹ This discussion between Fatima and Ayan was recorded and transcribed. It took place on April 28, 2010.

to stay here. Why did you say that?” I did not hear her whispering at the time. I only noticed later when I was transcribing the tape.

After I found my cell phone I asked the girls what we were talking about. Fatima told me to drop that topic and the two of them talked for a minute in Somali. I was a little surprised to realize that Ayan felt I could not be trusted with this potentially sensitive information about her mother, but I am reminded of some sage advice I read while preparing to do this research. It goes as follows: “Don’t be so presumptuous as to believe that you have trust or even special rapport with the people you are trying to write about, even when it seems you do” (Duneier, 2004, p. 209).

The single-sex discussion groups, which I held at the end of the year when MCA testing was over, were highly anticipated, yet somewhat chaotic (imagine eating pizza, excitedly looking at photos, wanting to look at all your friend’s photos, and trying to have a fruitful discussion all at the same time). At the time it seemed that the photographs were more of a distraction, but upon reflection I think the photos did trigger conversations about their home lives and their neighborhoods that otherwise might not have surfaced. Abdul, for instance, shared a picture of himself with a black eye, and then proceeded to describe a fight between Somali, Mexican, and Sudanese boys in his neighborhood. This led to talk about fights between Somali, Sudanese, and African American boys and revealed how race and ethnicity impact their daily lives.

My intention with the cameras was to give students some ownership of the research process. Collecting data in the form of photographs was a way of telling their own stories, of writing themselves into the research (Wolf, 1996; Fine, 1994). I am aware, however, that photographs can be voyeuristic, especially when they are of “third

world” people. In talking about our collective fascination with *National Geographic* magazine, Willinsky (1998) warns, “We have to watch ourselves. We have to attend to our own responses, to the fascination, wonder, desire, and pathos” (p. 151) of the Western gaze. In order to avoid perpetuating the Western gaze, I did not make copies of the photographs for my research. The photos were, in my opinion, the property of the students who took them.

Coding and Analysis

Focus has shifted from “are the data biased?” to “whose interests are served by the bias?”
(Lather, 1991, p. 14)

All of the interviews¹² and discussion groups were recorded and transcribed. This was a laborious process that took me about half a year. My careful attention to what they were saying, how they were saying it, even the silences and hesitations, added new layers of understanding to my analysis. In addition, doing my own transcribing of the interviews¹³ and the discussion groups kept me close to the data. Throughout this process I wrote memos and took notes on initial thoughts, questions, and intuitions. When I was done I had over 400 pages of transcription to add to the 500 pages of fieldnotes. It was time to start coding and making sense of the mountains of data.

To begin my formal analysis, I open-coded two interview transcripts and three months worth of fieldnotes, identifying all possible ideas, issues, and themes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). I then took all the themes, issues, and ideas and grouped them into major themes. Using NVIVO software I set up a code book with 24 major codes (for

¹² With the exception of Ahmed and Hafsa who both declined to be taped.

¹³ I had the four White teachers’ interviews transcribed by a professional.

example: Being Muslim) each with numerous sub-codes (for example: fasting, wearing hijab, and prioritizing religion). I then did focused line by line coding on all of my fieldnotes, memos, and transcripts (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Some of the codes evolved over the course of the analysis and some became more important than others. I used the NVIVO program as a way to file and keep track of my data. For instance, if I wanted to see all the text coded at “talking about dating,” I could click on the major code “Gender Norms” and the sub-code “talking about dating” to find all the text in one spot. This made it much easier to think across different texts, to find similarities and discrepancies, and to begin to formulate some theories about what was going on with my data. My approach utilized both inductive and deductive reasoning in the sense that I built the themes from the ground up, yet the themes themselves were influenced by my own biases and preconceived interests.

Throughout this process I was writing memos, listening and re-listening to recordings of the interviews and discussion groups, and filling up notebooks with questions, ideas, and insights about what was going on with my data. I read through all of my fieldnotes chronologically numerous times. I began to write in order to analyze. I wrote until my assertions fell apart. Then I wrote some more. I spent over a year struggling through this process. Eventually three chapters began to take shape that mirrored by main interests going into the research – one on racialization, and two on the intersections of religion, culture, and gender. Although I had not intended to write a chapter on the hijab (in fact I wanted to avoid doing so since it seems to be a Western fascination that is written about far too often), I found that I needed to sort out what the

girls were saying about the hijab before moving on to the chapter on gender norms.

Things were starting to make sense.

Ethical Dilemmas

The greatest ethical dilemma I faced throughout this research centered on representation. I worried whether I - White, Western, and wealthy - could do worthy research with/on/about Somali immigrant youth, how I would write about people to whom I had grown quite attached, and what purpose my research would serve.

Postcolonial theorists such as Spivak (1988) and Bhabha (1994) warn that the desire for accessibility to *the Other* can become a form of surveillance and neocolonization (Jones & Jenkins, 2008). I wanted to do research that resists the overwhelming tendency to lapse into colonizing discourse; that seeks to keep difference alive rather than eradicates it. How does a White person write ethnography about Somali immigrant children without becoming the imperial translator (Fine, 1994)? Spivak (2005) encourages feminist ethnographers to “learn to learn from below, *from* the subaltern, rather than only study him (her)” (p. 482, emphasis in original). This leads not to speaking ‘of’ or ‘for,’ but ‘speaking to’ (Spivak, 1988; Young, 2000). I tried hard in my research to ‘speak to’ the students with the understanding that “those of us fortunate enough to engage in research with youth are obligated ethically and politically to recognize the knowledge they carry in their bodies and biographies” (Sirin & Fine, 2008, p.197).

Another dilemma that I struggled with was how much to do for people in the community given the scarcity of resources and the many ways in which our lives became “knottily entangled” (Fine, 1994, p. 72). Virtually every day students came to class without pencils. It was a chronic problem. Much time was wasted scrounging around in

lockers in the hopes of locating a stray pencil stub, so I took to stashing packs of pencils from Sam's Club in my canvas tote bag to pass out to the students who needed them. It was a small gesture on my part, but it signified to the students that I cared about them and their learning. I hesitated to do much more than this because I did not want to impose my Western standards on the community.

I noticed, for example, that the kids had three or four worn out basketballs that they used among twenty or so boys each day on the playground. I had about a dozen basketballs in my garage that were not being used that were of a better quality than the 'playground' balls they were using. After watching the boys for a few weeks, I thought about donating all those extra basketballs just sitting in my garage. Upon further reflection, I decided against it as I realized I was interpreting this scene from a Western perspective, not in terms of difference, but in terms of deficiency. The boys did not complain about the quality or lack of balls. In fact, they had a pretty good system in place to guarantee everyone got to play in teams at the same time. There was a lot of sharing going on and they were having fun. This is one of many instances in which I struggled to keep my impulse 'to help' (Fine, 1994, p.79) in check, and instead chose to reflect critically on my Western gaze.

And finally, like Thorne (1995) in her landmark ethnography with elementary children, I felt sometimes like a spy, or a voyeur. I became, over time, privy to their clandestine world – the sneaking of candy, the sharing of answers on homework and tests, the nail polishing and lip gloss swapping that occurred during instructional time, the extra lunches stolen, the mimicking of teachers behind their backs, the swapping of notes, and the illicit Facebooking during computer class. Although it was difficult at times to

suppress the teacher and the mother in me, I largely refrained from commenting on their antics and misbehaviors. I drew the line, however, if I heard or saw something cruel or if I was the only adult around and things seemed to be getting out of hand. Although I referred to myself in my opening fieldnote as a sort of benevolent figure, the truth is I ultimately passed “through their lives...sharing few real stakes with those I studied” (Thorne, 1995, p. 27).

Researcher Identity

Decolonizing research is performative – it is enmeshed in activism. (Swadener & Mutua, 2008, p. 31)

In the fall of 2010, soon after I finished collecting my data, several elders in the community asked if I would serve on the founding board of a charter high school with a STEM focus that would be geared towards the needs of refugee and immigrant students in Charlestown. I realized that it would be a great deal of work to start a charter school and that it would prolong completing my dissertation, but I also knew that I would continue to learn about the community and that this would enhance my research. Besides, there was no way I would turn my back on the community when they asked for my help. Eventually I was asked to serve as the chair of the board. It was going to be more work, but it was also a responsibility I would not refuse. My identity had now morphed from classroom volunteer, to researcher, to volleyball coach (more about that in chapter four), to board member, to board chair.

Like Bigelow (2010), I found myself swept up in the “symbiotic relationship between research and advocacy” (p. 17). Critical ethnography is, after all, undertaken

with the explicit purpose of challenging oppression and injustice. The formation of the STEM school seemed to do just that. As Hytten states (2004):

Given the stated goal of social transformation, the role of the research and the researcher is unique in critical ethnography. Particularly, researchers are not in the setting simply to observe, record, and describe, but to interact with the researched in mutually beneficial ways. (p. 99)

I'll close now with a short vignette, an aporia¹⁴ if you will, a rupture that refuses closure, that reminds me of the “dangerous ground between intimacy and betrayal” (Visweswaran, in Lather, 2001, p.483) in this work called ethnography.

* * * *

Half way through the year a new student arrived. She saw me jotting something down in my notebook and asked me what I was doing. I tried to explain rather quickly (because it was the middle of science class) that I was doing research about Somali kids. She just looked at me and said, “Why? We’re not animals you know!” (FN, 4/6/10)

¹⁴ According to Lather (2001, p. 482) Foucault defines ‘aporia’ as “that which stops us in our tracks.”

CHAPTER THREE: “Kiss my black ass!”

(Abdul to Safia after she called him a name. FN, 4/ 9/10)

The kids don't think of themselves as Black. It's so funny. I remember a couple years ago in the lunchroom, it happened to be Said and Muhammad again. It was breakfast, and I asked who had left a mess on the table. Said says, “That black kid!” He's pointing to Muhammad saying that black kid over there did it. He thought nothing of it. But really they notice the difference between their skin tones, and I was just taken aback by that too. Several teachers will tell you that they've heard that before between kids... They'll look at each other and say, “You're black.” It's a put down. I'm wondering where that comes from. That's got to be a learned thing. (Mrs. Ball, Interview, 4/20/10)

One thing that I noticed as I read and reread my data was that Somali boys talked a lot about race and ethnicity. They talked about fights with Sudanese boys and African American boys. They talked about White kids and Black kids, but considered themselves neither. They admired Le Bron James and Ludacris, played endless basketball, and listened to rap music. They sometimes spoke in *Black Stylized English* (BSE) (Ibrahim, 1999), but often preferred Somali. Some students attended the highly regarded Black Data Processing Associate's (BDPA) Saturday morning computer classes, but they did not know that the 'B' stands for Black. They didn't 'swag' their pants, but some of them talked about older siblings who did. Most of them didn't even wear shorts preferring the more conservative long pants in keeping with Muslim tradition. Meanwhile, the elders worried about Somali boys 'sagging' their pants and joining gangs, fearing that the one caused the other. The boys talked about experiences with racism, but they also said skin color makes no difference. In short, they appeared to be undergoing a somewhat complicated process of racialization in which they 'took up' many Black cultural discourses, at the same time that they drew sharp distinctions between themselves and Black Americans.

Girls talked about race in more oblique ways. They almost never referred to themselves as Black, yet many of them admired almost exclusively Black icons like Alecia Keys and Beyonce. They complained more than the boys about being teased because of their skin color, whether it was for being too light or too dark. They talked about fights too – between Somali girls and African American girls at the local high school, but these instances were rare. They sometimes talked in BSE, but far less often than the boys. They listened to rap and rhythm & blues, but some of them shunned American music altogether. They watched BET (Black Entertainment Television), but also MTV and American Idol. They wore hijabs and long skirts, and took seriously their faith as Muslims. At the same time, they criticized peers who dressed and acted like White girls. In short, Somali girls appeared to be undergoing a complicated process of racialization in which religion and gender were foregrounded as much as race. Despite the fact that they took up some Black cultural discourses, they were also aware that they must not act too Black *or* too White lest they be accused of not being Muslim girls.

The research on the racialization of Somali youth is equivocal. While several prominent researchers assert that Somali youth are ‘becoming Black’ (Ibrahim, 1999; Forman, 2001), others draw a more nuanced picture. They find that many Somali boys are taking up Black cultural discourses, but that they resist identifying as Black and instead maintain a strong Somali, Muslim identity (Bigelow, 2010; Shepard, 2008; Ajrouch & Kusow, 2007). Somali girls meanwhile, are less likely to take up Black cultural discourses. Anchored by their religion and culture, they tend to resist many aspects of American youth culture and strongly identify as Somali and Muslim (Shepard, 2008; Omar, 2009). Importantly, regardless of how they self-identify, Somali youth

continue to be racialized by others. My research with Somali boys and girls sheds further light on the gendered process of racialization, particularly how it unfolds in the elementary years.

To begin, I briefly discuss racism, colorism, and the changing racial landscape of the United States. I situate my research within these broader discourses because the ways in which Somali immigrants contest the color line point to new ways of thinking about race and what it means to be ‘black’ in America. Second, I examine how Somali adults in this community drew on indigenous racial, ethnic, and religious discourses to contest the racialization of Somali youth. Third, I explicate the complex identity negotiations the students engaged in as they confronted racialization ‘on the ground.’ Important discourses that emerged include: the significance of colorism; their relationships towards African Americans; their attraction to Black popular culture; and their experiences with discrimination. To further illustrate the complexity of the identity negotiations the students engaged in I highlight the identities of two students, Safia and Mohamed. Finally, I sum up the gendered nature of the racialization process and point to the need to further examine hegemonic discourses of White masculinity and femininity (Lee, 2005).

Racism, Colorism, and the Changing Racial Landscape

In this period of intense globalization, it is important to differentiate between the concepts of racism and colorism. Racism is the unjust sorting of people into racial hierarchies – with White at the top, Black at the bottom, and Asian and Latino falling somewhere in between (Lopez, 2003). Although most Americans are used to thinking in racial terms, in much of the rest of the world, “nationalist statements denying the salience of race are the norm” (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2009, p. 40). In Latin America for

instance, there is little official acknowledgement of race or racism and more of an emphasis on national identity – perhaps due to a great deal of racial mixing. Although these nationalist discourses elide the significance of race, Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich (2009) contend that racial disparities are actually greater in Latin America than they are in the United States.

Colorism, which is often conflated with racism, is “the privileging of light skin tone over dark skin tone” (Keith, 2009, p. 25), independent of any consideration of race. Indeed, research would suggest that there is a global preference for lightness (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2009). Noted race scholars Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich (2009) predict that the United States is shifting from a rigid race-based binary hierarchy (White-Black) to a more fluid panethnic pigmentocracy (white - honorary white - collective black) with light skinned people at the top of the hierarchy and dark skinned people at the bottom. This shift in the racial landscape will ensue, they argue, with the increasing numbers of non-White and mixed race Americans and the decline in a White majority. In this more porous hierarchy, a light-skinned Black or light-skinned Latino might be considered an honorary White, in effect providing a buffer between White people and the darkest people. Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich (2009) warn that this shift does not mean that racial disparities will diminish; in fact they may well intensify as the dysconscious (King, 1997) preference for light skin masks the continuation of White supremacy.

I want to argue that global ideas about racism and colorism are important to consider as we grapple with the needs of our increasingly diverse student population. Many immigrant students arrive with ideas about race and skin color that are quite different from those that circulate in the United States. In fact, many come from countries

in which nationality, religion, culture, and ethnicity matter more than race or skin color. Importantly then, this new wave of immigrants is confronted with an entrenched American racial hierarchy at the same time that they resist and contest the very notion of an identity based primarily on race. Consequently, we could be “in the midst of a significant racial demographic transformation,” (Kusow, 2006, p. 533). Furthermore, Kusow contends, “the increasing diversity within the black population in North America” has the “potential to transform the meaning of blackness from skin color categories to culturally and nationality-based ones” (p. 534). Importantly, if we can transform the racial landscape so that blackness is understood in more complex and dignifying ways, perhaps we can disrupt racism and White privilege.

Racialization and the Somali Community

Racialization, as discussed in chapter one, is “a socially constructed process where race becomes the predominant way of defining oneself or being defined by others” (Bigelow, 2008, p. 28). For immigrant students, figuring out where they belong in the American racial hierarchy is not just about skin color and phenotype, it is also about performing their identity – how they dress and act; who their friends are; what music they listen to or sports they participate in; how well they do in school; what language they speak - even whether or not they have an accent. This is not simply a matter of choosing which identity to take up because there are only certain identities that are made available to immigrant youth by the dominant society, certain discourses or ways of being that are presumed to be authentically ‘White’ (speaking standard English with no accent) or authentically ‘Black’ (dressing in hip hop fashion) for example. At the same time that immigrants are presented with certain discourses or ways of performing a racial identity,

they are also negotiating, contesting, and resisting with indigenous discourses of their own (Smith, 1999; Ngo, 2010; Bigelow, 2010).

Noted Somali scholar Abdi Kusow (2006) argues that ‘identity is anything but racial’ for Somali immigrants. He explains that Somali society, which is ethnically and religiously homogenous, was not structured around race or color-based categories since “almost every member of the society carry[ed] a dark skin tone” (p. 542). Rather, Somalia is a clan based system in which ancestry is used to differentiate between groups of people. This is not to say that skin color was insignificant; however, clan and tribal differences were paramount in ways that skin color was not. According to Kusow, how Somali immigrants understand *blackness* therefore, is quite different from the way in which *blackness* is understood by both Blacks and Whites in the United States, wherein “color-based systems of classification are the primary source of social stratification” (p. 534).

This idea that Somali immigrants have no experience with racialization is complicated, however, by the history of the Bantu, a darker skinned group descended from East African slaves, who were uniformly discriminated against in Somalia. Kusow (2006) says that the Bantu were “racially distinguished,” but he relegates this information to a footnote. Nevertheless, I think it is important to consider all the ways in which color, race, and ethnicity entered the Somali vernacular. Most of the literature on Somali immigrants is predicated on the assumption that Somalis have no experience with racialization, that they do not see themselves in terms of blackness.

In a cogent essay synthesizing the research on the education of Somali youth, Kapteijns & Arman (2004) offer an illuminating perspective on Somali resistance to American racism:

Many Somalis have been caught unaware by American racial discrimination. They do not regard their black skin as the liability or handicap that mainstream society often insists that it is. At least initially, they have resisted the stereotypes and historical liabilities of being “Black,” the American way. While such attitudes also reflect the social prejudice toward African Americans to which Somalis were exposed back home, as well as the complex history of Northeast African cultural prejudice toward other Africans, generally Somalis refuse to accept the negative social categories and straightjackets U.S. mainstream society has readied for them. (p. 28)

Somali resistance to being raced then is at least in part generated by the prejudice towards African Americans that they were exposed to in Somalia, as well as the unique prejudices that Somalis – who consider themselves of Northeast African and Arabic descent – have toward other Africans (Kapteijns & Arman, 2004; Berns McGown, 1999). This is important because Somali resistance to being raced in America is deep-seated and multi-layered. Furthermore, it has its genesis in indigenous ethnic and cultural prejudices and discourses. This is something that I believe distinguishes Somali immigrants from other black immigrants and might make their resistance to being racialized as Black more successful for future generations of Somali youth.

I found in my own research that Somali adults echoed, but also complicated the notion that Somali culture was not bound by racial or color hierarchies. The director of the school, Siyad, who was in his fifties and had lived in the United States for many years, spoke at length when I asked about relations with the African American community in Charlestown:

JL: I was wondering in general how the Somali community here relates to or interacts with the African American community.

S: You know always, I don't think there's a relation between the Somalis and Afro-Americans.

JL: There isn't a relation?

S: No, no relation at all. Never. Even in Minneapolis there is no relation. You know people are thinking that we came from same descendants, we belong to Africa you know origin, but there is no relation. We don't know each other. We came from East Africa and those Afro Americans they have been here for 500 years. We cannot come together. We cannot create you know some sort of understanding. But we know that we belong to same origins. But there is no relation at all. No relation at all. The whites, the Afro Americans, the Asians, the Hmong, the Hispanic, they are same to each, to us. Yeah, we feel that everybody is welcomed. We can establish relations with everybody. *We are not looking about the color.* We are looking as American citizens in general. That's how we like it. Yeah. Never! Never! Never! (Interview, 6/ 29/10)

We can see from this excerpt that Somali immigrants were “not looking about the color.”

In other words, there was no preconceived idea that Somalis should get along with African Americans just because they were the same color or originated from the same continent. For Somalis, unaccustomed to thinking racially, this makes perfect sense. For many Americans, so accustomed to thinking racially, this is hard to fathom. Indeed it is hard to read his strong resistance, “Never! Never! Never!” as simply denying that race and color matter. I have to wonder if he would have said the same if I had asked about relations with White Americans – if he would use the same forcefulness. This seems much more complex than the premise that race and color somehow do not matter to Somalis. In fact, at least here in America, they appeared to matter very much.

It was important to some of the Somali adults in the research community to draw distinctions at times between Somalis and other Africans. Occasionally they made reference to the Arabic heritage; lighter skin tones; long, soft hair; and Caucasian-like

features of Somalis as a way to distinguish themselves from other Africans. I even heard a reference to Somalis being ‘the first Whites.’ One elder told me that race and color did not matter in Somalia, but then proceeded to tell me that his wife, who is very light-skinned, was teased relentlessly as a schoolgirl in Somalia– so much so that she used to wish that she was darker. He ascribed the teasing to jealousy based on a universal preference for light skin over dark skin. But he emphasized that Somalis do not accept the White/Black hierarchy that Americans do. He also told me that part of the current political strife in Somalia was due to lighter skinned clans holding too much of the power. One thing is clear – while racism did not seem to play a large role in the national lexicon, it seems that shades of colorism prevailed.

Calling upon indigenous discourses (saying for example that race does not matter) to resist becoming Black in the United States is an example of *resistance in accommodation* (Anyon, 1983; Ngo, 2002). In her research Ngo (2002) found that some Hmong girls in the United States were continuing to marry at an early age – as they frequently did in traditional Hmong culture – but for different reasons. In some cases, the girls were deliberately resisting the authority of their parents (getting married to escape a strict household for instance), and in other cases they were resisting school altogether (getting married to have children and drop out). What looks like a traditional cultural practice, is really an act of ‘resistance in accommodation’ (Ngo, 2002; Anyon, 1983). Taking up a discourse that is culturally acceptable and using it to resist something in the dominant culture, is not unlike Somali adult immigrants asserting that ‘race does not matter,’ and using that indigenous discourse to resist being racialized as Black in the United States.

If Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich (2009) are correct that the United States is evolving into a pigmentocracy, then it is especially important to consider how Somali adults are refusing to be racialized and how that might affect the racial landscape. If in insisting they are not ‘that kind of Black,’ Somali adults can position themselves and their children above African Americans, as light-skinned Arab and North African Blacks, or ‘honorary Whites,’ (to use Bonilla-Silva’s term) then perhaps they will be better off financially, socially, and educationally. In a binary racial hierarchy this would be impossible. However, with increasing numbers of immigrants contesting the traditional White/Black dichotomy, it might be possible, especially for veiled Somali females - since they are easy to distinguish from American Blacks, but also for some (especially light skinned and/or Caucasian-featured) Somali males.

Importantly, this does not disrupt White hegemony, nor change the fact that other people will continue to be unfairly treated on the basis of skin color and phenotype. In fact, by stepping over the color line, Somalis would be reinforcing it for American Blacks. Similarly, Waters (1999) wondered at the conclusion of her landmark research with West Indian immigrants, “Despite their black skin, can West Indians distance themselves from black Americans and become nonblack?” (p. 341).

Racialization and the Students of Future Academy

Who is Black?

The students at Future Academy used the term ‘black’ in two different ways. When used to describe someone within their own community, they were generally calling attention to skin tone. To specify that the person’s skin was particularly dark they would say the person was black. Sometimes the descriptor was used benignly; at other times it

was used derogatorily. The second way in which the students used the term ‘black’ was the way it is used most often in mainstream discourse in which Black equals ‘African American.’ Used in this way it did not generally include Somalis. One of the reasons this is so interesting is because many in the mainstream think of Somalis as Black. They are mostly black-skinned, they come from Africa, and to many they appear phenotypically Black. It throws us off guard when Somalis refer to other people as Black as it challenges the color line. The use of the word ‘black’ was not always straightforward. Consider Abdul’s use of the phrase, “Kiss my black ass,” which I chose for the title of this chapter. Although Abdul did not consider himself Black, his use of the phrase in that instance signaled a powerful identification with Black masculinity.

The following is an example from Mohamed’s interview in which he used the term ‘black’ to describe skin tone, not race. In this excerpt he was describing his older brother after we realized that his brother was on the same high school track team as my oldest son.

JL: So if I see him one day at practice can I introduce myself and say I know Mohamed?

M: Yes, I’ll tell you what kind of color he is. He’s black. He has a curly hair - ah he got long teeth out front like that. They put new teeth on him. That’s all I know.

JL: Okay, is he tall?

M: Yeah he’s tall.

JL: Skinny?

M: No he’s kind of strong.

JL: Cool. I want to meet him that’d be so fun. How does he like North Side?

M: He’s dark colored, he’s dark colored.

JL: Dark colored, okay. (Interview, 4/8/10)

I remember thinking it was odd when Mohamed specified that his brother was black since I assumed that all Somalis were ‘black.’ It was only later that I realized he was specifying that his brother was a darker complexion than many other Somalis. Mohamed was also a dark complexion, as was the rest of the family, so I am not sure what his intention was here. He repeats “dark colored” several times for emphasis. He might have been trying to make it easier for me to figure out which athlete was his brother, or he might have been signaling his own ambivalence over the fact that he and his brother were darker than most people – dark enough to stand out – ‘dark colored.’ This is especially problematic in the United States where racial hierarchies are deeply entrenched, where darker boys are often coded as more dangerous (Lopez, 2003).

Shades of Colorism

Girls also talked about light and dark skin tone, however, for girls this was tied up with notions of beauty. During a discussion group, Ayan and her best friend Fatima talked indirectly about lighter skin being more attractive than darker skin. In this excerpt, they were recalling how Ayan used to be much lighter skinned when she was younger.

F: She looked so cute in first grade. She used to play outside and then now she got darker. I’m serious she used to be lighter than me.

A: Way lighter.

F: Just like a little bit lighter than me like – almost a couple of shades darker than Samar. And she has this picture and she has lipstick on. She looks so cute!

A: I had red lipstick on and then my mother put – what was it called – this makeup thing on me. I was in Africa and I was wearing my clothes for Africa and I was like standing with my brother. And then

F: Her brother Ali is so funny! His teeth are just like Bugs Bunny!

A: My aunt comes. She's like, "Who is this kids?"

JL: She didn't even recognize you guys?

A: No in the picture. And then she's like- and then I'm like, "I don't know." And she's like – the only person cute here is this little girl. She's like – such a cutie.

JL: And it was you?

A: And she was like, "Is this a Arab girl or what?" "Is this a Arabic girl? Cause she looks nothing like a Somalian - like her brothers." (Discussion, 3/18/10)

Caught up in this notion of being 'too dark' is of course the underlying assumption that black is bad (dark, less attractive, scary, primitive, evil) and white is good (light, more attractive, enlightened, civilized, pure). Although this dichotomy is arbitrary, it is deep-seated, ubiquitous, and often dysconscious (King, 1997). It is worth noting that Ayan and Fatima had an implicit understanding of shades of skin tone that I did not share as a cultural outsider. In describing Ayan as a young girl, they placed her on a color continuum that was 'lighter' than Fatima, but 'a couple of shades darker than Samar.' It is also interesting to note the assumed connection the aunt made between light skin tone and Arabic ancestry. Light skin tone was recoded as Arabic, which was implicitly better looking than Somalian.

In fact, Ayan did have Arabic ancestry as did Fatima, as we can see in the following excerpt. The connections between ethnicity, ancestry, skin tone, languages spoken, and where one is born are all mixed up in the process of figuring out identity, particularly for immigrant youth. Noticeably absent in these excerpts was any explicit talk of being raced. We see further reinforcement, however, that being Somali was different from being African. In fact, even when Ayan talked about living in Africa (she

lived in Kenya), she quickly distinguished herself from *being* African by pointing out she had hair done like an ‘Indian girl.’

A: When I was Africa too, there’s a lot of pictures I took in Africa. Me and Ali are standing by each other. Ali’s wearing a cowboy hat and my hair’s like – my hair’s did like a Indian girl. And I’m like....I’m actually a little bit Indian cause my mother’s grandfather.

F: This girl is Somali, Indian, and Arabic. She’s one third of Somali, one third of Indian, and one third of Arabic.

A: One fourth of Somalian, one third of

F: Okay me, I know for sure I’m like something of Arabic

JL: Lots of Somali people are though right?

F: No not just because they’re light.

A: My dad’s dad –

JL: No I meant because of where it’s located like –

A: No my dad’s dad is Arab.

F: My dad and my brother and my three brothers were born in Arab, in Saudi Arabia.

A: Yeah if I was born in here that doesn’t mean I’m an English person.

JL: Well it means you’re American!

A: American, ah! Yeah.

JL: Which is kind of cool because you were born here. You were born here too right?

A: I wasn’t born here.

F: Mm hmm.

JL: No you weren’t yeah so.

A: I was born in Yemen so I’m Arabic. I speak a little bit of Arab. (Discussion,

3/18/10)

Claiming Arabic ancestry and speaking Arabic were sources of prestige in this community. Interestingly, Ayan considered herself Somali, even though she said she had equal amounts of Arabic and Indian heritage. Oftentimes Somalis are portrayed in the literature as being ethnically homogenous. For Somalis in the diaspora, the reality is actually more complex. The students who participated in my research had heterogeneous ancestry including Somali, Arabic, Oromo, African American, Kenyan, Italian, Indian, and Native American. What it means to be Somali, to claim that one is Somali, is neither straight-forward, nor monolithic. For students in the Somali diaspora, identity pronouncements belie complex negotiations around ethnicity, ancestry, skin tone, race, language, gender, and religion, all of which complicates the process of racialization.

Teasing Over Skin Tone

For some students at the research site, the issue of skin tone was a source of constant teasing. Darker students were made fun of, but so were lighter-skinned students. The problem was especially salient for girls and reinforces how skin color was inextricably bound up with notions of beauty and femininity. For example, Haweya, a dark-skinned fifth grader, complained that a certain boy in her class called her 'black' every single day. This made her self-conscious and insecure about her own identity. She tried unsuccessfully to get the boy to stop on her own but felt that the boys always got away with teasing the girls.

Haweya's identity was complicated by the fact that her mother was Somali and her father was African American. She kept this aspect of her identity hidden from her peers. During her interview when I asked her how she would describe herself, this was

her reply:

H: I don't really tell them if I'm half Black cause they're gonna tease me about it so I'll just tell I'm Somali. Cause last time when I was in Kentucky I told one of my friends I'm Black and then they never were my friends again.

JL: Oh my goodness!

H: I don't know they racist. But I don't like that.

JL: Yeah. So you think other Somali kids would care if you were?

H: Mm Hm. They would not like me. They would never come to my house at all.

JL: Wow. What do Somali people think about Black people?

H: Well some of them, not all of them. Some of them don't like Black people cause they think that Black people are gonna beat them up cause you know how – like if you say, if you – some Black people if they're- what's it called – if they're mean they might beat them up. That's all. A lot of them think that. But I'm Black and I don't think I beat people up. (Interview, 2/23/10)

So the boys called Haweya 'black' because of her skin tone without knowing that she was 'half Black.' Meanwhile, she was afraid to tell the other kids that she was half Black because in the past this has caused her to lose friends. Importantly, she qualified my blanket statement, "What do Somali people think about Black people?" by pointing out that some Somalis, not all of them, don't like Black people. Ironically, we have a girl who was half Somali and half Black taking up an identity as Somali-only in order to resist the discrimination from within her own community that comes with being African American. Although she resisted being racialized as Black by fronting a Somali-only identity, she could not completely escape the stigma associated with having dark black skin.

In addition, we can hear through her pauses and restarts ("you know how – like if you say, if you – some Black people if they're – what's it called") that she was struggling

with how to talk about Black people without perpetuating stereotypes. Rather than suggest that all Black people are dangerous she settled on “if they’re mean.” She was trying to reconcile the fact that many Somali people are afraid of African Americans, yet she herself was African American and would never “beat people up.” The identity negotiations Haweya was undertaking were complex to say the least.

Sara was another fifth grade girl who was teased relentlessly by the boys, but in this case she was teased because of her light skin. When I first met Sara I took note of her light skin and wondered if she might be Arabic, as she had a decidedly lighter complexion and Caucasian-like features. Sara left school the year after the research due in part to the teasing that she endured at the hands of several fifth grade boys. The following is an excerpt from her interview:

S: It’s because – they tease me a lot, my skin color and they say, if we’re in like computer class they’ll be like um, “You’re gonna go to church.com.” I’m like –

JL: You’re gonna go to what.com?

S: Church.com or something like that.

JL: What does that mean?

S: I don’t know.

JL: Church.com....

S: Yeah, like Christianity and all that because of my skin color so – I’m like, “You’re being racist!” (Interview, 2/18/10)

It took me a moment to understand the insult the boys tossed Sara’s way during computer class. They told her she was going to go to ‘church.com’ which was an indirect way to refer to her as White (i.e. Christian) and insult her light skin tone. During her interview Sara told me that her dad was American with Native American ancestry, and her mom

was Somali. She was born in Ethiopia, stated that she was from Philadelphia, and considered herself “mixed.” When she told me that her father was American I assumed he must be White because Sara was so light-skinned. She also told me that he was a Christian who converted to Islam. She was evasive in her interview and did not want to tell me too much about her father. I felt that it was important to respect her privacy and not ask too many personal questions. I did not want to abuse my power as a White adult researcher interviewing a Somali child.

I found out later, rather accidentally, that Sara’s father was African American. Given the community’s reticence towards African Americans, I can understand why she did not want to tell me this. Needless to say, negotiating her identity was complex. She was Somali, African American, Native American, and Muslim. She visited her African American father in rural Minnesota on the weekends, and lived in a very strict Islamic household¹⁵ with her Somali mother and Arabic step-father during the week. We will hear more from Sara in the coming chapters.

These examples are interesting for several reasons. First, they demonstrate the significance of skin color and tone as students, teachers, and others (like me) try to sort out where Somalis fit in the American racial scheme. They also speak to the gendered effects of colorism as the girls were teased by the boys, but the reverse did not seem to be a problem. Several of the examples demonstrate the stigma of having dark skin, for boys as well as girls. The final excerpt shows that for Somali girls there is also a danger to being racialized as too light because lightness is equated with being Christian. To Sara, a

¹⁵ For instance, Sara is not allowed to go anywhere without her mother except to school. She is not supposed to have friends who are not Muslim, and she is not allowed to have friends call her house or come over to play.

devout Muslim, being labeled ‘Christian’ was an insult.

It is significant that Sara and Haweya hid their African American heritage from their peers, and demonstrates the extent to which Somali youth tried to distance themselves from African Americans. In the following section I turn my attention more closely to the relationships that existed with African Americans.

Relationships with African-Americans

It is well documented in the literature that the majority of Somali immigrants do not see themselves as Black and do not align themselves with African Americans (Bigelow, 2010; Kusow, 2006). In fact, there is a significant amount of animosity between Somalis and African Americans (Bigelow, 2010; Shepard, 2008; Tettey & Pupilampu, 2005). There are myriad reasons scholars give for this tension including: living together in poor, urban neighborhoods; competition over scarce resources (including jobs and housing); underfunded schools; cultural misunderstandings; Islamophobia; xenophobia; White privilege; and institutional racism. The fact that many White Americans presume that Somalis and African Americans should get along simply because we see them all as Black, says more about White privilege than it does anything else. The fact is that some Somalis arrive in the United States with preconceived negative ideas about African Americans (Kaptejns & Arman, 2004). Even those who arrive without preconceived prejudices are quickly inundated with American-style racism (Kusow, 2006).

Echoing existing research, many of the Somali adults in this community expressed openly prejudicial attitudes towards African Americans. Often they associated African Americans with many of the negative aspects of American culture including

drugs, gangs, and violence (Bigelow, 2010; Shepard, 2008). One elder, Ahmed, who had been in the United States for five years, relayed the fears the community had that their children were acting like African Americans.

You see girls in skimpy clothes. This is not good. This is a big issue, dressing like African Americans with hats backwards, the way they walk...we don't like African American stuff like drugs, criminal behavior, and gangs. We don't have a problem with White people. Most White people respect people. It's different from Europe which has discrimination. There is an American mentality that White people accept immigrants. (Interview, 12/18/09)

Ahmed believed that America was welcoming to immigrants. He was 76 years old, spoke English haltingly, and spent most of his time immersed in the Somali community. Therefore, it is likely he will retain his unproblematic stance toward White people. Research on Black immigrants suggests that first generation adults often have an unblemished view of White America (Woldemikael, 1989), whereas many second generation children, who experience significant discrimination in American schools, develop an adversarial view of White America and begin to identify more with their Black classmates (Waters, 1994). Importantly, the unblemished view of White America is the flip side of the tarnished view of Black America. Without an understanding of White privilege and its connection to institutional racism, there can be no real understanding of the intransigence of problems facing Black (and Brown) America.

Not all Somali adults expressed such blatant prejudices towards the African American community. Siyad, the director of the school, explained the friction between Somalis and African Americans this way:

S: Even in the Twin Cities there is always tension - the Afro Americans and the Somalis.

JL: I wonder why that is...

S: Because we have some children who like to adopt Afro American cultures like putting their pants here, but so there is always a tension between the community at large. You know, hanging the Somali students, Somali children with the Afro Americans, the community they don't like it you know. If establishing a greater relation with all the communities, that's good, but we don't like to have a special relationship with certain communities. It's not our philosophy. It's not our ideology. Never! Never! Never! (Interview, 6/29/10)

Although he acknowledged that the Somali community does not like to put their children in schools with African American children, he put it in terms of not wanting special relations with any one group within the United States. He was resisting the racialization of the community as Black (placing Somali students with African American students) by asserting their connection to all communities. He did so without resorting to the blatant prejudice that the previous elder displayed. In fact, he seemed to utilize color blind discourses much as many White Americans use when they talk about race (Bonilla-Silva, 2006).

Somali adults were not the only ones to hold prejudicial views towards African Americans. Some of the students spoke openly and sometimes inadvertently about their prejudices towards, and fear of, African Americans. Ali is a 1.5 generation Somali boy who had been in the United States for five years. He had this to say about relations between Somalis and Black people:

Like you know how Somalians scared of guns and stuff you know? So Black people you know how they mostly carry guns, so in high school Black people mostly – it depends on the Black person – mostly if you're a gangster and you're Somali you know how they like mess with you if you mess around with them. So Somalians, my sister's like, Black people just go to their car they're like – “Pump that trunk!”¹⁶ (claps his hands) and then the Somalians are all gone you know like pump that trunk to get the gun like AHHHHH! (Interview, 1/19/10)

¹⁶ He probably means, “Pop that trunk.”

It is apparent that Ali held a distorted stereotype that most Black people carried guns. At the same time, I could sense some hesitancy as he realized he was making some broad generalizations and ended up inserting – “it depends on the Black person,” to qualify his negative remarks. This story reveals the reality of the everyday struggles between Somali and African American teenagers at the local high schools. According to Ali, the Black students deliberately yelled out “Pump that trunk!” and then pretended to get guns to scare the Somali students. Ali recognized that the Black students were just playing with the Somali students, but the prank itself reinforced the misunderstanding and animosity between the two groups of students. Ultimately, the Somali students believed that the African American students were likely to have guns in the trunks of their cars, and the African American students capitalized on this fear to reinforce their power over the Somali students at the school.

It is no wonder there was tension between Somali students and African American students given the amount of fear and mistrust that existed between them. The following excerpt from Fatima’s interview further illustrates some of that fear. Fatima was a second generation female who identified as Somali American and lived in a mostly White neighborhood in the northwest quadrant of Charlestown. In kindergarten and first grade she attended an ethnically diverse public school before switching to the charter school.

Fatima had this to say about Black people:

JL: Well, how do you think Black people in Rochester feel about Somali people?

F: Um, well. I don’t know because when I see Black people I just, and I’m inside the car, I would put my head down.

JL: Oh why?

F: I don't even look at them.

JL: Oh why?

F: I'm afraid cause they're just walking, they're staring at you. Some kid even like follow you in a car. So that's why I don't even bother looking at them. Or I just turn or I just put my head down and act like I'm sleeping. (Interview, 12/7/09)

Fatima said that she puts her head down and hides when she is in her car and sees a Black person. This naïve yet visceral fear of Black people seemed to be reinforced within the Somali community. It is unclear how this fear and animosity will influence the process of racialization for Somali youth and the types of identities they take up.

According to Waters (1994), who has conducted the most extensive research with Black immigrant youth:

The key factor for the youth I studied is race. The daily discrimination that the youngsters experience, the type of racial socialization they receive in the home, the understandings of race they develop in their peer groups and at school affect strongly how they react to American society. The ways in which these youngsters experience and react to racial discrimination influences the type of racial/ethnic identity they develop. (p. 802)

Despite the fear of African Americans expressed by some of the students, they may discover that they themselves “bear no special immunity from anti-Black sentiment” (Rong & Brown, 2002, p. 260) and may “gradually adopt the mantle of blackness” (Forman, 2001, p. 51) that is so often thrust upon them.

Becoming Black?

According to Ibrahim (1999), one of the foremost authorities on ‘becoming Black’ in the African diaspora, Black popular culture interpellates African youths’ identities. Ibrahim (1999) draws on Althusser’s notion of interpellate to signify “the

subconscious ways in which individuals...identify with particular discursive spaces and representations” (p. 359). According to Ibrahim (1999):

One invests where one sees oneself mirrored. It would be unrealistic to expect to see Blackness allied with rock and roll or heavy metal, as they are socially constructed as White music. On the other hand...African youths had every reason to invest in basketball – which is constructed as a Black sport – but not hockey, for example. (p. 365)

In fact, basketball dominated the daily landscape of the majority of the boys in the school. Pick-up games dominated before school, recess, and any after school free time that the boys had. They also had an after-school basketball team.¹⁷ The Somali adults in the community lent their full support to this distinctly American, and one might add – quintessentially African American – pastime. The principal hired a coach, purchased uniforms, and allowed the boys to participate in games with other middle schools in Charlestown. This is an example in which the principal, with the support of the Somali community,¹⁸ encouraged selective accommodation. The decision to let the boys form a basketball team reflects the pragmatic outlook of the community. They were willing to accommodate to mainstream norms when it did not interfere with religious or cultural beliefs.

Here is what Siyad had to say when I asked rather indirectly about the boys taking up Black discourses:

JL: Sometimes I see the younger kids, especially maybe the boys because they like the African American basketball players and the Rhythm & Blues and the rap music –

S: That’s just a kind of hobby.

¹⁷ The fact that basketball was only offered for the boys will be addressed in chapters four and five.

¹⁸ The director frequently referenced ‘the community’ when he made decisions that affected the students.

JL: Yeah, cultural things that they like. For some of the kids, let's say the boys here, if they're out in the community, they may not – some White Americans may see them as African Americans. They might not recognize because they don't have the hijab like the girls, they might not be recognizable as Somali –

S: Pshoo! You know even, even our kids if we say you are Afro American they say – No, I am Somali American. They regret being Afro American. They say – No, we are Somali Americans. That's how they like to respond it. (Interview, 6/29/10)

Somali elders worried about boys sagging their pants and considered this sartorial choice to be a gateway to a life of crime and drugs (Bigelow, 2010; Shepard, 2008). Identifying with basketball and rap music, however, did not elicit the same concern; they were considered merely hobbies. The parents disapproved of rap lyrics, but the enjoyment and identification with rap music happened mostly clandestinely since the students listened on their iPods and MP3 players.¹⁹ The fact that 'sagging pants' was such a point of contention signifies the importance of clothing both in adolescent culture and in this Islamic community. My data supported the principal's assertion that the Black cultural discourses adopted by the students were 'just a hobby' and not an indication that they identified as African American. I turn now to the identity negotiations that the students engaged in.

Identity Negotiations

In order to gain an appreciation for how the students self-identified, I generally asked something along the lines of, "How would you describe yourself?" or "How would you identify yourself?" Of the students I interviewed, about half identified as Somali,

¹⁹ Several teachers commented on the fact that the kids owned iPods which they felt was hypocritical since Somalis are mostly poor. What they did not realize is that the iPods were 'family' iPods often shared between multiple siblings and family members, even cousins. The extent to which the kids shared belongings, clothing, homework answers, food, etc. was largely misunderstood by the mainstream teachers.

while half identified as Somali and American. No student identified as Black or African American. As might be expected, all of the students who identified as ‘Somali’ were foreign-born, with the exception of Safia, who was second generation. Also, as expected, all the youth who identified as a combination of Somali and American were born in the United States, with the exception of Mohamed who was born in Somalia (Bigelow, 2010). In the following sections I highlight the identity work of Safia and Mohamed to show how they responded to discrimination and created their own hybrid identities, at once distancing themselves from, and being intrigued by, Black cultural discourses.

Asserting her Somali identity – Safia.

Safia was born in Minnesota and considered herself Somali-only. She did share numerous examples of personal experiences with discrimination as well as a general outlook that indicated a diminished view of freedom in America. The following is a powerful excerpt from her interview. Keep in mind she was only twelve years old at the time of the interview; at numerous times throughout the interview, she became emotional and started to cry. In this excerpt Safia was speaking passionately about what it means to be Somali and to face discrimination in America.

And I started crying and saying how - how you guys took their identity and their souls telling them that they're darker than us. You just like took away their life, how people saying oh we're racist and we don't like the skin you're in. Either change or just don't come at all. You guys say it's a free country – the home of the free. We don't feel free; we feel, we feel, we feel like dogs being treated, being bathed in our own poop. We feel like dogs, we don't feel anything to be free. (Interview, 11/23/09)

Safia started off by talking about how “you guys” (i.e. Americans) took away Somali peoples’ identities and souls by telling them they are too dark. “We don’t like the skin

you are in.” She pointed out the hypocrisy in that we say we are the land of the free, but Somali people do not feel free here. In fact, she claims that “we feel like dogs being bathed in our own poop.” It was especially poignant that she chose the metaphor of being bathed in dog poop to describe the depth of her feelings of rejection. Many Somali Muslims believe that it is against their religion even to touch a dog. Imagine then the humiliation of being bathed in dog poop. Her words are a powerful reminder that some Somali immigrants feel not only unwelcome in America, but completely debased. Perhaps it comes as no surprise that Safia, despite being born in the United States, identified strongly as Somali. While research suggests that a strong ethnic identity can serve as a protective factor against discrimination, it can also lead to increasingly anti-American sensibilities (Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008).

Although Safia strongly identified as a Somali Muslim, she was also one of the savviest girls when it came to Black popular culture. She watched BET (Black Entertainment Television), listened to rap and R & B, and could often be heard singing popular tunes. She seemed to ‘take up’ more Black cultural discourses than any of the other girls. For instance, she sometimes used Black stylized English phrases such as, “I’m a do this” and “Whadap?” Strongly identifying as Somali and Muslim did not preclude taking up many Black cultural discourses. In fact, Safia very much displayed a hybrid identity – at once a devout Muslim, a proud Somali, a youth invested in Black discourses, and an outspoken female who did well in school. At the same time, Safia challenged male and female authority figures in school and was frequently given after school detention. She was also suspended several times during the school year. One time

she was suspended for wearing her sweatshirt backwards and refusing to turn it around when the director insisted that she do so.

Unlike many of the other students in the study, Safia felt a kinship with African Americans. When I asked how she thought Black people and Somali people in Charlestown got along, she had this to say, “I think Black people in Charlestown really get along because we understand that - how we can sit down and say – ‘How do you feel?’ And we can both say, ‘Oh we’re being teased because of how we look.’” Later in the interview she elaborated:

Somalians, they have one dream. And mostly they’ve seen so many people’s dreams come down and the fight and what happened to Somalia - stuff like that. So they were like, Black people can do it, so those Black people that can do it, so can I. So that’s why you can hear all the boys talking about NBA players. That’s who they look up to saying I’m Somali, he’s Black and we had a rough time, but that doesn’t mean I have to go to drugs and cigars and stuff like that. That’s why most of the girls and boys look up to Beyonce because and Alecia Keys because they all help...actually I really like Alecia Keys because she really helped out in Somalia and Africa. (Interview, 11/23/09)

We can see that Safia related to and admired the struggles and successes of African American icons. Woven into Safia’s strong Somali Muslim identity was an appreciation for and identification with Black America.

This idea that Somali people have some sort of connection to African Americans was subtly displayed by other students in the school, particularly through curricular choices. I noticed for instance, that the students seemed to be especially interested in language arts stories and current events that featured African Americans. The following is a brief excerpt from my field notes taken on one of my first days observing in the sixth grade language arts class:

At some point Ali asks, “Is *La Bamba* a White American story or a Spanish story?” Then as soon as the kids get their textbooks out, they begin noting the stories they want to read. This seems to be the first time they have gotten out their reading textbooks, not surprising given that this is only day 5 of school. “Can we read the Oprah story? Can we read the Obama story?” There is a chorus of voices wanting to read the stories featuring African Americans. (FN, 9/14/09)

Other teachers told me that they observed a similar engagement with African American literature and African American history among the students at the school. Despite the fact that many students identified with African American stories and history, this was not deliberately addressed in the official curriculum. Most of the students’ identifications with African American discourses seeped through in the hidden curriculum - the ‘whassup my homeys?’ that transpired in the hallways; the clandestine rhythm and blues music shared with ear buds concealed under hijabs; the hip-hop dance moves and bodily gestures tried out on the blacktop.

Forging a hybrid identity - Mohamed

Mohamed, who emigrated seven or eight years ago, was the only 1.5 generation immigrant who did not identify as Somali-only. In fact, he contested my either/or categories when I asked him about his identity:

JL: Would you say that you’re American or Somali or a combination?

M: I’m a citizen (spoken quietly).

JL: Pardon?

M: I’m a citizen. My dad passed the citizen test.

JL: So you’re an American citizen yep. But would you say like, if someone said, are you American or Somali would you, do you make a point of telling someone you’re Somali so they know about you, or you don’t – it doesn’t matter so much or?

M: I tell I’m a friggin – I’m a tell I’m American and a Somalian! There’s no

difference! (now speaking loudly and forcefully)

JL: Yep, no difference, yep. Cool. Okay, do people ever mistake – like do people sometimes think you're African American, do you think that's sort of different?

M: No one did that. They treat me the same way as they do. (Interview, 4/8/10)

This excerpt is interesting because Mohamed initially resisted being categorized as either American or Somali and asserted his citizenship. At the time, I believed that Mohamed was a second generation student born in Virginia. Recall that when I interviewed his father, I discovered that Mohamed was actually born in Somalia. I do not know if he hid this fact just from me, or if he hid this from his friends and teachers as well, but it is another example of the degree to which Somali youth feel they must protect themselves from potential harassment and exclusion. Although Mohamed was not explicitly talking about race or skin color, his assertion that there was no difference between being an American and being a Somalian, disrupted the hegemonic discourse that American = White.

Obviously he did not come by this view naively. His anger was apparent as he went from barely whispering that he was a citizen, to vehemently asserting in Black stylized English, "I'ma tell I'm American and Somalian!" I assert that Mohamed did not come by this view naively because he talked at length about racial tension and discrimination, describing fights between Somali boys and Sudanese boys, as well as Somali boys and African American boys. He said several times in his interview and the discussion group that the staff at North High School did not "stand up" to protect the Somali students. He learned about the racial strife second-hand through his brothers and sisters who attended North High School.

Experiencing Racial Discrimination

The boys.

Mohamed also experienced discrimination first-hand in his own neighborhood. During his interview he described an incident in which he and his cousins were taunted by some White kids who called them ‘Africans’ and pushed them down a hill. When several of the boys talked at length about fights with Mexican, Sudanese, and Africa-American boys during the boys’ discussion group, it became apparent that their neighborhoods do not feel safe. Almost half of the families had been victims of robberies and home intrusions. Many of the kids lived in the poorest quadrant of the city with the greatest concentration of diverse communities.

Interestingly, Mohamed, who lived in a mostly White neighborhood in the northwest quadrant of the city, did not feel safe either. The house was built for his family by Habitat for Humanity. Here is what Mohamed had to say about his neighborhood:

M: I’m dead. How about if Obama got killed by assassin and he was Black and then every White people try to kill every Black people? I’m the only one in the neighborhood! GET THE BLACK PEOPLE!!

JL: Oh that’d be terrible. It used to be like that in the United States. I mean-

Nur: Racism.

M: Kill the niggers! (Discussion, 5/5/10)

This was one of the rare occasions, a “moment of identification” (Ibrahim, 1999, p. 351) in which a boy self-identified as Black in a way that recognized the stigma of blackness in America. His statement also challenged my bias that the youth who lived in middle-class, White neighborhoods would feel safer than those who lived in poor, non-White neighborhoods. In fact, over the past year as I have been writing this dissertation, there

have been numerous instances of swastikas spray painted on the properties of Somali families in the northwest area of Charlestown. The students and their families might not have felt safe in the poorest neighborhoods of Charlestown, but the middle-class neighborhoods, with their insidious violence, were not safe havens either. The swastikas served as a stark reminder that trying to fit in to the mainstream is fraught with hidden dangers for many immigrants of color.

The racial harassment the boys were subjected to in the regular public schools and in their neighborhoods – *during their elementary years no less* - was harmful and pervasive. In addition, experiences with racialization for the boys often involved physical danger and fighting. Lopez (2003) warns of the toll that a lifetime of discrimination can take on Black immigrant men:

The psychological costs to the individuals and groups subjected to this type of experience included repressed rage, humiliation, frustration, resignation, and depression. Men's encounters with negative stereotypes served as painful reminders that they were racially stigmatized and not truly accepted by the wider society. Social rejection and face-to-face discrimination were realities that not only were humiliating and stressful, but also had a lingering effect that shaped the life perspectives of the second generation in surprising ways. In due course, these experiences contributed to men's worried outlooks about their prospects for social mobility through education. (Lopez, 2003, p. 38)

The girls.

Incidents of discrimination were not confined to the boys in the study. Many of the girls also recalled incidents in their public schools and in the community at large in which they faced racial discrimination. Some of these incidents took on religious overtones which I address in chapter four. The following is an excerpt from Fatima's interview in which she described an experience in her neighborhood after I asked her what other kids in Charlestown were like.

F: Yeah, the kids – they're nice, but then like I was playing one time with a girl [interruption] I was playing with a girl in the park and her dad came to pick her up and they were White, and then he told me to stay away from her.

JL: My goodness, how old were you?

F: I was like 7 years old. He told me to stay away from her and he told her daughter to stay away from me. And we asked why and he said you're too young to know. And when I told my sister, my sister said because they are being racist.

JL: Wow that must have made you feel terrible.

F: Just because we're Black. So what – people are orange and yellow. You don't judge them because of that.

JL: Wow, my goodness. That is sad, huh?

F: It's so annoying.

JL: So you guys were just playing at the park and he said don't play with my daughter anymore?

F: Yeah. But the mother was nice. She was like – you can play with her. She said that you can play with her when I'm around. But don't play with her when her father's around cause he's like racist and he'll get mad very easily. (Interview, 12/07/09)

This excerpt is significant because we can see racialization happening 'on the ground' so to speak. At the time of the interview Fatima was twelve. This incident happened about five years prior, but still annoyed her, and rightly so. This is also interesting because many times when the children talked about incidents of discrimination, they attributed it to being Somali or Muslim. In other words, they saw the discrimination in terms of their ethnicity, their religion, or their status as foreigners. Interestingly, this parallels how they self-identified. Here we see a 'moment of identification' in which Fatima recognized that she was being discriminated against purely because of the color of her skin.

There is another brief exchange involving Fatima that demonstrates her awareness

that in America, Somalis are lumped together with other Black people. The following field notes were taken during a language arts class in which they were reading *The Gold Cadillac*, a story about discrimination in the South in the 1950s.

As they are discussing racism in the 1950s in the South, Safia asks, “What if you’re Somali and go there?” Fatima tells her, “You are still colored.” The kids are completely engrossed by this story. They want to know all about racism and White people. They want to know if all White people were racist. Ayan says all White people were racist, but the teacher tells them - not all White people were racist. Later, on the playground, Ayan tells me that lots of White people are racist. (FN, 9/ 30/09)

The innocence of Safia’s question, “What if you’re Somali and go there?” is countered by Fatima who said, “You are still colored.” In other words, there was no escaping that in America you were ‘colored’ no matter what your ethnicity. Racial ascription trumps ethnic self-identification. This excerpt also highlights the students’ curiosity about racism and White people. Although many Somalis hold prejudicial views about African Americans, few have an accompanying awareness of the institutional racism and White privilege that undergird the American racial hierarchy.

The Gendered Effects of Racialization

Hypermasculinity.

Echoing prior research, there appeared to be a gendered effect to the pull of racialization as almost all the boys identified with Black cultural discourses, whereas only some of the girls did (Omar, 2011; Shepard, 2008). Indeed, when the elders talked about African American culture, equating it with the tropes of sagging pants, gangs, and violence, they were referring to African American *boys*. Their fear was that Somali boys were at risk for acting like African American boys. The discourse that equates African American males with hypermasculinity – as uncivilized, oversexed savages who need to

be controlled - can be traced back to the institution of slavery, the founding of the nation, and the ensuing establishment of White male privilege (Lei, 2003; Lopez, 2003).

Popular discourses continue to perpetuate the criminalization of the Black male body at the same time that we glorify Black athletes, musicians, and rap artists (Lopez, 2003; Hall, 1997). In fact, pernicious representations abound in the news of Somali men as pirates, warlords, and terrorists.²⁰ Somali boys must contest, modify, and in other ways respond to these negative discourses as they assert their own version of Somali American masculinity. Meanwhile, left unexamined are the hegemonic discourses of White masculinity against which Somali boys must compete for their very humanity.

“I want to be a white girl.”

Unlike their male counterparts, Somali girls did not elicit the concern of the elders and the community that they were acting like African American girls.²¹ My findings echo Omar’s (2011) research with Somali teenagers in Minneapolis and Australia in which he concluded:

There is general agreement among our participant youth that Somali girls’ level of imitation of mainstream students, including black Americans, is very limited and lesser than boys’ level of imitation, because “Somali girls are not like boys. Very few of them wear pants and...imitate black Americans” (a female youth from Minneapolis). (p. 130)

Perhaps the greater fear for the girls in this community was that if they became too Americanized they would not be considered Muslims.

For girls at Future Academy the idea of becoming Americanized was often

²⁰ I gathered newspaper articles featuring Somalis for two years during the research. The vast majority of articles were about terrorists, warlords, and pirates.

²¹ Hardly any mention is made of African American girls. With the exception of a note-worthy fight at North High School between Somali and African American girls, they were largely invisible (Lei, 2003).

articulated through the discourse of ‘acting like a White girl.’ This is illustrated in the following excerpt from my discussion with Fatima and Ayan:

F: People do not like to be individuals. They don’t like to be unique. They just want to be oh – *I want to be a gangster. I want to be a White girl. I want to be this. I want to be that.* (spoken in a mocking sing-song voice)

A: Change to good stuff.

F: *I don't want to be a V.* (spoken in a sing-song voice)

JL: What’s a V? -- OH!

F: A virgin.

JL: Gotcha. When you said that I was like – okay, whoops I think I figured that out. Yeah.

A: But then you know um you know how you know when they come here – you can change. I changed too, but then change to good stuff not like bad stuff.

F: Girls in this school, like eighth graders and seventh graders and sixth graders, they say, “I’m not a V. I’m not a V.”

JL: They say that?

F: Yeah and which they are!

JL: Why would they say that?

F: I don’t know. I’m like – I would never do that ever in my life. Ever!
(Discussion, 3/18/10)

Notice how Fatima juxtaposed “I want to be a gangster” and “I want to be a White girl.” She was implying that Somali boys try to act like gangsters (a word discursively linked to blackness), whereas Somali girls try to act like White girls. I would argue that each of these stances is connected to gaining power and visibility. Fatima used a mocking, sing-song voice to show her disapproval. Although she was criticizing her peers for having these desires, she may also have been intrigued by the possibilities of ‘acting like a White

girl.’ It is interesting how ‘acting like a White girl’ was discursively linked to not wanting to be a virgin. Acting White was therefore equated with the possibility of having sex.²²

Girls who wore tight sweaters or dated or even occasionally wore pants could expect to face ridicule at Future Academy from boys as well as other girls. In the following excerpt, Sara describes being teased for wearing pants to school one day.

One thing Sara mentioned is that she hates the teasing that goes on here. One day she wore pants to school because she couldn’t find a clean skirt. When she got here some of the kids said, “Look at the White girl.” The next day another girl wore jeans and she was teased too. (Discussion, 4/28/10)²³

Whereas boys’ sartorial choices were coded as Black and dangerous, girls’ sartorial choices were coded as White and sexually promiscuous. For girls these discourses struggled against hegemonic notions of the ideal White female (beautiful, slender, Christian, and chaste) (Lee, 2005) and the ideal Somali female (covered, Muslim, and chaste). In desiring both Whiteness and sexuality, or perhaps Whiteness through sexuality, the girls seemed to challenge some of the constrictions of being Somali and Muslim. It is important to remember that they are redefining what it means to be a Muslim girl in the U.S. context. I address the connections between being Muslim, wearing hijab, and sexuality in more detail in chapter four.

Concluding Thoughts about Racialization

I began this chapter by situating my findings within several broader discourses concerning racism, colorism, and the changing face of the U. S. racial landscape. From there I turned to the ways in which the Somali community drew on indigenous racial,

²² This differs from Bigelow’s (2010) research in which ‘acting like a White girl’ was associated with reading a lot, studying hard, and doing well in school.

²³ The batteries in my digital recorder died out during this discussion so I began taking notes.

ethnic, and religious discourses to contest the racialization of Somali youth. The bulk of the chapter was devoted to exploring how Somali youth experienced racialization ‘on the ground.’

I examined four major discourses: the significance students attached to skin color, their tenuous relationships with African Americans, their attraction to Black cultural discourses, and their experiences with racial discrimination. To illustrate the complexity of the racialization process I highlighted the identity negotiations of two students, Safia and Mohamed. The chapter concluded with a synthesis of the gendered effects of racialization best summed up by Fatima who criticized Somali boys for wanting to “be gangsters,” and Somali girls for wanting “to be White girls.” Analyzing the underlying hegemonic discourses of White masculinity and White femininity deserve further exploration.

The racialization of Somali youth is complex. Establishing charter schools and dugsis²⁴ in the hopes of encouraging Somali youth to maintain their culture and religion may mitigate some of the pressure to act White or become Black, but Somali youth are still immersed in the racialized discourses of American youth culture. Furthermore, according to Waters (2001), “the American myopia about ethnic differences within the black community makes the middle-ground immigrant identity unstable” (p. 308). In addition, many Somali youth take pleasure in identifying with Black popular culture. As Ibrahim (1999) reminds us, “choosing the margin...is simultaneously an act of investment, an expression of desire, and a deliberate counterhegemonic undertaking” (p. 365).

²⁴ Dugsis are Qur’anic schools that the students attended after school and on weekends.

Drawing on indigenous cultural, religious, and racial discourses may enable many of the youth, particularly boys, to engage in performativities of Blackness without seeing themselves as Black (Shepard, 2008). It is precisely this performativity, however, that confuses parents and elders in the Somali community, not to mention people in the mainstream. After all, how long can one ‘act Black’ without ‘becoming Black’ in a racially stratified society? Alternatively, we might ask: how long before Whitemainstream (Grande, 2004) society learns to accept diversity within Blackness? How might the process of racialization of Somali youth inform and compel those of us in the mainstream to step up our efforts to undo White supremacy?

CHAPTER FOUR: “What the hell is wrong with your hijab?”

(Safia, FN, 2/16/10)

Faced with the dialectically interlocking sentences that are constructible as “White men are saving brown women from brown men” and “The women wanted to die,” the postcolonial woman intellectual asks the question of simple semiosis – What does this mean? – and begins to plot a history. (Spivak, 1988, p. 297)

The Genesis of the Volleyball Team

I played a part in the gender wars whether I care to admit it or not. Not knowing how to leave at the end of the school year, I told the girls I would come back in the fall and coach their volleyball team. In the history of Future Academy, there had never been a single sports team for girls, although the boys had a basketball team and a soccer team. The girls felt that this was unfair and had been advocating for a team of their own. As a former basketball player, I was hoping the girls would choose basketball, but the majority wanted to play volleyball, a sport I knew little about. I agreed to be their coach because I liked spending time with them and I felt a sense of commitment to the community. In addition, as a female athlete and a feminist, I could not resist the opportunity to coach the school’s first-ever girls’ sports team. With the approval of the director, and a little help from the boys’ coach, Mustafa, the volleyball dream was launched.

As it turned out, the first day of volleyball practice was nothing less than pandemonium. I had not anticipated the level of excitement - even frenzy - that greeted me when I arrived at school the first day of practice. Apparently, the excitement surrounding the formation of the first-ever girls’ team was already disrupting the school day. Mustafa told me I had become quite a hero to the girls and I hadn’t done anything yet. When I entered the building, girls started surrounding me asking if they could be on the team. At that point I had no idea who had returned permission slips and who had not,

but it was essential to have their parent's permission to participate, especially as girls.²⁵

As soon as the last class ended girls started running to the bathroom to get ready for practice. Despite having spent several years at the school, I had not considered exactly how the girls would dress for practices. I assumed they would wear their hijabs and skirts as it is part of the implicit school dress code and does not seem to be a barrier to participation in gym class.

Unbeknownst to me or any of the staff, however, many of the girls had taken it upon themselves to bring sweatpants and tee shirts to school. They began changing in the bathroom from hijabs and skirts to simple head scarves, sweat pants, and tee shirts. Some of the girls began running around the halls – to their lockers, to find their friends, to assert their independence. The boys, reacting to all the excitement, began chasing the girls around the school. When the boys ran into the gym, the girls started screaming at them. They were not supposed to be seen by the boys dressed in these revealing clothes and they considered the gym to be a temporary safe zone. They ran shrieking into the large storage closet where we kept the balls and P.E. equipment. One boy told me that the girls needed to leave; the gym belonged to them. I kicked the boys out of the gym, but they were looking through the windows and it was impossible to protect the girls from their gaze. The boys continued to run and shout in the hallways and some of the girls were running in and out of the gym. Things were out of control.

Finally Mustafa stepped in to take control of the situation. The first thing he told the girls was they had better not tell their parents that he gave them permission to dress

²⁵ For religious and cultural reasons, it was unusual for girls to participate in sports in Somalia and in the refugee camps (Mutuli, 2007).

like this. In an aside he told me that he was afraid the fathers might hold him responsible and beat him. When I heard that, I wanted to make it clear that I had not given the girls permission either.²⁶ It was obvious that they had planned this surreptitiously. Mustafa told them that they would have to change in the storage closet from now on and that they could not leave the gym to get water or to go to the bathroom without covering up. That was the only way this was going to work or we would have to cancel volleyball right then and there. The girls protested vehemently. In fact, I was surprised by how vocal and assertive they were as they argued that they should be allowed to go to the bathroom and get a drink of water without having to put their hijabs and skirts back on. *'This was their volleyball team! It is the boys who should be kept away!'*

Although they had to accept Mustafa's conditions, they established the right to change from hijabs and skirts into more athletic clothes as long as they remained in the gym. After a bit of grumbling from the girls, Mustafa left and we turned to begin our practice. Earlier in the week we had attached the volleyball net to the gym walls with screws, but as soon as we began practicing the net fell down. Undeterred, we put the net aside and practiced volleying back and forth over a row of folding chairs...an inauspicious beginning, but a beginning nonetheless.

* * * *

I began this chapter with a vignette about the genesis of the girls' volleyball team because it helps me to plot the story of my research with the girls of Future Academy. I invoke Spivak because she reminds me to think beyond the colonial story that sees

²⁶ Looking back through my fieldnotes, I see that Fatima asked me on the last day of school if they would be able to have the gym to themselves so they could take off their hijabs, but I never followed through to see if this would be possible. Obviously I did not understand how important this was to the girls.

Somali girls as mere victims of a patriarchal culture and religion. I intend my story about gender to be subversive - to allow the girls' voices to break through the colonial and gendered discourses that often silence them; to challenge readers to think differently about gender norms and 'third world' cultures, not merely "reinscribe colonialism by calling for ethnic women to abandon their culture where it collides with Western feminism" (Huisman et al., p. 154). After all, it is not as though American women have a monopoly on gender equity. Those of us interested in promoting justice and equality for women have many things to learn from each other. Furthermore, in order to broaden our understanding of the patriarchal discourses embedded in Somali culture, we must interrogate the mutually constitutive discourses of xenophobia, Islamophobia, and sexism embedded in American culture (Lee, 2005; Bigelow, 2010).

And so I begin with some questions of simple semiosis: What does it mean that the girls wanted a sports team of their own? How do we make sense of the chaos that resulted when the girls took off their hijabs? How does the community act as a panopticon, an unseen but omniscient moral compass? How do Somali girls challenge, embrace, make sense of, or seek to change, the various gendered and religious discourses available to them? How might we see them, not as oppressed victims, but instead as cultural innovators (Kapteijns & Arman, 2004)?

In the following two chapters I attempt to answer the questions the volleyball incident provoked. As poor, "black" Muslims, who are also immigrants and refugees, Somali girls are subaltern in many contexts (Spivak, 1988; Zine, 2006; Khan, 2002). Nevertheless, by giving voice to their stories, I hope to shed some light on the personal

and thoughtful ways in which they are making sense of the frequently competing gendered and religious discourses available to them. In addition, I hope to elucidate the ways in which their gendered identities transcend binaries such as Somali/American, traditional/modern, oppressed/free, and instead show the ambivalent, hybrid nature of their emerging identities (Bhabha, 1994; Ngo, 2010).

In this chapter I explicate the ways in which the hijab is often misunderstood and misinterpreted as a symbol of oppression in the Western world. Then I explore the counter-narratives Somali girls employed to challenge the hegemony of Orientalist discourses surrounding the hijab (Said, 1979). Topics raised in this chapter foreshadow what is to come in the next chapter where I unpack some of the most salient gender discourses affecting the girls' lives. These include gender norms within the home and their plans for the future.

Before doing so, I briefly introduce five of the sixth grade girls who were my main informants. Importantly, I do not wish to speak in dichotomies or hierarchies, yet I struggle to describe the girls in ways that make it easier for the reader to come to know them. So, in broad strokes of my post-colonial pen, I loosely categorize the girls on a continuum from more traditional/resisting Americanization to less traditional/more Americanized (Lee, 2005) with the understanding that none of the girls fit neatly into one category or the other, and that neither was more desirable than the other. Furthermore, in highlighting the myriad ways in which they exceed those very categorizations - the ambivalences (Ngo, 2010) or incommensurable moments (Bhabha, 1994) - I hope to disrupt privileged notions of Western feminism, and show how the girls exhibit both agency and strength as they navigate their way into young adulthood.

The Sixth Grade Girls

In general, the more traditional girls were 1.5 generation immigrants who spoke Somali in their homes. They tended not to wear any make-up, did not date or talk about dating, and did not interact much with boys outside of class. They were quiet and did not draw attention to themselves. They did not engage significantly with American pop-culture (television shows, movies, music, Facebook, etc.), did not join the volleyball team, and held more gender-specific beliefs. Two of the more traditional girls were among the top students in the class. Several of these girls refused to participate in gym class on a regular basis. Fewer of these girls participated in my research, either because they chose not to, or because their parents would not let them.

In contrast, the more Americanized girls were born in the United States, spoke English fluently, wore make-up, and talked about and interacted with boys outside of class. As Muslims they said they were not allowed to date, but other students told me that some of these girls had boyfriends. In general, these girls were the leaders of the class; they were more vocal and more popular than the traditional girls. They were also among the top students of the class. These girls enjoyed many aspects of American popular culture including television shows, movies, and Facebook. They also enjoyed rap music and rhythm and blues, and could often be heard singing pop tunes. When *Twilight*, the popular teen romance film premiered, several of these girls purchased tickets online so they could attend. They also seemed up to date on the latest celebrity gossip. Most of these girls joined the volleyball team, and they seemed to challenge *some* of the more traditional gender norms within Somali culture.

Shamso

Shamso was an eleven year old, second generation Somali-American whose parents had lived in the United States for almost twenty years. She was average in size and had medium brown skin tone. She described herself as both Somali and American and was probably the most Americanized student in the class. Her family spoke English at home. In fact, Shamso said she did not speak Somali fluently. She lived in a large house in an all-White neighborhood and had three brothers and three sisters. As Shamso described it, “We’re the only Somali people within miles of that place.” Her father owned a transportation business and her mother ran a daycare out of their home. Her younger cousin, who I also interviewed, told me that Shamso’s family was rich; at the very least it appears that they were more financially secure than the majority of the students who attended Future Academy. Several other things set Shamso apart. During her interview she told me that she likes to swim, “because we are religious, but we’re not like – like - you can’t swim religious.” She explained that many Somali girls do not swim, or they wear a tee shirt and shorts, but that she wears a bathing suit and takes off her hijab. Her family celebrated Thanksgiving as well as Eid and she enjoyed lots of American fast food. Shamso did well in school, and was well-liked by the teachers. She and her siblings had transferred in and out of Future Academy, although currently Shamso was the only sibling at the charter school; all the others attended regular public schools. Shamso never spoke about racial or religious discrimination; in fact she felt that it was not a problem in Charlestown. She had very strong views about gender equity as we shall see more clearly in the next chapter.

Safia

Safia was also second generation, but as we learned in the previous chapter, described herself as Somali, not American. She was twelve years old and tall with a light brown skin tone. Because of her English fluency, vocal and assertive personality, and high level of engagement with American pop-culture, Safia seemed more savvy and Americanized than many of the other girls. She also strongly embraced some (though as we shall see, not all) American gender norms. Her parents were divorced and she lived with her mother and younger sister. I also interviewed Safia's mother since she worked as a paraprofessional at the school and spoke English well, although she required them to speak Somali at home. Safia was deeply religious; being Muslim came up often in her conversations. Her family lived in the poorest quadrant of Charlestown, but her mother was proud that she had purchased her own house and her own car (which was blue and had the Somali flag painted on it). Safia was intelligent and opinionated and frequently talked out in class. She was clearly the leader of the sixth grade class. Although she did well in school, she frequently earned detentions for her behavior, as well as occasional suspensions for fighting. Safia figures prominently in this chapter on gender and she was one of my favorite students.

Fatima

Fatima was a twelve year old, second generation Somali-American who presented herself as very traditional and religious. She was tall and had light brown skin. Her parents were divorced and she lived with her mother and two of her siblings. She had several older siblings who no longer lived at home. They lived in a house in a predominately White neighborhood. Fatima's mother did not let them play outside

because she considered it too dangerous. Her mother worked the day shift in a local factory so she could be there to cook dinner and care for the children after school. During the girls' discussion group, Fatima was the most vocal in terms of enforcing what she felt were appropriate behaviors and beliefs for Muslim girls. At the same time, Fatima was very interested in things like make-up, nails, and doing hair. In her interview, she confessed that she put some pictures of herself on her Facebook page even though her mother told her not to. She was also looking forward to getting a cell phone for her birthday. Having a cell phone and Facebook page did not fit the image of the other more traditional girls. Fatima also confided in me that her sister's boyfriend once texted her all night long, and other students told me that Fatima had a boyfriend. Several of her brothers had experienced personal difficulties. One was sent to live with an aunt and uncle in Colorado because he fought too much in school. Fatima claimed that he was only fighting to protect their sister because too many boys 'were hitting on her.' Another brother was unemployed. Fatima was quiet in school, was not engaged academically, and sometimes got in trouble for things like spending too much time in the hallways or swapping notes during class. She was a below-average student who was required to attend summer school due to her low performance on state-mandated tests. It seemed to me that Fatima might be at risk for dropping out of school.

Ayan

Ayan and Fatima were best friends. When they were in first grade they attended the same ESL classes at Kennedy Elementary School before enrolling in Future Academy. Ayan was a thirteen year old, 1.5 generation Somali immigrant who lived in Kenyan refugee camps before coming to the United States at age five. Ayan was on the

heavier side and had dark black skin. They spoke both Somali and Arabic in her home, but not much English. She was traditional in many ways and was deeply religious. She fasted every day during Eid²⁷ and hoped to become an Islamic scholar. Traditionally women did not study the Qur'an in Somalia so in this sense Ayan challenged the male hierarchy. She was intellectual and often carried around books on Islam and other religions. The other girls often looked to her for religious advice. She did not excel in school, but this was due in part to her limited English proficiency. She occasionally got detention for doing sneaky things like chewing gum or skipping class to wander the halls. Ayan had many responsibilities at home including cooking and cleaning and helping care for her three younger brothers. This likely interfered with her ability to do her homework. She held mostly traditional views regarding gender norms as we shall see in the following chapter. She also had several older brothers and step brothers, one of whom had special needs. Her father appeared to be ten or fifteen years older than her mother. He worked at the school and had two wives, and therefore two families to support.²⁸ Ayan frequently worried about her family's financial struggles. Like Fatima, Ayan was required to attend summer school due to her performance on state- mandated tests.

Hafsa

Hafsa was the only student that I interviewed who was born and lived in Somalia. She was twelve years old and came to the United States when she was eight. She was tall and slender with dark black skin, and was the youngest of ten siblings. Her family lived

²⁷ Ayan had her period and so was required to fast. Most of the other girls did not. However, many younger kids at this school fasted at least occasionally during Eid.

²⁸ I did not always understand the family situations. Many in the community glossed over the fact that some men had more than one wife. It was not something they felt comfortable talking about as they knew this was looked down upon by Americans, not to mention that it was illegal.

in a townhome in a mostly Somali neighborhood. They spoke Somali at home because neither of her parents spoke English. Her parents did not have jobs and did not know how to drive. They relied on her older brothers to drive them places. Hafsa was a below average student, but she was very well-behaved and seemed to enjoy school. She was always smiling and was well liked by everyone, but mostly hung out with other traditional girls. She did not listen to popular music, but said that she and her sisters sometimes played Somali music when they are cleaning the house. Although Hafsa was in many respects traditional, she defied the stereotype of not liking to play sports. Hafsa was a natural athlete; she enjoyed participating in gym class and would toss the football around with the boys or join a co-ed game of “Tip” on the playground. She was also one of the best athletes on the volleyball team.

Complicating the Hijab

The hijab, or veil, predates Islam, yet has become the single greatest trope of Islam in the Western mind (Ahmed, 2011; Zine, 2006). The reasons we are fascinated reveal more about the hegemony of Orientalist discourse than they do about the veil itself. Many Westerners, tainted by the legacy of Christian-inspired imperialism, see the veil as a marker of oppression. Indeed, part of the success of the colonial project was contingent upon convincing the West that Islam was the backward religion, its women in need of rescue from their brutal, dark-skinned men (Said, 1979; Willinsky, 1998; Ahmed, 2011; Spivak, 1988). Orientalist discourses continue to taint our political landscape as exemplified by the accidental burning of Qur’ans by the United States military in Afghanistan in 2012, by the fight over the proposed mosque at Ground Zero in 2010, and

by the horrific abuse of prisoners by U.S. soldiers at Abu Ghraib in 2004, to name just a few examples (Kumashiro, 2006).

It is no wonder, then, that we continue to assume that a Muslim woman who is wearing a veil has been forced to by her father or husband (Zine, 2006). The idea that a Muslim woman would *choose* to wear the veil simply eludes us. We must ask ourselves, however, why we care so much. Why are we so quick to assign the veil a negative connotation in the Western paradigm? Why are we so anxious for Muslim women to cast off their veils? All of this fascinates me because, having spent so much time immersed in the Somali community, I have come to see the veil as an arbitrary garment, a floating signifier if you will; analogous to, but the antithesis of, the bikini. Why is covering the head and body considered degrading, but exposing the body is not? Why is refusing to be a sexual object vilified, but catering to the male gaze exemplified? One could easily argue that the hijab-clad woman and the bikini-clad woman are merely different iterations of sexism; the one averting and the other attracting the hegemonic male gaze.

If we are truly a nation in which diverse religions and cultures are to be accepted and protected, then it is important to interrogate the underlying assimilationist discourse in our condemnation of the veil. What is it that we want – for Muslim women to cast off their veils so they can look and act more like ‘us’? Kumashiro (2006), drawing on Yoshino’s work, argues that we have progressed from requiring that one convert, to requiring that one pass. For example, it is now okay to be gay, as long as one acts or appears as though he or she is straight. Kumashiro cautions, however, that the mandate to pass is really a mandate to cover (i.e. to hide the fact that one is gay). Put another way, we cannot outwardly discriminate against someone for being gay, but we often

discriminate against them for acting or appearing gay. Or, to use a different example, we cannot deny a person a job because of her race, but we might not promote her because of her cornrows. The demand to cover is subtler than the demand to convert, but, Kumashiro argues, it can be just as debilitating.

If we are sincere in our commitment to honoring diversity then we must challenge the implicit norms at work in the demand to cover. Certain hairstyles and clothing choices, cornrows and hijabs for instance, can be seen as a challenge to Whiteman norms. What we really want is for people who are 'diverse' to assimilate so that hairstyles and clothing choices, to name just two examples, are close enough to Whiteman norms that *we* are not made uncomfortable. Extending Kumashiro's argument, I want to assert that underlying our condemnation of the veil is a subconscious preference for White, Judeo-Christian norms. Left unexamined, these norms lead to covert and overt acts of discrimination for nothing other than donning a headscarf.

Wearing the veil is customary in some Muslim countries, but not in others depending on historical and political circumstances. Some Muslim women consider it a religious requirement, but for others it is a personal choice. Some women come from countries in which the veil was required, but choose not to wear it in the United States in order to blend in culturally. Others come from countries in which it was not required, but choose to wear it here as an affirmation of their religious identity. For some Muslim women in the United States, wearing the veil is a counter-hegemonic act - a desire to assert their Muslim identity in an often hostile Judeo-Christian land (Zine, 2006). In this way, Islamophobia co-constructs emerging Muslim identities, in some cases precipitating and in other cases discouraging the wearing of the veil (Bigelow, 2008). Finally, some

women choose to wear the veil to resist the overt sexualization of women that is rampant in American culture. In this sense, wearing the veil is not simply a traditional, patriarchal discourse, but an act of resistance to the dominant misogynistic discourse. As such, the hijab can be construed as an act of resistance in accommodation (Ngo, 2002; see also Anyon, 1983) or “resistance through culture” (Shain in Archer, 2002).

Following the colonial period, scholars and historians predicted the widespread disappearance of the veil; now Islamic scholars are documenting its resurgence, not only in fundamentalist Islamic nations, but across the globe (Ahmed, 2011). Interestingly, in the United States, it is often veiled, religious Muslim women - not secular and unveiled Muslims - who are at the forefront of democratic efforts to promote social justice, including justice for women (Ahmed, 2011). Without a doubt the veil has taken on new meanings and new possibilities in the 21st century.

Somali Women and the Hijab

The majority of Somali women and girls wear the veil in the diaspora, but compulsory veiling was not always the norm in Somalia (De Voe, 2002; McMichael, 2002; Bigelow, 2008; Abdi, 2007). According to noted scholar Cawo Abdi (2007), veiling became mandatory in the late 1980s in Somalia, and later on in the refugee camps, due to the rising influence of the conservative Islamists, as well as the increasing threat of sexual violence brought on by the civil war. Furthermore, Abdi (2007) argues that mandatory veiling in the diaspora is indicative of the increased scrutiny and regulation of women’s bodies and behavior that was not the norm in the past. Needless to say, veiling has taken on new significance for Somalis living in the diaspora. As one Somali woman living in Australia explained it:

The Somali community here...is fresh from the civil war, they are made to succumb to Islamic faith and religious values predominate...there is a wave of fundamentalism in Australia. Maybe it is about preservation of culture because we are a minority culture here. Our traditional values are more prescriptive than they have ever been. I never remember people wearing thick veils. All of this is new for me. I started wearing a veil because of the anger and judgment of the community. I realized I was judged because I did not wear a veil. (McMichael, 2002, p. 181)

Although this example refers specifically to Australia, it echoes the research on Somali women in Canada and the United States, who likewise describe the pronounced emphasis on wearing the veil, and the added salience of Islam in their daily lives as they adjust to life in a non-Muslim land (De Voe, 2002; Bigelow, 2008; Oikonomidou, 2007; Huisman et al., 2011). Importantly, it also points to the scrutiny experienced by some Somali women who felt “the anger and judgment of the community” if they did not wear the veil (Abdi, 2007; Huisman et al., 2011).

Experiences with the veil are somewhat different for Somali girls since many girls do not have a personal history of non-veiling. They have grown up, whether in the refugee camps or in the diaspora, in communities in which veiling was the norm. I turn now to the practice of wearing hijab as articulated by the girls of Future Academy.

Somali Girls and the Hijab

During the interviews, I asked all the students if things were similar or different for boys and girls in Somali families and the topic that was brought up most frequently was the fact that girls had to wear the hijab. Importantly, this did not signify any sort of inequality or injustice to the students I interviewed, it was just an accepted part of being a Muslim girl. My findings are similar to those of De Voe (2002) who conducted her research with middle and high school Somali girls in St. Louis, Missouri. Hafsa was an

exception. She commented, “Boys are lucky they don’t have to wear hijab.” She added that when her sister runs track at South High School she gets hot running in hijab. For Hafsa, resentment over wearing the hijab, along with her enjoyment of sports, were examples of incommensurable moments in an otherwise traditional outlook. This ambivalence will become more apparent in the following chapter when I explore the girls’ beliefs regarding gender norms.

The rest of the girls I interviewed considered wearing the hijab to be an affirmation of their faith and therefore a sign of strength and moral character. They did not seem to resent the hijab, nor did they feel that being required to wear hijab made them somehow inferior to the boys. For many of the girls, being considered equal to boys did not imply being treated exactly the same. I have come to understand that this is a difference between notions of equality that circulate in the United States, and notions of equality that circulate in some Muslim communities (Ahmed, 2011).

During a joint interview that I conducted with Ayan and Fatima, I brought up the notion of equality between Somali men and women. The following is our exchange:

JL: Sometimes White people think Somali men ... don’t treat Somali women equally kind of, like they –

F: No! That’s Arabic people. Because they say women are not equal to men. Women are! I mean come on if it wasn’t for women they wouldn’t even be there!

A: Look at this. You know in the back, in the prophet Mohamed’s days, it says that you know this is one of his friends. The first day he became a messenger he said that everybody’s equal. You should treat everybody equal, like give charity, give like charity, even a smile could be charity you know? But then you can’t treat a person – like we’re girls. Right now mens- it’s actually some kind of culture it’s not a religion, it’s culture. And that culture’s very bad because in our Islam it doesn’t say that to treat woman like nothing.

F: The way you want to be.

A: And you can't capture a woman inside. It's against our Islam. I don't know where they got that from. That's not what our religion says. They're just trying to make our religion look bad. (Discussion, 3/18/10)

In this exchange it is important to note how quickly and forcefully Fatima refuted me when I said that some White people think Somali men do not treat women as equals. She interjected with, "No! That's Arabic people." She denied my narrative of Somali inequality and offered a counter-narrative of Arabic inequality. For Fatima and Ayan, equality between women and men is guaranteed in Islam. Furthermore, the fact that men in some Islamic cultures treat women poorly cannot be blamed on Islam, but on a cultural misinterpretation of Islam. Fatima was clearly aware that people in the West have the perception that Somali men do not treat Somali women equally, yet she was secure in her beliefs and not afraid to voice them. The same can be said for Ayan. She supported Fatima's argument by drawing on her knowledge of the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed. Despite many in the West continuing to read Somali girls as oppressed, Ayan and Fatima not only renounced that discourse, they drew on Islam to do so. My findings echo the extant research in which Muslim girls overwhelmingly desire to "achieve equality within Islam not without it" (Archer, 2002, p. 371).

As a public school, Future Academy could not and did not explicitly state that wearing a headscarf was a requirement for its female students. However, it was an implicit rule and was considered compulsory from a religious perspective. Consequently, every female student wore the headscarf, as did all of the Somali support staff. The one exception to this unwritten rule was the school nurse – a Somali woman in her twenties who came to the school about once a week from Minneapolis. She wore Western style clothes and did not wear the veil. Otherwise, every mother, grandmother, aunt, sister, and

friend that visited the school when I was there, invariably wore the veil. In fact, I cannot imagine any student being allowed to stay at the school without a headscarf. Not only would the principal have insisted on it, the Arabic teachers, who seemed to function as de facto religious leaders, would have insisted on it as well. It is also likely that other students, boys as well as girls, would have teased any girl who dared to show up without a veil, such was the strength of the community norm.

As a matter of course, the vast majority of the girls and all of the Somali staff at Future Academy wore the more conservative hijab²⁹ in addition to the simple head scarf. While the head scarf covers the hair, the hijab is bigger and covers the head, the shoulders, and the chest. All of the girls in sixth grade and below routinely wore the more conservative hijab, with the exception of one fifth grade girl. This fifth grader wore a loose fitting scarf draped over her hair and around her neck so that her hair was slightly visible underneath the scarf. I invited her to participate in my study, but her mother did not give her consent. It would have been interesting to hear her perspective as she was the only young girl to challenge ‘the proper way’ to wear the headscarf.

During their interviews, I asked each of the girls to tell me about wearing the hijab. The following excerpt is from my interview with Ayan, who is seen by the other girls as somewhat of an Islamic scholar. I found her analogy about the hijab helpful:

Hijab? Oh it's more parts of the beauty. Yeah it's more parts of our religion to cover our hair because it's beauty too. Hair is beauty more like our chests, you know? (Interview, 11/10/09)

²⁹ Although many Somalis routinely use the term hijab to refer to the head covering in general, the more specific usage refers to the larger garment that goes over the headscarf and covers the shoulders, chest, and back, leaving the entire face visible, but not the hair.

Ayan drew a parallel between a woman's chest and her hair, thereby giving me, the non-Muslim, a sense of the importance of covering. If I were to extend this analogy it would be equivalent to a Western, non-Muslim woman going out in public without a shirt. For some Somali women, not wearing the veil was akin to feeling naked.

Once the girls entered seventh and eighth grade, some of them wore the simple headscarf without the hijab. It seemed that once they became teenagers they were granted a certain amount of leniency as long as they covered their hair. I asked Safia about this in her interview as I was curious about the distinction between how the older girls dressed and how the younger girls dressed. The following was our exchange:

JL: I do notice some of the eighth grade girls, they don't wear this whole outfit (gesturing to her hijab), they just sometimes have just like a scarf...is that sort of different when you get older, or?

S: Well, it's because (getting emphatic) they're rude, disrespectful, they talk a lot. And let's say they don't have the basic family rules. They don't have respect your culture. They don't – their mom doesn't say that. Like for instance what I really hate about Nima is how that she thinks she's all that. She tries to hang out with the boys, and she takes off her khimar,³⁰ wears tight clothes just to show off her breasts. I really don't feel comfortable even being around her because I don't want any of that to rub off on any kid– just take off your khimar...and just go over to the church. Either you just get out of the whole school because it's really disturbing seeing little kids looking up to her and all the bad things she's saying. And I said to her one day, she never talks to me anymore when I said that. I said – either you're Muslim, or you're not....She just makes us look slutty and trash, just all the Islam culture. She just makes it look trashy. (Interview, 11/23/09)

It is obvious the disdain Safia felt towards Nima, an eighth grader who Safia accused of taking off her headscarf and wearing tight-fitting clothes. It is possible, however, that she felt some jealousy or envy towards her as well. It is not clear when Nima took off her

³⁰ Khimar is another word for a head covering or scarf.

headscarf. Perhaps she did this on the playground or during some other surreptitious moments away from adult supervision, as this would not have been tolerated by the administration. This excerpt illustrates the way the girls policed each other in their dress and behaviors. Safia said that she told Nima, “Either you’re Muslim or you’re not.”³¹ What it means to be Muslim was coded onto the girls’ bodies through strictly enforced sartorial rules. If you took off your headscarf, you might as well renounce your faith and join the church. We can see how quickly a Somali girl was accused of being slutty and trashy simply for removing her hijab.

If we look closely, however, even the strict rule about wearing hijab was complicated: Was hijab required or just a headscarf? How loosely tied could the headscarf be and still be considered proper for a Muslim girl? Despite Safia’s insistence, there was some latitude at the school and in the community at large, for girls to choose for themselves exactly how to wear hijab, particularly as they got older.

Importantly, the fact that all the girls were expected to wear hijab in school does not necessarily mean that all the girls routinely wore the hijab outside of school. All of the girls I interviewed, however, considered wearing it to be a religious requirement, not simply a school rule. There were just a few instances in the interviews in which the girls talked about not wearing the hijab. Shamsa volunteered that she did not wear the hijab when she went swimming, and Sara told me that she sometimes took off her hijab when she was driving in the car with her family. Otherwise the girls gave the impression that they wore the hijab anytime they were in public.

³¹ In this community there was not a sense of being a ‘good Muslim,’ or a ‘bad Muslim’; you were either Muslim or you were not. At the same time, what it meant to be Muslim in the U.S. was in a state of flux.

‘Opening Your Hair’

Although the rules surrounding hijab were fairly rigid, there were occasions when the girls loosened their hijabs and headscarves so they could quickly tighten their pony tail or fix their hair. This act of ‘opening your hair’ was subject to certain rules, but as always, rules are open to interpretation. It seems that ‘opening your hair’ represented a moment of temporary transgression, particularly in this community where uncovered hair was associated with being Christian and being ‘slutty’ – in short not being Muslim. During the girl’s discussion group, Safia, who seemed particularly intrigued by hijab-wearing transgressions, asked the other girls for advice about what to do when she needed to fix her hair.

Safia: Let’s talk about opening your hair. I want to know that. If you open your hair in public and like is it like, are you gonna get in trouble? Not walking around but like you’re trying to fix your hair really fast and your hair –

Ayan: Try to do that somewhere that people are – even if there’s girls around you can do that, but if there’s boys around try not to do that in front of them because –

Kowsar: But if it’s emergency.

Ayan: First of all, it’s gonna get attracted by boys, that’s how we believe because you know how hair it’s parts of your beauty on girls so and then boys are like, they just like the hair so they might cause attractive for boys and – (she is interrupted by another girl). (Discussion, 5/18/10)

I share this excerpt because it illustrates how the girls co-constructed the rules regarding how to be a Muslim girl. What it meant to be Muslim was not always clear cut in the messiness of everyday life in America. Ayan suggested that they try not to fix their hair in front of boys as it “might cause attractive for boys.” In other words, it is up to the girls to conduct themselves in such a way that the boys would not be attracted to them, perhaps leading to some type of unacceptable, sexual behavior. Kowsar softened that rule

by suggesting they could ‘open their hair’ in front of boys if it was an emergency. It is interesting that Shamsa did not reveal that she opens her hair when she goes swimming - perhaps she did not want the other girls to know.

The title of this chapter, *What the hell is wrong with your hijab?* is taken from a ‘hair-opening’ incident that occurred during the sixth grade language arts class. I was sitting in my usual spot in the back row and noticed that Fatima had pulled her hijab forward so that it was covering her face. She did this so she could reach under her scarf and discreetly fix her pony tail. This was when Safia blurted out, “What the hell is wrong with your hijab?” (FN, 2/16/10). I did not get to ask Safia why she made the comment, but it appeared that she was policing Fatima. Safia seemed to have little tolerance for girls who contested the modest Islamic dress code, but her lack of tolerance seemed to belie an underlying curiosity and ambivalence.

As a matter of fact the only other girl that I saw ‘open her hair’ like this was Safia herself. One day in language arts class she removed her hijab and untied her headscarf so that I could clearly see her pony tail as she reached back to fix her hair. This was rather startling as I had never seen a girl deliberately expose her hair like that. I looked around to see if there would be any reaction and noticed Maryan, the paraprofessional, carefully eyeing Safia as she fixed her hair. The other students either did not notice or chose not to say anything.

Given that American culture and media are obsessed with appearance, particularly when it comes to women, it was not surprising that some of the sixth grade girls were interested in their appearance. As the year progressed, I noticed more and more passing around of lip gloss and nail files amongst a small group of the girls. Fatima and Safia

were two of the girls most interested in make-up, nails, and doing hair, so it made sense that they were concerned about keeping their hair style fixed just right even though it was hidden beneath their hijabs. They were interested in ‘looking good’ and ‘being proper’ at the same time. I share these small incidents of ‘opening your hair’ because they signal the strict discourses surrounding the hijab and what it means to be a Muslim girl in this community, as well as the work done around the periphery as the girls reinforced and contested proper hijab-wearing etiquette. This was particularly salient as the girls approached adolescence and were increasingly interested in their appearance, the boys, and the temptations of becoming young adults in a Western-dominated society.

Taking off Hijab

I want to refer back to the volleyball story for just a moment to reflect on the girls’ desire to take off their hijabs in the context of the volleyball space. It is common practice for Somali women and girls to take off their hijabs when they are at home or when they are in an all-female space such as a beauty salon. These are considered special moments of female bonding and sisterhood (Zine, 2006). The volleyball practice was an ideal place to remove their hijabs because it was an all-female space, and it would facilitate their ability to play the game. I also think the girls felt empowered because they orchestrated not only the formation of the team, but equal rights to the gym,³² and permission to take off their hijabs. Although many of the girls removed their hijabs for practice, they all kept on the headscarf, so that their hair remained covered. Importantly,

³² During the volleyball season, the girls had the use of the gym on Tuesdays and Thursdays after school. The boys used the gym on Mondays and Wednesdays for basketball practice. Prior to volleyball, the boys used the gym all four days of the week. There was some resentment on the part of some boys; however, we had the full support of the administration.

the fact that they removed their hijabs for volleyball practice did not mean that they wanted to stop wearing hijab in other spheres of their lives.

As we have learned, one reason for girls to wear the veil is to prevent boys from being attracted to them. Wearing the veil is not just a religious symbol then, but a way to protect female chastity and by extension, the purity of the ethnic community. As child-bearers and child-rearers, immigrant women have traditionally been cast as cultural carriers. This is particularly salient in the diaspora where ethnic boundaries are in greater danger of becoming blurred. Women's bodies are therefore discursively and ideologically linked to notions of chastity, authenticity, and nostalgia for the homeland (Maira, 2002). As we saw in the case of Nima, taking off the hijab opened a girl up to charges of being sexually promiscuous. Maira (2002) aptly refers to this as the "virgin/whore complex" (p. 184). In other words, a girl who wore the hijab was considered a good girl, a virgin; and a girl who did not was considered a bad girl, a whore. There seemed to be no middle ground. Remember, however, that Fatima told me that a lot of the girls at the school said they were not virgins even though everyone knew that they were. Despite enormous community pressure to wear hijab and refrain from promiscuous behavior, the girls also felt pressure from their peers and American youth culture, to assert that they were not virgins. It is important to point out this ambivalence lest we are left with the impression that the girls wholeheartedly embraced the moral constrictions of being a Somali Muslim girl in the diaspora.

In one of our discussion groups, Shamsu brought up the fact that some Somali girls at North High School routinely took off their hijabs and 'transformed' themselves in the bathroom before school in an effort to fit in to the mainstream. All of the girls seemed

to know about this practice, and most of them conveyed, through their tone of voice, their disapproval. The following is our exchange:

Shamso: At my brother's school, which is North, there's these girls – particularly Somali girls – they like, they leave their house with

Fatima: Shuka³³

Warda: All those coverings and stuff.

Shamso: Skirts and stuff.

Bahcha: Yeah, and then they go in the bathroom and they change.

Shamso: And then they go in the bathroom and they transform like in 5 minutes.

JL: Into looking like an American --?

Shamso: No, not American like -

Safia: Prostitute.

Shamso: Well they like came to America right now, they think that's like the – no they didn't come to America right now, but they came and they don't know the –

Safia: Custom.

Shamso: Yeah, and then they – they go in and they put eye liner up all the way over here and then right here... And then these girls they just transform in like 5 minutes.

Bahcha: And then they come home and just

Shamso: And they come home and wash it... And then they put their stuff back on like nothing ever happened. My motto, me and my sister's motto is – you leave the house the way you're gonna come back and stay at school. (Discussion, 5/11/10)

The girls talked disapprovingly about the high school girls transforming themselves. We can see how readily the connection was made between taking off the hijab, wearing too

³³ Shuka is anything that covers the body, like a skirt or coat.

much make-up, and acting in a sexually promiscuous manner. When I asked if the high school girls were trying to look like Americans, the girls countered that they looked like prostitutes. They seemed to be engaging in boundary work, explicitly linking the hijab and modest dress with sexual purity, and the lack of hijab and immodest dress with sexual promiscuity.

It is important to point out my own bias in this excerpt. When Shamsa said, “They transform in like five minutes,” I asked, “into looking like an American?” The unspoken assumption that I made here was that the girls did not *already* look like Americans when they were wearing their shukas and hijabs. Dysconscious xenophobia is hard to recognize and even harder to dismantle. As we try to understand the actions of the high school girls, it is important to point out that they likely experience subtle and not so subtle hostility at the hands of their peers and teachers for dressing in hijabs and shukas, for being Muslim, and for looking and acting in ways deemed “un-American.”

One of the advantages of attending a Somali school is that there was no pressure to take off their hijabs. In fact, the pressure was in the reverse direction, to keep their hijabs on. This may serve the girls well in the future as research shows that the more ‘Americanized’ immigrant children become, the more likely they are “to engage in risky behaviors such as substance abuse, unprotected sex, and delinquency” (M. Suarez-Orozco, 2000, p. 8). Meanwhile, immigrant students who actively maintain the expressive aspects of their home culture (such as clothing, values, and worldviews) while learning the instrumental aspects of the host culture (such as skills and competencies) tend to do better academically and beyond (M. Suarez-Orozco, 2000).

During our discussion about wearing hijab, Safia brought up the subject of what

would happen if she were caught without her hijab in public.

Safia: If my daddy saw me with no hijab, oh my god, it would – the whole world would be upside down.

JL: If your dad saw you without hijab?

Safia: Especially in like at home or like in the front of my house, yes, but if it was in public...

Kowsar: Not just because of your dad, Allah is always looking at you.

Safia: Yeah but Allah's not gonna come down and slap me.

Shamso: He will after like when you be in the fiery pits of hell. (Discussion, 5/18/10)

Given her age, it was not unexpected that Safia interpreted the rule in terms of what her father expected, much as non-Muslim parents enforce rules about appropriate clothing choices, particularly with their pre-teen daughters. Safia stated that “the whole world would be upside down.” When Kowsar pointed out that it is not “just because of your dad,” that “Allah is always looking at you,” Safia expressed her fear that her father would slap her. This is especially interesting because Safia did not live with her father and had not lived with him for several years. The mere threat of her father’s reaction, however far removed, conveyed the strength of the community’s moral imperative to wear the hijab. In this way, the community acted as a panopticon, a ubiquitous source of power controlling the presumably docile bodies of the girls (Foucault, 1979).

The threat of corporeal punishment was also significant here because it was not uncommon in Somali culture for husbands and fathers to use physical punishment to enforce family rules and family honor. Safia’s mother, Hawo, told me:

My culture, if the man does not see any man in your life like a father or brother or somebody said – hey this is wrong. They think they can do whatever they want to

you. They think you are – they own you or stuff you know? (Interview, 4/21/10)

Although some men used force against women in traditional Somali culture, it is important that we do not reduce Somali culture to that one misogynistic discourse, nor talk about Somali culture as though it is static, unchanging over time. After all, the Department of Health and Human Services estimates that up to 25% of women in the United States are victims of domestic violence (<http://www.hhs.gov>), yet we do not equate American culture with physical violence against women. In fact, we often laud it as the epitome of women's equality.

Counter-Narratives: Somali Feminism

It is also important to recognize the strength and resilience of Somali women, to complicate the notion that they are monolithically oppressed. Safia's mother, Hawo, for example, came to the United States as a refugee when she was seventeen. She came on her own and did not speak English, yet she managed to get a job in a turkey processing plant. She worked thirteen hour days in order to save enough money to sponsor her family to join her in the United States. She eventually married and had two children. I quote an excerpt from her interview to give you a sense of her incredible courage as she fought to make a safe home for herself and her children. In this passage she is talking about her decision to divorce her abusive husband:

But I prayed you know. I was so frustrated and I don't know nothing what to do and in my culture when you get divorced it's says something wrong with you. All the oldest women when you ask their problem and how they solved it, they just told you that they cry in their pillow. I don't want to cry for the rest of my life! That is not something that my religion backed. No – that's wrong! And I will be by myself happy rather than with someone unhappy you know. I can't live like that. It's not good for my daughters because they are women. They will think this

life will be okay with them... And I said - that's it you know because he was violent to my kids. He wasn't that brave because he tried to be violent with me and I don't like somebody to hit me. Really I don't. It was one day he chased Safia, and I came from work and I was sitting in my living room and I was eating. And Safia come running and hide behind me, and he throw a shoes that was metal inside. The shoes is heavy and he hit me this side and there is a – a word says that when an adult get hurt he don't think good. It was so painful, my plate, my food, I throw it in his face! I told him if you hit me again I'm not gonna call any police. It's gonna be you and me! So you better watch it! I'll come find any ways to hurt you, you know. So don't hit me. And he never did again. (Interview, 4/21/10)

I found it quite remarkable that she stood up to her abusive husband and decided to divorce him, despite cultural and religious prohibitions against doing so. Like cultures, religions are dynamic (Ahmed, 2011), and we can see how Hawo drew on her own understanding of Islam – “that is not something my religion backed” – to justify her decision.

I could not help but think, as I listened to Hawo, that it was no wonder Safia was such a strong-willed and independent young woman. This challenged any preconceived notions I may have had that Safia acted the way she did because she had adopted American-style feminism. Her feminist personality can just as easily be attributed to her Somali mother, and, as we shall see in the next chapter, to her Somali grandmother. Perhaps it would be more accurate to describe Safia's behavior as a hybrid of Somali and American feminist discourses, “neither One, nor the Other, but *something else besides, in-between*” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 219).

Hijab as Gendered Performance

The hijab can be seen as a discourse or a text that signals a way to perform an identity as a Muslim girl. In her interview, Safia explained why she wore hijab and what

it meant about performing her identity as a Muslim girl:

Oh, wearing hijab is one of my religion's basic rules because – the god Allah he told us that you don't have to show your body to other people so it's better to cover up because the more you show people, my mom says when you're being quiet nobody can say if you're dumb... or smart because you're respecting the teacher. So it's better to cover up and be shy because you're girls. Don't cause men, they ---- they're men, they play soccer, they get dirty. But girls we stay at home, we read our Koran, we pray salat, we cook food. It's kind of our custom so - that's why I wear hijab. I'm not, I don't take it off and say – oh I'm this or I'm that. I have to stay with my culture. Either I'm Muslim or I'm not. (Interview, 11/11/09)

In this excerpt Safia gave several different reasons for wearing hijab. First it was a basic religious rule attributed to Allah. Girls should wear hijab to maintain modesty and not show their bodies to men. 'Don't cause men, they --' and here Safia hesitated. Like Ayan, she seemed to be insinuating that men could not be trusted sexually if they saw a woman without hijab or in revealing clothes.

Perhaps even more interesting are the explicit gender discourses Safia referenced in this passage. Men are men. 'They play soccer, they get dirty.' Girls, meanwhile, were supposed to be shy, devout, and domestic. 'We stay at home; we read our Koran; we pray salat; we cook food.' There were certain ways to perform a Muslim female identity. Either she followed these rules and was Muslim, or she took off the hijab and she was not. The hijab stood in for, became vested with, how to perform being a Somali Muslim girl. While these highly rigid gender roles may appear sexist to American readers, it is important to recognize the salience of Islam as they determined the extent to which they could 'take-up' American gender norms and still be Muslim girls. This passage is particularly interesting in light of the fact that Safia was an enthusiastic and talented member of the volleyball team. We must recognize the ambivalent nature of her evolving

identity as she made sense of idealized, and sometimes competing, Somali and American gender norms.

What is also interesting about this is that Safia was the most talkative and opinionated student in the sixth grade class. She dressed modestly, never really challenging the injunction to wear hijab and loose fitting tops and skirts, but she was far from shy or quiet, particularly when it came to interacting with the boys. In fact, she frequently teased and berated the boys in her class. Although Safia held onto an idealized notion of what it meant to be a Muslim girl, she also challenged many of those discourses in her day to day life.

Wearing the hijab enabled Safia to identify with her community and her religion, but also gave her the strength and freedom to contest unfair cultural norms, not only within Somali culture, but within the mainstream culture as well. Basit (1997) explained this as “a process of negotiation...whereby Muslim girls are able to win more freedom in certain areas, such as education, by behaving in accordance with parental wishes in other ways” (p. 436) such as wearing the hijab. In this way, the hijab provided a “symbolic reconciliation” (Ahmed, 2011, p. 123) between Safia’s commitment to being a Muslim girl and her desire to determine her own future as a member of the Somali community.

Hijabophobia

“You can’t wear this rag on your head here! This is America.” (words spoken to a Somali woman, in Ajrouch & Kusow, p. 85, 2007)

While I was conducting my research at Future Academy, an article appeared in an area newspaper about local Muslim women and the practice of wearing hijab. Several points made in the article are worth mentioning as they give a vivid sense of what the

local climate was like for Muslim women. In the article, local college women said that they were asked on a regular basis whether they were forced to wear the hijab. While they did not mind people asking about the hijab, they took offense at the implication that they were forced to wear it, and by extension, that they were somehow treated as second-class citizens by their culture and their religion. One of the women made the point that women and men are treated differently in Islam *and* in American culture; she suggested taking a look at the magazines in the check-out line to see the number of naked women compared to the number of naked men. Another woman drew on the quintessential American discourse of freedom of expression to justify her right to wear the hijab in the United States (Stolle, 2010).

Especially interesting for my research were the recollections of one woman who had attended South High School. She recalled being routinely spat upon, called names, threatened, and told to go back to her own country (Stolle, 2010). We must not underestimate the extent of the religious, sexist, and xenophobic harassment that hijab-wearing Somali girls and women endure in schools and communities throughout the United States. As a corollary, it is imperative that we work to dismantle the insidious notion that Muslim women who wear the hijab are monolithically oppressed.

Research on the education of Muslim girls in North American schools documents the extensive alienation and discrimination they experience, particularly for wearing the hijab (Zine, 2001, 2006; Sarroub, 2005; Bigelow, 2008; De Voe, 2002). Furthermore, research suggests that teachers often feel compelled to help immigrant girls overcome their supposedly oppressive cultures (Basit, 1997; Zine, 2006; Lopez, 2003). For Somali girls, this often takes the form of encouraging them, either explicitly or implicitly, to take

off their hijab. Several of the girls relayed experiences with this in the regular public schools they attended. The following is an excerpt from my interview with Fatima:

JL: Have you ever gone to any other schools?

F: Kennedy.

JL: Oh ok, what grade for Kennedy?

F: First.

JL: Did you like that?

F: No because they would tell me to take off my scarf.

JL: The kids?

F: No, the teachers and the principals. And they would tell me to take off my scarf and I would say – no! So then they convinced me to take it off, and they told me to wear a Halloween costume. They bought me a Halloween costume that like really shows my figure and they told me to take off my scarf, and when – and then my mom took me out of that school because my mom she didn't like it. They convinced me to take off my scarf! (Interview, 12/7/09)

According to Fatima, the teacher convinced her to take off her scarf which made her feel violated. It may be that the teacher was trying to prevent her from feeling left out of the Halloween festivities, or perhaps ensure that she was not teased by her peers. Regardless, this incident led Fatima to confide in her mother, who promptly took her out of the school and enrolled her in Future Academy. The salience of the memory of being coerced into taking off her hijab and putting on a revealing Halloween costume³⁴ demonstrates how damaging the demand to cover can be (Kumashiro, 2006).

Many of the girls described experiences with Americans staring at them and judging them simply for wearing the hijab. While staring might not seem particularly

³⁴While some Somali parents let their children trick or treat for Halloween, many of the kids at Future Academy told me that it was against their religion to celebrate Halloween.

cruel, the following excerpt from Fatima's interview reveals how deeply she was affected. In this excerpt we are talking about wearing the hijab.

JL: So do you think, if you, when you're out and about town do you feel like sometimes other Americans...don't understand it or?

F: Yeah they would just judge you for no reason and ask

JL: What would they do?

F: They would judge you and I would get annoyed and I'm like, I want to just beat the crap out of them sometimes. I just want to jump them because we don't – when somebody in their culture embarrasses us, they're embarrassing their culture, and showing that's a rude culture and something like that. And if they know how it feels to be a Muslim, they would actually like it because it's actually nice and it's like you get more peace from each other in Islam and how you greet each other, how you talk to each other in such nice ways, it's actually nice, but they don't understand that. Instead of asking, they talk behind your back and give you evil looks. (Interview, 12/7/09)

Instead of asking her questions about Islam, people talked behind her back and gave her evil looks. This angered Fatima so much that she wanted to “beat the crap out of them.” She refused, however, to internalize the negative discourses that denigrate Islam, and instead asserted that the people who judged her for wearing the hijab were the rude ones. Furthermore, she offered a counter narrative that Islam is a peaceful religion that people would actually like if they understood it better.

As a result of the ongoing ostracism they experienced, some girls were made to feel that they do not belong here, in America. Keep in mind that many of the participants in my research were born in the United States and are American citizens. The theme of belonging came up numerous times in the discussion groups. At one point I asked the girls what it is like living in Charlestown. Kowsar, a twelve year old, second generation Somali girl, chimed in first:

There are people like when you're just driving or when you're just out places, they just look at you and they act like you don't belong here or this is not your country or this doesn't belong to you. Well it doesn't belong to them either, it's for everybody. It's created for everybody. (Discussion, 5/11/10)

Importantly, Kowsar refused to be victimized and talked back to the discourse that sought to exclude her on the basis of wearing the hijab. She stated, "Well it doesn't belong to them either, it's for everybody. It's created for everybody." Kowsar's understanding of the United States was that it is a land of immigrants; a land created for everybody. Muslim girls should not be made to feel that they do not belong here just because they wear the hijab. Drawing on distinctly American discourses, the hijab became a point of resistance to xenophobic and Islamophobic discourses that sought to exclude Somali girls from their own country.

Hardening Your Religion

Interestingly, it was not just residents of Charlestown who made the girls feel as though they did not belong in the United States; sometimes Somali religious leaders made them feel the same way. According to the girls, their religious leaders repeatedly cautioned them to 'harden their religion' since this was not a Muslim country. Safia explained it to me like this:

You know like when you're in Somalia, there's no distractions. I know there may be gangs, but let's just say that it's not as bad as America so when – like all their clothes. I'm just telling you now, like all their clothes. You'll never see a store with booty shorts, or stuff like that. So there's no distractions. So when you come to America they force you to harden your religion because a lot more distractions – there's a lot more prostitutes and all on the streets... They want to enforce it better here than when there. (Discussion, 5/18/10)

According to Safia, Somali religious leaders worried about the distractions of American culture - exemplified by booty shorts and prostitutes. They wanted Somali children to

harden their religion through such things as modest dress and attendance at dugsi, so they did not become distracted by the vices and sexual promiscuity of American society. Perhaps this is akin to middle-class families who enroll their children in piano and karate lessons, soccer and baseball leagues; keeping them busy so they do not have time to get into trouble. Like Islamophobia then, misogynistic discourses in American society influenced and co-constructed the trajectories of the religious identities of Somali girls. What may seem like traditional fundamentalist Islam may in fact be a new and purposeful “hardening of the religion” in reaction to the sex and danger of American youth culture. In other words, wearing the veil is not simply a ‘harkening back,’ but a ‘moving forward.’

Kowsar also relayed how some of the elders told Somali children that they had to stick to their religion since this was not their country. The implicit message was that America was not a land for Muslims - that it was not, and never would be, their country.

Kowsar: Yeah...there are Somalis that say – you’re in America you have to stick to your religion. This is not your land or stuff even if -

Shamso: It’s a melting pot. It’s everybody’s land.

Kowsar: Even if you were born here they say that you have to stick to your religion...

Safia: It’s not our land. We have to leave as -³⁵

Ayan: That is true. We can stick to our religion.

Kowsar: Yeah you have to stick to your religion even though you can stay and do stuff, but then you still have to follow all of the directions and stuff. They say that – it’s not your land. This is not what you’re supposed to be doing and stuff.

³⁵ Safia seems to be suggesting that this was not their land. She said, “We have to leave as” and then is cut off. I am making an educated guess that she was about to say –“soon as the war is over,” but of course I cannot be sure.

Still...people who were born here, they still tell them that. Even if you were born here, you can stick to your religion *and* be a part of America (emphasis hers). (Discussion, 5/18/10)

What seemed to trouble Kowsar was that some Somali elders thought that being American and being Muslim were mutually exclusive. Kowsar, who was born here, resented when they told her that this was not her land and “this is not what you are supposed to be doing.” Some Somali elders believed that Islam would provide the anchor that would prevent unwanted Americanization. Importantly, however, Kowsar saw a way to “stick to her religion *and* be a part of America.” We can see the confidence with which Somali girls such as Kowsar assert their ability to navigate American culture while maintaining true to their religion. It would be wise for us, as educators and fellow citizens, to nurture their abilities to do so.

Conclusion: There is Nothing Wrong With Your Hijab

For the most part, Somali girls at Future Academy considered the hijab to be a religious requirement and a community expectation. They did not see it as a symbol of oppression, nor did they feel that it precluded them from being considered equal to boys. In many cases, in fact, it seemed to provide a source of strength and freedom from which they could embrace, contest, negotiate, and challenge sometimes competing American and Somali gender norms, all the while remaining firmly ensconced in their families, their community, and their religion. At times they subverted the discrimination they experienced, and further justified their right to wear the hijab and to practice their faith. Wearing hijab often provided the anchor the girls needed to resist the negative influences of American youth culture. Ironically, this may lead to better educational and emotional outcomes in the long run.

Although Abdi (2007) presents a strong argument that reimagined conservative practices, such as veiling, are indicative of the increased scrutiny and regulation of women's bodies and behavior, my data show that the girls in this community embraced the veil and challenged stereotypes at the same time. They outperformed the boys in school, earning higher grades and more academic awards. They gave inspiring speeches at graduation and were planning their futures as doctors, wives, and mothers. On top of that they successfully advocated for their own sports team. I would not underestimate their determination, their inner strength, and their sense of justice as girls. In fact, their successes might be seen, not in spite of the fact that they wore hijab, but precisely because they did so.

CHAPTER FIVE: “Power to the girls!”

(Shamso, Discussion group, 5/18/10)

Many times she wished to speak, to act, to protest, to challenge. The odds were heavily against her. She hid her feelings; she hid her truths; she concealed her fire; but she kept stoking the inner flame. She remained faceless and voiceless, but a light shone through her veil of silence. And though she was unable to spread her limbs and though for her right now the sun has sunk under the earth and there is no moon, she continues to tend the flame. The spirit of the fire spurs her to fight for her own skin and a piece of ground to stand on, a ground from which to view the world – a perspective, a homeground where she can plumb the rich ancestral roots into her own ample mestiza heart. (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 45)

This evocative passage from Anzaldua reminds me of the struggles of women everywhere. It reminds me that the challenges we face as women bind us and make us stronger. It also reminds me that, despite our commonalities, we often draw strength from our own ancestral roots. As a feminist, I will always stand on the side of possibilities and opportunities for girls and women. As a post-colonial feminist, however, I do not presume to speak for ‘third world women’ about what that might mean, but rather to choose to learn from and with them about the endless possibilities of ‘transnational feminisms’ (Lopez, 2003). It is in that spirit, the spirit Anzaldua evokes, that I re-present the stories about gender that the sixth grade girls chose to share with me as we sat munching on cookies, talking and laughing, arguing and clarifying, trusting (I hope) that my re-telling will honor their humanity.

* * * *

Kowsar: When we were outside me and Warda were waiting for our tests, all the boys they were saying that girls cannot throw basketballs.

Warda: And then we-

Kowsar: They said that we can’t throw basketballs; that we’re not strong enough – that we don’t know how to play basketball, so why don’t you guys just leave. And then we went, and then Warda threw it and then she made a basket, and then

I went to go throw it and I made a basket-

JL: Oh yeah!

Kowsar: They were like, “Uh uh uh. I didn’t mean to. Oh I didn’t think you could make it.”

Warda: Yeah, they were stuttering. It was so hilarious. Now what? Now what? And then they were like – Now what you know? And I kept on going and going, and they were like, “Damn, you are good.” And then it was Kowsar’s turn. She kept on going and going just like me, and I’m like – oh so you gotta say some’in. And they were like, “No. You’re good.”

JL: Good job you guys.

Shamso: Power to the girls! (Everybody cheers and laughs) (Discussion, 5/18/10)

I begin this chapter with a brief story Warda and Kowsar shared during the girls’ discussion group because it illustrates the ways in which Somali girls and boys co-created gender norms within this community, sometimes in opposition to each other and sometimes in tandem. Part of the story points to the history of gender norms in Somalia in which girls seldom participated in sports (Mutuli, 2007). It also points to the teasing that went on between boys and girls around the girls’ perceived lack of ability and interest in sports. At first the boys thought the girls were too weak to shoot a basket. Quickly, however, they acknowledged that the girls could make baskets and were almost apologetic saying, “I didn’t mean to. I didn’t think you could make it.” They even offered up, “No, you’re good.” How quickly the boys went from telling the girls to leave the basketball court, to acknowledging that they were good at shooting baskets. I think too often I paid attention to the teasing and bickering between the boys and girls and less attention to the moments like these when they challenged and learned from each other.

In their retelling, Warda and Kowsar took up a feminist discourse (that I quickly supported with my ‘Oh yeah!’ and ‘Way to go you guys!’) sharing how they proved to

the boys that girls can shoot hoops. Indeed, all the girls cheered and laughed when Shamsó shouted out, “Power to the girls!” But what that means is decidedly complicated for many of the girls in this community. Does it mean (as it does for me) equal access to sports? That girls can be powerful and strong? As we saw with the formation of the volleyball team, many of the girls were interested in being able to play sports, but pushing up against that was the cultural norm that girls should stay inside and not get dirty. How far can you challenge gender norms and still be considered feminine enough to satisfy cultural norms?

To illustrate my point, I want to share a formative memory from my youth. As a young girl, I loved football. My dream was to be the first female coach in the NFL. The Halloween of my fourth grade year I dressed up as a football player, complete with helmet and shoulder pads. I felt invincible. But that evening, as I went about trick or treating, everyone assumed I was a boy. I guess I should have seen that coming. I felt humiliated, but was relieved that no one could see my crestfallen face beneath the helmet. It goes without saying that my dream of breaking the glass ceiling in the NFL died that night. I share this memory because it reminds me that for Somali girls, preserving and contesting gender norms might be full of contradictions and vulnerabilities that we can only imagine.

In this chapter I explore the “considerable autobiographical work” (Bartels, 2005, p. 24) the girls engaged in as they deftly wove together various American, Somali, and Muslim discourses. I demonstrate how they asserted their agency and individuality while remaining firmly committed to their faith, their families, and their community. Continuing to draw on post-colonial, feminist, and critical theories, I re-present the girls’

stories in ways that challenge Western readers to see beyond the hubris of the Western gaze; to see the girls as creative, confident, and resilient – sometimes challenging and sometimes defending traditional Somali gender norms, often through the prism of Islam.

Importantly, however, what it means to be Muslim is not monolithic and the girls interpreted in their own ways the extent to which being Muslim impacted their lives and their plans for the future (Berns Mc Gown, 1999; Bigelow, 2010). As Khan (2002) cautions, “religion, which is seen in ‘normal’ societies as one of many institutions, is seen in Islamic societies as the overriding influence, feeding Orientalist assumptions about the role of religion in the lives of individual women” (p. 4). I take a tenuous position then in which I want to honor the importance of Islam in the lives of my participants, yet I do not want to exoticize them. Put another way, I want to theorize about how the girls are negotiating gender norms, where being Muslim is understood not as prescriptive, but generative.

Making sense of the interplay of American, Somali, and Muslim gender norms is complicated on several levels. First, gender norms vary within any culture or religion and are always in a state of flux. For the sake of argument, however, I draw on essentialized discourses (commonsense understandings of ‘American gender norms’ and ‘Somali gender norms’) in order to make some distinctions. This is further complicated by the fact that Somali gender norms and Muslim gender norms are often intertwined, but are not synonymous. Second, I assert that American gender norms (often equated with equality for females) sometimes reinforce traditional male interests, desires, and traits. For example, we might admire the woman who makes it in the corporate world, but not the man who stays home to care for his children. If American gender norms are primarily

equated with women being able to do anything men can do, but not the reverse, then the things that women have traditionally done (and may wish to continue doing) are devalued and patriarchy is inadvertently reinforced. Finally, I assert that American gender norms are not universally better or more desirable than Somali or Muslim gender norms.

To say that American or Western gender norms are not universally better than Muslim gender norms is to challenge some of the underlying assumptions upon which we make sense of the world. Basit (1997) compared British teachers' notions of freedom for adolescent girls to Muslim parents' notions because the teachers were concerned that the girls were oppressed at home. British teachers associated freedom for girls with the right to stay out late, to have a boyfriend, to choose where to go, and to choose what to wear. Muslim parents defined freedom in terms of the right to receive an education, to make friends, to go out when necessary, to have a career, and to get married. I would argue that the lists, while not comprehensive, challenge the idea that Western notions of freedom are inherently more worthy than Muslim ones. Furthermore, and significantly, the Muslim students in Basit's (1997) study, "while envious of the freedom that the English girls had, attributed it to the fact that English parents did not care about their children" (p. 432). From a Muslim girl's point of view, the British notion of freedom is not universally desirable. We must be mindful not to presume that Muslim girls need saving.

In addition, Western notions of freedom and equality rest on a discourse of individualism, whereas Somali and Muslim value systems often prioritize family and community. According to Berns McGown's (1999) landmark research, most Somalis "do not want to lose, or to have their children lose, this sense of responsibility for others, which they [see] as being in conflict with the total freedom that they believe comes with

Western individualism” (p. 213). So, for example, the fact that a few girls in my research could not participate on the volleyball team due to responsibilities at home might be seen from an American perspective - grounded in individualism - as unfair, particularly if the same expectations do not apply to boys. From a Somali perspective, however, the needs of the family sometimes eclipse the needs of the individual.

We might ask at what point individual wants and desires should take precedence over family and community needs. Is individual freedom more important than family and community responsibility? These are important questions that challenge the hegemony of Whiteman discourses. If we take seriously the call to dismantle hegemonic ways of thinking, we might find new perspectives from which to view the world, new ground to stand on.

In the first section of this chapter I examine the discourses the girls and the adults in the community used to talk about gender norms within the home such as: who was the provider, who was the head of the household, and who was expected to do chores. In the second section I unpack the discourses the girls used to talk about their future plans, including education and careers, and marriage and children.

Domestic Gender Norms

Traditional Somali culture, which is mostly pastoral, has been described as patriarchal, with men serving as the provider and head of the household, and women performing the bulk of the childcare, cooking, and other domestic work (Shepard, 2008). Some scholars have challenged the rigidity of this portrayal and assert that as pastoralists, Somali women engage in extensive physical work such as “constructing and dismantling huts [and] tending livestock” (Abdi, 2007, p. 185; see also Berns McGown, 1999). Abdi

also asserts that Somali women have a certain freedom of movement and autonomy given their nomadic lifestyle that is often overlooked by Western academics. In urban areas, many women cared for the home and the children while their husbands worked, but even then “Somali women...continued to work, running cottage industries such as making baskets, selling foodstuffs in the market, operating businesses, or working in more formal settings” (Abdi, p. 4). Nevertheless, the idea that Somali culture is extremely patriarchal prevails in mainstream and academic discourse.

Complicating the picture is the fact that Somali culture has been in an accelerated state of flux since the civil war. Many men either fled or were killed during the war leaving women as sole providers and heads of households throughout Somalia, the refugee camps, and the diaspora. This fact goes largely unacknowledged (Abdi, 2007; Berns McGown, 1999). Concurrently, in the power vacuum left by the war, there has been a rise in the influence of a more conservative version of Islam in Somalia and the diaspora that has increased the regulation and scrutiny of women (Abdi, 2007).

Abdi (2007), whose research was conducted with women in refugee camps and the diaspora, and who, as a Somali woman, has some ‘homeground’³⁶ on which to speak with authority, argues that the rise in influence of the Islamists has caused gender norms to become more restrictive than they were before the war. My research with elementary aged girls finds an increased emphasis on religion, but importantly, with a shift in thinking about gender norms towards greater gender equity. All of this complicates what we mean by Somali gender norms. However, the general idea persists that choices and

³⁶ I am referencing the quotation from Anzaldua (1987, p. 45) used at the beginning of the chapter.

opportunities for girls in traditional Somalia culture were limited when compared to Western standards.

Two signature aspects of Somali culture - that the man is the head of the household and that he must provide for his wife - are often attributed to the teachings of Islam. We have seen that this dynamic is changing due to the war, with many women forced to take on the role of provider and head of the household (Abdi, 2007; Berns McGown, 1999). One interesting consequence has been the increased role women have taken on as the religious teacher in the home. This has led to more women reading and studying the Qur'an, something they did not typically do in Somalia. Somali women are now able to consult the religious texts themselves in order to determine how or to what extent to integrate Western norms into their daily lives (Berns McGown, 1999).

As part of my research I was curious how American gender discourses, such as women's rights, were impacting Somali families. I asked several of the elders – all men – if they thought women's roles were changing within the family. Although my primary focus is on the youth, it is important to understand the home context in which youth are forming their attitudes and ideas about gender norms. The following is my exchange with Siyad:

JL: How are women's rights and women's roles in the home and things, how does that affect Somali culture? Maybe seeing their role as stronger or?

S: You know we are Muslims. I will talk from my point of view. Always I have to have the upper hand in the house. It's my culture. Although I have a good response for my wife and I'm married for about 30 years...but always the house must be under my control. That's the tradition of Islam. And we have to have that kind of a style in life if you are going to succeed. Men has to have the upper hand in our culture. And we have to implement that style. Not implement – it's mandatory for Islam. We have to do it. There must be respect between the wife

and the husband, but always man will have the control of the house. Yeah, he will have the upper hand. And I will insist that while I'm in America! We have to do that because we cannot break the laws of our Islam, our religion.
(Interview, 6/29/10)

The idea that the man or husband was the head of the household was normative in this community and was based in cultural traditions and Islamic teachings. Siyad interchanged the discourses of religion and culture, at one point stating, "It's my culture," and at another "That's the tradition of Islam." From a Somali perspective it is difficult to distinguish cultural discourses from religious ones. For many Somalis, being Muslim is inextricably bound up with being Somali. Importantly, justifying a cultural norm (the man is the head of the house) on the basis of religious grounds (it is written in the Qur'an) makes it seem irrefutable. The fact that Siyad *insisted* on having the upper hand belies the threat that being in America brings to this patriarchal relationship.

Ahmed, a respected lawyer and judge in Somalia, seemed to have a more realistic view of the tensions that were arising between wives and husbands because he was sometimes called upon to settle marital disputes. He recognized the impact that the women's rights movement and women's access to jobs were having on marital relationships, but stressed that divorce should be avoided and the family preserved:

The head of the family is the husband in our country. There are old traditions in all cultures. When the family comes here, the wife learns about civil rights, and other rights. There is access to jobs. You can see some conflicts [between husband and wife]. The *man* is supposed to provide necessities and the *wife* is supposed to cook, clean, and assist him... There are good chances here that we didn't have [back in Somalia]. American culture will influence more and more. We want our young people to take the good cultures, the good behavior: study, work, have good relations with other people, but preserve some good Somali cultures too. (Italicized emphasis mine) (Interview, 12/08/09)

Ahmed started off by saying that the husband is the head of the household and used the

hierarchical terms ‘man’ and ‘wife’ to talk about men and women. He conveyed an understanding that conflicts were arising because ‘old traditions’ were being challenged by Somali women in the context of the United States. Importantly, the notion of being the head of the household was discursively and ideologically linked to being the breadwinner. Ahmed said, “The man is supposed to provide necessities” and “the wife is supposed to cook, clean, and assist him.” He was describing the way things were, not necessarily the way he thinks things will continue to be, as he also acknowledged that American culture will influence gender dynamics more and more.

The elders were not the only ones to put forth the Islamic ideal that the husband was supposed to be the breadwinner and provide for his wife. Safia raised this issue in the girls’ discussion group as illustrated in the following excerpt:

Safia: It’s like when you get married it doesn’t matter if the girl, if the female spouse is a millionaire. If she’s a millionaire and the male spouse is a taxi driver, he still has to provide for her. She doesn’t have to clean the house; she doesn’t have to have children....

Shamso: Really??!!

Kowsar: No, if she asks for like money – he has to give it to her.

Bahcha: What?!

Safia: Basically he has to provide for her because she’s the girl. We have children; we clean the house every day so if he asks for – we do more work in their lifetime than they’ll ever do. (Discussion, 5/18/10)

This excerpt illustrates some of the confusion surrounding the Islamic ideal that the husband has to provide for the wife and what that means in reality. Safia said that even if the wife was a millionaire and her husband was a taxi driver, he still had to provide for her. Kowsar supported her and added “if she asks for money... he has to give it to her,”

but Bahcha asked incredulously, “What?!” Safia initially set up an expectation that the wife does not have any responsibilities; she does not have to have children or clean the house. Shamsa expressed her disbelief, “Really?!” as this seemed far removed from the reality of their everyday lives. A moment later Safia contradicted herself and said, “We have children; we clean the house every day.” She pointed out that women do more work around the house than the men will ever do.

The girls seemed to be grappling with the idealized discourse that Somali men are supposed to provide for their wives, and the reality that women contributed in enormous ways to the survival of the household. Interestingly, there was no acknowledgment that in a significant number of households in the community, women were the primary bread winners and the heads of the household. Safia’s and Fatima’s mothers, both of whom were divorced, worked long hours in order to provide for their families. Fatima told me that her mother sometimes got up at four in the morning to make their dinner in advance, so she only had to reheat it when she got home from work. Safia’s mother had saved enough money to purchase a car and a house. The accomplishments of these Somali mothers, who came here as refugees, ‘the odds heavily against them,’³⁷ provide a counter-narrative to patriarchal discourses.

When the girls talked about gender norms such as domestic duties and chores, they drew on a variety of Muslim, Somali, and American discourses to explain their beliefs. Some of the more traditional girls, all of whom were 1.5 generation, believed that there were different chores and expectations for Somali boys and girls because boys were stronger than girls. Most of the other girls, all of whom were second generation, strongly

³⁷ I am referencing the quotation from Anzaldua (1987, p.45) used at the beginning of the chapter.

contested this idea. We had a lively exchange during our second discussion group that is worth quoting at length:

Ayan: Like right now sometimes a girl can't do what boys can do. And most girls can't do what boys could – boys can't do what girls can do because sometimes if they like if something like's so heavy you know like in our family I don't pick up heavy stuff or that because if I try to do it – you think you're so strong let's see you do it yourself!

Kowsar: Can I add onto it?

Safia: It's not fair because -

Kowsar: They always say that boys are stronger than girls...

Safia: But it's so a lie.

Kowsar: That's so not true.

Hafsa: They're stronger here (points to her arm).

Ayan: We're stronger here (puts to her heart).

JL: What do you think about that?

Kowsar: I don't know it depends you can't just say girls are not stronger than boys. There are people -

Hafsa: Yes they are. Boys are stronger.

Ayan: Boys are stronger in the muscle.

Bahcha: Just because they pick up things?!

Shamso: Oh wow!! SEXIST!!!! Maybe they have healthy muscle function doesn't mean they're stronger.

Ayan: We're stronger here (again points to her heart).

Shamso: No, no, no! (lots of talking at once)

Hafsa: Boys *are* stronger. Girls are girls. Boys are boys.

Ayan: Jill, Jill. (talking over the others) No, seriously you can see it. Boys are stronger in the muscle place and girls are stronger –

[Lots of commotion and talking]

Shamso: Cause they have healthy muscle function, but LISTEN!

Bahcha: Yeah, but girls can get strong too.

Kowsar: Yeah!

JL: Shamso what do you want to say about it?

Shamso: I think that not all boys are stronger. Girls just - this has been here so long that girls just go with it. They can beat boys...like sometimes. Like if you could really try you could at soccer and stuff. Yeah, "You suck. You suck." And then if you beat them. "Oh I was just...ah ah." (Discussion, 5/18/10)

We can see in this excerpt that the more traditional girls such as Ayan and Hafsa thought in terms of gender dichotomies. Hafsa said, "Girls are girls. Boys are boys," and they both asserted that boys were stronger in the muscles and girls were stronger in the heart. This is especially interesting given Hafsa's natural athletic ability and the fact that she sometimes crossed gender barriers in gym and on the playground to play football and basketball with the boys. Her espoused views regarding rigid gender norms seemed to be in contrast to some of the discourses she enacted in her daily life. This points to the ambivalence of the identity work Somali girls engaged in as they made sense of the various gender discourses regarding sports and physical capabilities that emanated from their lived experience and home culture, and the discourses of gender equity that circulated in the mainstream culture.

Importantly, Shamso did not cast this discussion in terms of just Somali girls; she stated, "Girls just – this has been here so long that girls just go with it." She was critiquing the discourse that boys are stronger than girls from a universal perspective. In other words, it is not just Somali girls who succumb to thinking that boys are always stronger, hence more capable at sports than girls. This happens to many girls. The suggestion that girls can beat boys at soccer sometimes, if they really try, suggests a less bifurcated understanding of gender norms. Shamso, Kowsar, Safia, and Bahcha resisted

Ayan's and Hafsa's gendered understanding of strength and athleticism, saying things like, "It's so not true." "That's not fair." We might attribute this feminist discourse to the girls' taking up of American style gender norms such as those exemplified by Title IX. But we might also recognize some homegrown feminism based on a critical consciousness formed in the gender-biased divisions of labor in the home (Lopez, 2003).

I would argue that the struggles on the ground over gender – the tendency to think in hierarchical terms such as 'Who is stronger? Who is faster? Who is better?' – are complicated for all children (Thorne, 1995). It does seem, however, that more rigid patriarchal discourses circulated among the more traditional girls within this Somali community. Perhaps whether or not we agree with these discourses is less important than whether we can suspend judgment and be open to learning from each other. For example, because I was more interested in their thoughts about what girls could do physically, I missed an opportunity to ask Ayan what she meant by being stronger 'in the heart.' By prioritizing physical strength over emotional strength I was implicitly reinforcing hierarchies that have traditionally favored boys. My opportunity to learn from Ayan was lost; the voice of the subaltern ignored.

Later in the discussion, Safia and Shamsa elaborated on some of the ideas that we had been discussing:

Safia: One day I want to empower Somali women because we don't –

Shamsa: Somali women, talk about the whole world!!

JL: Go ahead Safia...one day you're going to empower Somali women?

Shamsa: Not only Somali women.

Safia: I'ma empower Somali women because they take it like they're wet pieces of towel. No, you, it's your choice. You get – he doesn't have, you don't have to

do everything. Once you guys are bonded, he has to provide for you of course - he's the male of the house. If you guys say boys are stronger, why do we have to do all the work? If you guys believe that males are stronger than women - they, why -

Shamso: Go do it. Go do it.

Safia: If you guys say that boys are stronger, they can pick up TVs. They can weight lift, whatever, why do we have to do all the work? Why do we have to? (Discussion, 5/18/10)

Once again we can see that Shamso thought about gender norms not only in terms of Somali women, but in terms of all women. She did not want to reduce sexism to a problem that exists only for Somali women, but more broadly for women everywhere. Safia, however, was focused on Somali women. Lopez (2003), drawing on Hurtado's work, writes about second generation Caribbean women who engage in blasphemous feminism for "confronting unpleasant, unvoiced, and often ignored social relations that have been suspended for the sake of group survival" (p. 126). Importantly, this type of feminist critique arises from a deep and abiding love for the community. Like the women in Lopez's study, Safia was extremely proud of her heritage. This does not preclude her from critiquing the injustices in her culture in an attempt to make life better for Somali women.

Indeed, Safia expressed concern throughout the discussion that Somali women were doing a disproportionate amount of the household work, saying numerous times, "Why do we have to do all the work?" In Somalia men were not expected to take care of household chores such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare (Shepard, 2008). In many of the interviews, boys and girls said that the girls helped their mothers the most with the domestic chores, with the bulk of the household chores falling on the oldest daughter.

This norm was changing, however, as some of the boys acknowledged that they were expected to do some chores around the house. The following is an excerpt from my interview with Abdul, a 12 year old second generation Somali boy.

JL: Do you have to do a lot of chores and stuff at home?

A: My sisters do. I just sit home. I just sit down watch TV.

JL: They do all the chores...how about your brother? Does he have to do any chores, or mostly just the girls?

A: He's mostly in the room playing video games while I'm on the computer.

JL: And then your sisters do the chores? Hmm, so it's kind of a little bit different for the girls and boys, or?

A: Yeah, but we do it sometimes, like on Fridays...yeah

JL: What do you do on Fridays? What kind of chores do you do on Fridays?

A: I clean the bathroom, I clean, I do the dishes and that's all. (Interview, 11/15/09)

Initially Abdul contributed to an essentialized discourse that girls do all the chores, but then he acknowledged that he has to clean the bathroom and do the dishes on Fridays. Likewise, Ali reported that he had to wash the dishes, and Mohamed told me, "I have to do the kitchen on my own day, and it's Tuesday" (Interview, 4/8/10). In reality then, the boys were contributing to some of the household work which was a change from how things were done in Somalia (Shepard, 2008).

Shamso provides an interesting feminist perspective on how chores are delegated in her household:

JL: Ok, what do you think about things for boys and girls in many Somali families that you know – like are expectations the same or chores the same or do you think things are different for girls?

S: In my family we have a list of chores. It's not just girls doing the chores. It's everyone doing the chores. And I don't know where they just girls do it, because in my family you do it equal.

JL: Really. That's pretty cool.

S: And if we don't, I would protest. (Interview, 12/ 21/09)

At the time I was surprised, but also impressed, when Shamsó said that she would protest if only girls had to do the chores. This alluded to my own static thinking about Somali culture. As I got to know Shamsó better I saw that she challenged other rigid gender norms as well. Shamsó's feminist outlook might in part be inspired by American feminism, but as Lopez (2003) reminds us, we must not discount her own homegrown experiences. In much the same way that American families have adapted to having women work outside the home and men share in the household duties, Somali culture is changing as men and women adjust to different economic and domestic circumstances.

Future Plans

Shamsó: I might get married when I finish college, but then like not 22, like 25. And I must have a big ring the size of my eyeball. Ring the size of my eyeball...

JL: You want a rich man?!

Shamsó: No not a rich man, I'm gonna be the rich person.

JL: Cool! That was sexist of me to think you had to have a rich man!

Safia: Thank you – somebody knows what sexist means.

JL: I'm ashamed of myself. (Discussion, 5/11/10)

I begin this section with this brief excerpt from the sixth grade girls' discussion group because it exposes my own blind spots as a feminist researcher. When Shamsó said that she wanted a ring the size of her eyeball, I immediately jumped to the conclusion that she

wanted to marry a rich man, never once considering that she might have ambitions of achieving her own wealth. With that one simple sentence – ‘you want a rich man?’³⁸ I attempted to erase her agency on at least two levels. First, I presumed that the man in the relationship would be the rich partner, not the woman. And second, I presumed that she would be given this engagement ring by a man, a Western tradition drenched in patriarchy whereby the man presents his fiancée with a ring when he asks her to marry him. Negating my interpretation, Shamsó asserted her own agency declaring, “I’m gonna be the rich person.” Furthermore she assertively stated, “I must have a big ring,” not ‘I hope my husband gets me a big ring,’ or ‘I want a big ring.’

This is just one example of the times I found myself *othering* the girls, assuming on some level that they were victims of a patriarchal culture and that I was not. In the spirit of ‘working the hyphen’ (Fine, 1994) between self and other, researcher and participant, I refuse to occlude my complicity in perpetuating hegemonic discourses, especially when the purpose of critical research is to be emancipatory. Importantly, I in no way mean to imply that I am trying to “save” the girls; rather by emancipatory I mean to suggest that we all stand to benefit if we take the opportunities to learn how our discourses, actions, beliefs, and behaviors limit and contain each other. Rather than “burying the contradictions that percolate at the self-Other hyphen” (Fine, p. 70), I am jarred out of my whitewashed, academic feminism into acknowledging this young Somali girl’s feminist view of the world – a world in which she boldly charts her own destiny.

The two discourses that I will unpack in this section - the first having to do with

³⁸ I also presumed that she was heterosexual, but interrogating heteronormativity was beyond the scope of my research given that homosexuality was widely condemned in this community.

education and career choices and the second having to do with marriage and children - inevitably overlap, influence, and interrupt each other, especially for girls. But I will attempt to flesh them out in two separate sections. As I do so, the following table may prove helpful in keeping track of the girls and their plans.

Table 1. Future Plans

Female student	Career choice	Number of children desired/When	When they want to get married
Ayan	Islamic scholar/Obstetrician	5-6/university	23, 24
Sara	Singer/Midwife	10/not in high school	Did not say
Warda	Pediatrician	5+	23, 24
Haweya	Pediatrician	2	Did not say
Kowsar	Pediatrician	6 /after university	22
Shamso	Anesthesiologist/Police officer	0 – 1/after university	25, 26
Hafsa	Gym teacher/Nurse	Did not specify	Did not specify
Safia	Neurologist/Brain surgeon	6 /after university	26
Fatima	Pediatrician	11 /age 20 and up	16 and up

Educational and Professional Goals of Somali girls

Education

Education in Somalia was traditionally male-oriented. Girls were frequently not expected or encouraged to attend school past the primary grades (Omar, 2009).

According to Safia's mother, Hawo, who completed high school, a lot of girls went to school in the refugee camp, but:

Some girls don't like to go to school. And nobody pushed them to go. Nobody says, "You have to go." If she don't like it, let her go to the kitchen and cook and clean...but the boys they must. They must go to school. (Interview, 4/ 21/10)

Now that Somalis have immigrated to the United States they have embraced the opportunities for a free public education for girls as well as boys. This is a rapid adaptation considering girls were not expected to complete high school in Somalia. Somalis in the United States recognize the need for everyone to receive an education in order to escape poverty and secure a decent job (Kapteijns & Arman, 2004; Omar, 2009). In addition, the entire community is invested in, and dependent upon, the success of their children's education because "children are regarded as future providers for their parents, families, relatives, and the Somali community" (Omar, 2009, p. 63).

Outperforming Boys

"Girls go to school, boys go to jail."³⁹ (Hawo, Interview, 4/21/10)

Following in the path of previous immigrant groups, Somali girls were outperforming Somali boys in school (Omar, 2011). In the most recent class to graduate from eighth grade at Future Academy, four of the five awards for the highest grade point average in each subject went to girls, and seven of the eight graduation speakers were girls. The reasons girls were outperforming boys were similar to those found in other immigrant groups. Somali girls spent more time at home and not on the street. They

³⁹ At the time of the research, Hawo told me that there were 33 Somali men in jail in Charlestown. The community worried about the fact that Somali boys were not faring well in school and were ending up in the streets or in jail. When I asked the parents and the elders why they thought the boys as a whole were not doing as well as the girls, they said Somali boys had too much freedom and were becoming too Americanized.

studied longer hours and were more concerned with achieving good grades. In addition, like other immigrant girls, they utilized a dual frame of reference in which they compared the opportunities they had for an education in the United States with the opportunities girls had back in Somalia (Kapteijns & Arman, 2004; Lopez, 2003).

Safia utilized a dual frame of reference when she discussed why Somali girls do well in school:

When they come to America because of the war there and it helps us cause colleges, high school, it helps a lot. The girls let's say, get a greater chance to become doctors and not just 2%, 3% about 40 and 50% Somalians that come here really work hard because they know their background that kind of helps them and expectations for women actually gonna get higher than the boys cause now they have a choice, a pure full choice when they come here. (Discussion, 5/11/10)

According to Safia, the expectations for women are actually higher than boys in the United States because here women and girls have a 'pure full choice' to attain an education. Given this opportunity, they do not want to squander it. They work hard, inspired by the 'chance to become doctors.' Ironically then, the fact that girls were denied academic and professional opportunities in Somalia seemed to provide a psychological boost that benefited Somali girls in the diaspora.

According to Lopez (2003), immigrant women's views about the role of education in their lives are "intimately tied to their status as women" (p. 119). Not only do they utilize a dual frame of reference, they also see education as a way to postpone marriage and children and achieve independence (Olsen, 1997; Sarroub, 2005).

According to Omar (2011), some Somali girls feel pressure from their parents to marry early and start families before they finish high school. Quite the opposite emerged in my research where the consensus seemed to be that girls as well as boys should finish high

school and go on to pursue higher education. In fact, in a reversal of what one might expect, Fatima wanted to get married at around age 16 and have lots of children, but her father said, “You will ruin the sparkle in my eye if you do that” (Discussion, 3/18/10).

Here is how Siyad explained changes in the tradition of early marriage and the need for Somali youth to get a good education:

S: There is no more culture that you’d hear in America. Marrying at an early age, that’s back at home. Here even you cannot do it because it’s – it’s illegal to marry under 18. So they cannot do it, even 18 I don’t see most of them marrying at that age because they found out they have to get the best education because some of them when they graduate from the high school, they married and then they got kids and then they ended in zero while they see some of their classmates becoming doctors, engineers, teachers, social workers so from now the number of marriages has decreased from the community. We don’t see that much happening. Before 2004, we had numerous marriages happening in the Twin Cities, but now it declined because of the socioeconomic status and -- a lot of motivation that came from the community, from the scholars. So they don’t rush in marriage now. They are going to the mainstream. (He chuckles.)

JL: And that part is good? Parents want to see that - for sons and daughters both?

S: Yes, you know...it’s not recommended having quick marriage at the age of 18/19. We like the kids to have the education. Once they finish their degree at the age 24, 25 then they can plan their marriage. Before that then we see it’s an emotional marriage that will never rest in good situation, by at large. (Interview, 6/ 29/10)

Importantly, Siyad did not make any gender distinctions here. Girls as well as boys were encouraged to delay marriage and finish college so they would have the opportunity to become doctors, engineers, teachers, and social workers. As further proof, Siyad noted that the rate of marriages in the Twin Cities was declining as the community encouraged young adults not to rush into marriage. This was an example of the community’s willingness to strategically accommodate to mainstream norms that were perceived to be

economically beneficial to the individual and to the community. Although mainstream representations often perpetuate the idea that Somali culture is highly patriarchal, we can see that this community embraced a gender neutral approach to higher education and career opportunities.

Some of the girls in my study wanted an education and a career so they would have something to fall back on if their marriage did not work. As Safia said in her interview, “I’m not gonna get a husband and kids until I have my career because I have something to fall back on.” Safia had seen first-hand the struggles of her own mother to find a decent job while raising two children on her own. Safia wanted a career and a family, but she also wanted to be prepared to support herself and her children if the marriage did not work out. As a young woman, she had to plan her future carefully. If she got married and had children before she completed her education there was a chance her familial responsibilities would get in the way of completing her education.

The following was Safia’s response to my question about when she wanted to get married:

I want to get married like – listen I actually don’t expect to get married too soon because literally I really want to finish college. I want to finish *everything*. I don’t care if I’m 40. I want to finish college first. And the chances are I might get married at the age of 26... And then cause I don’t want to like – be carrying, be pregnant and have to study and go take tests and go to school being pregnant. I don’t want to do that. So I’m⁴⁰ gonna finish everything, I’m definitely gonna go to 2 years of college, 2 years university then Yale, I mean 4 years of college, 2 years at university, 6 years. I’m gonna do 4 years of college, 2 years university, maybe 3 years I don’t know. I’m gonna do 4 years of college, 3 years of university, 6 years of law, medical school then I’m gonna do half time in Yale. (Discussion, 5/11/10)

⁴⁰ I transcribed Safia’s interview to reflect her use of BSE (Black Stylized English), the significance of which was discussed in chapter three.

Although I originally asked about marriage, Safia quickly turned it into a discussion about her education. She was a little unsure of how many years of college and graduate school she would need to complete in order to become a doctor, but we can see that she was determined to complete her education before she got pregnant. Furthermore, she had her sights set on places like Yale University. Although some might be quick to discount this as unreasonable, a Somali teen from the community was recently offered a scholarship to attend Yale University. That young woman ultimately chose the honors program at the University of Minnesota, but she was emblematic of the high aspirations and achievements of this Somali community.

Ayan also placed a high value on postponing marriage so she could complete her education. Keep in mind that I loosely categorized Ayan as mostly traditional because she actively resisted typical American teenage past times like going to movies, listening to popular music, and so forth. She also took a more conservative approach to her faith than many of the other girls in terms of fasting, praying, and studying the Qur'an. The fact that she wanted to become an Islamic scholar – a field generally reserved for men - defied traditional norms. She also said that she wanted to be a pediatrician because she loved children.

Ayan's educational and professional goals enable us to see how her desires and identity transcended dichotomies such as traditional/modern, Muslim/American, oppressed/free. The following is our exchange after she told me that she wanted to have two careers.

JL: You're gonna be a busy woman! Do you think you'll have kids and get married and do that too?

A: I don't know. I'm not gonna like put my head into that right now. Just for my education.

JL: You're too young. Good for you.

A: It's not that I'm too young! I don't think I'm too young for that but then it's that it's in our culture that if the girl gets their period [it's] like their time for their marry. That's one of the bad kinds of a culture in Somali.

JL: You mean because you feel like you would get married too young like as soon as you

A: No you can get married too young but then to leave a family it's more like- there's some bad cultures and good cultures in Somali. Then one of them is like if a girl gets her period you know... and a man - like she's ready. That means she's more like an adult person.

JL: Yep. So she could go get married.

A: Yeah. But then like you - if a man takes you, your family you know, your education - like if you get marry you might have a baby like regular, but then your education you're not like ready you know?

JL: You'd rather get your education first?

A: Yeah. Graduate first something like that. (Interview, 11/10/09)

According to Ayan, once a girl had her period, she was considered an adult person and was ready to get married. Ayan considered this an example of one of the bad cultures from Somalia because then the girl might have a baby and have no chance to complete her education. Her use of the idea of good cultures and bad cultures was helpful in understanding the accommodation process. Although Ayan had her period and could conceivably get married and have children, she did not want to follow that part of Somali culture. Instead she wanted to focus on her education and graduate. We can see how her investment in education was intimately tied to her status and identity as a woman.

Furthermore, and importantly, her investment in education, with the intent to become an Islamic scholar, subverted the mainstream notion of Islam as a backwards religion.

Although the overwhelming discourse spoken at the school was one of pursuing an education above all else, there were a few girls who frequently came to school late or were frequently absent. One of these girls we met in chapter three, Sara. She was in fifth grade at the time of the research and lived in a strict, religious household. Her mother stayed at home to care for the four children while her step-father managed a hotel. Sara was often expected to help her mother with the household chores, particularly after her baby brother was born - even if that meant missing school. Notably, they did not have adult female relatives who lived nearby who could help her mother. In Somalia, female relatives would have stepped in to help a sister or daughter with childcare, particularly before and after the birth of a child. That sort of cultural capital was no longer available to many young families in the diaspora.

During the fifth grade girls' discussion group Sara mentioned that she was absent from school a lot. When I asked her why, she told me, "In my family, my mom comes first, not my education." This stood in contrast to most of the other families at Future Academy. Sara also expressed some concerns during her interview that she would not be able to achieve some of her future goals due to her family's strict adherence to Islam.

JL: And then how important do you feel like your religion is because I know it's a big part of Somali culture?

S: Actually to me it's very important. To me it's kind of like life and death to me, so. I respect it a lot although there's some things I can't do that I really want to achieve so.

JL: Like what?

S: Singing. (Interview, 2/18/10)

This was one of the few occasions when one of the girls explicitly conveyed that being Muslim would restrict her life choices. For the most part, they envisioned achieving their dreams while remaining firmly committed to their faith (Archer, 2002; Basit, 1997). In Sara's case, she worried that she would not be able to pursue a singing career because careers in the arts were discouraged in Islam (Omar, 2009). In addition, she wanted to go to Julliard to study music, but felt that her mother would never let her go that far away for her education. Many Muslim parents do not like their children to live on their own until they are married, especially their daughters. Although many Westerners see this as a sign that Islam is a repressive religion that denies girls opportunities, Muslim girls view this as protection from the dangers inherent in Western cultures (Basit, 1997; Archer, 2002).

One day at lunch I was sitting with the fifth grade girls talking about what they want to do in the future when Sara said emphatically, "I don't want to be a housewife!" (FN, 4/6/10). Like many immigrant girls, Sara was learning at an early age that "homemaking is hard work" (Lopez, 2003, p. 115). During the discussion group she told me, "If you get pregnant in high school it will ruin your life." Because she lived in a strict, Islamic household, I think Sara worried that she would have to get married and have children before she had a chance to pursue the education and the career that she desired. Lopez (2003) reminds us that

"notwithstanding the fact that the legacy of the women's movement has left an indelible imprint on the outlooks of young women growing up in the United States, women's dreams of an education and financial independence were also an extension of the lived experiences of their immigrant mothers" (p. 140).

Staying at Home

“You don’t even leave the house really.” (Fatima, referring to girls in Somalia, Discussion, 5/11/10)

Many in the Future Academy community talked about the way things were in Somalia that contributed to a patriarchal and static view of the culture. Some scholars have written about this as a nostalgic longing for a past that never was (Maira, 2002). In some cases, immigrant parents held onto a view of their home country that was ‘stuck in the past,’ neglecting the changes that had occurred through modernization and globalization. In the case of Somalia, diasporic gender discourses were further complicated by the fact that gender norms had become more conservative in Somalia, further reinforcing a static and mostly patriarchal view of Somali culture (Abdi, 2007).

Listen for instance, to Siyad describe how women ‘stayed at home:’

You know, back at home woman used to stay at home because men were the bread winners. And it’s a tradition; it’s a religious process because we are Muslims. Somalis are Muslims 100%. And that’s our culture and tradition. We always give them the chance to stay at home, take care about the kids. And men are the breadwinners. It’s a tradition. Some of women worked back at home, but they were few number. (Interview, 6/ 29/10)

To Siyad, staying at home and caring for the children was not something women were forced to do, but something they were given the chance to do by their husbands, the breadwinners. Siyad considered the tradition of having women stay at home to be part of Islam. In fact, taking care of the home and the children was a source of status for Somali women (Omar, 2009; Kapteijns & Arman, 2004). He did volunteer, however, that ‘some women worked back at home,’ but then dismissed this because ‘they were few [in] number.’

Hawo provided a different perspective when she talked about the lack of choices women had in Somalia. In this case she was referring to women in abusive homes.

H: Back home the reason that they stay the marriage, the woman cannot get a job. You can't support yourself or your kids so you have to stay in that horrible situation.

JL: Would you have done the same in Somalia? (i.e. divorce her husband)

H: Back home I would have done the same because I grow up without my dad back home. My Mom use to be self-employee.

JL: Wow!

H: Yeah, she used to be a businesswoman, and always we used to have shops.

JL: So your whole family's kind of remarkable...the women in your family.

H: Yeah, my mom was strong woman and she used to support more than 20 people in her house. She used to go state to state back home and take stuff ...go back and forth. She used to make a lot of money and we have a very good life. (Interview, 4/21/10)

To Hawo, not being able to get a job limited your choices, forcing women to stay in abusive homes. It is interesting to note how surprised I was to hear that Hawo's mother was self-employed. Being involved in the school for several years seems to have reinforced a homogenized view of Somali women in my mind, perhaps because Somali men held positions of power in the school, whereas Somali women did not. Furthermore, I did not speak Somali and most of the women did not speak much English, so I was not able to hear many of their life stories.

Hawo goes on to tell me more about how her mother helped them survive in the refugee camps:

When we evacuate we left everything. In Kenya they put us in Sahara desert place. It was hot. They said they already served whatever they had and we have to wait until next month. My mom think about solution and one morning she say,

“Let’s go guys.” We just walk, walk, walk until we find jungle, woods and we collect woods. My mom says, “Okay we’re gonna collect this woods. We’re gonna bring to the camp and we’re going to sell it.” And we are like seven women in the family and we collect all the woods and then we sell them as little as you can imagine like maybe five shillings in Kenya which is like nothing. And then we collect that money, we save it, we do like three months and then we – we can buy 50 kilo sugar or flour, and then we buy that and then we sell it. And then, we make the business until we have a shop. (Interview, 4/21/10)

It is important to share Hawo’s story because it helps to paint a fuller portrait of the strength and wisdom of Somali women, unsettling the notion that they never left the house.

Working Outside the Home

The increase in the number of Somali families headed by women has propelled many women into the workforce. In addition, many Somali women in the United States are forced to work in order for their families to survive. This places an enormous strain on families as mothers and fathers juggle multiple jobs along with the needs of their families, both here and in Somalia.⁴¹ To add to the stress, many families are without the support of grandparents and extended family and thus have to rely on their daughters and sons for help running the household. Here is how Siyad explained to me why many Somali women were now working outside the home:

But when they came here, it became mandatory for them because one source of income was not sufficient so...two sources of income was needed so both the parents, mom and dad, they are running up and down – even not one job, some of them are doing 2 jobs in order to cover up the cost in here and to care about the relatives and their parents or their families that they left back at home. So it’s tough here. The women who stay at home, they have to work. (Interview, 6/29/10)

⁴¹ Many Somalis send part of their earnings, known as remittance, to support their families left behind in Somalia.

From Siyad's perspective it became mandatory for women to work in the U.S. because one source of income was not enough. Oftentimes fathers and mothers were working two jobs each – “running up and down.” In Charlestown, parents were working in low wage jobs such as factory work, driving taxis, and stocking shelves at Target and Wal-Mart. Most of the women did not have high school diplomas, and many of the men had degrees that were not recognized by the United States government.

Leitner (2004), in her work with Somali women in rural Minnesota, shed some light on what it was like to be employed from the women's perspective:

Women talked about and longed for the greater freedom they had in their everyday lives in Somalia. Many of them were working outside the home for the first time and commented on the grueling eight-hour shift. Combined with family responsibilities, this left them little time for socializing and community life. They deplored that life in America revolves around work and money, and that people just take care of themselves, resulting in less time and concern for the community. (p. 51)

It is interesting that in this so called land of freedom, Somali women longed for the greater freedom they had back in Somalia. From a critical stance, working outside the home, while often admired as an end goal of Western-style feminism, has not been easy or rewarding for many adult Somali women. No doubt the girls thought about their futures in terms of the limited opportunities available to their own mothers.

What the Girls Want

“I don't have to stay home and do nothing cause I'm gonna be bored.” (Safia, Discussion, 5/11/10)

As we discussed career plans it became obvious that all of the girls I interviewed had high aspirations. Of the nine girls, seven stated that they wanted to become doctors as one of their top two career choices. The other two girls also stated something in the

medical field with one wanting to be a midwife or a singer, and the other a nurse or P.E. teacher. My findings are in line with previous research that highlights high educational and employment aspirations for Somali youth, particularly Somali girls (Omar, 2009, 2011; Kapteijns & Arman, 2004). One study found that Somali girls wanted to become doctors and nurses for humanitarian reasons (Omar, 2009). Most of the girls in my research wanted to be either pediatricians or obstetricians, fields related to helping women and children. In contrast, Safia told me, “The only reason I want to become a surgeon is I want to prove myself” (Interview, 11/23/09). Not surprisingly, Shamsó also chose professions that defied gender stereotypes. She wanted to be a police officer, which was virtually unheard of for women in Somalia (Omar, 2009), or an anesthesiologist.

Marriage and Children

JL: Why don't we go around and say, tell me about when you think you'd get married,⁴² how many kids you want to have, and if you think you would marry a Somali man. Let's start with Warda. When do you picture yourself getting married?

Warda: At the age of 23, 24.

Shamsó: Don't you want to finish college?

JL: That would be done with college.

Shamsó: But don't you want to become like a doctor, for 4 years.

Warda: Shamsó, shut up please.

Kowsar: You can get married and then continue and then have kids when you're done with your school.

JL: And you think you'd pick your own husband?

Warda: Well duh, who would pick it for me?!

⁴² I did make an assumption that all the girls wanted to get married, which is of course problematic.

JL: I don't know.

Fatima: Your father has to approve the guy. (Discussion, 5/11/10)

Several important points were raised in this excerpt. The first has to do with the age at which the girls pictured themselves getting married and the second has to do with when they said they wanted to have children. Warda said she wanted to get married at around age 23 or 24, but Shamsa expressed concern that if she got married too soon she would not finish college. Interestingly, she also made the assumption that Warda would want to go on to medical school. Kowsar's remark that Warda could get married, finish her education, and then have kids revealed the underlying concern that having children would derail their educational and career plans. Most of the girls talked about getting married at around age 23 or 24, with Shamsa and Safia saying slightly older at age 26. This is quite a rapid cultural accommodation considering the average age of marriage in Somalia was around 15 to 18 (Siyad, Interview, 6/29/10).

Fatima was the exception. She told the group that she wanted to get married at age 16 and up, which caused a considerable amount of giggling amongst the girls. Numerous times throughout our discussion she interjected comments such as, "She'll be 30 then!" when the girls were talking about postponing marriage until after college and university. She was clearly thinking that the girls were waiting too long to get married. Unlike the other girls, Fatima wanted to have children by the time she was 20; she also wanted eleven children. Most of the other girls wanted to postpone having children until they were done with college and university. On average they wanted five or six children, a significant drop from the typical Somali family which averaged around ten children

(Hawo, Interview, 4/21/10).

I want to draw attention to the assumption I made when I asked, “And you think you’d pick your own husband?” to which Warda replied rather incredulously, “Well duh, who would pick it for me?!” My question was based on a preconceived notion that arranged marriages were the norm in the diaspora. By exposing my own bias – that I continued to think about Somali culture in static and patriarchal ways - I present a less sanitized and tidy version of qualitative research than perhaps we are used to. I want to keep the focus on learning *from* and *with* each other, not on learning *about* the other (Spivak, 2005; Fine, 1994). The girls, living as they do in the borderlands, were capable of challenging me to see and feel what it is like to be continually othered, continually positioned as somehow less than fully human.

As for arranged marriages, the girls agreed that the custom had died out and that they would choose their own husbands. The only caveats were that their fathers would have to approve (this did not seem to trouble the girls and appeared to be more of a formality) and their husbands would have to be Muslim. The following excerpts are from the girls’ discussion group when I asked the girls if they thought they would marry a Somali man:

JL: Do you think he’d be Somali or you don’t care what he is as long as you –

Warda: I don’t care, but I guess due to our religion...

JL: Do you care whether your husband is Somali or Muslim or it doesn’t matter?

Fatima: I don’t give a crap really.

Warda: Are you crazy?! You can’t marry a guy-

JL: It's her life she can-

Fatima: I would marry a Somalian, a White Muslim, or a Black Muslim or mixed Oreo.

Bahcha: As long as your dad approves.

JL: Do you think you'd marry a Somali person or Muslim or it doesn't matter?

Ayan: Any Muslim person.

JL: So the religion is really more important than where you came from?

Safia: You have to, there's no choice.

Shamso: No choice?! Pfffff!

Warda: Shamso! (speaks to her in Somali)

Kowsar: It has to be Muslim. (Discussion, 5/11/10)

This series of exchanges is interesting for several reasons. First of all, it is apparent that I continued to think in terms of ethnicity and was surprised that being Muslim was the top priority in choosing a spouse. I asked towards the end of the discussion, "So the religion is really more important than where you came from?" Safia told me that they have to marry a Muslim – "there's no choice," but Shamso protested saying, "No choice?! Pfffff!" At this point Warda jumped in and appeared to reprimand Shamso in Somali. We can see how the girls guided and chastised each other, marking the boundaries of acceptable behavior for a Somali Muslim girl contemplating her future. They could marry when they were young or wait until they were forty, but they must marry a Muslim man. This is generally considered a rule for Muslim girls, but not for Muslim boys (Berns McGown, 1999).

This discussion points to the salience of Islam over ethnicity or race and thus challenges the American racial hierarchy. Fatima even said, “I don’t give a crap” when I asked if she would marry a Somali man, then added that she would marry a “White Muslim, a Black Muslim, or a mixed Oreo [Muslim].” She was emphasizing that the race or color did not matter, but being Muslim did.

We have seen that being Muslim took on added resonance in the diaspora. However, it is also true that the girls interpreted what it meant to be Muslim differently. For Fatima, who was quite strict in her interpretation, being Muslim meant trusting in Allah and not questioning his authority. For example, when we were talking about having children Warda asked the group whether they wanted to have more girls or boys. Here is our brief exchange:

Warda: Now let’s talk about whether you’d rather have more girls or more boys.

Safia: More boys.

Bahcha: I’d rather have more boys.

Shamso: More girls.

Safia: Mostly boys, no I want to have equal.

Fatima: Safia that’s up to Allah to decide.

Safia: No I’m like if I was gonna have it equal.

Shamso: Why does everybody have to turn to religion?

Safia: Abaya⁴³ please like two minutes of your life let go, tell her what you want to do when you grow up. Be free! Allah’s not holding you down like that!
(Discussion, 5/11/10)

⁴³ Abaya is a term the girls used to address each other.

In this exchange both Shamsa and Safia challenged Fatima when she said that it was up to Allah to decide whether they would have more girls or more boys. Shamsa interjected, “Why does everybody have to turn to religion?” - once again contesting the strict adherence to Islam that was the norm at the school. Interestingly, Safia, who described herself as very religious, also contested Fatima’s overly deterministic interpretation saying, “Be free! Allah’s not holding you down like that.” Having a choice was important to Safia; she did not want Fatima to feel constrained by their religion. The discourse Safia used of girls having a ‘pure full choice’ now that they are in the United States was deftly woven into her Muslim-Somali-American worldview (Archer, 2002).

Conclusion

I set out in this chapter to show how the girls creatively wove together Muslim, Somali, and American gender norms while remaining firmly committed to their faith, their families, and their communities. As such, they formed hybrid and ambivalent identities that resist binary categories such as modern versus traditional, feminist versus oppressed. Some of the girls, like Ayan, empathized with their mothers and did their chores willingly. Others, like Safia, saw their mothers’ situations more critically and resented that women had to do all the housework. Still others, like Shamsa, protested and expected the same treatment as their brothers. As border-crossers, the girls negotiated gender norms and expectations based on their homegrown experiences (Lopez, 2003) and their unique beliefs and desires. What it meant to be a Somali, Muslim, American girl was by no means monolithic.

Perhaps the most striking way that Somali girls embraced gender equity was in the high aspirations they had for their futures. Many knew from personal experience how

time-consuming and difficult it was to take care of the cooking, the cleaning, and the childcare. Many also knew that women do the bulk of this labor. Consequently, many of the girls planned to postpone marriage and children until they were done with college and firmly on their career paths. The ways in which Somali girls were taking up certain American gender discourses, embracing the 'pure, full choice' to get an education and pursue professional careers, were intertwined with equally important Somali and Islamic discourses that embraced family and community values and honored their deep ancestral roots. I learned over the course of the year that there were many ways for girls to realize their hopes and dreams, and many ways to live with strength and compassion in the world.

CHAPTER SIX: Conclusion

I call ethnography a meditative vehicle because we come to it neither as to a map of knowledge nor as a guide to action, nor even for entertainment. We come to it as the start of a different kind of journey. (Tyler, in Clifford & Marcus, 1986, p.40)

The Journey

It has been five years since I first walked through the front doors of Future Academy to inquire about volunteering at the school. I had tried to call first, but there was no listed phone number, so I just showed up at the school one day. I remember feeling nervous and out of place, but thinking that someone had to be willing to build bridges. After all, if I was going to be working with teachers around issues of diversity and inclusiveness in the classroom, I had better be willing to walk the walk. Since the beating of the Somali boy, the mayor had started a ‘Not in Our Town’ campaign, but there was much work to be done. I thought my journey might begin here, getting to know the Somali community first hand.

I believe one of the things that compelled me to follow my instincts and volunteer at the school was my transformative experience as a study abroad student in Kenya. As I was writing my preliminary exams in preparation for this dissertation, reflecting on what it might mean to do ethnographic research with Somali immigrants, I found myself bombarded with memories of Kenya, so I wrote a poem. I include that poem here, now, because it foreshadows many of the themes that emerged in my research, themes such as: the gendered division of labor, the strength and resilience of women, the lasting effects of religious imperialism, how race matters in our everyday interactions, even how the desire

'to help' can be misguided when two cultures "collude and collide" (Khan, in English, 2005, p. 89).

* * * *

The smell of smoky milk,

And fires burning.

Sleeping next to Baba Tassie on the goat skin

While Mama Tassie sleeps nearby, children sprawled around her,

She wakes throughout the night to stoke the fire

Keeping us warm.

Noticing that the women do all the work

While the men play Bao.

Lugging firewood strapped to my head for miles,

With the sinewy Samburu mamas.

Admiring their toughness and infectious good humor.

Singing and laughing while we share the labor.

Living with the chief who has two wives, two lives.

Waking up to the blaring sounds of Radio Kenya with my little sister

Who has no school uniform.

Riding on the back of the scooter with the chief.

Meeting the sister who goes to school.

Realizing I live with the second family.

Out on the town with Muhoho Kenyatta,
Son of Jomo, beloved father of Kenya.
Wondering about the gemstones on every finger;
Judging his wealth among the poverty.
Feeling White, out of place among Kenya's Black elite.
But not among its poor...

Attending the Catholic Church
Filled with Black bodies,
A White priest,
And a White Jesus nailed to the cross.
Being stung by the hypocrisy;
An irreconcilable chasm with my religious upbringing.

Confused by the argument that broke out between the Euro-American students
And the African-American students.
We did not understand their frustration with us.
"What can we do?" we pleaded.
"Don't *do* anything!" they implored us.
"You are the problem."

* * * *

Doing this ethnography has indeed been a different kind of journey for me. I
could not have anticipated the tremendous ways in which my life has been impacted by

Safia, Ayan, Ali, and the other fifth and sixth grade students, as well as their parents and other community members. On many days I was reminded of just how different our life circumstances were, and had been. Like the day Rashid, the computer teacher, told me how his brother had been shot to death in front of him and his children, and how they had fled for their lives. Or the day Hawo recalled, through tears, the memory of her sister cradling her starving baby in the refugee camp, and how she thought to herself, “I hope the baby dies.” (Interview, 4/21/10). I had trouble falling asleep that night.

Looking back, I think everyone at school wanted the children to feel safe and normal, so no one talked about the war or the reality of being refugees. Occasionally Siyad reminded the teachers, when they were frustrated with the students’ behavior, that the families were struggling, that the community was “disenfranchised,” that they listened to Somali television everyday and that people they loved were still dying “back at home.” It was easy to forget that they were viscerally connected to their homeland and to the traumas that were continuing to occur.

But they did not make excuses; as a community they pulled together. Rashid told me one day how the families help each other in crisis. Everyone chips in, even if they need to raise several thousand dollars, the community will come up with the money, whatever amount is needed. This sense of community, of sharing resources was commonplace. I was frequently impressed with the way the students shared everything. When someone had a special treat, like a fruit roll up, it was broken into tiny pieces and passed around. I watched many times as students took off their sweatshirts when they were leaving the playground, and passed them to their sibling/cousin/friend to wear as they headed out to the playground.

One day Ms. Z. told me that she got frustrated when a student earned a piece of candy as a reward, but then shared it with the students around her. She thought that defeated the purpose of the reward. I guess what I am trying to say is that there was a whole lot of ‘community’ going on at Future Academy that sometimes stood in sharp contrast to the individualism admired in the mainstream. Maybe that is one of the reasons I was drawn to the school. Perhaps it was a sense of community that was lacking for me in ‘mainstream’ Charlestown.

Summary and Significance of the Work

In chapter one I reviewed the literature on Black, Muslim, and Somali immigrant youth and identified gaps in the research. I suggested that there was a need for research within the immigrant literature that attends to elementary-aged youth. There are, it seems to me, important and formative things going on during these years that we best not ignore. I also identified a gap in the research that examines the experiences and identity work of Somali youth in the United States. Empirically, my research helps to fill these gaps. It also breaks new ground by examining the racialized and gendered identities of second generation Somali youth. In addition, I pointed out the need for more critical research that interrogates hegemonic discourses in the mainstream culture. For example, rather than assume that girls who wear the hijab are oppressed, we can see how they are resisting sexism in the mainstream culture. Attending to these complexities allows us to see beyond the Western gaze; to see our participants as fully human.

In chapter two I explained my methodology, how I gathered and analyzed my data, and how the writing of the ethnography unfolded. As a post-colonial, feminist researcher, I paid particular attention to the ethical dilemmas of doing research with

Somali youth. Importantly, I also explained how my research led to advocacy on behalf of the students. Doing so helps to point the field of ethnography in new directions.

Chapters three, four, and five formed the main body of the dissertation and add substantially to the literature on Somali youth in the United States. In chapter three I took up the subject of the racialization of Somali youth. I showed how Somali immigrants at the charter school drew on indigenous discourses regarding race, ethnicity, and religion to distance themselves from African Americans and resist racialization in the United States. At the same time, many boys took up Black cultural discourses. Somali girls, on the other hand, restricted themselves from acting too Black or too White, lest they be accused of not being Muslim. Importantly, the community's fears that boys were 'acting Black' were linked to essentialized notions that equated Black youth culture with drugs, gangs, and violence. Fears that the girls were 'acting White' were reduced to fears about girls' sexuality (Huisman, et al, 2011). We cannot theorize about racialization then, without also attending to gender and religion. I turned to the intersections of these important topics in chapters four and five.

In chapter four I demonstrated how Somali girls embraced the veil. They believed that girls and boys were different, but equal in Islam, and they resented when they were stared at and discriminated against simply for wearing the hijab. Importantly, they often subverted the discrimination they experienced, and drew on American discourses to justify their right to wear the hijab. Furthermore, the hijab acted an anchor and a guide that helped the girls stay grounded in their faith and their community, and avoid negative aspects of American culture. Ironically, wearing hijab, which is so often seen as a symbol of oppression in the West, may have been the very thing that helped the girls succeed.

In chapter five I explored how the girls wove together various American, Somali, and Muslim gender discourses, creating hybrid and ambivalent identities. At times they challenged, and at other times they defended, traditional Somali gender norms. One of the most significant ways in which the girls embraced gender equity was in the high academic and professional goals they had set for themselves. This was quite a departure from the opportunities girls had back in Somalia and speaks to the strength and resilience of Somali girls growing up in America.

Implications

In many ways Somali immigrants are challenging the discourse of assimilation that continues to hold sway in our collective imagination. They are building mosques and charter schools in order to maintain their culture and practice their religion. Girls are reaffirming their desire and their right to wear the hijab. Somali boys are taking up Black cultural discourses, but are refusing to be racialized as Black. What is at stake for those of us in the mainstream if Somali citizens refuse to assimilate? If they continue to wear hijab? If they step over the color line? By highlighting the ways in which Somali immigrants are deliberately resisting assimilation, we are forced to confront our complicity in maintaining White privilege and Judeo-Christian norms. If we are to make progress in places like Charlestown, then we need to begin to have serious conversations in our schools and our communities around these weighty topics.

Previous research reveals that Somali teenagers and adults face significant and often debilitating levels of discrimination in the United States (Bigelow, 2010; Leitner, 2004). My research adds a renewed sense of urgency as findings reveal persistent racial and religious discrimination in the early and formative years of elementary school. Lopez

(2003) and Waters (2001) have warned of the psychological costs that result from a lifetime of discrimination. Without an understanding of White privilege and its connection to racism and Islamophobia, we run the risk of Somali youth becoming disenchanted with the prospect of achieving their American dreams. This risk seems to be especially acute for Somali boys and young men. More research and advocacy is needed on behalf of Somali boys.

The Triple Crisis: Representation, Legitimation, and Praxis

Representation

Contemporary ethnography is concerned with what Denzin (1997) calls the “triple crisis of representation, legitimation, and praxis” (p.3). The crisis of representation alludes to how to discursively re-present other cultures, other people, without assuming an omniscient stance, without objectifying or obliterating *the Other* in the hopes of making sense for *the Self*. Fine (1994) quotes bell hooks at length on this subject in a passage that speaks passionately of the dangers of co-opting *the Other*:

Often this speech about the “Other” annihilates, erases: “no need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the colonizer, the speak subject, and you are now at the center of my talk.” Stop. (hooks, in Fine, p.70)

On some level there is no escaping that I am the author, the one responsible for manipulating the data to tell this story. In fact, my concern with how I would re-present my research participants was sometimes paralyzing. So many negative discourses circulate in the mainstream media about Muslims in general, and about Somali immigrants in particular, that I was afraid my research would add to the Orientalist

discourse. So, let me be clear – when I wrote about the fighting that occurred between Somali boys and African American boys, I was not trying to contribute to the essentialization of “black”⁴⁴ boys. Rather, I was trying to show how hegemonic discourses in the mainstream work to marginalize and oppress all “black” boys. The story that I am telling here is rather urgent. Because we cannot change what is happening to young Somali boys in our school yards and in our neighborhoods if we do not actively work to dismantle hegemonic discourses such as racism and White privilege that circulate perniciously in the mainstream.

Legitimation

Although qualitative research has become firmly established in the social sciences, the issue of legitimation has gone unresolved. Some scholars believe qualitative research should be judged by the same criteria that are used to judge quantitative research, namely reliability, validity, and generalizability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Others argue that:

The job of validation is, not to support an interpretation, but to find out what might be wrong with it...To call for value-free standards of validity is a contradiction in terms, a nostalgic longing for a world that never was. (Cronbach, in Lather, 1991, p. 65)

Most qualitative scholars agree that qualitative research (which calls into question the whole notion of objectivity) requires different, although equally rigorous criteria. There is no consensus in the literature, however, as to what those criteria should be. Critical researchers suggest a variety of alternative methods for evaluating qualitative research including: verisimilitude, emotionality, personal responsibility, catalytic

⁴⁴ I am deliberately avoiding the use of Black here (where Black signifies race) because Somali boys do not consider themselves Black.

validity, political praxis, dialogue, an ethic of caring, and polyphonic texts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Lather, 1991). Denzin (1997) also contends that “a good text exposes how race, class, and gender work their ways into the concrete lives of interacting individuals” (p. 10).

I was not interested in producing a text that strove for ‘the Truth,’ or that neatly explained away difference. Rather I was interested in producing a multi-vocal text that would help us glimpse irreducible heterogeneity; that would challenge us to confront the limitations of the Western gaze and see the world in more complex and dignifying ways. Trinh (1989) cautions that:

No anthropological undertaking can ever open up the other. Never the marrow. All he can do is wear himself out circling the object and define his other on the grounds of his being a man studying another man. How can he, indeed, read into the other knowing not how the other read into him? (p.76)

Praxis

Praxis, a central idea in Marxist philosophy popularized by Freire, involves putting theory into action in an on-going cycle of action – reflection – action. Lather (1991) states that, “Praxis is, of course, a word with a history. I use the term to mean the dialectical tension, the interactive, reciprocal shaping of theory and practice which I see at the center of an emancipatory social science” (p. 172). Praxis-oriented research or “research as praxis” (Lather, p. 51) is therefore committed to critiquing the status quo, eliminating oppression, and creating a more just society. Although the vast majority of critical research does not cause concrete social and material changes (Hyttén, 2004), critical researchers can, through their research, writing, teaching, and activism, contribute to a better vision of how we might do education otherwise. One of my goals in writing

this ethnography was to honor “Bakhtin’s moral and epistemological imperative...that texts be written and read in ways that morally move readers and viewers” (Denzin, 1997, p. 39).

* * * *

I want to leave you with one final story. It is the story of the last volleyball match of the season (it was a short season).

We were playing in our second volleyball match at a middle school across town. The team we were playing was made up of all White girls and one Somali girl. Our team was 100% Somali. We had been practicing over a row of folding chairs for a couple of weeks, and had practiced with a net just a few times. We did not have high expectations about winning. The girls just wanted to have fun. Since I do not know much about volleyball, it took all my concentration to keep the rotation going smoothly. We had a lot of girls and after every point we rotated a new person in. The girls were clapping and cheering, even for the other team whenever they made a point. We were so engrossed in keeping the rotation moving, that we did not notice the scoreboard. All of a sudden the other team stopped playing. They just looked at us and said we had just won the match. We were stunned. The girls started jumping up and down and screaming (and I mean screaming) for joy! The other team was smiling too; our jubilation was contagious.

In the midst of the commotion I saw Shamsu walk over and take a picture of the scoreboard with her cell phone. I asked her what she was doing and she told me

that the boys would not believe that they had won, so she was gathering proof. After the game we excitedly piled into my Suburban and a couple of vans for the ride back to school. The girls asked if we could crank the tunes. It was a beautiful fall day so I unrolled the windows and they started singing along to Katy Perry's *Teenage Dreams*⁴⁵ at the top of their lungs. We pulled into the parking lot and saw the boys boarding the after-school bus. I started honking my horn like crazy. The girls poured out of the cars to announce their victory. Everyone was excited at the news – the director, the teachers milling about, and yes, even the boys. We had just made school history.

⁴⁵ I had no recollection of the song that the girls were singing, but I went to visit them at the STEM school that many of them attend as I was finishing up the writing of my dissertation. We were reminiscing about the volleyball game when they started singing the song, *Teenage Dreams*. I was surprised that they remembered the exact song they were singing that day, but Warda looked at me and said, "Don't you remember?! I will never forget!"

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Appendix A

Interview Protocols

Student Interviews

Background

1. How long have you lived in Charlestown? Where were you born?
2. How do you like living in Charlestown?
3. Tell me a little about your family. How many siblings, etc? What does your father do? How about your mother? Do you have relatives in Somalia? Have you ever been there?
4. Tell me a little bit about yourself. What words would you use to describe yourself?
5. Would you describe yourself as American or Somali or something else?
6. How important is your religion? Do you think most Americans understand your religion?
7. Can you tell me about the hijab? Have you ever been teased for wearing hijab?
8. Are things a lot different for boys and girls in Somali families or pretty similar?
9. Can you tell me about how you use English and Somali at home?
10. What do you want to be when you grow up?

School Experiences

1. How do you like attending X school? What are some of the best things about it? What are the worst?
2. Have you gone to any other schools in the US? In Charlestown?
3. Why do you think your parents want you to attend a Somali school?
4. Tell me a little bit about the teachers.
5. Tell me a little bit about your friends at school.
6. How do boys and girls get along at X school? Are things the same or different for boys and girls at this school?
7. How is your learning going? How do you think you learn best?
8. What is your favorite subject? What's your least favorite subject? Why?
9. What types of things do you do on the playground? Who do you usually play with?
10. Tell me a little bit about how and when you use English and Somali in school.

Outside of School

1. What do you do when you have free time at home?
2. What kind of chores do you do to help out at home?
3. Who do you play with in your neighborhood?
4. What type of music do you listen to? What TV shows do you watch?

5. What places do you go to in Charlestown (the grocery store, the mall, the movies)?
6. What activities do you do?
7. How do you celebrate holidays and special days? Tell me about fasting during Ramadan? Did you fast?
8. Do you have friends who are not Somali (in your neighborhood, etc)?
9. How do you think White people in Charlestown feel about Somali people?
10. How do you think Black people in Charlestown feel about Somali people?
11. What do you think about racism in Charlestown? Have you ever experienced racism?
12. Some people say that after awhile some Somali children and teenagers start to act like they are African American. Do you think there is some truth to that?

Teacher and Staff Interviews

Background

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself and why you became a teacher/staff person.
 - a. How did you come to teach at X charter school?
 - b. What are your goals as a teacher/staff?
 - c. What are some of your successes teaching here?
 - d. What are some of your struggles?

School Experiences

2. Why do you think this charter school was formed?
3. How would you describe X school?
4. How would you describe the students here?
5. How would you describe the teachers here?
6. How would you describe the families here?
7. How would you describe the larger Somali community here?
8. What changes do you see happening with Somali families?

The Students

9. What are some of the difficulties the students seem to have at X school? What are some of their strengths?
10. How do you see gender coming into play in the classroom/the school?
11. How do you see religion coming into play in the classroom/the school/the community?
12. How do you see race coming into play in the classroom/the school/the community?
13. What changes do you see happening with the students? Can you talk about the influence of American culture on Somali children? How about Black cultural forms?

14. Can you tell me about the students' use of the Somali language in school?

Parent Interviews

Background

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself. How did you come to live in Charlestown?
 - a. What was your experience like coming to live in the US?
 - b. How long have you lived in Charlestown?
 - c. How do you find living in Charlestown?

Experiences with Family/Community

2. What is it like to be a member of the Somali community here?
3. How is your family transitioning to life in the US?
4. What is it like for youth in the Somali community?
5. What do Somali boys in your family/community do in their spare time?
6. What do Somali girls in your family/community do in their spare time?
7. What do you think are the greatest struggles for the Somali community here?
8. What do you see as the greatest strengths of the Somali community?
9. What are your goals as a parent? Are your goals similar for your sons and daughters?
10. How do you see Somali youth changing and growing in the US?
11. What are your greatest concerns or fears for your children?
12. In what ways are Somali boys succeeding/struggling in the US?
13. In what ways are Somali girls succeeding/struggling in the US?

Experiences with non-Somali Community

14. How would you describe the relationship between the Somali community and the White American community?
15. How would you describe the relationship between the Somali community and the African American community?
16. Have you or anyone else you know experienced discrimination of any kind?