

‘Mogadishu on the mend: Representing post-war Somalia and Somalis in the 21st century’

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Abstract

Since the end of the civil war in Somalia, representations that offer a hopeful vision for the country’s future have perhaps unsurprisingly grown in number. In online publications such as Warya Post, for example, Somalia’s colours, flavours, traditional dances and music are on display in a lively manner that re-awakens cultural aspects buried during the decades of war, when images of guns, militants and bloodshed predominated. At the same time, in the media of the Western societies in which Somalis have resettled, there is still a tendency towards negative stereotyping of Somalis (often comprising anti-Muslim sentiment, as in the works of Ayaan Hirsi Ali), as well as an emphasis on Somalis as a threat due to links of a minority to terrorist organisations. With the understanding that every society is constituted in and through a people’s distinctive forms of image making, the imaging of Somalis as outsiders that we witness in much mainstream Western media and political discourse reinforces the experience of disconnection many Somalis feel from their host environments. Surveying artworks of Somali-Australian artists such as Nadia Faragaab and Hamishi Farah and literary works of Italian-Somali authors such as Ubax Cristina Ali Farah’s *Il comandante del fiume* (2014) as well as websites such as Warya Post, whose aim is to provide a progressive platform for perspectives that challenge mainstream media, this paper analyses differently mediated images to understand new trajectories of cultural citizenship. Building on my PhD study of Somali belonging (2012), and thinking with the idea of imagination as social practice (Appadurai), how does the positive image-making in Somali artworks, music and literature contrast with media images in the Western societies in which many Somalis reside? To what extent does positive image-making establish new horizons of hope for displaced or fragmented Somalis?

Introduction

Somalia has been affected by civil unrest since the late 1980s. Over the past two decades, the conflict has displaced a large proportion of the internal population, while over one million Somalis live in the diaspora.¹ Since its outbreak in 1991, the Civil War in Somalia has produced large numbers of Somali refugees. In the myriad global locations in which they are scattered, Somalis have faced particular challenges. Among these challenges is a lack of positive cultural representation. Alongside other African and Muslim groups who have resettled in the West, Somalis have experienced discrimination and pressure to assimilate, fortified by dominant media accounts of their settlement. The bestselling books by the neo-conservative Somali author, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, have contributed to this discrimination. In her memoir, *Nomad* (2010), for example, Ali prescribes ‘assimilation into civilisation’ as the solution for the ‘non-West’ of the planet.² The inevitability with which Hirsi Ali regards the abandonment of traditions in favour of ‘modernity’ ignores that modernity itself has evolved from culturally specific traditions.

The lack of positive representation of Somali culture is not just an issue for the societies in which Somalis have resettled. It also presents a problem for young Somalis who are unaware of their heritage, or whose awareness of it is limited to negative imagery. Harvard-based Historian Safia Aidid lists, in an online article for maandeeq.com, (*maandeeq* means ‘she-camel’, in Somali) the terms with which we are accustomed to seeing Somalia reported: ‘crisis, conflict, anarchy... terror... refugee, militant, warlord, failure, collapse, clan, radical, terrorist, extremist, or pirate. ‘Also useful’, writes Aidid, are the words ‘nomadic, pastoral and tribal’ as well as made up verbs combined with these other words, such as the ‘Somalization of the crisis’.³

¹ According to Ioan Lewis, by early 1993 approximately “three-quarters of the population had been internally displaced by civil conflict; by late 2008 there were an estimated 1.3 million internally displaced Somalis.” Lewis, Ioan., “Somalia: Physical and Social Geography,” *Africa South of the Sahara 2010*, Europa Regional Surveys of the World (London: Routledge, 2009), 1094.

² Ali, A. H. *Nomad: From Islam to America. A Personal Journey Through the Clash of Civilisations*, 2010, p 259.

³ Aidid, Safia. www.maandeeq.com [Accessed 10 October 2015]

Within this terrain, there is a growing push for social cohesion.⁴ This means that young people are implicitly, if not explicitly, pressured into cultural coherence, rather than their culturally diverse affiliations being acknowledged and respected. In this paper, I take into account several examples of emerging representations made by young ‘diasporic Somalis’ that paint Somalia in a positive light.

‘I am the most regular guy’
(2014)
acrylic on board
124 x 84 cm
Albeit Tho Series

Hamishi Farah
Australian (Somali ancestry)
b. 1991



Australian artist with Somali ancestry, Hamishi Farah, subverts assumptions about what it is to have Somali roots. While rendering aspects of his Somali background, as an artist, Farah has affirmed his reluctance to use his Somali ethnicity to distinguish himself from other artists, in statements such as: ‘there is a African sized gap in Australian Art and I don’t want to fill it.’⁵ Farah has also admitted to emphasising his Somali heritage when applying for funding from the Australia Council for the Arts. In this sense, Farah’s practice strategically positions his Somali heritage to obtain institutional support while subverting assumptions of how this should be rendered aesthetically, reminding viewers of the multiplicity of belongings inhabited by Somalis in the diaspora, and highlighting the colonial assumptions that continue to be

⁴ Vasta, Ellie. 2013 ‘Do we need Social cohesion in the 21st century? Multiple languages of belonging in the metropolis.’ *Journal of Intercultural Studies*. 34(2)

made in the West about 'African Art'. Farah deploys a number of symbols commonly found in Somali diasporic households in his *Albeit Tho* series (2014) of artworks. For example, in recognition of the web-based communication technologies that connect Somalis in their distant global locations, his painted work, titled: 'I am the most regular guy', features Skype-patterned armchairs.⁶

Emerging representations of home

What does home look like for displaced Somalis? With the understanding that every society is to a significant extent constituted in and through a people's distinctive forms of image making, the imaging of Somalis as outsiders that we witness in much mainstream Western media and political discourse reinforces the experience of disconnection many Somalis feel from their host environments. Thinking with Appadurai's idea of imagination as social practice, how does the positive image-making in Somali artworks, music and literature contrast with media images in the Western societies in which many Somalis reside? To what extent does positive image-making establish new horizons of hope for displaced or fragmented Somalis?

Italian Somali author Cristina Ali Farah's latest novel, *Il comandante del fiume* (2014), articulates a sense in which young Somalis living in the diaspora are being expected to live through identities ascribed to them by others, rather than ones they might choose for themselves. Through a young protagonist named Yabar who is based on the life of her teenage son, Ali Farah draws readers' attention to a network of disaffected Somali youth who live at the margins of European societies. Yabar gets into trouble in his hometown of Rome and is sent to live with Somali relatives in the UK as a punishment. 'They are much more religious in London', says his friend Sissi. After he arrives in London, Yabar reflects:

I'd been in London for a week, and I still hadn't seen anything of the city. I could have been anywhere – England, Australia, Minnesota – but I had the impression that I was in Somalia: all the shop owners are Sikhs or Benghali but there were also call centres, Money Transfer outlets and Somali-owned restaurants, and locals too. Veiled women, children of all ages pulled along by hand or in their strollers, youngsters, elderly folk, and everyone saying hello to each other as though they were in a small town. (my translation from the Italian, 185)

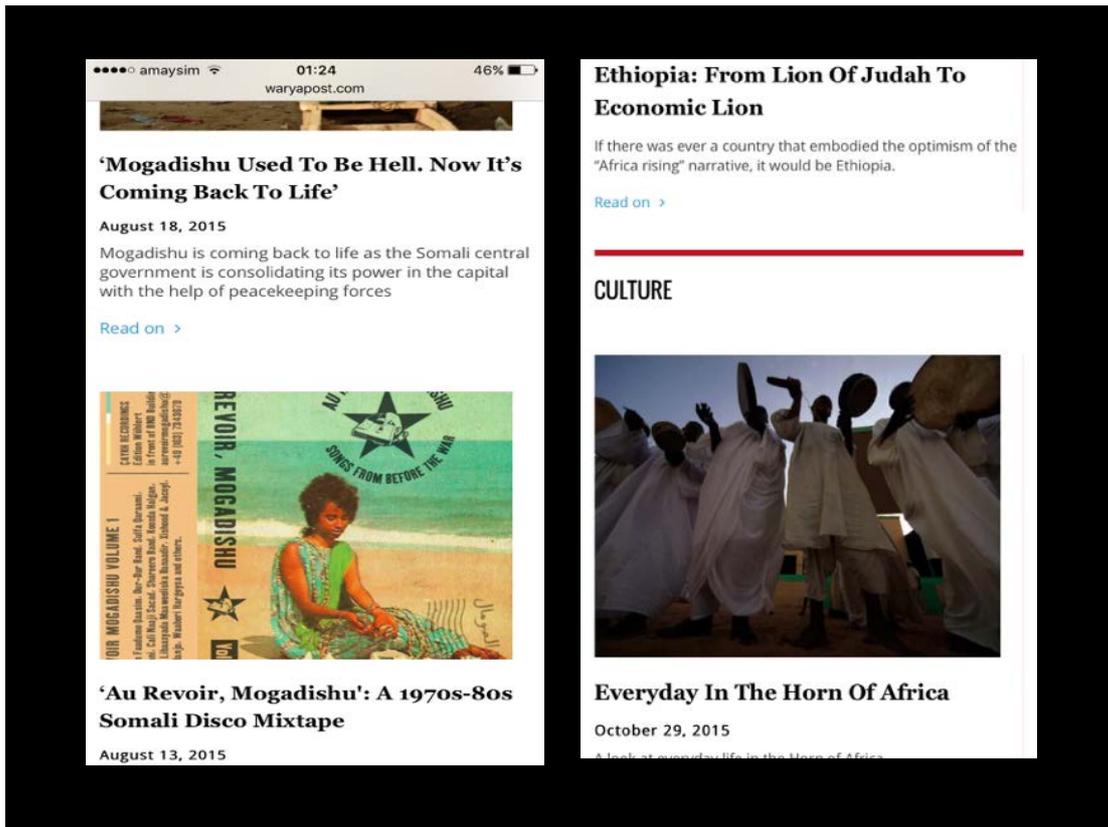
⁶ Farah, Hamishi. <http://hamishi.asia/albeit-tho/> [Accessed 28 October 2015]

We know belonging is multi-scalar and intersectional. Belonging can be cosmopolitan or national, or local, or regional, or place-based, or affective, dreamt of and longed for. Belonging is intimately intertwined with desire. But how do such belongings work together, or against one another? In my PhD, I sought to understand what happens when Somalis find themselves needing to adjust to life contexts that are very different to those of Somalia. I investigated what I called ‘possible spaces’ for belonging that have emerged following the relocation of Somali migrants and refugees.

Thus began a search for possible spaces of home. I focussed on representations for their ability to articulate and intervene in public perceptions of Somali identity formation. At the heart of my research were the questions: to what extent do particular cultural formations contribute to or detract from Somali settlement and belonging in their host countries? What kinds of representations make it possible for Somalis to ‘take place’ and feel at home in the world?

Imaging Post-war Belonging

The *Warya Post* website, established by Somali intellectual and journalist Fatuma Abdhulahi, garners a range of positive stories about Somalia, publishing original articles and re-publishing others that paint the country in a positive light. The website actively recollects fragments of what means and has meant to be Somali over the centuries. Stories bearing titles such as ‘Mogadishu used to be hell. Now it’s coming back to life’, ‘The night life of Mogadishu’ and ‘Beautiful Somali buildings are rising up in a former war zone and it gives me hope’ present a fresh vision of a city on the mend, after decades of destruction, filling readers with hope and purpose.



MOGADISHU, Somalia — Streetlights now line this city’s main street, Mecca Avenue. Kids run around, weaving between food stalls, free-range chickens and mangy dogs. Record stores play loud music out of speakers, advertising their selections... Residents stand in lines at local banks. Pharmacies, butchers, restaurants, grocery stores and mobile phone shops abound. Traders who have trekked into the city from the countryside carry baggage filled with goods to sell at street markets. At the end of the day, they fill their bags with goods to sell back home. Everywhere, new buildings are under construction.

The city of Mogadishu, known for enduring years of conflict is fast taking on a new charm with entertainment spots emerging as the city savors relative peace. When the sun sets, the town takes on another life – one of serenity, recreation, with entertainment in the hotels, at the array of beach hotels and tea houses. In the suburbs, donkey carts and cattle herds roam the streets, grocery shops and hair salons are open late into the night, while youths play street soccer under solar-powered lights...

While presenting an optimistic vision for Somalia’s future, *Warya Post* does not shy away from features that document the ongoing issues of tension and violence in the city. A recent article discussed the ongoing problem of Al-Shabaab attacks on hotels, for example. The complex series of representations on display are evidence of a city that is healing. It is as though, during its recovery, flashes of post-traumatic stress are to be

expected. *Warya Post* covers the experiences of Somalis wherever they may be located in the world and reports on cultural formations being produced in them. The site is divided into four key sections, 'trending, opinion, lifestyle and culture'. There are articles on divorce, Somali cuisine, imposter syndrome, soccer and on cultural formations being made in the diaspora. In Germany:

Berlin-based cassette label Caykh Recordings and Jakarta Records recently put together the striking *Au Revoir, Mogadishu* mixtape, a collection of pre-war songs from 'the golden days of Somali music.' The 45-minute Somali disco mix runs through a number of selections from the likes of Dur Dur Band, Waaberi, Qadiijo Qalanjo and several other acts... This Tape of 70s and 80s Somali sound is a rich blend of traditional Somali folk music infused with Western funk, rock and reggae and a touch of Indian, Arabic and African flavors,' explains Caykh. 'There are hardly any proper releases of this soulful sound of guitar, synthesizer and drums. I spent some months finding, compiling and editing rips of TV and live recordings on old VHS tapes and radio broadcasts to cassette tapes and here is what I got. Enjoy! With love from Mogadishu.

Warya Post promotes an archive of Somali culture and history that educates and reminds its global audience of Somalia's rich and complex heritage, a heritage that is a far cry from soundbites about the country as a failed state. As a project, the website is central to the rebuilding of Somali lives inside and outside of Somalia. There are a growing number of similar initiatives within the Somali diaspora, not least those of the Melbourne-based Somali arts organization, Burji Arts, established by artist Nadia Faragaab in 2013, which has produced an archive of Somali artistic practices and last year launched, in partnership with the University of Melbourne, the world's first Somali-English dictionary app.

Nadia Faragaab's practice establishes continuities between indigenous cultures, recuperating rich fragments of Somali cultural traditions and actively recollecting them to imagine shared futures. In 2015, for the Brunswick-based Counihan Gallery's *Both Sides of the Street Via* exhibition, Faragaab collaborated with indigenous artist Vicki Couzens' (Kirrae Wurrong and Gunditjmarra) to produce a video work 'Gestural Intent'.⁷ The video takes on a register of non-verbal dialogue, exploring a language of gesture to create spaces of non-fixity. Set up side-by-side behind a white translucent curtain, screens with recordings on loop of each artist performing culturally specific

⁷ Faragaab, N. and Couzens, V. 2015 'Gestural Intent.' *Both Sides of the Street*. Exhibition curated by Thompson, K. and Flynn, E., The Counihan Gallery, Brunswick. June 19 – July 19.

gestures broaden the repertoire of human communication, engaging animal spirits, holding the immaterial in the material.

Couzens, painted with circles and stripes, is filmed in a night landscape from up close while, in the background, she dances beside fire. Faragaab appears in shadow against a white backdrop. In some moments she can be observed in a jalbaabka (a burqa-like garment worn by Somali women since the civil war in Somalia). Faragaab deploys her body and its extremities to enact the rhythms and signs of Somali non-verbal language. At times the gestures of both artists reminded me of watching birds or snakes, leading me to imagine the artists' shared language of gesture on display as one that disrupts anthropocentrism.⁸

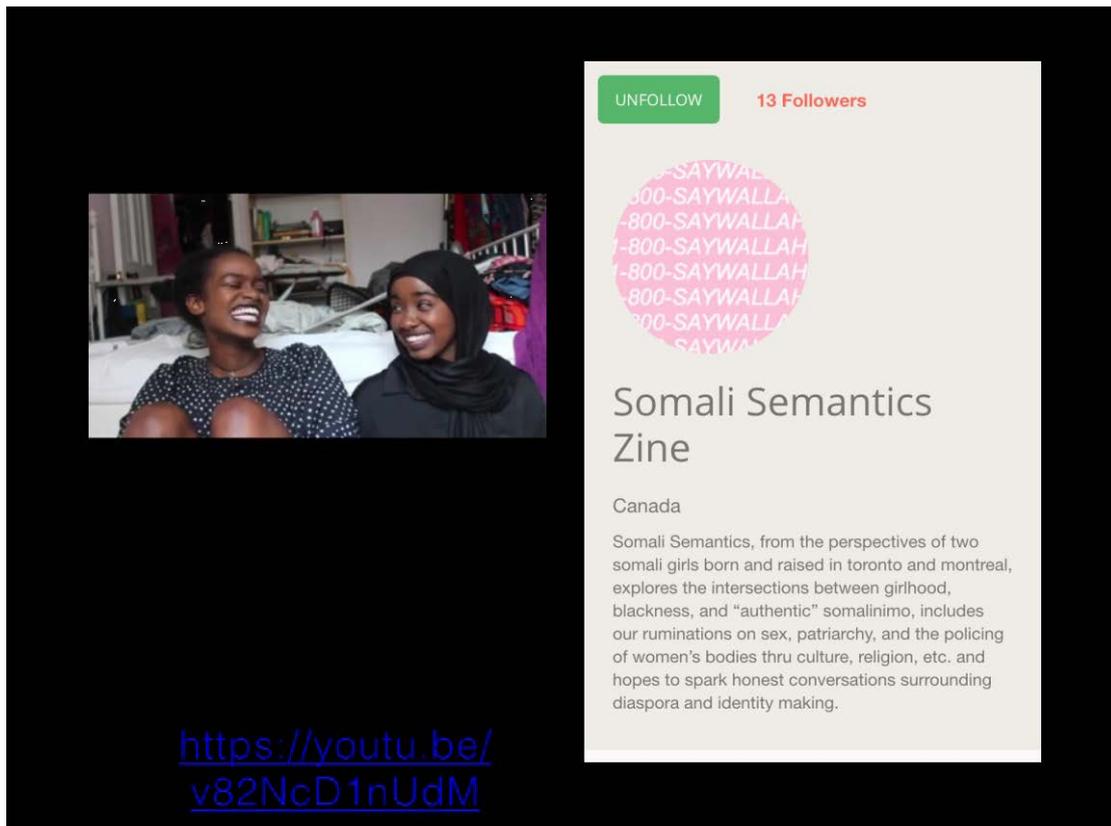
Digital technologies and belonging

Digital publishing is increasingly used as a platform for establishing new representations that negotiate identity and belonging. This negotiation is important in the face of pressure to assume cultural and social coherence. Spaces created by publications such as the ISSUU / Tumblr *Somali Semantics Zine* (<http://somalisemantics.tumblr.com>) articulate these concerns and seek to negotiate the contradictions inherent in multi-faceted belonging. A local friend with a Somali background posted a link to the zine on Facebook and claimed to have spent the whole day immersed in the publication (which was largely written in Canadian English vernacular).

The zine confronts a number of issues, traditionally considered taboo in Somali culture such as what to do in the advent of sexual frustration when one cannot have sex before marriage, and is surrounded by a culture in which sexual relations outside of marriage are the norm, with marriage occurring later in life than in their parents' and grandparents' generations. And what to do about the burden of care faced by many young Somali women, who are expected to prioritise looking after family members before attending to their studies?

⁸ Gerrand, V. 2015 'Reframing Australia. A review of Both Sides of the Street.' *Overland*. <https://overland.org.au/2015/07/reframing-australia/> [Accessed 10 October 2015]

Koen Leurs and Sandra Ponzanesi argue that digital diasporas may no longer be understood simply in terms of their ‘vertical relations to a homeland or place of origin or as horizontally connected to a clearly marked transnational community’. Instead, they suggest we regard diasporic digital practices as rhizomatic insofar as they ‘reshuffle traditional understandings of origin and belonging.’⁹



In their *Somali Semantics* zine, Sumaya and Yasmeen adopt an array of practices of ‘branding and becoming’ to express themselves, 1800-Saywallahi (wallahi means ‘I swear to God’). The zine primarily addresses young Somali women, wherever they might be located, but is also intended for a broad general audience:

for somali girls: we hope you see a little of yourself in this zine and that it makes you feel a little less alone in a sexist, anti-black and islamophobic world.

for everyone else: we hope this gives you a better understanding of our reality as kickass, not-here-for-it, magical black somali canadian girls.

⁹ Loers, K and Ponzanesi, S. 2011 ‘Mediated Crossroads. Youthful Digital Diasporas.’ *M/C Journal* 14(2).

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The images of Somali belonging explored in this paper move us beyond the geographies of exclusion fuelled tabloid media including the anti-Islam bestsellers by Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Hirsi Ali's lies may sell copies, akin to the tabloid newspapers, but complex, hopeful depictions of the realities of Somalis today are gaining global traction.

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