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Working the System: The Role of Islam in Student Negotiations of a Midwestern Charter School

Liza Baer

I. Introduction

What is the role of Islam in American public life? This question points to one of the central themes of this Civic Forum. Why is the role of Islam a topic that we, as participants in this forum, want to investigate? Edward Said would chalk up our interest in Islam to “Orientalism.” Dr. Said tells us that, “the Orient and Islam are always represented as outsiders having a special role to play *inside* Europe,” or in this case, the United States.¹ Not only does asking “what role for Islam?” risk constructing Islam as outsider and “other,” the question also treats Islam as a monolith with a single role to play. I want to challenge those assumptions of “otherness” and homogeneity.

Anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod suggests that we perform such a challenge by employing what she calls “ethnography of the particular.” Instead of making broad theoretical claims, an ethnography of the particular looks at specific individuals and their “strategies, interests and improvisations.”² Using Abu-Lughod’s idea of ethnography of the particular, I argue that we should move away from the broad questioning of Islam’s role in American public life. We should instead turn our attention to the analysis of individual strategies used to balance obligations to self, community, society, and systems of belief. As we work toward 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 under-

standing that Islam already plays a variety of roles in American public life.

I thus shift away from the broad question of what the role of Islam should be in American public life and instead ask how a specific group of Somali Muslims negotiates its place within a particular U.S. institution: a charter school. I limit my focus here to one ethnographic case study at the School for Immigrants and Refugees (SIR), which enrolls a primarily Somali student body.³ SIR specializes in teaching the English language, a feature that attracts immigrant and refugee students. Students attending SIR are between 14 and 22 years old. 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 2006.⁴ 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.⁵

I use a performance analysis as the means to carry out an ethnography of the particular on the Somali Muslim students at SIR. 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 the subjects of study. This type of analysis builds upon Pierre Bourdieu's assertion that, "action is neither 'purely reactive' in Weber's phase, nor purely conscious and calculated."⁷ Instead of viewing individuals as mindless conduits of ritual or as intentional 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 individuals' actions have the power both to reiterate and also reinvent religious traditions.

Performance analysis reinforces attention to particularities and actions of individuals. 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.⁹

The subjectivity of the ethnographer influences his or her study. Building upon this assumption, 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 'other' must also partly be a function of how anthropologists write about them.¹⁰

The "othering" 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?"¹¹

The call for reflexivity so crucial to postmodern theory demands the acknowledgement of 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 academia 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, including my own actions and words alongside those of my informants. This writing strategy attempts to demonstrate how my presence influences the textual interpretation of the discourse and practice of my informants.

I begin my analysis by focusing on the ways in which students incorporate Somali Muslim practices into the physical 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 regarding their educational experience. Student criticisms of their school illuminate the diversity of behaviors and needs of Somali Muslim students. 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.¹² 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 question “what should the role of Islam be in American public life?” for *themselves*.¹³ 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.

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

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 the 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.

A. Spatial Appropriations

At the beginning of the fall, the school 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 almost nothing useful to offer. All it had were some empty cottage cheese cartons and water bottles lying on the floors of the stalls. In my irritation I did not pause to question what those objects were doing in the bathroom.

Weeks later, I entered Bathroom A before going to catch my bus. It was 12:15, lunch time for half the student body before prayer break began at 12:25. The bathroom was crowded with girls, most standing barefoot, their shoes kicked off. Girls crowded around the sink, filling bottles with water. 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." Walking in, I discovered that, like Bathroom A, this new bathroom had two stalls, one sink, and one mirror. There was also, however, an addition unique to Bathroom B, outfitted with 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. Asha sat on a bench 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 my presence was acceptable. After assuring me that she did not mind, she launched into an explanation of her actions. "It's called *wudu*," she informed me, explaining that this is a cleansing of hands and feet that must be performed before prayer. The conversation provided me with two pieces of information. First, I connected the girls' behavior in Bathroom A to *wudu*. 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 was then curious to see if all the girls who practiced *wudu* would choose the new Bathroom B. It was constructed, after all, because of student demands. During an interview with Stella, one of the school's office assistants, I learned that the students had lobbied for a new set of bathrooms, and succeeded. Despite the new amenities offered in Bathroom B, I noticed that students continued to use Bathroom A as they always had. In addition, shortly after its opening, the girls began to use Bathroom B in a similar manner. Bottles lay on the floor of the stalls and girls lined up to use the sink to fill containers or wet their arms. I still have not seen 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 maybe the adaptations the girls made because of the need to share one water source have become engrained habits. 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.

B. Temporal Incorporation

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 in a publicly funded school work? I looked to some of my student informants for answers. When I started discussing the benefits of attending SIR with Mohammed in an interview, praying came up immediately. I asked him why he thought praying was allowed in a publicly funded charter school. He replied that, "the majority of people who come to this school is Muslim. So that way we can pray." Praying in mainstream public schools, on the other hand, is not permitted, he told me, because public schools "belong to the government" and "most of the people who go to the public schools are not Muslim." For Mohammed, allowing prayer is and should be a function of the majority. When Muslims are not in the majority, it makes sense that praying not be allowed 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. "They don't think nothing." Stella's comments echoed Aafi's attitude toward 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. "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 comparisons between SIR and other public schools. Sahoo appreciated that at SIR "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." Nawal agreed, telling me that SIR "is good for prayer." When asked what they meant by prayer, the girls told me that "prayer" encompassed prayer time as well as the excused religious holidays the school gives students for what Suhoor called "Eid and stuff."¹⁴

When I asked Stella about these extra holidays in the school year, she told me that the school uses its "floating holidays" in order to give days off during both Eids.¹⁵ "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 is similar to the one that Mohammed used to explain the school's prayer policy. Like spaces within the school that adapt according to the needs of its

users, the school institution also adapts. Student needs structure the school, temporally and spatially.

C. 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 “is it important to have 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. “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 was boring for Fanaa. Both Fanaa and Fadumo attached a social aspect 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 be satisfied with a prayer experience, they needed a network of other people to share in the practice of prayer.

Although roughly 90% of the student body is Muslim, student behaviors (such as in regard to prayer) are diverse. The behaviors I observed can be mapped into overlapping circles, a sort of Venn diagram. In the center, where all the circles meet, we find the label Somali Muslim.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ These students tend to be newer arrivals to the U.S. Many females in this circle dress in the *jilbab*, which comprises “a *masar* that wraps around the hair, and a tailored head covering (sometimes called a *hijab*) that fits closely around the face and drapes over the shoulders.”¹⁸ Their male counterparts typically wear button-down shirts and pants in a style that is “generally loose-fitting and modest.”¹⁹ On Fridays, these boys also can be seen long white tunics. The newest arrivals speak little English and rely on Somali to communicate.

In another conjoining circle are 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. 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."²⁰ Other girls might wear a *masar*, tied 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 that of the Americanized boys, which will be described subsequently. These students speak English with more ease, but continue to use Somali in the hallways.

In a final, overlapping circle, we find mostly Americanized students.²¹ These students are less likely to practice things like *wudu* or prayer in school, or to follow the rules that demand modest dress and forbid things like alcohol and smoking. The Americanized girls still usually cover their heads, although typically they choose a headscarf 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.

Using a Venn diagram to illustrate student behavior allows for blurry, rather than rigid, boundaries. There are newly arrived boys who 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 these are not rigid. Acknowledging that there is a wide spectrum of behaviors demonstrated by students reminds us that far from demonstrating homogeneity, the Somali Muslim students at the school are diverse.

The diagram also illuminates how prayer plays a social function in the school. Students like Fadumo and Fanaa use prayer time as a way 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.

D. 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*. 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.

III. 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.

A. Making Comparisons

Students tended to critique the school by comparing it with their other American educational experiences. Suhoor, Nawal, and Nashad, for example, 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.”

Comparisons between 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.” Almost 95 percent of Somali children attend *dugsi* before starting formal schooling.²² 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. Lack of comparison with *dugsi* may reflect that students feel the educational system in the U.S. is distinct from those in Somali, 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, plan to pursue nursing. For Nashad, interest in nursing is tied to 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 is “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. Perhaps they criticized the school because they intended to get as much out of their education as possible.

B. 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. “When we have class, they are talking too much, like when the teacher is talking to explain for the lesson,” Nashad added.

For my staff informants, student behavior was also of concern. An English Language Learning 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 more Americanized students were more likely to have disciplinary problems. According to Stella, SIR is “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 student demographic changes, but 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. In Kenyan refugee camps, where most Somali refugees reside, 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, [immigration authorities] 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, there are fewer newly arrived Somali refugees enrolling in the school. In the meantime, the Somali youth already in the U.S. grow more Americanized with time. This range of students has created 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 doesn’t 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, or even consider it *haram*. Mohammed, for example, once told me 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 the school frustrating.

Leslie, a social worker at the school, found attitudes toward dating and sex frustrating as well. She wanted to start a girls' group, a space where girls could discuss things like sex, drugs, and violence. She hasn't yet found enough interest at SIR to start one. These topics, she admitted, do come up in one-on-one meetings she has with students, but such conversations do not happen 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 sexless lives. Some students *do* date and some are sexually active. In addition, many students marry and have children in their late teens or early twenties. Several female students in the classes in which I work are married and/or 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.

1. Student Expectations

Talking with informants and students in classrooms yielded this observation: concerns that students (both Americanized and new arrivals) talked about had little to do with Somali Muslim practices themselves. Students did not complain 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, the students with whom I spoke did not view other public schools, with less accommodation of Somali Muslim practices, as more challenging.

While admitting that at her old school, one had to obtain permission to pray, Suhoor assured me that “I can ask my teachers.” With teacher permission to pray, Suhoor and her best friend Nawal just prayed in the classroom at their old school. Other students were curious, but the girls did not mind answering their questions. Suhoor would just tell them “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 they were asked about how they dressed. Fanaa told us that “some students say to us [my sister and me], 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 me and the others 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.” I wanted to know if such prying questions bothered them. “No, it was only a question, I can answer,” Fanaa answered. “The question is 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 did 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.

This willingness to give up some accommodations for prayer should not obscure the fact that Somali Muslim practices are harder to perform outside of Somalia, whether at SIR or mainstream public schools. The challenges of learning English and navigating a new society take away from time and energy allocated to performing Somali Muslim

practices. One day, I noticed that one of my students had dozed off in class. When approached, he told me that he had awakened early so as to be at the mosque at 5:00 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.”

B. Conclusions about Students’ Opinions of Their School

Challenges that students face at the school illuminate two conclusions. Firstly, challenges originating from the tensions between new arrivals and Americanized students demonstrate the diversity of Somali Muslims that the school serves. This diversity means that there is no singular approach the school can take to address its Somali Muslim students’ needs. In addition, concerns about the educational experience at SIR reveal that students expect the school to be **just that—a school**. No one asked for the school to be transformed into a space exclusively for Somali Muslims or for the education it offered to mirror that of institutions in Somalia, like *dugsi*. Additionally, students did not perceive the school’s accommodations of Somali Muslim practices as sufficient substitutes for quality instruction or extracurricular offerings. Some students expressed willingness to return to mainstream public schools, where Somali Muslim practices were less accommodated, in order to get a satisfying education. We thus see that students expect the school, a public institution, to fulfill its primary function: educating them, its students.

III. Personal or Communal? Exploring Student Discourse

When speaking to me about the challenges and rewards of their school experiences, students used two strategies: individual and collective. These strategies stem from a triangular set of influences upon students’ identities, opinions, and behaviors: the community, the individual, and God, or Allah. Using a discussion of the collective speech strategy followed by an examination of the individual speech strategy, I acknowledge the balance being struck between individuality, community, and adherence to a higher authority.

A. Collective Identity

I call the first speech 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 comment illustrates two elements of the “us/we” strategy. Firstly, she used “we,” referring to all Somalis. This placed her in a group with which to identify. Secondly, the idea of “one religion” made all Somalis into a group with a singular religious faith or set of practices. The group, Somalis, is unified around a single identifier: having “one religion.”

A conversation I had with Mohammed, Abdi, and Aafi provides another example of collective discourse. We had entered into a discussion about my religious studies major and my interest in the dynamic nature of religious practices and beliefs. In the middle of the conversation, 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.” Mohammed used collective discourse to connect himself to a wider community.

The collective “we/us” strategy can be analyzed through the lens of structuralism: “our religion” works on “us,” shaping what we do and how we feel about our surroundings. For example, one day in class, I shared with the students in my small group that my favorite animal was the dog. A male student spoke up, telling me that he hated dogs, adding that, “Muslims hate dogs.” The student’s rationale worked as follows: “Muslims hate dogs” and he is Muslim, so therefore he hates dogs. He accepted that identifying as a Muslim influenced his opinions of certain things—in this case, dogs.

Identifying with a group shapes not just opinions, but behaviors. I witnessed this in my interview with Suhoor. We were talking about how she would explain the practice of prayer to non-Somali Muslim students. Confidently, she told me that she would announce to curious peers that, “we are Muslim and we have to pray five times a day.” She justified 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 was not choosing whether

or not to pray. As a “Muslim” she was compelled to do so, because that is what belonging to such an identity requires.

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 “othering” 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 the 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.

B. 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. Her language did not express a sense of unity as the collective speech strategy did. Instead of a “we” or an “us,” she alluded to the existence of an “I” or a “me.”

The concept of personal choice pervades this individual rhetoric. During our interview, Abdi, Aafi, Mohammed, and I got into a discussion about local mosques. In the middle of the debate over the number of mosques in the area, Aafi exclaimed, “Oh, there are more

than eight, because some Arabs have mosques." I wanted to know if only Somalis could go to the Somali mosques and Arabs to the Arab ones. Abdi answered, "you can pray wherever you want...you can go to every mosque you want, Arab or Somali." The mosque one prays in is thus a choice in Abdi's eyes, an individual decision rather than one made collectively. Individual rhetoric was also part of 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."

Rhetoric of choice also surfaced during conversations I had with students about the Somali Muslim practice of 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 was feeling too tired and sick to concentrate on his schoolwork. 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 personal choice: you can fast if you want to.

The choice present in this "I/me" strategy is always in play with the collective discourse already discussed, but also gets tempered by another influence on the individual: Allah. While some students believed they could choose where they prayed, for example, or how they obtained an education, subjection to God's will is incorporated into that choice. When talking about the future, like going back to Somalia or getting a diploma, I often heard students say "*insh Allah*." On four or five occasions, after uttering this phrase, students went on to explain its meaning—"God willing." Individuality is thus modified through relationship to Allah's will.

C. 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. Communal and individual identities are fluid, playing various roles in different contexts. 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, therefore, cannot *just* address a group's needs, nor can accommodation focus on individual choice alone. Find-

ing 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.

IV. 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?²³ 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.

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. Permission for such fluidity at SIR means that bathrooms, for example, can serve as bathrooms as well as quarters for *wudu*. Allowing adaptability and blurriness of the 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, subscribe. 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: 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 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 article. 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 discourse surrounding the strategies Muslims, individually and communally, use to negotiate the public space?

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Notes

1. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 71.
2. Lila Abu-Lughod, "Writing against Culture," in *Feminist Anthropology: A Reader*, ed. Ellen Lewin (Malden, Oxford, Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), p. 159.
3. In order to protect the anonymity of everyone involved, all names, including that of the school and those of students and staff, are pseudonyms.
4. 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 U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, "Refugees by Numbers, 2006 Edition," online at <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/basics/openssl.htm?tbl=BASICS&id=3b028097c#Refugees>.
5. Bernhard Helander, "Somalia," in *Islam outside the Arab World*, ed. David Westerlund and Ingvar Svanberg (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), p. 39.
6. Catherine Bell, "Performance," *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, editor Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 208.
7. Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. Richard Nice (Palo Alto, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 148.
8. Bell 1998, p. 217.
9. Said 1978, p. 10.
10. Abu-Lughod 2006, p. 160.
11. 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), p. 5.
12. 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), p. 43.
13. I focus on Muslims here because the question addressed 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.
14. 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 when 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 God, 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.

15. In the words of 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].”

16. 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 regarding Jewish identity, allowing for “Judaism” to encompass diverse manifestations. See Michael L. Satlow, “Defining Judaism: Accounting for ‘Religions’ in the Study of Religions,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 4 (December 2006): 837–860.

17. The word “*haram*” describes a set of laws prohibiting certain behaviors, including consuming pork or alcohol (or any drug that causes intoxication or alteration of the senses), and having sex outside of marriage. Because it can lead to sex before marriage, some Somali Muslims also believe that dating is *haram* (again, see Haynes for a clear, concise explanation).

18. Heather Marie Akou, “Nationalism Without a Nation: Understanding the Dress of Somali Women in Minnesota,” in *Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress*, edited by Jean Allman (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 58.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

21. 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.

22. Lee Cassanelli and Farah Sheikh Abdikadir, “Somalia: Education in Transition,” *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies* 7 (2007): 108–109.

23. 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.

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