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“XENOPHOBIC TIMES: MUSLIM SOMALI DIASPORA AND THE NATURE OF HUMAN RIGHTS, CULTURE, AND IDENTITY IN THE USA”

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Abstract

The current political climate in Washington DC signals an apparent shift to a more Xenophobia stance. The latest treatment of refugees appears regressive, negating the UN’s 1951 Refugee Convention and its subsequent 1967 Protocol, raising the question of what constitutes human rights for refugees and transnational persons. Subsequently, how does this impact USA Refugees, particularly Muslim Somali women and children, and the way in which their identities are constructed and scrutinized by a Xenophobic climate?

Through personal interviews and video footage, I explore how Muslim refugee women, like Ishtar and Saharo, who are often hidden female faces in the Somali Diaspora, assimilate and adjust to a predominantly white, Christian Bible belt community, whilst still maintaining their culture and identity in their widening Diaspora. I observe how the evangelical element of protestant religions in the Bible Belt region of Kentucky (KY) appear to offer a surprising bridge to both Christian and Islamic refugees alike, with shared values and conservative social foundations providing common ground. This ultimately demonstrates an unexpected tolerance in this region and the possible “hybridity” of cultural values.

Keywords

Xenophobia, Muslim Women, Somali Diaspora, Identity, USA Refugee

Note names are changed.

1. Xenophobia: The Political Climate and Refugee Reality

The election of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States signaled for many Americans, and indeed the world, that vast sectors of the American population did not embrace inclusiveness and diversity. The apparent shift to a more xenophobic stance in Washington raised questions of America's commitment to long standing United Nations policies on human rights. It suggested to the Somalis in the small southern city of Owensboro, Kentucky that they would once again be facing volatile political and ideological climates, as well as adapting and navigating their cultural and societally constructed identities in the Somali diaspora. On the one hand, the city presented challenges with its deeply religious, conservative Bible belt community and population of just over 59,000, with almost 19.8% living at the federal poverty levels in 2015, *Fig. 1* (U.S. Department of State, 2016). Yet, on the other hand, the city's inexpensive housing also presented real opportunities. Refugees could find jobs in factories that accommodated their lack of higher education or English language skills, with these jobs providing enough income to actually realize the aspiration of owning a home. As the election results unfolded, Muslims in this small city wondered if their first chance for a stable life, in what for many of them had been almost a decade of uncertainty in refugee camps in Kenya or other satellite countries near Somalia, would still be possible. Many of the Somali refugees in Owensboro still awaited the approval for their relatives to join them in the States. Yet, Trump's administration and his executive orders made it increasingly clear that Somali refugees would no longer be welcome to enter and Muslims were to be targeted.

However, the Somalis I interviewed maintained their approach to navigating their new homeland, adopting a pragmatic stance on campaign concerns and the resulting presidential realities. Their approach of both adapting to western culture, as well as maintaining their own cultural values and beliefs in the process demonstrates Homi Bhabha's notion of 'hybridity.' By perceiving Owensboro as an "in-between" space that allows Somali and western cultural values, beliefs and constructs to intermingle, this paper considers the way in which the inhabiting of a cultural hybridity alters the identities of Somalian refugees, particularly for the Somalian women

and children. Bhabha articulates further on this “in-between” space, arguing that, “It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated.”(Bhabha, 2012). Subsequently, I explore how this hybridisation of cultures adapts and navigates the negotiation of differing values and both alters the collective and individual experiences of the refugees I interview. The refugees I interviewed expressed a desire to understand the American culture, as well as adapt their own cultural inclinations to accommodate their new environment. Even when faced with hostility in the current American political climate, they still rallied as a community to advise one another on how to better integrate, wanting to better adapt to their new home. Although, the executive order effectively banning all travel from Somalia changed the landscape, my findings in the interviews indicated that Somali identity merged more cohesively with the Southern community than anticipated. It suggests that in spaces such as these that cultures, like the Somalian refugees’ culture and bible belt culture of Owensboro, form a hybrid of identities when adapting to the different social environment, highlighting the emergence of “cultural hybridities” when renegotiating identity (Bhabha, 2012). The following section considers the political context of the xenophobic shifts in American culture and questions how this has impacted the Somalian community currently found in Owensboro. The third section explores the integration of Somali refugees into the Owensboro community, detailing the process and issues concerning their adaption to western culture. I then progress to examining my data, analyzing the interviews conducted with members of the younger generation of Somali refugees to question the value placed on financial stability and difference in cultural emphasis on the importance of education. Following this, I detail the gendering of Somali culture and how gender hierarchies alter through the hybridization of both Somalian and Western cultural values. By considering the way in which gender positioning and constructs alter in the “in-between” cultural space, I finally explore how Somali women, with their recognizable Muslim identity through the wearing of the hijab, navigate the predominantly white, Christian “Bible belt” community whilst still maintaining their culture and identity within their global diaspora. Ultimately, over the course of interviews and data collected, I observe that the evangelical element of protestant religions and a conservative ideology suggest a surprising bridge to both Christian and Islamic refugees alike, with shared values and conservative social foundations providing a common ground that allows unexpected tolerance in the region.

2. Executive Order: Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States

The initial and revised travel bans particularly alarmed the Somali community in Owensboro as many awaited relatives' arrival from refugee camps. With the collapse of the Somali state in the early 1990's, most of these Somali refugees had navigated incredible hardships, such as sustained violence, loss of relatives, and uncertain futures. The protocol was intended to protect refugees from further persecution and risk of death. To find their new homeland increasingly hostile was disheartening. On the 27th January, 2017, Trump made an executive order to ban travel, which brought into focus many practical issues for refugees awaiting relatives. It suspended entry into the United States for those traveling from seven, primarily Muslim, nations, and limited refugee entry to no more than 50,000 – half the previous number (Whitehouse, 2017). This order not only risked the Constitutional Rights of such persons, but also potentially violated the Human Rights Convention of 1951 and the 1967 Protocol respectively, namely Article 33 which prohibits “refoulement”. The article states that “No Contracting State shall expel or return ("refouler") a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.”(UNHRC, 2017). The Department of Homeland Security explained the order on 29th January, citing the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) as grounds for authorizing temporary entry for “nearly all travelers, except U.S. citizens, traveling on passports from Iraq, Syria, Sudan, Iran, Somalia, Libya, and Yemen”, as well as suspending the Refugee Admissions Program (Department of Homeland Security, 2017). Many politicians and lawmakers across the nation balked at the order and its xenophobic undertones. Senator Edward J. Markey (D-Mass.), a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, voiced concerns, saying “Suspending the U.S. refugee resettlement program will endanger refugees' lives and tear families apart...Today's executive order from President Trump is more about extreme xenophobia than extreme vetting. This executive order is the equivalent of a “Keep Out” sign posted at America's borders.” (Markey, 2017). Subsequently, U.S federal district courts blocked the ban, deeming it ‘unconstitutional.’ Washington Attorney General Bob Ferguson, who filed suits against the initial ban in February 2017, commented in May after the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit ruled to keep the nationwide block in place on the President's revised travel ban, saying “I will [continue to]

support challenges to this illegal and unconstitutional executive order” (Office of the Attorney General, 2017).

The xenophobic promises of Trump’s Washington had been indicated long before the presidential race when Donald Trump had perpetuated the birther question of Barack Obama, the former Democratic president, questioning his religious beliefs and alluding to his name to suggest Islamic ties. So it was no surprise, as a relatively newborn Republican and unexpected (and initially somewhat unwelcome) Republican candidate in the race, that xenophobic language and “Islamophobic” stances littered Trump’s campaign. As quoted in the BBC, Professor Khaled Baydoun of Barry School of Law and affiliate professor of the University of California–Berkeley Islamophobia Project says, “From start to finish, the 2016 presidential election vividly revealed that Islamophobia is alive and potent and politically resonant as ever [in the U.S.]. Scapegoating Islam and vilifying Muslims was far more than merely campaign messaging; for Donald Trump it was a winning strategy.” Furthermore, Michael Flynn, Trump’s disgraced former national security advisor, adopted the long-standing approach to manipulate Islam into a political ideology, rather than a multi-ethnic religion, saying Islam “hides behind this notion of it being a religion” comparing the religion to “a malignant cancer.” (Zurcher, 2017)

These attitudes in approaching Islam as the “other” have long been embedded in American culture. National programs, such as the Department of Homeland Security’s Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) that extended a pilot program into Boston following the 2014 bombing, have highlighted the long-standing attitudes of counter terrorism looking for roots based in religion. As a Harvard event questioned at the time “The announced Boston CVE program raises strong concerns among many civil rights advocates as well as counterterrorism experts about the ways that flawed models of so-called radicalization may undermine Constitutional rights, stigmatize certain individuals and sow distrust -- particularly between Muslims and federal authorities as well as internally within Muslim communities” (Human Rights at Harvard, 2014). These attitudes towards Muslims in America crystallized into mainstream politics with Trump’s inauguration and subsequent plethora of executive orders fulfilling campaign promises. To the Somali refugees in Owensboro, as the new administration’s xenophobic stance began to unfold, the refugees, and indeed the country, began to realize the land of the free had different classes of freedom. It became clearer that campaign promises had not merely been political rhetoric — it was now the ruling political ideology for a societal ‘right to signify’ (Bhabha, 2012) on cultural temporalities.

This shift to a more xenophobic climate was brought to the forefront in Owensboro when the Islamic Centre of Owensboro sustained an attack in January 2016. The sign outside the Center was smeared with ketchup and the national news reported it as a potential ‘hate crime’ against Muslims. Local police investigated, approaching it more as a prank. However, eleven months later, almost immediately following Trump’s victory in the presidential election, a more serious act of vandalism occurred with paint smeared across the Islamic Center’s sign. This time, police acted immediately and the community rallied behind the Islamic community. The mayor and hundreds of people, who represented over a dozen churches, turned up to support and help the Center. The Center’s treasurer, Dr. Aseedu Kalik, asked for people to avoid focusing on the actions of a few individuals as “that is not what the bigger community [of Owensboro] is about” (westkentuckystar, 2016). Whilst the support demonstrates the expansive acceptance and inclusivity found amongst Owensboro inhabitants, the attack itself (arguably more concerning than ketchup) was not reported by any national papers, with the coverage on hate crimes seemingly less newsworthy. This lack of reporting on the attack in any paper could be perceived as reflecting a shift in the nation’s mood to nationalistic and more xenophobic stances after months of Donald Trump’s “America First” campaigning. The incident and ensuing silence around it, sparked my interest to research more deeply into the Muslim community, in particular the relatively new Somali population that presented a more noticeable and larger collective Muslim presence, and how they interacted and assimilated into the conservative and intensely religious Owensboro community.

3. Somali Diaspora in Kentucky: Integration and a Human Face to the Politics

“I hear people say Muslims are terrorists...we are just people. We simply want to learn how to be American and make a new life.” (Istar)

The U.S. State Department’s Reception and Placement Program through overseas Resettlement Support Centers (RSC) distributes refugees through nine domestic refugee resettlement agencies. USCRI is one of those nine domestic refugee resettlement agencies that works with 97 smaller agencies throughout the region, including the International Center of Kentucky in Owensboro, to process refugees as they arrive in the States, see Table 1 below for more details (U.S Department of State, 2017). To gain a perspective on the numbers of Somali

Muslims entering the small city of Owensboro, data compiled by the Kentucky Office for Refugees (KOR) indicates from records dating back to May 1994 that around 4,559 Somalis have been resettled in the entire state of Kentucky through a refugee resettlement agency (RRA), or moved to Kentucky after being initially resettled in another state and requested services from a refugee resettlement agency. Of those 4,559 Somali refugees, between the years 2010 – 2015, there were 1702 arrivals with 1399 in Louisville, 269 in Bowling Green and 34 in Owensboro, with the first Somali refugee resettled in Owensboro in March 2014. In the period between April 2016 to April 2017, Owensboro received a further 73 Somali refugees, please see Table 2 for more details (Kentucky Office for Refugees). The procedure for vetting refugees and distributing numbers throughout the states is a stringent process that involves a number of agencies as *Fig.1* “Refugee Process” demonstrates. With the recent increase in Somali refugees settling in Owensboro, this research is important to document how both populations are coping with the cultural challenges.

As the election’s Xenophobic and “Islamophobic” attitudes and the post-election’s legal wrangling over the travel ban unfolded, the International Center of Kentucky in Owensboro continued to serve the refugee community, bringing in new Somali individuals and families, housing and finding jobs for them. With my ties to the International Center and the community’s rallying around the Islamic Center of Owensboro in November of 2016, my interest in bringing a human face to this politicized issue began initially as a documentary since writing and filmmaking are my primary focus. However, as I researched more heavily, I realized the issue was far deeper than diasporic discourses through shared refugee narratives, ones which sadly were replicated many times over due to the harsh realities of the Somali civil war and resulting diaspora. With Somalis facing further political issues in their new environment, it was important to break down preconceived ideas and embedded prejudices in America to show the humanity within us all and universality of our common struggles and dreams. Equally, I recognized that the prospective clash of religion between Islam and Bible belt congregations potentially might bring many of those prejudices and social dynamics into focus.

Taking an approach based in the grounded theory method, I gathered data speaking with refugee agency employees as well as conducting face to face interviews with over 15% of Owensboro’s refugee population along with narrative analysis. My interview questions included family, religion, culture and identity, new beginnings in a new land, struggles to integrate, and life goals. I then took these narratives and applied established research and statistics. I initially

anticipated finding a deep intolerance from the Bible belt community where maintaining status quo is endemic. My findings so far, however, have demonstrated a normalized and typical reaction within the Somali community, but an unexpected tolerance and outreach within the socially conservative Owensboro community.

Owensboro has been welcoming refugees into its fold since the International Center of Kentucky in Bowling Green established an Owensboro satellite office in 2010. Although Owensboro has for many years been home to refugees and increasingly open to other cultures and diversity, these refugees have predominantly been from Myanmar and primarily Christian, integrating fairly seamlessly into the Bible belt population. Indeed, a Myanmar food market exists where the refugees may buy familiar products from their birth land. The Islamic Center of Owensboro had served the Muslim population including Myanmar's Muslim Rohingya. With the steady influx of Somali refugees since 2014, both the Islamic Center as well as the International Center were well prepared to accommodate the Muslim refugees. Nonetheless, when they were resettled to a small southern city in western KY, integrating into the new culture proved a challenging transition.

4. Navigating the New Homeland for Economic Success

The social ease of the Somalis is apparent with their ready smiles and willingness to speak. Their knowledge of English stems from a multinational and cultural experience both in Somalia and education during their transnational travels. After spending many years in refugee camps (the average of those I interviewed was nine years), the freedom to earn money signifies independence and control as a people. As Ahmed, a long time Somali-American resident of KY noted "Somali's are pragmatic and focus on economic success individually, but identify with collective wealth as a tribe and in general as a people." Ahmed, who was born in Somali and left when he was two years old, spent his childhood in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan before settling in KY in 2001. He understands both sides of the Somali economic conundrum. In his mid-thirties, his situation attests to Somali men's pressure for immediate financial gains opposed to the more stable but slower path education offers. While his entrepreneurial mother owns a Somali shop in Louisville, KY that provides clothes and textiles to the greater Somali community, he chose higher education and attended a Kentucky university, even participating in their study abroad program. However, he did not finish his degree, finding it difficult to see the financial benefits as well as identify long-term goals. Money represents success for Somalis, and trying to convince

the adult Somalis that the path to wealth in the United States often requires higher education and patience developing skills is difficult.

The younger generations generally have more respect for education as even though the initial jobs may pay less, in the long run they offer greater opportunity. Mohamed, an articulate and poised Somali teenager who lost both of his parents and lives with his older brother and sister, has just gained a certificate that allows him to work at the hospital as a phlebotomist. After virtually growing up in a refugee camp in Nairobi, he loves the stability of Owensboro and with determination, aspires to eventually become a doctor. However, the older male Somalis often look at the more immediate picture, favoring the making of \$12 an hour at Tyson, a poultry processing plant one hour from Owensboro, than the taking of a job that requires less overtime, which would allow more time for education and may lead to better long-term jobs. Ultimately, they opt for immediate returns, this ultimate ‘carpe diem’ reflective of the instability in their life experiences. As staff at the International Center will attest, negotiating from a \$9 an hour local factory job to a \$12 an hour factory job a further two hours travel time away signals perceived financial success within the Somali community and the news is shared and compared, analyzed and dichotomized almost surgically between the members of the Somali community.

Ahmed asserts that the community must work together, looking out for each other to better integrate into their new homeland. Working as a community is complex, though, as Somali’s are also tribal people and clans can risk disagreement within the Owensboro refugees. After Somalia’s Civil War in the 1990’s, loyalty and pride to respective clans became more prominent (Kabir, 2014). This risk of clans becoming a divisive issue is not lost on Ahmed who says “I insist on not revealing my clan to any of the refugees as I want the community to come together,” hoping that Somali refugees will rally, rather than retreat to tribal prejudices. Kristin Langellier, in her study exploring the in which identity is performed and re-constructed for Somalians in the global diaspora, suggests that Somalis may ‘look homogenous’ but that “some Somali cultures are more restrictive and it depends on” tribe and intercultural relations between tribes (Langellier, 2010, p.75). The importance for Somali’s to create a more homogenous set of beliefs could prove crucial to their ability to adapt and assimilate into their new homeland. As I witnessed at a community meeting at the Islamic Center, the Somalis discussed how the Somali community could better support one another, stressing the need for a collective welfare whilst also better integrating into the American landscape. The men encouraged each other to be exemplary employees, turning up for work on time and, as Ahmed suggested, “avoid discussing

negative and tragic elements of your [diasporic] lives.” Yet, as the Somali refugees attempt to integrate and navigate the essential needs of housing, work, and food, they also stand firm in trying to maintain their cultural identity, adopting a pragmatic ‘hybrid’ of cultures and adjusting some of their prescribed cultural ‘rules’ to accommodate the new ideological and economic landscape.

5. Gender, Social Identity, Culture, and the ‘Second Home’

The women refugees particularly embrace maintaining a cultural identity whilst employing an empirical approach to clans as a means to ‘network,’ demonstrating the resilience and adaptability embedded in the Somali consciousness. Gender relationships in Somali are founded on a patriarchal order. Whereas within the patriarchal hierarchy of Somali social structure, Somali women may be perceived as subordinate, yet the practical need to earn money in America allows women to play a more prominent role. As Cawo Abdi points out, the findings in her study “support the argument that women’s consciousness about their subordination is heightened with migration” (Abdi, 2014). New opportunities for these women in Owensboro allow them to re-negotiate their place, even fighting the male discourses and gendered hierarchy.

One of the women interviewed, Istar, highlights how the practical needs and implications of now living in America assists in subverting the gender hierarchy found in Somalian culture. She challenges the subordinate female role as she adopts both the position of head of household whilst still presenting herself as a “good Muslim woman. She is a 32 year old Somali journalist from Mogadishu who fled Somali after her family were targeted. Istar has been in the country for almost a year, but has kept her vast network of family, friends, and ‘distant relatives’ close. As a Muslim female journalist, she has lost many family members and endured great sacrifices in her career quest, the reality all the more poignant as she now works in a local factory to make her way in the Owensboro community. However, what Americans might perceive as a subordinate economic role actually represents independence for many Somali women as the money Istar earns re-positions her standing in the family. She spent eight years in Kenya and has not seen her father for 16 years or her husband, who now lives in Uganda, for nine years. As a lone woman facing the diaspora, she displays both vulnerability and fortitude. She reveals that her distant relatives, her description of her tribe or clan, are how she managed to navigate the perils of persecution and civil war. She explains how clan members assisted her to circumvent the conflict as well as maneuver in her new host country, Kenya, when she escaped to relative safety in

Nairobi. “My distant relatives in Kenya helped me move to a different city when I first arrived in Kenya, but it was too hot, so I went back to Nairobi.” She affirms that these ‘relatives’ are her extended clan although she tries to avoid using the word. Regardless, networking is a vital part of Somali people’s social interaction.

To Istar, social media is her lifeblood to her identity and culture. Istar navigates these “transnational social fields” that Somalis inhabit (Al-Sharmani, 2016) by using Facebook and WhatsApp daily to keep in touch with those across the globe. She maintains these ties, sharing with them her knowledge of immigrating and living in the U.S as well as sending vital money back home. Her father recently contracted malaria and her precious dollars saved his life. Equally, she sends dollars for education expenses to help her niece realize her medical dream. Istar finds herself in an unexpected role of provider, not only as a lone female in the diaspora, but also almost adopting a role as head of household transnationally. Her identity espouses an international fluidity and fluency, demonstrating how “daily lives of diasporic Somalis, their aspirations, and challenges as well as their resources and life choices are embedded in and influenced by their close ties and interdependent relations with networks of relatives living in multiple countries” (Al-Sharmani, 2016). During video footage, she shows me her multitudinous contacts across the world, news shared, and photos of friends and family, most either spread across the globe in the ever-widening diaspora or risking their lives back home. She points to a young male relative, dressed for soccer, whose story is too hard for her to bear. But she brightens with thoughts of her new life and the dreams she hopes to reanimate.

Istar bristles slightly to the label ‘refugee’, explaining that she is a “legal person with papers and rights.” She says her status is very different from that in Kenya. She no longer perceives herself as a refugee as she has now found a “second home.” Kristen Langellier notes how one Muslim woman she interviewed stated the desire of “freedom for a Muslim to be a Muslim in any environment” (Langellier, 2010). This offers an apologist stance that mirrors Istar saying she simply wants to create a new life. Her concern, as she tries to re-establish her identity in her changing environment, is that she will be marginalized and labeled. As Murray Forman observes, if Somalis remain in this position of refugee or immigrant, they remain in a prohibiting role that limits their ability to fully redefine their identities and assimilate into their new homeland (Forman, 2001). Whereas Kenya was a host country that afforded Istar safety and opportunities to carry on as a radio journalist underground, it did not allow her to fully integrate as a resident/citizen, her lack of papers prohibiting her from working at an official radio station

when a place was offered. She was labeled a refugee in Kenya. Similarly, Saharo, a 23 year old single Somali woman, also found herself a sole provider for her younger brothers in Kenya as she worked at West Gate Mall. Her newfound and forced independence, due to the catastrophic loss of her parents at the age of 13, meant she re-defined her identity as she adjusted to her new realities. Both women view themselves now as legal residents of the U.S on their way to becoming citizens. Yet, Somalis struggle to overcome the refugee label that potentially marginalizes and subjugates them as a subordinate class of U.S resident.

Navigating as a woman on her own for over eight years whilst still maintaining her Muslim values has been challenging for Istar. She has learned to adjust and adapt to her host environments. With elements of identity often shifting in response to life's changes, identity for Somalis is constructed around the visible notion of religion, along with cultural expectations that are founded in the gendered hierarchy. Istar explains, "Even though I have not seen my husband for many years, being married is important as it gives Somali women independence to run their own household." She achieves this independence as long as she presents her image as a proper Muslim woman by maintaining the expected modesty of wearing her hijab. She makes a point in our numerous encounters to stress she must never allow any man who is not a relative to see her bare head. Istar's identity is also grounded in doing the perceived 'right thing,' regardless of the physical geography. Many of the younger Somalis are drawn to her for guidance, and she finds herself caring for others in the Somali community, feeding them and housing other women from her modest income at a local factory. Whereas Somali men tend to be more political and tribal in their thinking, I have observed that the Somali women, adopting the traditionally perceived normative female domestic role, focus more on family and relationships in the U.S, within the global diaspora, and back in Africa. Housing in Owensboro creates some difficulties with most Somalis living in apartment buildings with the reality of single women and men living side by side, and seeing each other regularly as they often walk past open doorways in the heat of Owensboro's spring and summer. Istar embraces the practical aspects and need to assimilate into the Western culture, mixing with the opposite sex and often feeding the young men who come to her and another young woman's apartment. I observed often how they sat at her table discussing community and work concerns as she offered them the traditional dish of chicken and rice with the option of spaghetti served with the prerequisite shidni, a red chili sauce with tamarind. Since Istar is married, she interacts with men, referring to them "like my brothers" even though they are not members of her immediate family.

Here again, we see re-interpreting the stricter rules of Islam, a reified integration to adapt to the immediate needs with prior ideology blending into practical application. Gender relations shift in uncertain environments, reflecting Abdi's observation of how income opportunities influence normative gender arrangements (Abdi, 2014). Subsequently, Istar has maintained her culture with the traditional meals and her domestic positioning. She positions herself to be perceived as the 'good Muslim woman,' one who keeps her head and body covered, follows the strict prayer times, adopts a respectful big sister/maternal role, and defers to the men on matters of religious protocol when questions are asked. Istar, whilst living life as a lone, independent female in the West, is still a married Muslim woman and strives to always maintain the expectations of modesty and propriety. Many of the Somali women, like Istar, Saharo, and others I interviewed, have found different ways in which to ward off unwanted attention. For example, Saharo, who lives with her siblings, tells the local men she works with that she is married and left her husband and children behind in Kenya. The true narrative is that she left her boyfriend of five years behind in Kenya, describing him as her 'best friend' although accepting the reality that they may never be together. Both women recognize in the Somali, and more significantly Muslim, diaspora that marriage protects women and garners a more respected position in Somali social hierarchy. However, many of the women I spoke to had been separated from their husbands in the diaspora and were trying to navigate the forced estrangement whilst maintaining, as Istar explained, the more socially "secure position as a married woman." In the diaspora, Somalis find themselves needing to decide "what to reject and what to preserve of their culture" (Langellier, 2010), particularly when they begin a new life in a Western culture. Changes in food, housing arrangements, gendered dynamics, and economic independence often leave them struggling to maintain their identity. The question of being Somali is at times difficult to define when for many of them, Somalia is a decade old memory. When deciding what to maintain of their identity and what to accept as change, much of what is preserved of Somali culture and identity is heavily tied to Islam.

In my interviews, I found that for the women to maintain their identity, the one thing that remains constant for them, more than race or national heritage, is religion, with the veil, or hijab, allowing the women a consistency to preserve their identity within the Muslim community. With the advent of Somali refugees increasingly populating the Owensboro community, the most noticeable cultural difference came in the form of the hijab as an identity and its religious ties which surpassed identifying as "Somali." Whilst I spent time with some of the Somali women as

they navigated their daily life and frequented shops and restaurants, I observed a natural acceptance to the exotic dress and hijab amongst the indigenous Owensboro residents, with respect and politeness, rather than contempt or suspicion as the primary reaction. Owensboro's residents comprise a deeply religious population with the majority of the residents identifying as practicing Christians, many evangelical, within a predominantly Republican electorate. Their reaction to the Muslim women's foreignness within the community suggests that a strong identifiable Christian foundation counters political sentiments, with the Owensboro residents' desire to do good things and help others apparently transcending any xenophobic notions.

6. Islam and Bible belt Christianity: Shared Religious Identities

As mentioned earlier, Dr. Kalik of the Islamic Center of Owensboro made it clear to the local media that the vandalism of the structure, which serves as the local 'mosque,' a serviceable building that from the outside looks much like an office building, was not indicative of the wider Owensboro community's sentiments and treatment of the Muslim community. I had previously attended a Muslim service at the mosque with some of my college students and found the Muslims there to be extremely tolerant of headscarves not being worn by female visitors (although we adopted our scarves to be respectful). When I attended a Somali community meeting at the Islamic Center, the Somalis were equally welcoming, with many coming up to chat and practice their English skills in conversation with me. The women served a selection of food in large foil trays, which resembled the church potlucks so often found in Christian churches throughout the States, albeit minus the 'goat' dish. Young girls, dressed in colorful headscarves, offered me halva (*Xalwo*), the gelatinous texture reminiscent of a sticky, somewhat gritty Turkish Delight.

After food had been eaten, Ahmed and another man led the meeting, establishing themselves as the community 'elders.' The need to succeed and the practical ways to integrate drove much of the rhetoric, but the key concerns the Somali men raised, with the women and children quietly commenting on the proceedings in their segregated side of the hall, were founded in the famine and draught in Somalia. In this religious setting, they discussed raising money to send funds back home. The more secular option of using the funds for a party was then proposed, polarizing the community's response with the majority surprisingly voting for a party. With many of them living with the weariness of war their entire lives, the Somalis desire their own space to navigate and enjoy freedom of choice in the new homeland. However, this

necessity for their transnational identities to coexist in the diasporic Somali discourse reifies the need for a cohesive narrative through line. In the absence of a clear paradigm for their diaspora, Islam provides a common thread which runs through the entire community.

7. Islam as an Identity

Women in the diaspora often perceive the wearing of the veil, deeply tied to Muslim practices, as a clear identity. As Langellier says: “In the face of so many losses and so much change, Islam provides the single most stable source of strength and public communal identity for Somalis in the diaspora.” (Langellier, 2010). This sentiment resonates with the women I interviewed. None of them would consider changing their practice of wearing the hijab. Indeed, Istar states that religion is singularly what has helped her survive it all. She attempts to be flexible in some areas of prescribed Muslim practices, such as adjusting some items of her clothing for work, but she wears her hijab almost as a protective source of her identity-- as a Muslim and acceptance into the Islamic community, regardless of nationality, to be perceived as a good Muslim woman. Langellier notes that the normative position requiring women to cover their bodies to adhere to patriarchal expectations is arguably a fair exchange in the diaspora to automatically earn respect and stability. It may indeed be this “religion as identity” (Langellier, 2010) that both alarms Westerners who recognize this deep imprint, but equally resonates with the Bible belt community. Owensboro’s Christian population, many Southern Baptists, share many of the Muslim values in their patriarchal structures, coupled with conservative attitudes and beliefs of no sex before marriage and abstaining from alcohol. Barring the Muslim women’s hijab, many of the Western women in Owensboro would arguably find the Somalis modesty, social attitudes, and religious ideologies relatable. As Saharo points out, Catholics that she met in Kenya had similar attitudes. Just as Muslims fast during Ramadan and celebrate Eid, so too Catholics practiced fasting and Lent. She also pointed out how similar the first few books of the Bible are to the Koran, trying to bridge the gap between the religions to find common ground, rather than intolerance and opposing discourses.

Furthermore, the Somalis in Owensboro, who in their transnational communications to one another on each other’s diasporic placements, report that communities ranging across the U.S do not compare as favorably as the cities in Kentucky. They have found the KY inhabitants to be warm and welcoming, particularly the churches who have opened up their facilities for the families to enjoy community time in their halls and facilities, including gyms for the children to

play in and socialize. The Somalis never feel the Owensboro residents have an intent to press Christian beliefs upon them, but rather it is the community reaching out to welcome and assist them in integrating. They do note, however, that their own Islamic attitudes to other religions can be less tolerant or welcoming, it being unlikely that a mosque in Somalia would invite Baptists to use their facilities if they were in need. But the experience opens a dialogue to broaden both culture's thoughts. I observed how Somalis considered the non-Muslim environment's model to re-evaluate their own attitudes within broader social interaction. Certainly, the Islamic Center's established warm attitude towards the Owensboro population has given the arriving Somali refugees cause to reconsider their social model in less rigid terms. Langellier suggests that "[many] Somalis tend to be cultural Muslims, and some of the things that Somalis tend to think are Islamic are actually just their own cultural manifestations or distortion of the religion" (Langellier, 2010), much in the way Christians often reinterpret the Bible to apply it to their own ends. There are some practices, however, that remain firmly grounded, wearing the hijab being an immovable practice for some like Istar. She explains that she will stand before Allah and be judged on all her deeds. The way she dresses contributes to the 'good' deeds she will have accumulated. The Bible belt reality of her new homeland is that her prescribed attitudes to judgement and the notion of hell and heaven would find common ground in any Baptist Church on a Sunday morning in Owensboro.

To conclude, my ongoing research suggests that shared values in religious identity can create dialectic models for Muslims in conservative Christian environments. The identity of the Somali refugees, particularly the women who find their way to KY in the diaspora, embodies the social constructs of both Somali Muslims' collective assumptions as well as the receptive homeland's conventional social models. Within the "in-between" space that Owensboro provides, Somali identity constructs adjust to integrate into the western community, forming a cultural hybridity of the two cultures. Equally, the injection of vastly different cultures and diversity for a small Bible belt community opens avenues for broader thinking and wider tolerance of different views from both cultures. Both sides approach to the dialectic has allowed the two communities to discover common ground as well as find more meaningful truths and strengths within their own constructs. I have observed from teachers and employment agencies to businesses and churches that the residents of Owensboro hold a genuine desire to help these refugees who have experienced persecution and despair. Equally, the Somalis' desire to work, give their children a better future, and live a good life is a shared value the residents can respect.

As they navigate their new homeland, transitioning from refugees to legal residents of America, they find commonality with their new neighbors.

The shared religious values of the Bible belt community have had a surprising result in creating a more inclusive environment for the Somalis, combating elements of prejudice and xenophobia in much of the rhetoric that has emerged from the new Washington administration. Ultimately, a cultural “hybridity” helps the refugee population integrate more effectively into American society, whilst benefiting both communities to challenge the traditions of status quo. Taking these findings into account, Somali Muslims may consider settling in communities with deeper religious values, where they may find broader cultural tolerance. By highlighting the shared values and spaces, many founded within religious constructs, I would hope to find that this dialectic model reflects attitudes in other communities throughout the U.S.

Table 1: *U.S Department of Commerce “Quickfacts”*

https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/2158620
U.S Department of Commerce
People
Population
iPopulation estimates, July 1, 2016, (V2016)
59,273
iPopulation estimates, July 1, 2015, (V2015)
59,042
iPopulation estimates base, April 1, 2010, (V2016)
57,449
iPopulation estimates base, April 1, 2010, (V2015)
57,449
iPopulation, percent change - April 1, 2010 (estimates base) to July 1, 2016, (V2016)

3.2%
iPopulation, percent change - April 1, 2010 (estimates base) to July 1, 2015, (V2015)
2.8%
iPopulation, Census, April 1, 2010
57,265
Race and Hispanic Origin
iWhite alone, percent, July 1, 2015, (V2015) (a)
X
iWhite alone, percent, April 1, 2010 (a)
87.5%
iBlack or African American alone, percent, July 1, 2015, (V2015) (a)
X
iBlack or African American alone, percent, April 1, 2010 (a)
7.3%
iAmerican Indian and Alaska Native alone, percent, July 1, 2015, (V2015) (a)
X
iAmerican Indian and Alaska Native alone, percent, April 1, 2010 (a)
0.1%
iAsian alone, percent, July 1, 2015, (V2015) (a)
X
iAsian alone, percent, April 1, 2010 (a)
0.9%
iNative Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone, percent, July 1, 2015, (V2015) (a)
X
iNative Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone, percent, April 1, 2010 (a)
0.1%
iTwo or More Races, percent, July 1, 2015, (V2015)
X
iTwo or More Races, percent, April 1, 2010
2.5%
iHispanic or Latino, percent, July 1, 2015, (V2015) (b)
X
iHispanic or Latino, percent, April 1, 2010 (b)
3.2%
iWhite alone, not Hispanic or Latino, percent, July 1, 2015, (V2015)
X
iWhite alone, not Hispanic or Latino, percent, April 1, 2010
86.1%
Population Characteristics
iVeterans, 2011-2015
3,995
iForeign born persons, percent, 2011-2015
2.6%
Housing
iHousing units, July 1, 2016, (V2016)
X
iHousing units, April 1, 2010
26,072
iOwner-occupied housing unit rate, 2011-2015
58.0%
iMedian value of owner-occupied housing units, 2011-2015
\$104,100
iMedian selected monthly owner costs -with a mortgage, 2011-2015
\$960
iMedian selected monthly owner costs -without a mortgage, 2011-2015
\$353
iMedian gross rent, 2011-2015

\$637
iBuilding permits, 2016
X
Families and Living Arrangements
iHouseholds, 2011-2015
23,995
iPersons per household, 2011-2015
2.35
iLiving in same house 1 year ago, percent of persons age 1 year+, 2011-2015
83.5%
iLanguage other than English spoken at home, percent of persons age 5 years+, 2011-2015
4.0%
Education
iHigh school graduate or higher, percent of persons age 25 years+, 2011-2015
85.5%
iBachelor's degree or higher, percent of persons age 25 years+, 2011-2015
19.9%
Health
iWith a disability, under age 65 years, percent, 2011-2015
13.1%
iPersons without health insurance, under age 65 years, percent
▲12.9%
Income and Poverty
iMedian household income (in 2015 dollars), 2011-2015
\$37,279
iPer capita income in past 12 months (in 2015 dollars), 2011-2015
\$21,805
iPersons in poverty, percent
▲19.8%

Table 2: Somalis Resettled in Kentucky

Data compiled by the Kentucky Office for Refugees

Records in the database go back to May 1994. Since then, around 4,559 Somalis have been resettled in Kentucky through a refugee resettlement agency, or moved to Kentucky after being initially resettled in another state and requested services from a refugee resettlement agency. Below is basic information on the number of Somali refugee resettled in Kentucky since May 1994.

1994 – 1999

412 arrivals

All arrivals in Louisville

Primary arrivals: 404

Secondary arrivals* 8

**database only has information about secondary migrants who request services from a refugee resettlement agency in Kentucky.*

2000 - 2009

1649 arrivals

Louisville:	1637
Bowling Green:	12

Primary arrivals: 963
Secondary arrivals: 686

2010 – 2015

1702 arrivals

Louisville	1399
Bowling Green:	269
Owensboro:	34*

**the first Somali refugee was resettled in Owensboro in March 2014*

Primary Arrivals: 1340
Secondary Arrivals: 362

2016 and January – April 2017

796 arrivals

Louisville	502
Bowling Green:	221
Owensboro:	73

Primary Arrivals: 607
Secondary Arrivals: 189

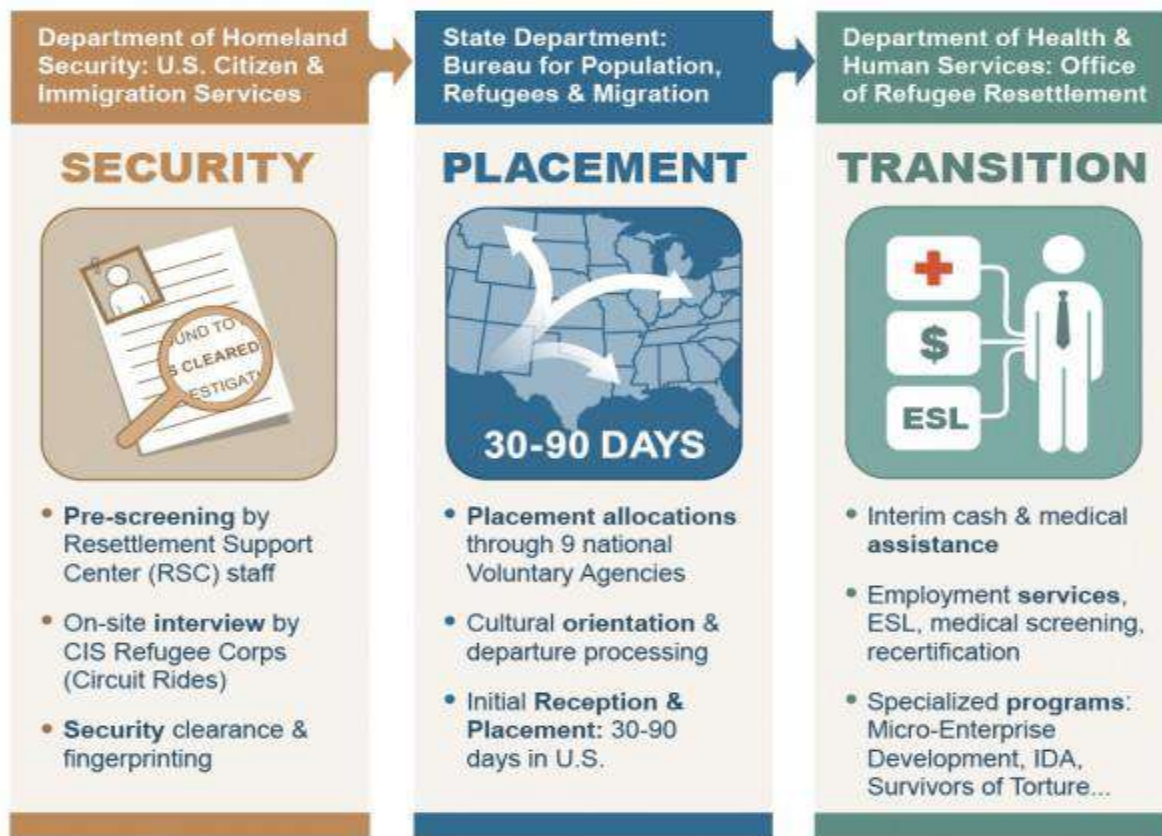


Figure 1: "Refugee Process"

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