

Beyond Place:

Diasporan Creative Placemaking

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Abstract

This paper explores the case of the Somali diaspora and an artmaking initiative with young Somali women to offer an example of how art educators can engage with creative placemaking with community members belonging to a refugee diaspora. By considering placement rather than displaced aspects of diaspora and attending to the interplay of difference and identity negotiation, this paper offers strategies for crafting spaces for aesthetic engagement including exhibiting difference, artmaking as interruption, and resistance to the present.

Popular conception of refugee diaspora as an involuntary displacement obscures the agency of its members. Without belittling the traumatic experiences many refugees have faced, refugee diasporas also include those born in diaspora, others who left earlier, and those choosing different migration routes. Redefining diaspora as a process of community building that attends to the interconnections between host, home and other diaspora locations and to which members self-identify as belonging challenges assumptions about place-based identity and understandings of how the process of placemaking is tied to place.

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Creative placemaking is a process of developing community that centers art and artmaking, while explicitly attending to place-specific identities and the relationships between cultural groups so that all have the opportunity to actively participate. My experiences working with 1.5 and second generation young adults as a community artist and researcher led to consideration of the benefits of an explicitly diasporan community building approach within Anderson's (2010) framework for creative placemaking. For Anderson (2010), creative placemaking utilizes locally specific form and content to address "the local community's issues, values, mores, and aesthetic sensibilities" (p. 6) and "aspects of culture that promote inequity" (p. 5). I found that my collaborators challenged the inequalities they face as members of a diaspora and as minorities by putting forth a vision for their future as participating members of their communities.

This paper explores the case of the Somali diaspora in Columbus, Ohio and an artmaking initiative with young Somali American women. This offers an example of how art educators can engage in creative placemaking with community members belonging to a refugee diaspora. This paper addresses the following questions: How does a diasporic lens alter understandings of creative placemaking? How are we engaging in placemaking across places we may not physically inhabit? How does a sense of displacement, and more importantly a sense of placement, inform creative placemaking with community members in diaspora?

Somalis in Columbus and DSVU

Although some left earlier, the Somali diaspora mobilized in the years following the start of the civil war in 1991 and established communities in Europe, the Middle East and North America. Somalis began arriving in Columbus, Ohio in the mid-1990s and today there are an estimated 45,000, making it one of the largest populations of Somalis in the United States, second only to Minneapolis. Although some were resettled with official refugee status, secondary¹ and chain² migrations to Columbus began en masse in the early 2000s as Somalis learned of affordable and safe housing, jobs, and better living conditions.³ The city, including its citizens and service providers, was unprepared to deal with such influx. Upon arrival, many Somalis faced racism and Islamophobia while simultaneously learning to speak a new language, function in a new social system, and, for some, deal with the trauma of war and displacement (Moore & Joseph, 2011; Roble & Rutledge, 2008; Waters, 2012).⁴ Many nonprofit organizations have formed and offer vital services such as ESL education, job training, and case management (CRP, 2005; Roble & Rutledge, 2008). However, common anti-Somali ideologies and misperceptions persist regarding Somali religion and cultural practices, exacerbated by misinformation regarding immigration and resettlement policy (particularly relevant to housing and health care), representation in local media outlets, and portrayals of Somalis in popular culture.⁵ Despite frequently negative depiction, Somalis in Columbus have formed a diverse and burgeoning community.

Life in two (or more) cultures compels a negotiation and redefinition of identity and cultural practice, particularly among 1.5 and second generation Somali Americans, as well as a desire to participate in American life. Participation, contributing to all aspects of public life and actively choosing which aspects of the dominant culture to engage with and which elements of Somali culture to retain (Roble & Rutledge, 2008), is tied to place. The opportunity to access the benefits of society vary by locale. For example, in Minneapolis, a Somali was

¹ The movement from the location of primary resettlement.

² A series of migrations within a family.

³ For example, while a group of 160 Somali Bantu were resettled to Columbus in 2004-2005, the influx of secondary migrants in the year following more than doubled their numbers (CRP, 2005). Although some resided with relatives already settled in Columbus, others occupied the city's homeless shelters, which not only strained their capacity to serve local needs, but were also unable to provide the needed transportation, translation, and employment services.

⁴ Incidents of work-place discrimination (Waters, 2012) and more extreme examples such as the shooting of Nasir Abbi by Columbus police in 2005 exemplify the lack of knowledge about Somali culture and language among non-Somalis.

⁵ For example, blockbuster films such as *Black Hawk Down* and *Captain Phillips*.

elected to city council in 2013, while in Columbus, the political engagement of Somalis is still limited primarily to outreach efforts (DachenBach, 2015). Creative placemaking is occurring through arts initiatives aimed to educate the larger community about their Somali neighbors. These initiatives facilitate dialogue about the process of identity formation within diaspora and raise awareness about the ways in which young Somalis in particular are defining themselves and actively participating in their communities⁶.

Fourteen Somali American women have responded to this sociocultural context through two narrative participatory photography projects within an arts-based initiative, Dumarka Soomaaliyeed Voices Unveiled (DSVU). The women of the first project identified stereotypes they have encountered related to dress, religion, and women's role and interrupted them by offering multiple accounts of different experiences through story and photograph. The focus of the second project shifted to cultural expectations, and through dialogue, storytelling, and photography (both of and by the women participating), the women self-curated multiple viewpoints of developing identity among confrontations of different cultural expectations. These conversations in particular put conflicting ideas about who these women should be according to non-Somalis and the women's parents and elders, as well as expectations of dress and behavior in different locations, into play. These issues illuminate the process of diaspora identity negotiation and the ways that Somali women are participating as active members of their community.

Redefining diaspora and diasporic identity: From displaced to placed

The women who participated in DSVU are members of a refugee diaspora; all born outside of Somalia. They speak varying proficiencies of Somali; English is their first language. Only one has stepped foot in Somalia. They have lived in many places in the diaspora - the Middle East, Toronto, Minneapolis, Atlanta, Virginia, and Columbus. Some remember refugee camps and other's families came as political asylees or on student visas before the war began. They all attended university and some have obtained graduate degrees. They grew up immersed in Somali culture at home (often focused on cultural preservation) and American culture at school. The Somali community's response to the challenge of host cultural influence varies by location. Those raised in diaspora are faced with the challenge of

⁶ Some examples include The Somali Diaspora Project (Roble & Rutledge, 2008), Tariq Tarey's visual ethnographic work (tariqtarey.com), Moore and Joseph's (2011) cultural training for K-12 teachers in Columbus, and the art and cultural education efforts of Mohamud Dirios (Warah, Dirios & Osman, 2012), founder of the Somali Cultural and Research Institute.

placement rather than displacement as they learn how to identify as Somalis in diaspora in relation to home and host countries as well as their local community.

How we conceptualize diaspora fundamentally affects the way in which we as art educators engage with diaspora communities. Diaspora is a process of community-building occurring for at least two generations after migration with two major factors: 1) the self-identification of belonging to a diaspora community and 2) interconnections between host and home countries and between members of the diaspora (Johnson, 2012). The focus on process rather than a group of people shifts attention away from the defining traumatic historical events propelling diaspora movements (displacement) to the process of building community (placement) in which individuals take an active role in defining and building their community.

Diasporic identity is often discussed in terms of identity discontinuity (Milligan, 2003) in which the intersections of past, present and future imaginaries are considered and cultural identity is (in process of being) lost or in conflict with the dominant culture (Dokter, 1998). In contrast, redefining diaspora based on placement, rather than displacement, more closely considers individual agency in establishing connections between place, people, culture and identity. The young women of DSVU occupy multiple spaces – some self-identified and some not – and attend to multiple places – local, diaspora, and origin. They identify themselves as Muslim, Somali, and American. They choose (or not) some identity markers, such as *hijab*, while others, such as the color of their skin, are chosen for them. And while these markers do not necessarily correspond with their experiences, they offer an important starting point to share stories of what it means to be Somali women in the diaspora. Consideration of the 1.5 and second generation perspective offers a more positive diasporic identity, one in flux both physically

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as members move to maintain familial ties, for jobs, education, marriage, and housing as well as figuratively through transnational practices of remittances and the transmission of ideas and resources. The other is constructed in the cultures and places with which they self-identify.

Process of identity formation and placemaking within diaspora

What do the concepts of diaspora and diasporic identity offer creative placemaking? Rios and Watkins (2015) utilize Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of assemblage to theorize how emergent spaces are forged through a territoriality dependent on the continuous circulations described as deterritorializations and reterritorializations. Deterritorialization is a process of decontextualizing a set of relations between culture and place, and reterritorialization is their subsequent restructuring. Defining place as an assemblage of people, ideas, and resources that constantly negotiates between local and extralocal processes (including local circumstances and political and economic forces) creates a circulation of activities and ideas designed to reproduce and further group livelihood and identity through collective organization across particular locations (Rios & Watkins, 2015). The consideration of the relationship between the local and extralocal and the people, ideas, and resources that occupy them, rather than their correspondence, shifts the concept of identity to a process of becoming (O'Sullivan, 2006.). Scholars in Somali Studies have adopted this concept to define diasporic identity formation as a process of negotiation to define and redefine who we are, and often who we are not, to ourselves and others, through imagined and narrated identities, cultural divisions, and renewal in the context of diaspora (Griffiths, 2002; Hall, 1996; 2000; Langellier, 2010).

Rios and Watkins' (2015) productive definition of *translocal placemaking*, developed out of Hmong diaspora placemaking efforts, considers the various entanglements that historically shape diaspora including memories and practices tied to place of origin and efforts to participate in the local community. A *diasporan creative placemaking* likewise attends to participation in the local community, bringing artists and art endeavors to the center of efforts increasing participation and understanding between cultural groups. It also considers the relationships between as well as the arts practices and traditions of local, diaspora, and origin communities.

Whereas Rios and Watkins (2015) consider the relationship between local and extralocal processes, Nancy's (1991, 2000) community theory attends to relationships between individuals (or singularities) and a group of individuals in community, or being-in-common, as well as how

they tell stories about themselves and through these stories define a community. The community Nancy proposes is an interrupted one, avoiding both myth (the grand narrative of community past, present, and future) and nihilism (the erasure of community), and articulated as a series of contingent singularities who make themselves and their community through a process of experiencing difference. Identity as a process of becoming in-common while sharing difference offers a useful perspective of diasporic experience positing storytelling as an integral aspect of developing a fluid, relational, and interrupted community. Creative placemaking efforts work towards an interrupted community. Sharing individual experiences of difference defers totalizing conceptions of communities and works towards a more just (and fluid) community. Telling stories of the spaces in between cultures and places, as Bhabha (2008/1994) writes, “provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovate sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (p. 2) and whose articulations of cultural differences produce new narratives of identity, community and belonging.

Drawing from Nancy’s practice of storytelling and the relationship between place and identity offered by Rios and Watkins (2015), I offer a framework to understand creative placemaking with diaspora communities, summarized in four questions:

- i. How do diasporan community members identify with different locales?
- ii. What do we learn from the movements and relationships between places and the communities that occupy them?
- iii. What stories are told about these communities, and how do these stories define the individuals that belong to them?
- iv. How can these movements and stories create opportunities to participate in community?

In the effort to participate or integrate into the local community, sharing difference provides ground on which to build community. O’Sullivan (2006) describes artmaking as a strategy for accessing that which is normally outside yourself, that which is different. Moreover, the practice of storytelling – whether visually, textually or orally – provides a medium through which to share difference and build a common history across multiple places. In the remainder of this article, I explore the possibilities and strategies of diasporan creative placemaking through examples from *DSVU*.

Narrative Participatory Photography: A Method for Creative Placemaking

Through the development and execution of DSVU, the women and I cultivated a strategy for creative placemaking which, following Bhabha (1994/2008), entailed creating a space for telling stories of difference. This method, narrative participatory photography, is culturally relevant, emphasizes storytelling and photography to explore community issues through collaborative artmaking, utilizes co-curation and writing (including poetry) as forms of analysis, and considers multiple audiences and modes of presentation (Smith, 2014a). It is locally specific in form, informed by the artmaking practices and cultural traditions already employed by the participants, as well as content, the topics addressed chosen by participants informed by their sociocultural context and interests.

The women's participation in DSVU is one effort to actively engage in placemaking and further integrate Somalis into the larger Columbus community. The women identified stereotypes, assumptions and expectations regarding Somali women that promote inequalities. Through stories they related their encounters with these fixed perceptions. Sharing experiences with each other and with others, allowed the participants to interrupt these perceptions by claiming and redefining them (Rogoff, 2000). In addition, the women demonstrated ways they worked to better their communities. The dynamic attention to outward and inward concerns includes diasporic identity negotiation, strengthening community services and opportunities to participate, and disparities between and misperceptions held by host communities and offers three important strategies for creative placemaking: difference, interruption and resistance.

Movements between locales

The women of *DSVU* are connected by their common location in Columbus, Ohio, sharing experiences of being Somali women in one of the largest Somali communities in the United States. Although there was broad consensus about the importance of learning Somali, practicing Islam, familial connections, and knowing Somali history and culture; the manifestation of these values in their everyday lives varied between individuals and different locations in the diaspora. For example, jeans are acceptable to wear in a public space within the Somali community of Toronto, but in Columbus, "that's just asking to move to another city." The broader community in central Ohio often expects Somali women to wear "traditional" religious dress. Nasra⁷ tells of a time she went to a city building and as she went through security, they asked her to take off the

⁷ Participants are named according to their preference – by first name, pseudonym, or initial.

zippered sweatshirt she was wearing. She tried to explain that it was not appropriate for her to take it off in such a public setting (the lobby), but the security guard said she was not dressed like a Muslim, and would not give her “special treatment” by allowing her to use a private room.

Nasra said, “I wear my *hijab* (the practice of modesty) every day, but because I was wearing my work uniform, khakis and a sweatshirt, I was told I was not Muslim by someone who had a very narrow concept of my religion. I am not more or less Muslim because of my dress.” Offering a juxtaposition of stories when participants’ understanding of their identity was challenged and creating a space where multiple perspectives can be discussed and presented promotes a reconsideration of community identity fostering connections among people and across cultures. These experiences are in some ways bound by location, and in others challenged by the movement between locales. Often considered outsiders within greater Columbus, they are not necessarily considered insiders by other Somalis. For example, Asha shared a story about traveling to Somalia for the first time:

The minute I stepped off the plane, you go to the airport. So there are two lines. The foreigner line and then there’s the naturalized citizen line. So I got into the wrong line. I was like, “I’m Somali. I’m in Somalia. I’m going to go in the right line.” And then I’m walking through the line and they were like, “What are you doing here? You’re a diaspora.” That’s the first I’ve ever heard that in my life. And I was like, “No, I’m Somali.” They’re like, “It doesn’t matter if you’re Somali, or if you were born here. If you don’t have the passport you can’t stand in this line.” And then I was like, “Oh ok.” Ouch. “Where do I go stand?” And

they were like, “Go stand with the other foreigners.” So I’m like, “We’re both Somali! What do you mean other foreigners?” (as cited in Smith, 2014b)

In this experience, Asha realized that her conception of Somaliness and belonging had been, up to that point, defined by those who had left Somalia; a concept that was deterritorialized when separated from the place in



Figure 1. Camels in the desert, taken by Asha during her trip to Somalia. This was the first time she had seen camels in the wild and described her excitement in seeing them while her cousins in Somalia did not understand the significance. Photo used with participant permission.

which it was formed. Through this and other encounters during her trip to Somalia, she distinguished ideas developed in diaspora from those held by Somalis in Somalia, and reformed an understanding of her own Somaliness. Recognizing that there are particular understandings within specific locations, as the women move from place to place, they challenge notions of home and Somaliness for themselves and others, and through encounters such as Asha's trip to Somalia, the boundaries of belonging are redrawn.

Despite the fact that DSVU is a project specific to Columbus, the women addressed identity across diaspora and back home, shifting the focus of inquiry from how these particular women understand what it is to be Somali women in Columbus to how this understanding changes in relation to other members of the diaspora as well as local and

origin countries [Figures 1-2].

These shifts and sometimes conflicts interrupt any fixed idea of diasporic identity, redefining it as a process of placement through self-identification amongst many locales. The complexities of diasporian identity lie in the multiple cultural, place-based juxtapositions that members of the diaspora find themselves negotiating.

Exhibition: A strategy of difference

Through the creation and implementation of DSVU, the women collaboratively deconstructed the spaces they occupy by identifying, engaging with, and redefining the contradictions, misrepresentations, and challenges of female diasporic identity thus beginning to

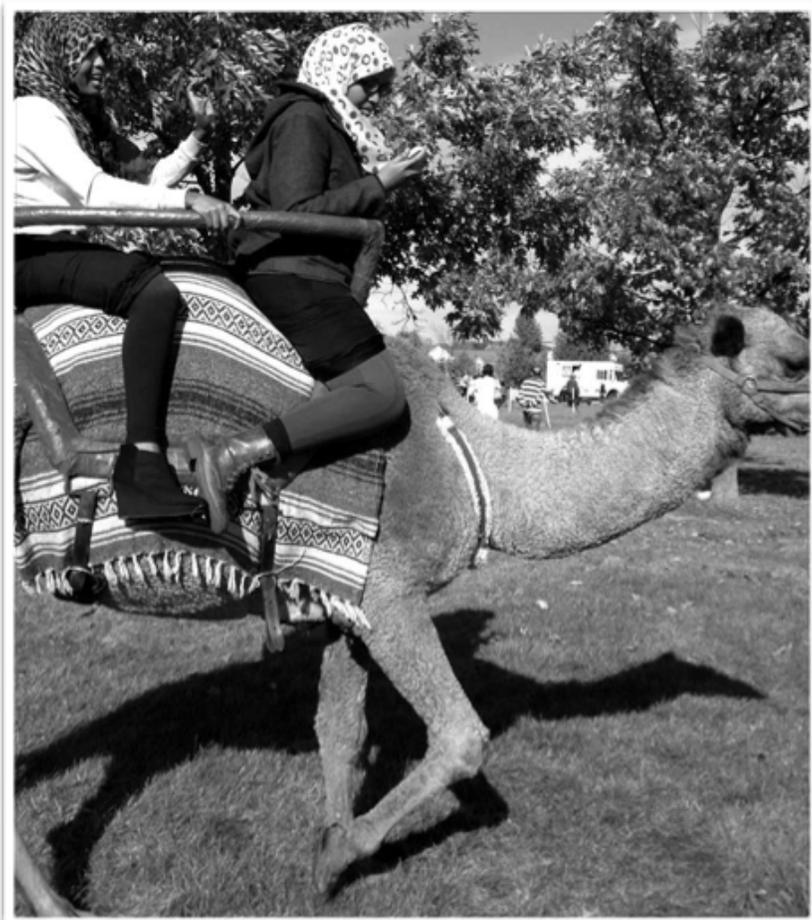


Figure 2: Zahra and Miriam ride a camel for the first time. The camel was rented for an Eid celebration at a mosque in the suburbs of Columbus. Photo used with participant permission.

reterritorialize the place through these interruptions and based on difference, creating a new place for themselves. Tubbs (2015) describes this as a strategy of difference. Nancy's (1991) consideration of community based on shared difference positions this strategy as one

working towards community, albeit one positing an end goal based not on the myth of sameness but rather on sharing experiences of difference.

Difference as strategy is manifest in the design of the exhibition, which was co-curated and displayed at public libraries [Images 3-5]. Together, the women and I selected photographs and narratives within broad themes. The photographs and text were displayed as individual stories, yet authorship was not assigned. Some stories were written by

participants, others were transcribed from group conversations and oral history interviews and co-edited into narrative form for display. Books including all the stories collected throughout the project (poems, essays, oral histories, and group conversations) were also displayed with the photographs and text. Photographs and stories were grouped according to topic, without separation, to emphasize the blurring between concepts like culture and religion, which for the women overlap, contest, and often conflict as they inform one another.

Viewer responses illustrate ways the exhibit initiated deterritorialization. In one instance, one viewer asked a library staff member, "Where are all the American kids?" Seeing photographs of women who did



Figure 3: Exhibit installed in community room. Project participants hosted a poetry reading during the exhibit's opening reception. Photo used with participant permission.

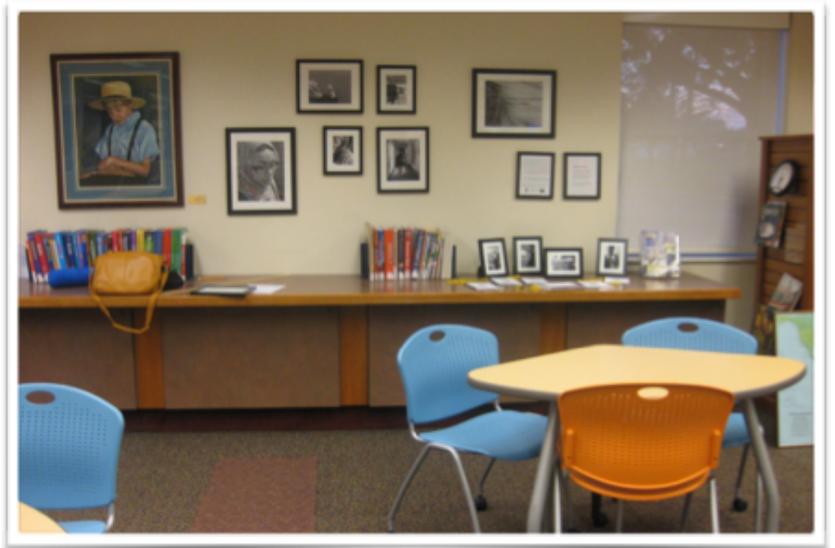


Figure 4: Exhibit installed in afterschool tutoring room. During a meet and greet event, a young Somali girl at tutoring asked one of the project participants if she was Somali and Muslim because she did not wear hijab. Presenting different representations of Somali women not only challenges non-Somalis' ideas, but also deterritorializes Somali notions of female identity as well. Photo used with participant permission.



Figure 5: Exhibit installed in computer lab, which Zam Zam saw and then initiated a second project. Photo used with participant permission.

not look like her forced a reconsideration of her notions of belonging and citizenship. Another viewer printed out a graphic of the Somali flag, handwrote the words, “Somalia. Don’t hate,” and taped it to the glass of the photograph in Figure 7. The second project initiative began after one young Somali woman saw the first exhibit and wanted to explore new questions. The flag and new initiative added different perspectives of Somaliness and experiences of 1.5 and second

generation women, redefining the exhibit’s representation of Somali women in Columbus.

The exhibit was installed in five different public libraries in central Ohio, chosen for their proximity to Somali communities. Although the women were primarily from the northwest side of Columbus, there are several enclaves of Somalis around central Ohio.⁸ The libraries are not designed for exhibiting art – the work was displayed in spaces designated for other purposes such as after-school tutoring, computer labs, and book stacks. In several locations DSVU was the first exhibition of art. Bringing art created by community members into a community space with the intention to educate non-Somalis about their Somali neighbors and encourage dialogue among both non-Somalis and Somalis alike about cultural expectations, identity issues, and challenging stereotypes reshaped the space and its purpose.

Artmaking as interruption

Nancy’s interrupted community offers another strategy, in which stories play an important role in defining community. Stories can establish what Nancy considers a mythical community, erase community, and create an interrupted community based on difference. Discussing and exhibiting photographs and narratives of multiple experiences of a common idea (cultural juxtapositions) side by side puts focus on differences rather than commonalities, shifting focus to the relationship between individual works and ideas undertaking sharing voices of the community in politically effective language. The women,

⁸Somali Bantu, for example, have settled around one location, however that library had not yet developed programming specific to its patronage and only recently received a general cultural training that did not address the cultural differences or histories between Bantu and Somalis despite their presence in the neighborhood since 2004.

for example, refused to present a single story, like Adichie (2009). They focused on the stereotypes that negatively affect their experiences as well as intentionally demonstrated the ways in which they as individuals are working towards greater community participation. Telling stories and showing these multiple stories presents a new interpretation of Somali and Muslim women's roles in their community.

Developing an interstitial perspective of community through creative placemaking looks to articulate the "common space...of a 'between'" (Nancy, 2007, p. xxiv), which forefronts social differences in order to revise and reconstruct community. For example, #SomaliGirlProb is a hashtag used by some participants on social media to address gender role disparities and issues related to modesty arising from the negotiation of competing and conflicting influences such as parents who want to maintain cultural traditions and values, a group of elders the women refer to as the "haram police," growing up among Western feminist values, and Islamic religious beliefs and practices. The women shared their #SomaliGirlProbs, and by identifying with this hashtag formed a community of difference based on a wide range of views and experiences.

Armaking as interruption is also practiced by working with stories in creative ways to articulate the common space that Nancy describes. One approach for interrupting the creation of a single story is to use curatorial strategies such as omitting authorship for individual works, organization by topic, and the intermingling of text and image. Another approach is to use creative practices, such as analytic poetry, to parse out conversations, debates, and discussions of experiences. In one example of analytic poetry, I examined the ways that women self-identified as members of diaspora by utilizing exact words and phrases from interview transcripts, participant writing, and researcher reflections.

*I don't know what it means to be a Somali woman.
Ask me again in ten years and I might have an answer for you.*

*I am a girl
I am a woman.*

*I am not that old.
I am eighteen, nineteen, twenty.*

*I am from Africa, but I am Somali;
The only Somali person that checks the Black box.
I am Somali, but I am Somali American.*

*A Somali girl living in America.
I am Somali, but I was born here.
I grew up here, but I don't have American blood in me. I have Somali blood in me. That's who my family is, that's what my culture is, that's what I grew up in.*

*I am Somali.
Not only am I Somali, I'm Muslim*

*I am open.
I am here so I'm going to learn what I need to learn to get by.
I am here to get my education.
I am in college right now, nursing school, finishing in a year.
I am going to go spend a year somewhere else and come back.
I am working all the time, sending money back home.
I am still trying to figure out what will have the most impact.
I am not very involved;
I am not staying here.*

*I am not sure,
I am really confused.
I am picking and choosing, and stuck between two worlds.
I am too Somali for my American friends and too American for my Somali friends.
They told me I am not Somali.
I am still finding my culture, you know?*

*I am fluent in Somali
I am trying to speak Somali
I am just looking at them, and they don't understand that I don't understand.
I am not fluent.*

*I am kind of a blonde.
I am always smiling at people,
I am a very rational thinker and I can be very blunt and not care.
Extremely liberal.
I am over here with my hair out, my jeans on, my shirt on.*

*I am wearing bright colors. You just don't do that here.
I am going to put the boundary back a little.
I am covered. It's expected of you, it's part of who I am.
I am like "This is a choice, right?"
I am like, why?
Why would I?
Why can't you be the same?
Why can't I laugh too loud or dance in public?
I am not believing anyone.
I am really against it, totally against this.
If I am talking about the things I want to talk about,
I am only showing it to some people.*

*I love knowing who I am
I am not going to hide.
I am sure...
I'm not done.*

*I still don't know.
I really don't, I honestly don't know. (Smith, 2014b)*

This poem, titled *I Am*, begins and ends with the phrase “I don’t know,” a phrase that dotted the women’s stories about learning what it means to be Somali women in America. The repetition of ideas includes variance of details, juxtaposing similarities among disparate stories and comparing different experiences of the same topic. Each of these elements work towards deference of definition, an important element in representing the ongoing process of identity negotiation and practicing interruption.

Resistance to the present

By identifying artifice and engaging with the ways these representations influence community building efforts, individual livelihoods, and policy making, participants in creative placemaking efforts seek to draw attention to and alter the way that people interact across cultural boundaries. The concept of participation (Roble & Rutledge, 2008) can offer a useful end goal: working towards a community whose members are actively participating in all aspects of it – politics, economy, education, social services, and culture – while maintaining extralocal connections. Moreover, participation indicates active negotiation of

identity – choosing which elements of the host and homeland culture to maintain. Active participation positions difference as central to the community, where differences between

individual and collective identity are identified, explored, and challenged. When these differences create disparities – from underrepresentation in government, lower average household incomes, and barriers to opportunities – they prohibit community building and thus placemaking. However, when artmaking interrupts fixed perceptions and points of conflict between cultural identities and practices and then deconstructs stereotypes, assumptions, and

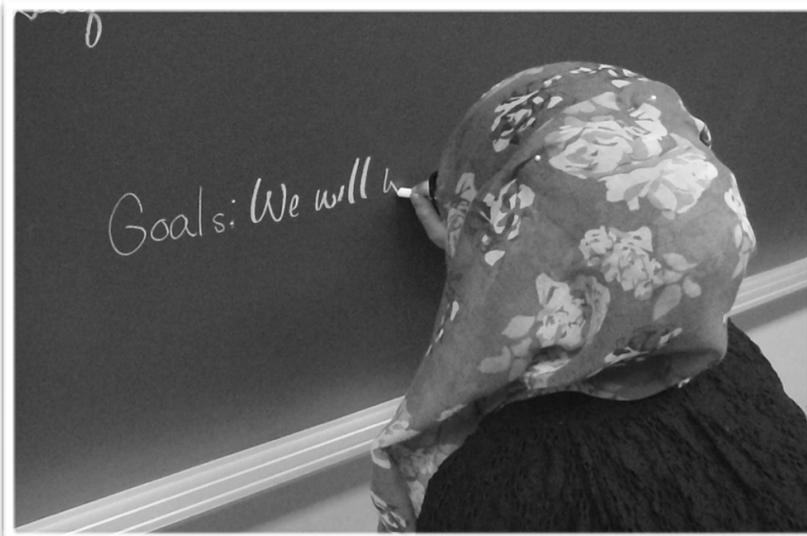


Figure 6: Nasra leading a group session for youth. Today, Nasra has started a mental health organization with a colleague. Photo used with participant permission.

expectations by sharing the experiences of individuals, cultures, communities, places, and identities touching, artmaking and exhibition become forms of resistance against totalizing ways of thinking and being.

One of the five topics addressed in the exhibition was vocation. Many of the women involved in the project have clear vocational objectives. For example, Nasra is a social worker, who wants to offer services to Somali students in public education because of her own experiences navigating the school system [Figure 6]. She remembers being called to the guidance office and being offered an ESL dictionary for testing just because of her name, or offered a translator at the doctor's office immediately upon walking in. S., on the other hand, sees herself as a backseat



Figure 7: S. in the library. S. is researching literacy practices among Somali youth and their families, and has, with her sister, started a literacy resource database. Photo used with participant permission.

driver, somebody who is helping to improve the community behind the scenes through her research in education [Figure 7]. For S., this is driven by her belief that the best deeds are



Figure 8: Qorsho studying on the lawn. She has since spent a year as an English teacher for the Fulbright program in Malaysia and is currently teaching third grade at a charter school in Columbus. Photo used with participant permission.

those that nobody knows about and are done for God's pleasure. Others are in school for nursing, medicine, and education [Figure 8], with the intention of working in Columbus, returning to Somalia, or like Muna, considering all locations in diaspora through international politics. These stories and images demonstrate the ways that young Somalis are actively addressing the issues facing their communities and also, as Zam Zam noted, reassure parents that their children have not lost their culture and are giving back to their

communities through their studies and careers. Not only is this depiction a resistance to the fears of parents in the diaspora, but also to the perception that Muslim women are oppressed. Through the stories of actively pursuing careers as well as their conversations regarding the discrepancies between cultural and religious dress and their choices to wear (or not) hijab⁹, the women of DSVU challenge the ways in which they are often represented and their lives are defined by others, both Somali and non-Somali.

Conclusion: Crafting a space for aesthetic engagement, or diasporan creative placemaking

Through this discussion of diaspora and creative placemaking, I have attempted to explore the way that considering placement rather than displaced aspects of diaspora and attending to the interplay of difference and identity negotiation offers an opportunity to reexamine creative placemaking practices. Considering the relationship between identity and place within diaspora communities attends to translocal placemaking (Rios & Watkins, 2015) as

⁹ See Smith (2015) for more on *hijab* narratives in DSVU.

well as offers strategies for crafting spaces for aesthetic engagement. Strategies for diasporic creative placemaking include:

- **Exhibiting difference** through sharing multiple stories and images that expose, dialogue with, categorize, and exhibit the contradictions, distractions, and representations of communities.
- **Artmaking as interruption**, or creatively engaging with stories to identify stereotypes and cultural expectations that present a single story of individual and collective identity and, through artmaking, present multiple stories that interrupt these ideas.
- **Resistance to the present** by identifying the myths of community that inform current sociopolitical contexts and offering alternative views in an effort to dispel present representations inhibiting active participation in community.

These strategies utilize artmaking practices to critically explore diaspora identity formation and address places both presently here and not here, past, present, and future conceptions of cultural identity, and the process of defining and redefining identity in relation to specific places within the diaspora, the relationship to their point of geographic origin, and the entanglement and disentanglement of the connections between them. Consequently, placemaking among Somali women in Columbus is not simply about placemaking in Columbus, but also about placemaking in the diaspora including Somalia. By actively placing themselves as members of the diaspora and examining what that means in relation to issues of identity as well as how this affects community development and participation, the women of *DSVU* shift from a sense of displacement to a sense of placement as a defining aspect of their identities and their actions. Creative placemaking benefits from this diasporic approach that considers placemaking across locales, the relationships and self-identification which define diaspora, and the aesthetic, cultural and artmaking traditions and contemporary art practices already in place. The strategies offered above present an opportunity to rethink creative placemaking efforts in terms of diasporic identity, specifically addressing cultural juxtapositions, the negotiation of past, present, and future, and the relationships between the places with which diaspora members self-identify and the ideas, and resources present in them. Creative placemaking from an inherently interstitial diasporic lens, draws from cultural and artmaking practices across multiple locales, addresses the ways in which community is presented as a single story, tells multiple stories of experience difference, and questions the ways that stories define and sometimes prohibit active participation in the greater community. By sharing stories of difference, educational exhibits like *DSVU* have the potential to open avenues for participation through increased understanding between cultural

groups and by raising awareness of the ways in which members of the diaspora are working to increase participation in their communities.

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