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WORKING THE SYSTEM:
The Role of Islam in Student Negotiations of a Midwestern Charter School

Liza Baer
Religious Studies Honors Paper
Advisor: Paula Cooey
April 23, 2009

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements 2

I. Introduction 3

A. Theoretical Framework 6

B. Methodology 9

C. Context 12

II. Making the School Theirs: Incorporation Somali Muslim Practices in the Public Space 14

A. Spatial Appropriations 15

B. Temporal Incorporation 18

C. Socialization and Behavioral Diversity 21

D. Conclusions about Student Appropriations of the Public Space 25

III. Reflecting upon the School: Criticism and Challenges 26

A. Making Comparisons 27

B. Examining Student Conflicts 29

C. Student Expectations 34

D. Conclusions about Student Opinions of Their School 37

IV. Personal or Communal? The Discourse Behind Explanations of Actions and Attitudes 39

A. Collective Identity 39

B. Articulating the Individual 43

C. Conclusions about Discursive Strategies 46

V. What Can We Learn? Concluding My Study 47

Sources 49

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Introduction

"What should the role of Islam be in American public life?" I received this question when an institution of higher learning asked me to write a paper for a forum on religion in the public square. The question demonstrates the desire of scholars and students to investigate the role of Islam, a desire manifested through the mediums of academic journals and public forums. Edward Said would label such scholarly interest in Islam as Orientalism. According to Said, "the Orient and Islam are always represented as outsiders having a special role to play *inside* Europe."[1] Said's more recent analysis of Orientalism includes the U.S. with Europe, thus rendering his critique applicable to a forum at a U.S. academic institution like the one in

[1] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978), 71.

which I was asked to participate, a forum that asks "what should the role of Islam be in American public life." In order to avoid the tendency to place Islam in a specific role *inside* American public life, thereby also avoiding Said's charge of Orientalism, I move away from the broad questioning of Islam's role in the public square. I instead focus on the ways in which individuals employ strategies to balance obligations to self, community, society and systems of belief. As we work towards a fairer, more robust, secular, pluralist democracy, the analysis of strategies used to appropriate, innovate, and negotiate religious practice into public space becomes the necessary prior step to understanding that Islam already plays a variety of roles in American public life.

What would such an analysis look like? I limit my focus here to one ethnographic case study of a Midwestern charter high school, the School for Immigrants and Refugees (SIR), which enrolls a primarily Somali student body.[2] I ask how a certain group of Somali Muslims negotiates tensions with liberal, individualist secularism as found in a particular U.S. institution: a charter school.[3] I begin my analysis by focusing on the ways

[2] All names of people and places, including the name of the school, are pseudonyms for the protection of informants' anonymity.

[3] Jim Laine reminds us that "secular institutions are not a neutral ground for the fair adjudication of multiple religions, but the coercive instruments of something that effectively stands in for the One True Faith, something that assumes a sort of taken-for-granted authority as reasonable and just." See Jim Laine, introduction to *Religion and Power* (publication forthcoming), 7, 9.

in which students incorporate Somali Muslim practices into the space of the school. In this section, "Making the School Theirs," I examine prayer and the practices associated with it. Looking at prayer yields insight into the multiple functions space can serve as well as the diversity of student appropriations of that space. In the next section, "Reflecting upon the School," I discuss challenges students perceive in regards to their educational experience. Student criticisms of their school illuminate how diverse the behaviors and needs of Somali Muslim students are, as well as the need for the school to adjust to that diversity. Finally, in "Personal or Communal" I discuss the discursive strategies students employ to talk about their opinions, behaviors, and identities. Using the discourse found in interviews and informal encounters, I show that students seek a balance between expressing themselves as individual persons and as members of larger communities.[4] These sections culminate with the concluding assertion that individual Muslims, tied in various ways to communities and to Allah, constantly answer and re-answer the "what should the role

[4] According to Chetan Bhatt, looking at identities is integral to understanding practice and its transformative potential upon public space. He argues that there is an "inextricable link between the production of identity, the presentation of bodies, and the transformation of the physical and social spaces of the life world." See Chetan Bhatt, *Liberation and Purity: Race, New Religious Movements, and the Ethics of Postmodernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 43.

of Islam be in American public life?" for *themselves*.[5] These individuals create and negotiate strategies for balancing obligations; taking active roles as they work the system in attempts to determine what roles their religious practices will play.

Using a case study to analyze the role of Islam in public life avoids the essentializing tendency to treat Islam as a monolith. My study shows that even within a small, seemingly cohesive group like Somali Muslims in a specific charter school, Islam plays various roles in individuals' strategies. Asking what *one* role Islam should play in American public life is thus unproductive. Rather, Islam works in a variety of ways, according to personal and communal choices and localized context. Focusing on the strategies individuals use to negotiate tensions between public and communal obligations therefore approaches the examination of Islam and its roles in American public life in the most appropriate manner. Before I can embark on such an examination of strategies, however, I must situate this paper within a theoretical framework, a methodology, and a physical and historical context.

Theoretical Framework

[5] I focus on Muslims here because the question I intend to address in this thesis is that of Islam in American public life. However, strategies of appropriation and negotiation could also be examined for persons outside of an Islamic tradition.

The study contained within the pages of this thesis derives its theoretical basis largely from a framework which I will place under the heading of performance analysis. Catherine Bell, a scholar of ritual, defines performance analysis as an approach that seeks "to explore how activities *create* culture, authority, transcendence, and whatever forms of holistic ordering are required for people to act in meaningful and effective ways."[6] Performance analysis appeals to me as an ethnographer in part because of the agency it promises subjects of study. This type of analysis builds upon Pierre Bourdieu's assertion that "action is neither 'purely reactive' in Weber's phrase, nor purely conscious and calculated."[7] Instead of viewing individuals as mindless conduits of ritual or as intentioned examiners of theology, representations that depict the individual as the medium for the articulation of a static system, a performance approach recognizes individuals' agency in the creation and recreation of their worlds. "Performance," we read in Bell's work, "simultaneously invoke[s] (and thereby both constructs and plays off) a strategically defined set of terms, values, and activities."[8] Examining performance of religious practices in a particular context thus acknowledges agency, recognizing that

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[6] Catherine Bell, "Performance," *Critical Terms for Religious Studies,* editor Mark C. Taylor, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 208.
[7] Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditaions,* trans. Richard Nice, (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2000), 148.
[8] Bell, 217.

individuals' actions have the power to both reiterate and also reinvent religious traditions.

My thesis acknowledges agency of my informants through the examination of their strategies as they incorporate Somali Muslim practices into the public space. Anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod provides a pertinent way to approach such an examination through an emphasis on practice and discourse. Looking at practice, she argues, "favors strategies, interests, and improvisations over the more static and homogenizing cultural tropes of rules, models and texts."[9] Combining this practice-oriented lens with a regard for discourse fosters the recognition that through behaviors and speech strategies, (often diverse or even competing), individuals and communities actively influence their localized surroundings.[10]

My thesis locates strategies within what Abu-Lughod describes as "ethnography of the particular." This type of ethnography entails "seeking textual means of representing" the details of individual persons' experiences.[11] I intend to use this framework as the "textual means" to represent the ways in which Somali Muslim students in a particular

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[9] Lila Abu-Lughod, "Writing against Culture," in *Feminist Anthropology: A Reader,* ed. Ellen Lewin (Malden, Oxford, Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 159.
[10] *Ibid.,* 159.
[11] *Ibid.,* 162.

charter school actively perform both discourse and practice in their negotiations of public space. I therefore focus, as I have already stated, on behaviors and strategies used by Somali Muslim students at SIR instead of Islamic texts or theology.

Performance analysis reinforces attention to particularities and individual strategies. This type of approach also acknowledges the presence of the ethnographer. In the words of Said,

> No one has ever devised a method for detaching the scholar from the circumstances of life, from the fact of his involvement (conscious or unconscious) with a class, a set of beliefs, a social position, or from the mere activity of being a member of a society.[12]

The subjectivity and positionality of the ethnographer influences his or her study. I come to my study as a socialized ethnographer whose realm of possible inquiry stems from certain liberal arts, academic discourses. Building upon this idea of ethnographer positionality, Abu-Lughod tells us,

> As anthropologists are in the business of representing others through their ethnographic writing, then surely the degree to which people in the communities they study appear

[12] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978), 10.

> "other" must also partly be a function of how anthropologists write about them.[13]

The 'otherizing' potential of ethnographic work originates from the power imbalance embedded in the relationship between the scholar and the subjects of study. Performance analysis demands that the scholar interrogate those unequal positions of power, asking questions like those posed by Talal Asad: "What was regarded as worth recording about 'other' beliefs and customs? By whom was it recorded? In which social project were the records used?"[14]

The call for reflexivity so crucial to postmodern theory forces me to acknowledge my own position within my writing. I must admit that I study the subjects that I do because I *can*. As Said has shown, my position within the academy in the United States (or 'Occident') privileges me to scrutinize the Muslim 'Other.' I perform a formal case study on the Somali Muslim students at SIR and not the other way around. To frankly acknowledge my presence within this study I must, therefore, place myself overtly within the text of this thesis, including my own actions and words alongside those of my informants. This writing strategy attempts to

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[13] Abu-Lughod, 160.
[14] Talal Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," (from the Occasional Papers Series of the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University, 1986), 5.

demonstrate how my presence influences the textual interpretation of the discourse and practice of my informants.

Methodology

At the time I began this project on Islam in American public life, I already held an assistant teaching position at SIR. My interest in conducting a case study at the school arose from first hand experience and my curiosity to know more about the students with whom I worked. Both my own intentions and conditions beyond my control shaped my method for this study. Let me first discuss those elements of my study over which I had no authority. One such element was the small number of informants whom I had the opportunity to interview: ten students and six staff members. Such small sample sizes resulted mainly from the upheaval that occurred at SIR during my study. For reasons beyond the scope of my thesis, a group of teachers left the school in late fall 2008, among them several teachers I had planned to interview. Some students, among them three informants included in my study as well as five other potential informants, also left the school at that time, unwilling to stay on without the support of the teachers who no longer worked at SIR. The teacher who acted as my collaborator in implementing my study left with this group of

teachers. As a teaching assistant in her classroom, she had allowed me to speak with students during her class periods, believing that it was excellent practice for them as English language learners. Without her, I had no direct institutional support for my research. In addition to this loss of support, I felt pressured to cut back my interviews with students. I believed that, because of the destabilizing effects that the loss of teachers had on the students, extra time should be spent on schoolwork and not on my study.

The small number of student informants interviewed also resulted from the voluntary nature of participation in my study. Many students refused to speak with me because of language barriers, telling me that they did not feel comfortable, because of their limited knowledge of English, having their responses recorded on tape. My set of informants thus excludes the newest arrivals to the U.S. As a teaching assistant at SIR as well as a researcher, however, I did much more informal observation than I did formal interviewing. My case study thus includes both direct quotations from informants and anecdotes from informal encounters and conversations, thereby bringing new arrivals into my text. The voluntary nature of the study also created another limitation: no Oromo students or students from Latin or South America volunteered to participate, leaving me only Somali Muslim students as informants. This does not mean that

students excluded from my set of informants, like Oromo and Spanish speakers, are not important members of the school community. While I wish their voices were included in my thesis, I will leave that task for a later project.

Using my small sampling of Somali Muslim students, I conducted group interviews, comprised by two or three students each. I did not approach the interview process with a rigid script. I instead began all interviews with general questions about what informants liked or did not like about the school, never asking questions about religious practice or belief unless an informant raised such a topic first. Often they *did* bring up Allah, or prayer, or other aspects of their religious lives, demonstrating that many informants' opinions of SIR have come to incorporate discourse about Somali Muslim practices.

In my transcriptions of these taped interviews, I attempted to convey the syntax used by my informants, therefore neither correcting grammatical nor vocabulary mistakes. While I made this conscious effort to authentically represent the voices of my informants in this thesis, we must remember that *I* appropriated the voices in this text. Readers can only hear my informants' voices through the lens of my interpretation and textual representation. As an ethnographer, I will continue to struggle with this limitation.

Context

SIR is one of five sites in a larger, decentralized charter school. All sites aim to aid students who have difficulties succeeding in mainstream public schools. SIR is the only site that specializes in teaching English language learners, a feature that attracts immigrant and refugee students. Students attending SIR are between 14 and 22 years old.

Some days the physical space of the school feels like a maze: I start at the door after disembarking from the bus and soon enough, after some twists and turns, I reach a corner of the building with no idea of how to get out. Not originally built as a school, the structure of SIR's building does not naturally lend itself to housing an educational institution. The halls in the main portion of the school make a squared figure eight surrounding two boxes of windowless classrooms. Hallways shoot out from this figure eight, leading to the gym, the reading lab and the school office. In addition, the administrative wing seems almost a tacked-on afterthought, decorated in wood paneling that does not match the tiled floors and white walls of the hallways and classrooms in the rest of the school. The administrative wing contains offices for the volunteer coordinator, social workers, college and career counselors, as well as the

copy machine and a lounge for staff. These services, because of their location in the addition, appear strangely isolated from the heart of the school. While students come and go, the administrative wing remains hushed and empty in comparison with the bustling halls in the school's main body.

Located in an industrial area, the surrounding warehouses and shipping facilities render the school physically isolated. Semi trailer trucks and trains pass by all day just feet from the school's walls. No sidewalks lead to the school, which sits in a sea of parking lots. This is not a neighborhood school. All students drive, take one of the few school buses, or ride the city bus.

Students come to school early and leave late. Many students qualify for school breakfast, and so arrive before classes to mingle in the hallways and drink from plastic containers of apple juice. And many stay for additional class periods after the school day officially ends at 3:30pm. Or they stay for night classes, which the school offers for students who want additional instruction or who, because of obligations like jobs or family, cannot attend school during the traditional hours of 9:15 to 3:30.

The majority of students came to the U.S. as refugees from Somalia, which has had no central government since the 1991 overthrow of President Siad Barre. The ensuing years of "clanist warlordism" produced

close to 400,000 refugees as of January 2006.[15] As refugees, many students first lived in camps in Kenya or Ethiopia prior to their arrivals in the U.S. The Somali students at SIR can thus often speak multiple languages, among them Somali, Oromo, Swahili, Amharic, and Arabic. I should mention here that "Islam constitutes a fundamental cornerstone in…social and cultural life" in Somalia, an explanation for why I use the term 'Somali Muslim' as a general label for refugee students from Somalia.[16]

Making the School Theirs: Incorporating Somali Muslim Practices into the Public Space

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15 Ahmed I. Samatar, "The Porcupine Dilemma: Governance and Transition in Somalia," *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies* 7 (2007): 76; The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, "Refugees by Numbers 2006 Edition," UN High Commissioner for Refugees, http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/basics/opendoc.htm?tbl=BASICS&id=3b028097c#Refugees.

16 Bernhard Helander, "Somalia," in *Islam outside the Arab World,* ed. David Westerlund and Ingvar Svanberg (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 39. Also note that I. M. Lewis reports that the type of Islam practiced in Somalia has roots in Sufism because of the clan-based lineage structures of Somali society. He tells us that, "where stress is placed upon the power of lineage ancestors to mediate between man and God, Sufism provides an interpretation of Islam which, while preserving the supreme absoluteness of Allah, modifies the uniqueness of the Prophet by interposing more accessible and more immediate intercessors." See I. M. Lewis, *Saints and Somalis*: *Popular Islam in a Clan-Based Society* (Lawrenceville, NJ and Asmara, Eritrea: The Red Sea Press, Inc, 1998), 30.

How do actions transform the spaces in which they are performed and inscribe identities upon the performers? In this section, I investigate this question through discussion of the practice of prayer at SIR. Divided into three parts, I focus first on incorporation of prayer into physical space, then into time, and finally into the social fabric of the school. Throughout this discussion, I demonstrate the possibility of fluid functions of spaces and practices.

Spatial Appropriations

To my surprise, I encountered my first examples of spatial appropriations in bathrooms at SIR.[17] At the beginning of the school year, SIR had one girls' bathroom, which I will call "bathroom A." On one of my first days at work, I stopped in bathroom A during the ten minute passing time. To my annoyance, I found no toilet paper in either of the two stalls, nor any paper towels at the sink. What was going on with this bathroom? As far as I could tell the space had nothing useful to offer. It had only some empty cottage cheese cartons and water bottles lying on the floors of the stalls. In my irritation I did not pause to question the function of those objects in the bathroom.

[17] As a woman, I limit my observations to women's bathrooms.

A few weeks later, I entered bathroom A again before going to catch my bus. It was 12:15 or so, lunchtime for half the student body before the all school prayer break began at 12:25. Pushing open the bathroom door, I found a crowd of female students in the bathroom, rather than in the lunchroom. Most stood barefoot, in long skirts, either patterned or solid colors, some dark, some bright, their shoes kicked off. Girls crowded around the sink, filling bottles with water, a process that revealed their forearms, a part of the body rarely shown in the classroom. Others squatted near the walls, using wads of toilet paper to dry wet ankles, feet, arms, and faces.

In the middle of the fall, construction finished on a second girls' bathroom, which I will call "bathroom B." I investigated, to determine what differences existed between bathrooms A and B. Bathroom B had two stalls, one sink, and one mirror, just like bathroom A. Bathroom B also contained, however, an additional space. This addition, with walls and floors covered in white tiles, included four faucets sticking out of the wall about a foot and a half off the floor, each with a small, black, plastic stool sitting underneath. A shower stall stood in the corner. Asha sat on a bench next to the door, outside of the addition, in a manner revealing that she was lathering her ankles and feet with soap. "Am I bothering you?" I inquired, wondering if she would tolerate my presence. After assuring me

that she did not mind, Asha launched into an explanation of her actions. "It's called *wudu*," she said, informing me that this word referred to the cleansing of hands and feet, which must be performed before prayer. She did not pause in her practice of *wudu* as she spoke. The conversation provided me with two pieces of information. First, Asha's explanation of *wudu* clarified the girls' behaviors in bathroom A. Second, Asha helped me understand that the bathrooms, while spaces for *wudu*, were also just bathrooms. Asha accepted that the bathroom functioned as a bathroom, with toilets and sinks, but also as a place that served the performance of *wudu*. She and I could use the bathroom for different purposes, simultaneously.

I then wondered if girls would continue to use bathroom A for *wudu*, or if they would choose the new bathroom B. Bathroom B came into being, after all, because of student demands. During an interview with Stella, a SIR office assistant, I learned that "one of the major problems [at the school] is that before prayer time you have to clean yourself and when you have a hoard of girls in the bathroom all trying to use one sink, it gets really complicated." Students lobbied for a new set of bathrooms, eventually getting their way. "So the new bathrooms have foot-washing things...that's an accommodation we made for our religious students," Stella told me. Despite the new amenities offered by bathroom B, I noticed

that students continued to use bathroom A as they always had, filling water bottles and using up all the paper products. And, shortly after its opening, bathroom B began showing the same signs of *wudu*. Bottles lay on the floors of the stalls and girls lined up to use the sink to fill containers or wet their arms. I still have not come across a girl using the foot-washing faucets that distinguish bathroom B from A. Perhaps I never entered the bathroom when the faucets were being used. Or perhaps the adaptation the girls made, using bottles rather than faucets because they previously needed to share one water source, became an engrained habit. Performance analysis lends significance to this adaptation of *wudu*. As performers, girls actively transform the ways in which they practice *wudu*. Their adaptability to surroundings and their innovative strategies changed *wudu* into a practice performed not with faucets, but with water bottles and toilet paper.

I witnessed students actively perform and transform Somali Muslim practices not just when I entered bathrooms, but also during an interview that I had with informants Suhoor and Nawal. Our interview took place during the extended break the school allocates for Friday prayer. In the gym, where the boys pray, a teacher acts as *imam* and presides over services. As girls, Suhoor and Nawal could not go to the prayer services in the gym, and so they chose to use their free time to talk

with me.[18] Although they told me they had already prayed, when the announcement to return to classes came over the loudspeakers at 1:00, the girls looked at me and asked, "Can we pray in here?" We were in a cramped study room, filled almost completely by its table and four chairs. Before I had time to rearrange the furniture or excuse myself, the girls began to pray, undeterred by the inadequacies of the crowded space. As with the use of the bathrooms for *wudu*, it was the act of praying or of *wudu* that was important, not the places in which those acts were performed. Suhoor and Nawal, like Asha, allowed the space in which they were in to serve multiple functions, accommodating both Somali Muslim practices and academic endeavors. In addition, these girls show us their propensity to innovate and recreate Somali Muslim practices according to spatial context. They adapt and modify both prayer and *wudu* in order to fit these practices into the public space of SIR.

Temporal Incorporation

Student demands led to the creation of the new bathrooms as well as the allocation of two spaces in the school for use during prayer time. Girls use

[18] Stella explains the separation of sexes during prayer time at the school: "they do have to separate, the men and the women can't pray together. Even in the mosque. That was a choice that that students made too."

a spare room in the school, which Stella called the "meditation room" during our conversation. The boys use the gym during prayer time. Sheets of paper taped to walls around the school announce that prayer time lasts from 12:25 to 12:45 every day except Friday. On Fridays, prayer lasts until 1:00. How does this allocation of time for prayer work in a publicly funded educational institution? I looked to some of my informants for answers.

Mohammed arrived in the U.S. in 2006 to rejoin his mother who had already been living in the area for ten years. A dedicated student, he attends both day and night classes at SIR. When I originally presented my project to students and requested their help, Mohammed volunteered immediately, seeming eager to share his opinions of the school with me. When we started discussing the benefits of attending SIR, praying came up immediately. I asked him why his publicly funded charter school allowed prayer. He replied, confidently, "the majority of people who come to this school is Muslim. So that way we can pray." Mainstream public schools, on the other hand, do not permit praying because they "belong to the government" and "most the people who go to the public schools are not Muslim." For Mohammed, the majority determines the allowance of prayer: when Muslims do not make up the majority, it makes sense for institutions not to permit prayer and vice versa. And what of the

non-Muslim students and the Muslims who choose not to pray? "They have the free time when we are praying," Aafi, Mohammed's friend, told me, laughing. "They don't think nothing." Stella's comments echoed Aafi's attitude towards the prayer break. "Break time is only 20 minutes and it's not taking away from any of the class periods either," she told me. "School still ends at 3:30 and each of the class periods are 50 minutes long. So with the prayer time in there, it's basically an extended break. Instead of a 10 minute break between classes, it's 20 minutes."

When asked how they felt about prayer time, my student informants frequently used the strategy of making comparisons between SIR and other public schools. Fadumo appreciated that at SIR "you don't have to tell anyone" before you go to pray because "all the teachers know, all the students know when it is time to pray." Suhoor and Nawal also compared the prayer policies of SIR with those of their former mainstream public school. During our interviews, this pair of best friends would often break into Somali, sometimes giggling and other times speaking in argumentative tones. But about prayer, they agreed. "[Here] you have prayer room. At that [other] school you don't have a prayer room, you don't have time. You have to ask your teacher. If she say 'yes,' you can pray," Suhoor told me. Nawal chimed in to tell me that SIR "is good for prayer." When asked what they meant by prayer, the girls told me that the

term "prayer" encompassed prayer time as well as the excused religious holidays that the school gives students for what Suhoor called "Eid and stuff."[19]

When I asked Stella about these extra holidays in the school year, she told me that the school uses its allocation of "floating holidays" in order to give days off during both Eids.[20] "The fact that 90 or 95% of our students are Muslim means we're not going to have any students in school those days anyway," she explained. "It sort of goes along with reasonable accommodations for religious holidays." This explanation mirrors the one that Mohammed used to explain the school's prayer policy. The percentage of religious students in the student body influences how the institution responds. Having a large majority of Somali Muslim students means that reasonable accommodation entails changing the

[19] There are two holidays in Muslim tradition that include the title Eid: Eid ul-Fitr and Eid al-Adha. Eid ul-Fitr is celebrated at the end of Ramadan, which is a holy month during which time fasting is observed during daylight hours. Eid ul-Fitr breaks this month-long fast in a celebration that lasts three days. The second Eid, Eid al-Adha, is celebrated later in the year, a day after Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca. This holiday celebrates the willingness of Ibrahim to sacrifice his son Ishmael to Allah, and lasts three or four days (See Charles Haynes, "Muslim Students' Needs in Public Schools," *Update on Law-Related Education* 22.1 (1998): 17-21). SIR only officially closes for one day at the start of each Eid, but students are granted excused absences for the additional days. Having days off for these holidays is not unlike time given to students for Christmas, Easter, or even Thanksgiving.

[20] According to Stella, "when I was in high school I remember having half days, or maybe randomly we don't go to school on Monday for a staff workshop. We have the same thing. They're called either floating holidays or early end days. We don't have any of those early ending days. We just combine them all and give them to the students [for Eid]."

school day (for prayer) and calendar (for holidays) to suit Somali Muslim practices. Student demographics thus influence the temporal structuring of the school, rendering it a fluid public space, responsive to the needs and desires of the public it serves.

Socialization and Behavioral Diversity

How do students view the act of praying in school? The term "socialize" surfaced in my interview with Fadumo, Shukri and Fanaa. Answering my question "how do you feel about having other Somalis in your school?" Fadumo responded "I think it is important because you can see your religion." "Why is that important," I asked her, digging for an explanation. "Because you can socialize the other people. We are all, we have one religion. And we can socialize. And we can pray on time." Fadumo strung together the concepts of socializing, having a common religion, and being able to fulfill obligations of religious practice.

Fanaa provided an anecdote to illustrate Fadumo's point. "First of all, I was so excited when I came here. When we were in Dallas, we prayed, me and sister only, and it was too boring." Without a network of friends, family or at least other Somali Muslims to pray with, fulfilling the requirement of daily prayer bored Fanaa. In contrast, SIR, because of its

large population of Somali Muslims, offered the exciting opportunity to pray with others. Both Fanaa and Fadumo attached a social dimension to prayer. They did not just want the school to give them time and space in which to pray. In order for these girls to view a prayer experience as satisfying, they needed their school to provide a network of other people to share in the practice of prayer.

Although Muslims (Somali and non-Somali) make up roughly 90% of the student body at SIR, student behaviors (such as in regard to prayer) are diverse. The behaviors of Somali Muslim students whom I observed fit into overlapping circles, a sort of Venn diagram. In the center, where all the circles meet, we find the label Somali Muslim.[21] This Venn diagram, however, shows that the label Somali Muslim describes a variety of behaviors. In one circle, we find students who strictly adhere to Somali Muslim practices like *wudu*, praying five times a day, fasting at Ramadan, and observing *haram* laws, which forbid things like pre-marital sex and drinking.[22] These students tend to be newer arrivals to the U.S., speaking

[21] The idea for this Venn diagram came from Mike Allen, who was inspired by a lecture given by Professor Barry Cytron on the work of Michael L. Satlow. Satlow constructs a similar diagram in regards to Jewish identity, allowing for 'Judaism' to encompass diverse manifestations. See Michael L. Satlow, "Defining Judaism: Accounting for 'Religions' in the Study of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 4 (December 2006): 837–860.

[22] The word "*haram*" describes a set of laws prohibiting certain behaviors, including consuming pork or alcohol, any drug that causes intoxication or alteration of the senses, and having sex

little English and relying on Somali to communicate. Many females in this circle dress in the *jilbab,* which comprises of "a *masar* that wraps around the hair, and a tailored headcovering (sometimes called a *hijab)* that fits closely around the face and drapes over the shoulders."[23] Their male counterparts typically wear button-down shirts and pants in a style that is "generally loose-fitting and modest."[24] On Fridays, these boys may also wear long, white tunics.

In another conjoining circle we see students who generally follow the same Somali Muslim practices as the newest arrivals, but who have resided in the U.S. for a longer time. These students speak English with more ease, but continue to use Somali in the hallways. Here, girls' clothing still covers all skin except for the hands and face. Many of these girls wear a *hijab*, accompanied by a sweater and skirt, or even a *shuka,* which is a "button-down overcoat."[25] Other girls might wear a *masar*, wrapped under the chin so as to cover the hair, ears, and neck in modesty. Boys' dress in this circle overlaps with the modest dress of the new arrivals and with that of the Americanized boys, who I will describe subsequently.

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outside of marriage. Because it can lead to sex before marriage, some Somali Muslims also believe that dating is *haram* (again see Haynes for clear, concise explanation).

[23] Heather Marie Akou, "Nationalism without a Nation: Understanding the Dress of Somali Women in Minnesota," in *Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress,* ed. Jean Allman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 58.

[24] *Ibid,* 56.

[25] *Ibid,* 58.

In a final, overlapping circle, we find mostly Americanized students.[26] These students are less likely to practice things like *wudu* or prayer in school, or to follow the rules demanding modest dress and forbidding things like alcohol and smoking.[27] The Americanized girls still usually cover their heads, although typically they choose a *masar* tied behind the head, leaving the neck exposed. While many Americanized girls continue to wear floor-length skirts, some, to use Stella's words, choose to wear "tight jeans and low-cut shirts and they won't cover their hair." The Americanized boys tend to dress in large sweatshirts and baggy jeans. The students in this last circle speak mostly English and some do not even speak Somali because they have resided in the U.S. all of their lives. For instance, at the bus stop one afternoon I encountered three Americanized girls skipping out of class at SIR, smoking cigarettes and gossiping about boys in English. All three girls dressed in tight sweaters and large jewelry. One of them wore jeans and no head covering. I learned through the course of casual conversation that the girl in jeans had lived in

[26] I use the term "Americanized" to describe Somali Muslim students who have resided in the U.S. all of their lives or for a long period of time. I chose this term because it was used by several different staff informants during my study, and therefore is an informant generated term. I prefer, when possible, to use informant generated terms in this paper, in order to avoid labeling phenomena in ways meaningless to those I am studying.

[27] My description of Americanized students does not imply that these students are 'bad' Muslims. I intend no judgments here. I aim only to show that Americanized students tend to manifest their affiliations with Somali Islam in different ways than new arrivals.

the U.S. for her whole life. She told me that while she could understand Somali, she did not know how to speak it.

Using a Venn diagram to illustrate student behavior does not eliminate blurriness. Some newly arrived boys wear huge sweatshirts instead of button-downs. Some girls, who usually wear a *masar,* come to school on Fridays in *shuka* and *hijab.* Some boys in sagging pants wear tunics to school on Fridays. The diagram suggests that there are trends at work in the school, but that these are not rigid. Acknowledging the wide spectrum of behaviors demonstrated by students reminds us that far from demonstrating homogeneity, the Somali Muslim students at SIR are diverse.

The diagram helps to illuminate how prayer plays a social function in the school. Students like Fadumo and Fanaa use prayer time as a strategy to gauge with whom they want to socialize. They choose to hang out with other students who use prayer time for prayer. Fadumo's idea of socialization is having peers with whom to pray. Prayer is thus both individual at the school, performed behind the closed doors of the meditation room or the gym, and also communal, practiced in the presence of others. The separateness of individual from community, of private from public blurs.

Conclusions about Student Appropriations of the Public Space

Student appropriations of spaces within the school, (which is itself a public space), show that public space can function in multiple ways, simultaneously. Rather than insisting that certain spaces be singularly designated for Somali Muslim practices, students accept that spatial transformation can be partial rather than absolute. The bathrooms, therefore, remain bathrooms while at the same time functioning as spaces for *wudu.* The gym, an athletic space, becomes a space for weekly communal prayer. Students pray individually and communally, a practice that shapes – temporally, spatially, and socially – the space at SIR. One space can function as a place for Somali Muslim practices and as a place for learning, a place for gathering and a place for solitary acts. Examining strategies, through a performance-based ethnography of the particular, proves that student behaviors *can* change the functions of spaces within SIR throughout the school day as well as transform Somali Muslim practices.

Reflecting upon the School: Criticisms and Challenges

Students adapt to the environment of SIR, making innovations that allow for practices like *wudu* and prayer within the walls of the institution. Some elements of the school, however, leave students feeling dissatisfied. This section explores the challenges faced by students and the implications of such challenges for understanding how Somali Muslim practices fit into the public space. The three subsections discuss, (in sequential order), comparisons between educational institutions, tensions between students, and expectations of what a school should be; these discussions illustrate the diversity of the student body and their needs.

Making Comparisons

Students critically compared SIR with other American educational experiences they had had. Students, like Suhoor, Nawal and Nashad, criticized the school by saying things such as "that school had a nurse and this school does not have a nurse" or "that one had a swimming pool. This one they don't have a swimming pool."

Farhiya, another informant, liked to play basketball but could not recruit enough other girls to make a viable team, which she found frustrating. Megan, one of the staff members with whom I spoke, added that extracurricular activities pose problems for many students because of transportation. She admitted that often students "can't participate in enrichment activities after school because they have to leave because of buses and they have no other way to get home." Dependence on buses may explain why the school has such difficulties recruiting enough players for a basketball team, for example. Unlike mainstream public schools, many of which have established sports programs as well as busing networks, the SIR administration may be reluctant to spend money and effort developing programs that many students cannot feasibly attend.

The strategy of comparing educational institutions never extended to schools that students had attended in Somalia, Kenya or Ethiopia. The majority of students I spoke with had attended *dugsi*, or Qur'anic school, beginning at age 5. As Fanaa explained, "everybody, if they are Muslim, goes to this school." Fadumo added that "when you finish the Qur'an, you can go to school to learn how to write Somali [or] English." Almost 95% of Somali children attend *dugsi* before starting school in the national Somali

education system.[28] However, despite the fact that all of my student informants attended *dugsi* and other educational institutions before coming to the U.S., this background never served as a base by which to judge the quality of SIR. This lack of comparison with *dugsi* may reflect that students feel the educational system in the U.S. is distinct from those in Somalia, Kenya and Ethiopia. It may also result from attitudes about time spent in the U.S. My informants not only wanted to profit from American educational opportunities, but also desired to return eventually to Somalia to put their education to use. Almost all of them wanted to attend college after graduation and many, like Nawal and Nashad, wanted to pursue nursing. For Nashad, interest in nursing came from the desire to "go back for my home country because they need a lot of nursing and they need a lot of doctors, pharmacists, so we going to do something for Somalia, that's why we came here." A career in nursing was "good for the country, because a lot of war, a lot of people is sick," Nawal added. These students saw their education in the U.S. as an opportunity to help the country to which they one day hoped to return. Drawing upon my theoretical framework, which focuses on strategies, I suggest that student

[28] Lee Cassenelli and Farah Sheikh Abdikadir, "Somalia: Education in Transition," *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies* 7 (2007): 108-109.

criticism of SIR is a strategy for trying to get as much out of their education as possible.

Megan, who coordinates the school's college-access programming, suggested that there might also be outside pressures for students to go to college. Besides wanting to help their country, students also "have friends in college and they see that and they want that too." Megan believes that, unfortunately, many of them are not ready for college. Students may want to go because their friends and family value higher education above other post-graduation options, but she wants students to realize that "they can do what they really want and they can do it in the time that is appropriate for them. So if they want to go to college but aren't ready now, they can go later." Student criticism of SIR thus originates from a mélange of pressures: assumptions about what U.S. schools should be like, expectations of what an education should achieve and how quickly, as well as perceptions of how family and friends value certain types of education.

Examining Student Conflict

For Suhoor and Nawal, other students' behavior represented the worst aspect of the school. "The students do not take order," Nawal complained

to me during our interview. Nashad added that "when we have class, they are talking too much, like when the teacher is talking to explain for the lesson." Along with rude behavior, students, they told me, steal and litter the school with garbage. They repeatedly brought up the theft of two school laptops, which occurred the day before our interview.

Student behavior also concerned my staff informants. An English Language Learning (ELL) teacher, who no longer works at the school, admitted to me that she changed the classes she taught, moving from more advanced to lower level English speakers. In the upper level courses, she explained, "many of the students had been in other high schools and had not been particularly successful there. They had picked up behavior patterns which meant that discipline was an issue in the classroom." She chose to teach only new arrivals because the Americanized students were more likely to have disciplinary problems. According to Stella, SIR was "seeing more and more of these Somali-born and Oromo-born students that moved here when they were two or three years old, and they basically are Americanized, (or we call them more Americanized students), and they tend to act up more."

Stella not only noticed the demographic changes in the student population, but she also conjectured an explanation: refugee policies. "The only people we get in Minnesota from Kenya or Somalia or Oromo are

family reunification people," she explained. According to Stella, many Somali refugees reside in Kenyan refugee camps, where officials started testing DNA to verify familial relationships.

> "They found out that these people are technically not brother and sister the way that we look at it, but they're fourth cousins or fifth cousins or they might not even be related, but they considered each other to be brother and sister. So because of that, [the immigration officials] think the Somalis are just lying to them and trying to beat the system. So they've temporarily suspended that family reunification program so we're not getting as many people from Kenya as we used to."

As a result, SIR saw a drop in its enrollment of newly arrived Somali refugees. In the meantime, the Somali youth already in the U.S. grow more Americanized with time. This range of students creates some tension. "We have these very conservative Muslim, very much Somali-culture students and we also have these very Americanized students," Stella told me. "In one case, there is a girl who comes to school here who wears a scarf but otherwise she wears tight jeans and tight sweaters and…clearly she doesn't dress like a typical Muslim woman should. There were a few guys who were harassing her because of the way that she was dressing." This conflict illustrates the tension between students whose behaviors may not overlap on my diagram. While the school attempts,

with spatial and temporal accommodations, to accept Somali Muslim practices, this does not ensure that all students feel welcome. The school must create an environment where students feel comfortable interpreting how to perform Somali Muslim practices in multiple ways.

Clothing is not the only contested issue at SIR, as another of Stella's anecdotes illustrates. An Americanized student, because of disciplinary issues, had to spend one class period each day in the office. One day he came in complaining. "He was kind of upset with the school because he can't talk to half of the girls here because they shy away from him because he's male." Many students avoid dating, and some consider it *haram*. Mohammed, for example, asked me once if I had a boyfriend. After I responded, I turned the question back on him, inquiring if he had a girlfriend. He shook his head, explaining that he couldn't have a girlfriend because it was not allowed. Other students, like the Americanized boy in Stella's story, however, want to date and find the lack of dating prospects at SIR to be frustrating.

There have been tense interactions with parents as well. For instance, each year, the school's attempts to put on a cultural show run into challenges. Last year, Stella told me, "there were a few students who were trying to get a group together, and then one of them told her mother and her mother got really upset and said that she wouldn't allow her

daughter to be dancing in front of a group of people because it was inappropriate." Ideas of modesty, held by some parents, clash with the behaviors of some of the school's students. This may be because some parents view the school as a safe space for their children. An English teacher whom I interviewed spoke to this desire for a safe space. "I think parents send their students here because they're comfortable with it, we respect their culture and students are allowed to pray." This idea of safe space does not necessarily include the desires and behaviors of Americanized students.

Parental ideas about how students should behave present challenges in other ways. Early on in my study, I sat down with Leslie, a social worker at the school. She works at all of the charter school's sites, not just at SIR, and so was conscious of some of the specific challenges of working with a student population made up primarily of Somali Muslims. Throughout our conversation, the issue of learning disabilities surfaced numerous times. Leslie felt that parents, friends, or other Somali Muslim community members did not accept student learning disabilities. She believed this disapproval caused students to perceive their learning disabilities as a "personal failure." Consequently, students usually resisted any services geared towards their learning disabilities, such as

time with a special education teacher or sessions with a social worker to talk about the frustrations associated with learning difficulties.

Leslie also told me that there were other subjects the students at the school were reluctant to talk about. At the other sites, she successfully started girls' groups, spaces where girls discussed things like sex, drugs, and violence. She has not yet found enough interest at SIR to start a similar group. These topics, she admitted, do come up in one-on-one meetings she has with students, but such conversations do not happen very often and when they do, it is usually boys and not girls bringing up these subjects. The infrequency of discussion surrounding an issue like sex is not the result of sex-less lives. Some students *do* date and some are sexually active. In addition, it is not uncommon for students to marry and have children in their late teens or early twenties. Recently, a student joked with me that if I had gotten married when I should have, at age 15, I would already have six children, giving birth at the proper rate of one child per year. While this was a joke, several female students in the classes in which I work are married, and several already have small children.

Somali Muslim students at SIR, however, do not always approve of teen pregnancy. Some female students who fall in the middle circle of our Venn diagram, for instance, harassed an Americanized student in one of the classrooms in which I worked for being a mother with no husband.

Such tensions between students need to be addressed in order to create a healthy environment for students and staff, a task that the students on the school's student council want to take on. The council's advisor spoke with me about the council members' concern over student behavior. She told me that they too "want to make a better school environment among students, as far as behavior and respect towards teachers and their fellow peers." It remains to be seen how such an environment will be created.

Student Expectations

Talking with informants and students in classrooms yielded this observation: concerns and challenges that students (both Americanized and new arrivals) talked about had little to do with Somali Muslim practices themselves. Students did not complain to me about prayer time, holidays, dress codes or meal options. This may reflect that the school has successfully addressed the needs of practicing Somali Muslims. However, at other, mainstream public schools, with fewer accommodations of Somali Muslim practices, the students I spoke with did not feel they faced significantly more challenges. While admitting that, at her old school, she had to ask permission to pray, Suhoor told me that this was no hardship. "I can ask my teachers," she assured me. With permission, Suhoor and

Nawal would just pray in the classroom. Their praying sparked other students' curiosity, but the girls told me that they did not mind answering questions. Suhoor would just tell inquirers "we are Muslim and we have to pray five times a day."

During my interview with Shukri, Fanaa and Fadumo, the girls began swapping stories about times when peers and teachers asked about how they dressed. Fanaa turned to the other two girls and shared an anecdote. "Some students say to us [me and my sister], in Dallas, 'why do you wear like this?'" I asked how she responded. "I just say to them 'why you wear those clothes?' I ask them." The girls laughed. Shukri joined the conversation, telling the others and me that "before when I was in Boston, some students asked me 'can I see your hair?' And I said 'no, because you are a man, and I am woman and my religion say no.'" Shukri, like Fanaa, said she did not mind, that she would just turn the tables and start asking her own questions. Shukri's story inspired Fanaa to tell another. "I remember one teacher," she said, "he used to teach us English class. And me and my sister, he said to us, 'just don't wear *hijab*. Just try. I want to see how you are.'" "What did you think?" I asked her. "It was funny." Shukri nodded her head in agreement. "Fanaa," I went on, "you weren't upset?" "No," she replied, "it was only a question, I can answer." I wanted to know if Fadumo had ever had such an experience. She told me

that, at her old school, which was a large, urban, public school, "they [other students] ask you 'what country do you come from?' When you answer that question, they say, 'which continent, Somalia is in what continent? In Africa or where?' I tell them it is in East Africa." All three girls, when questioned by curious students or teachers, willingly gave answers. Fanaa told me that this was because "the question in not hard. It is not hard to explain. Easy. If you want you can explain it. If you don't, just stop. It's easy."

While most students told me that it is easier to pray at SIR, they did not perceive the added challenges of prayer in mainstream public schools as exclusively negative. Many of my informants even expressed a desire to return to the public school system. Suhoor, for example, after telling me how much she valued having a prayer room and prayer time, told me that she wanted to go back to her old public school for the next school year. Why would a student like Suhoor, who conveyed appreciation for SIR's institutional accommodations, want to return to a school that did not offer those amenities? Here we see the concern for academic quality trumping the concern for accommodation of Somali Muslim practices. Suhoor felt that the academic rigor of SIR could not compare with her old school. As a student, getting a good education took precedence over having things like a prayer room. Suhoor was not alone. Fanaa, Abdi, and Aafi, all

informants of mine, shared Suhoor's desire to return to the mainstream, public school system, and all three actually left SIR in the late fall, along with many other students.

Regardless of whether or not my informants wished to go to other schools, none of them minded explaining their practices to non-Muslims. For example, at the end of our first interview session, Suhoor and Nawal wanted to know if I had more questions. "Can we talk again?" they asked. So we scheduled a second session, to which they brought their friend Nashad. And again, they kept asking what other questions I had, eager to talk about their feelings and experiences.

The willingness of students to talk about practices or opinions should not obscure the fact that students face greater challenges when performing Somali Muslim practices outside of Somalia, whether at SIR or mainstream public schools. The challenges of learning English and navigating a new society take their toll on how much time and energy students can allocate to performing Somali Muslim practices. One day, while supervising a group in the computer lab, I noticed that one of my students had dozed off. I went over to him, quietly calling his name to wake him. He opened his eyes, looked at me wearily and told me that he was too sleepy to do his work. I inquired if he had slept the night before. He had not, awakening early so as to be at the mosque at 5 a.m. It made

for a long day when praying at the mosque occurred before a full day of school. Abdi summed up this challenge. "[In Somalia] you have your culture, you have your language, so you don't have to learn another culture and another language. [Here] you lose time to practice your religion."

Conclusions about Student Opinions of Their School

Challenges that students face at the school illuminate two conclusions. First, challenges originating from the tensions between new arrivals and Americanized students demonstrate the diversity of the Somali Muslims that the school serves. This diversity means that the school cannot take one, single approach to address its Somali Muslim students' needs. The Somali Muslim students encompass a far from a homogeneous body and cannot be viewed as such. In addition, concerns about the educational experience at SIR reveal that students expect the school to be a school. While not all students had the same ideas about what a school should provide, all the students I spoke with still wanted SIR to fulfill its function as a publicly funded school. No one asked for the transformation of the school into a space exclusively for Somali Muslims or for the education it offered to mirror that of institutions in Somalia, like the *dugsi*. Students

did not perceive the school's accommodations of Somali Muslim practices as sufficient substitutes for quality instruction or extracurricular offerings, either. Some students expressed willingness to return to mainstream public schools – where they experienced less accommodation of Somali Muslim practices – because they felt that they would receive a more satisfying education there. And indeed, some students chose to leave, unhappy with SIR despite its attempts to incorporate Somali Muslim practices into the school day and the physical space of the school. The departure of these students from SIR serves as a reminder that the needs and desires of Somali Muslim students go beyond fulfilling Somali Muslim practices. The Somali Muslim students at SIR, through their articulated concerns about their education, asserted that they expected their school, a public institution, to fulfill its primary function: educating them, its students.

Personal or Communal? Exploring Student Discourse

When speaking to me about the challenges and rewards of their school experiences, students used two discursive strategies: collective and individual. Here again, the use of a performance analysis, along with sensitivity to the particular, proves productive: such a framework allows for the examination of strategies, in this case, discursive strategies. These strategies originate from a triangular set of influences upon students' identities, opinions, and behaviors: community, individuality, and Allah. Beginning with a discussion of strategies of collective expression followed by an examination of discourse of the individual, I examine the balance being sought across individuality, community and a higher power.[29]

Collective Identity

I call the first discursive strategy used by students a collective, "we/us" strategy. Using this strategy, students expressed themselves as part of an "us" rather than as individuals. For example, in our discussion of prayer and socialization, Fadumo stated that "we have one religion." Her

[29] While I see an identity balancing act playing out in students' discourses at SIR, I realize that this may not be the way students consider their own identities. Bhatt's discussion of holistic versus fractured identities can enhance our understanding of the above problem: "Although identities manifest themselves across different (ontically 'disjointed') social structures (ideology, agency, institution) and social spaces, this does not mean that those subjects necessarily have a sense of themselves as fractured across these spaces." See Bhatt, 43.

comment illustrates two elements of the "we/us" strategy. First, she used "we," referring to all Somalis. This placed her in a group with which to identify. Second, the idea of "one religion" made all Somalis into a group with a singular religious faith or set of practices. Shukri performed similar work when she told me that "all Somalis have the Qur'an." Again, she alluded to a group, Somalis, with a unified identifier: having the Qur'an. Fadumo and Shukri used a unified, collective discursive strategy to talk about themselves. Neither girl chose to say "I follow the Qur'an" or "I have a religion." The behaviors and beliefs they discussed did not belong to them individually, but to a larger community.

A conversation I had with Mohammed, Abdi and Aafi presented another aspect of the "we/us" strategy: historical unity. While discussing my interest in the dynamic nature of religious practices and beliefs, Mohammed stopped me short. "But our religion doesn't change," he insisted, "it never change. But other religions do change." By telling me that "our religion doesn't change," Mohammed alluded to unification with all past, present and future manifestations of "our religion." Insisting that something has been practiced the same way forever gives the performance of that practice historical validation. Such insistence on historical continuity came up in a story Stella shared with me during our interview. She and a male student were looking at a book about Somalia.

Stella and the student turned to a page with a photo of "three Somali women who were wearing traditional Somali dress, which is almost like a toga: off one shoulder…so your arm is showing." The student looked at Stella, indignant, stating that "this is not right, we do not dress like this. How can they say that this is traditional dress?" He could not believe that dress could change over time, change which occurred in the 1980s, as Muslim influences from Saudi Arabia became stronger in Somalia, replacing the types of clothing seen in the book with articles covering all of women's bodies.[30]

Collective "we/us" discourse can be analyzed through the lens of structuralism: "our religion" works on "us," shaping what we do and how we feel about our surroundings.[31] I heard this in student comments on a number of occasions. For example, one day in class, we read a story about animals. I shared with the students in my small group that I liked dogs the most out of all animals. The shocked faces of my students suggested that they did not agree with my opinion; so, I asked them what they thought of dogs. A male student spoke up, telling me that he hated dogs, adding, "Muslims hate dogs." The student's explanation follows this logic: "Muslims hate dogs" and he is Muslim, so therefore he hates dogs. He

[30] Helander, 48.
[31] Structuralism implies recognition of the constructed nature of ideas. I recognize, however, that the students in my study may not view their beliefs or opinions as constructed.

accepted that identifying as a Muslim influenced his opinions of certain things—in this case, dogs.

On another occasion, I attended a class field trip at an art museum. As we made our way through the Chinese wing of the museum, the docent stopped to speak about some sculptures that had been excavated from tombs. She explained that certain ancient Chinese communities buried these artifacts with the dead to ensure safe journey to the next world. While she was talking, I noticed that several students started mumbling under their breath. The docent looked confused. She began to explain the burial process in more detail until a female student interrupted. "We don't do that," she announced in a dismissive tone. She rejected the particular burial practice in question because of what she knew group attitudes towards the practice to be.[32] "We don't do that," so therefore she did not accept the practice either.

Identifying with a group does not just shape opinions, but also behaviors. I witnessed this in my interview with Suhoor. While talking about how she explained the practice of prayer to non-Somali Muslim students, Suhoor confidently told me that she would announce to curious peers, "we are Muslim and we have to pray five times a day." She justified

[32] The students' words left unclear to what particular group she was referring—perhaps Somali Muslims or Muslims in general?

her behavior not as an individual person choosing a practice but as a part of a collective whole, a whole that determined her behavior and the behavior of all its members. She did not choose whether or not to pray. As a "Muslim" she felt compelled to do so, a requirement of belonging to such a collective identity.

While using "we" and "us" to explain behaviors and tastes can further a group identity, conceptually, this collective strategy has negative consequences as well. It creates a "them." We see this otherizing potential in the statements of Fadumo and Mohammed. In Mohammed's declaration – "our religion doesn't change, it never change. But other religions do change" – he created two categories: "our religion" and "*other* religions." He rendered those who adhere to "our religion" distinct from those following "other religions." Fadumo performed this differentiation as well. Somalis, she told me, have "one language," whereas "other countries, they have two languages." Her statement created two distinct categories: an "us," "Somalia," and a "them," "*other* countries." Placing all non-Somalis or all non-Muslims into monolithic and othered groups makes it easier for students like Fadumo and Mohammed to ignore the diversity and complexity of people outside their "we/us" identities.

Use of the collective, "we/us" discursive strategy oversimplifies "others," but can also create a homogeneous "we." Collective discourse

discredits existence of internal variety. Answering questions about practice or opinion with "we" rather than "I" also makes it easier for people to take one Somali Muslim's personal preference as a preference of all Somali Muslims. I continually ran in to this problem during my study, having to remind myself that when students expressed opinions, they did not represent those of the entire student body or of Somali Muslims everywhere.

Articulating the Individual

Some students were sensitive to the ease with which their individual identity might be erased. Before I could even finish asking my first interview question, Fadumo stopped me. I had asked her, Fanaa, and Shukri their reasons for coming to SIR. "We have different reasons," she interrupted, ensuring that I did not lump her together with the two other informants in the room. Her language did not express a sense of unity as the collective discursive strategy did. Instead of a "we" or an "us," she alluded to the existence of an "I" or a "me."

The concept of choice pervades this discourse of individuality. During our interview, Abdi, Aafi, Mohammed and I got into a discussion about local mosques. The boys could not agree about the number of

mosques in the area—eight or nine? In the middle of the debate over the number of mosques, Aafi exclaimed "Oh, there are more than eight, because some Arabs have mosques." I wanted to know if Somalis could go to the Arab mosques and Arabs to the Somali ones. Abdi answered my question, an answer indicative of individual discourse: "you can pray wherever you want," "you can go to every mosque you want, Arab or Somali." In Abdi's eyes, the choice of mosque one prays in represents an individual decision rather than one made collectively.[33]

Attendance of *dugsi* in Somalia, according to Fadumo, also depends upon choice. When I asked her if everyone in Somali went to *dugsi*, she promptly answered "you can choose." Around 95% of Somali children attend *dugsi*, but Fadumo, nevertheless insisted that *dugsi* attendance rested upon choice. Discourse of the individual also surfaced in the attitudes that Fanaa and Shukri had towards answering questions about their Somali Muslim practices. As Fanaa told me, "if you want, you can explain it. If you don't, just stop," making the explanation of Somali Muslim practices a personal choice.

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[33] I originally wanted to jump to conclusions about the presence of choice in student discourse, equating choice with individualism. This impulse demonstrates just how engrained the liberal ideal of individualism has become in my perceptions of the world. I had to step back and realize that individualism is a relative ideal and may not be valued in a similar manner by my informants. As I will discuss shortly, individual 'choice' is always tempered by other factors, never entirely independent of influences outside the self.

Choice as a discursive strategy also manifested itself during conversations I had with students about a particular Somali Muslim practice: fasting. Abdiwali, a new arrival, usually came before school to get homework help. One day, well after Ramadan, the month long fast, he came in, complaining that he felt too tired and sick to concentrate on his school work. When asked if he knew the cause of his illness, he replied that he was fasting. I was curious about the reason for his fast. He explained it as a choice: you can fast if you want to. He then asked if I had ever chosen to fast. I had to admit that no, I never had. Safiya, a student in one of the classes in which I worked, displayed a similar attitude towards fasting. On a day in late fall, she did not join the other students going to lunch, instead hanging back in the classroom. I inquired the reason for her reluctance to leave for lunch, to which students generally run. She told me that she had decided to fast. Like Abdiwali, Safiya connected choice with fasting. It fell upon her, an individual person, to decide to fast.

This choice heard in the voices of Somali Muslim students at SIR gets tempered not only by collective discourse, but also by another influence: Allah. While some students believed they could choose, for example, where they prayed or how they obtained an education, that choice usually included some degree of subjection to Allah's will. When talking about the future, like going back to Somalia or getting a diploma,

students would say "*insh Allah*." On four or five occasions, after uttering this phrase, students went on to explain its meaning—"Allah willing," "if Allah wills it so," etc. Relationship to Allah's will thus determinately shapes individual choice and identity. For many of the Somali Muslim students at SIR, the future does not depend solely upon individual choice, but relies also upon the will of Allah, tying individual identity to a higher power.

Conclusions about Discursive Strategies

The two discursive strategies discussed above, one collective and the other individual, describe two thoroughly interwoven forms of identity: community and individuality. Any attempt to define roles for Somali Muslim practices in the public space must thus consider the interrelatedness of both identities and their relation to Allah. Communal and individual identities are fluid, playing various roles in different contexts. As my examples demonstrated, the Somali Muslim students at SIR sometimes express a communal identity through communal discourse, at other times they convey individuality through individual discursive strategies. Using one discourse over the other should not imply that at times students have only collective identities and at other times are

solely individuals. Identities cannot be separated from each other. Rather students are always both members of communities and also individuals. Accommodation of Somali Muslim practices thus, cannot *just* address a group's needs, nor can accommodation focus on individual choice alone. Finding ways to incorporate Somali Muslim practices into the public space is instead about addressing a community of individuals, who relate to one another, and to Allah, in diverse ways.

What Can We Learn? Concluding My Study

What can an examination of Somali Muslim students' behaviors and opinions teach us about Islam's role in American public life? [34] I argue that my study of the ways in which these students participate in their publicly funded charter school represents a productive way to approach the issue of Muslim participation in all forms of public life in the U.S. We can take the lessons we have learned from student behaviors at SIR and use them as an example of how one group of Muslims in the U.S. negotiates public space. Again, I should mention that it is only because I began with the

[34] When using "us" and "we" in my conclusion, I am referring to the scholarly community interested in answering questions about religion and its role in American public life. This includes students, professors, researchers, intellectuals and authors, from fields as diverse as religious studies and political science, sociology and public policy.

question of Islam in American public life that I focus on Muslims in the U.S. in this capstone. My study could be equally productive in approaching individuals of any religious tradition and their encounters with public space.

What does a study like mine teach about negotiations of public life? The students' strategies of spatial appropriation at SIR demonstrate the necessity of adaptable public space, of the allowance of multiple, overlapping, and simultaneous functions of a space. At SIR, permission of fluidity means that bathrooms, for example, can serve as bathrooms as well as quarters for *wudu*. Allowing adaptability and blurriness of functions of public space also fosters recognition of diversity. Spaces function in multiple ways because of the diverse behaviors and needs of the persons within them. We should recognize that incorporation of any religious practices requires allowance of their diverse manifestations. Not all Somali Muslim students are alike, just as not all Muslims are alike. This acknowledgement of diversity must include the recognition of the multitude of identities to which persons, like the Somali Muslim students at SIR, belong. Public spaces must not only answer the needs of individuals, but also the communities to which individuals belong and the beliefs to which they adhere. Incorporation of religious practice into the public sphere occurs through the balance that religious adherents, Muslim

or non-Muslims, continually negotiate across individuality, community, and systems of beliefs.

These conclusions about public space came from the examination of particular individuals, what Abu-Lughod has called "ethnography of the particular." I reiterate, here, my belief that this type of ethnography, coupled with a performance analysis that focuses on individuals' strategies, productively starts us on our way to knowing how to answer the question posed at the outset of this thesis: what should the role of Islam be in American public life? My work has been to show that the Somali Muslim students at SIR answer and re-answer that question on a daily basis, actively assigning roles for Somali Muslim practices to play *themselves*. I have used my study of Somali Muslims in a Midwestern charter school to argue that it is up to individual Muslims – who are tied to communities and to Allah in a multiple, diverse ways – to decide how to incorporate their religious practices and identities into the public space.

Recognizing the agency of individual Muslims to decide how to participate in U.S. public life leads to questions that require consideration beyond the scope of this thesis. On a practical or institutional level, we must ask: What strategies can American public institutions use in order to recognize the particularities of both individuals *and* groups that they serve? When does recognition of particularities undermine the creation or

maintenance of broader, national public spaces? My study also raises questions about the future function of scholarship dealing with Islam in American public life. What roles should scholars have in the disc ourse surrounding the strategies Muslims, individually and communally, use to negotiate the public space?

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