

# **Qof Ma Dhiban: Somali Orality And the Delineation of Power**

by

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supervised by

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“Someday your mother’s tongue will be a lost tribe, a testament to the new world a past generation that nurtures fear in their back gardens. Someday she will explore her past, in the only place left for it. Her memory.” (Dawes and Abani, “Paper Dolls,” p. 29)

### **Abstract**

This Major Research Paper (MRP) explores Somali origin myths as a site through which to track the formation, maintenance and transmission of power. It places into conversation colonial anthropological texts and Somali oral stories to examine a contemporary Somali diaspora’s response to the Madhibaan, a qabil (clan) with limited socio-economic power. Throughout the analysis, I ask: Where do Madhibaan Somali women appear? When do they materialize? Why do they show up? What does this absence/presence make possible?

I bring together several scholarly communities and conversations in this MRP which include: critical African/Black feminisms; critical race theory; post coloniality; oral histories; Somali studies; and decolonial knowledge production. It is my hope that I will make valuable methodological and theoretical contributions to the field of Somali Studies in particular on scholarship that includes Madhibaan Somalis as well as Somali orality.

### **Acknowledgements**

Ya Raab, Ya Allah. I start first with *bismillah al-rahman al-rahim*. Faith in the Creator has given me the courage and conviction I needed to navigate the unknown.

It’s important for me to start by noting that I write this paper from Tkaronto, the traditional territories of the Huron-Wendat and Petun First Nations, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River. In providing this acknowledgement, I position my work in a

broader collective call for the ongoing destruction and active dismantling of white supremacist, settler colonial, imperialist, patriarchal and capitalist societies.

This MRP came to life as part of a Black Feminist Thought graduate seminar taught by Kamari Maxine Clarke at the University of Toronto in Winter 2016. Thank you Kamari for reading the earliest drafts and for pushing me to think of depth instead of breadth. Continuing this work at a doctoral level is in large part due to your encouragement. I will forever be grateful. Thank you to my advisor-supervisor team, Honor Ford-Smith and Sarah Flicker for their positive affirmations and for pushing me to dream a little bigger. Your feedback and encouragement has not only helped birth this paper but has also contributed to my growth.

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To my sisters Miime, Idel, Rukia and my precocious six year-old nephew Abdi-Malik - I write so that we can perhaps choose to read these stories one day. I love you. Aishah Samut, your moral support and unwavering belief got me through. The saying bash-bash iyo barawaaqo (wishing you health and prosperity) is important for nomadic Somalis. It refers to water soaked

up by the roots that replenish the plants in times of drought. Barawaaqo iyo kheyr to my sister-in-arms, Hibaq Gelle, designing Project Toosoo with you gave me the nourishment I needed to finish.

My grandmother died in February 2013 and with her, her collection of stories. Every time I speak of Somali orality, my words in part resurrect my ayeeyo, Xaawo Xasan Kharab, for whom I was named. There is neither greater honor nor greater responsibility. I could not have survived this without my gracious, thoughtful and patient Aabo. Thank you for always answering the difficult questions and loving me even in the midst of my errors. Thank you for telling me these stories. Thank you for giving me conviction. Thank you for teaching me never to compromise my integrity, my identity and my faith. This research is testament to the silences you refused to bear. I make dua that I leave the same legacy for future generations to come. I am so proud to be your daughter.

And finally, this paper is for those who come from the lands I call home. It is one small contribution to the complexity of a Somalia I believe can come to fruition. May our stories continue to carry hope.

### **Foreword**

This MRP is an extension of my plan of study (POS) which focused on three key components: the examination of Somali orality in scholarly discourse and a contemporary Somali diaspora; the use of Somali orality as a methodological approach; and finally the exploration of decolonial aesthetic and archive. While the POS had a more general focus on Somali orality, my major research examines a single origin myth as a way through which to understand how hegemonies become carried as part of the contemporary Somali diaspora through orality. I have completed all

the learning objectives noted as part of my POS in particular increasing my ability to critically analyze the movement of power as a result of discrepancies between oral and colonial archives.

## **Introduction**

### **Mapping of MRP**

Section 1 provides an introduction to my guiding research questions by doing a number of things. The first, by examining the decolonial rupture that makes room for the theoretical work; the second, by exploring the site of personal experience and history that changes the stakes of the MRP and its contribution to scholarship; and finally by outlining a discursive frame that includes absence/presence as an analytic tool, and a methodological frame that incorporates Somali orality and the Somali imaginary as both a temporal and material site through the use of African feminisms.

Section 2 provides a look at the construction of the Madhibaan figure as co-constituted through the development of Somali subjectivity. Here, I aim to argue that the Somali can only exist if the Madhibaan exists as the perpetual Other. In this I search for Madhibaan Somali women. This section attempts to both personalize and contextualize how Madhibaan Somali women remain persistently silenced as a further exploration of the ways in which the European colonial archive and Somali hegemonic processes work to reinforce a social boundary. While scholarship often conceives of Somali women as a monolithic group this work aims to highlight the divergence of experiences. This paper is written using an explicitly African feminist focused lens to centralize and examine the silences of Madhibaan Somali women.

## Somali Diaspora in Canada

The contemporary Somali diaspora is the mass dispersal of people from the Somali territories after the 1980s, following a number of critical environmental and socio-political changes (Gardner and El Bushra, 2004, p. 2), including a substantial drought and sustained political conflict. The political conflict in the Somali territories should be understood within the context of the ongoing legacy of European colonialism, which resulted in the African independence movement of the 1960's. Siad Barre's presidency from 1969 - 1991 and his government's involvement with Russia reproduced the Cold War on the shores of Somalia, which quickened the collapse of an already fragile state. By the late 1980's multiple attempted coups, failing socio-political infrastructure, escalating violence, human rights abuses and a deadly drought had displaced hundreds of thousands of Somalis. In 1990, close to a fifth of the Somali population was believed to live outside the country (OCASI, 2016). By 1992, over one and a half million Somalis fled as refugees (Prunier, 1995) and settled in large numbers across Europe, the U.S., and Canada.

Somalis arrived in Canada in three major waves: the first group arrived in the early 1970s, making up no more than a dozen (Kusow, 1998, p. 95). The second wave came in the late 1980s, numbering in the thousands. Both the first and second wave were comprised of people who were relatively well educated and had substantive financial means, "often coming from countries and jobs where they had been well established" (*ibid*). Abdi Kusow notes "[r]efugee statistics in Canada suggest that in 1984 there were only ten Somalis in Canada. By 1991, this figure had increased to some 12,964 individuals" (Kusow, 1998, p. 94). Close to 70,000 Somalis had arrived in Canada by 1996, highlighting a drastic population increase and resulting in a lack of social services to properly support those fleeing civil war. Somalis are now the largest

African/Black diaspora in Canada. The 2011 National Household Survey estimates that there are 44,995 Somalis in Canada, with the majority of the population living in Ontario, though other Somali agencies note that unofficially that number is closer to 200,000.

It is within this context that my family arrived to Canada in 1988, trickling in as one of the first Somali families to live in Canada. Like many new Somali families, we settled first in the white building on Dixon Road, Toronto. At four, I recollect traveling by plane to our new home in British Columbia, dressed in a frilly white hand-me-down dress that had once belonged to my sister. Next to me on the airplane sat my tired mother and my two sisters. My father had gone ahead the week before with my brother and eldest sister. In the spring of 1992, after the move to British Columbia, my father was interviewed by the Vancouver Sun. The article, titled “‘Untouchable’ prejudices follow immigrant to Canada,” outlined the intra-communal violence and discrimination faced by Madhibaan Somalis. My family’s relocation from Ontario to British Columbia was in large part due to this discrimination, which he noted by saying, “I am a Somali citizen, but I and my family have been completely isolated by other Somalians<sup>1</sup> . . . [w] e are human beings, not animals.” (Farrow, 1992).

When I was fifteen, my father recruited me to help him develop ‘Somali Six’, a website he had built to speak to the constant persecution of Madhibaan Somalis both in Somalia and Canada. I understood the article, along with my father’s endless blogging as an articulation of the complexity of being a dual outsider—both to the Somali community, and as a recent refugee to Canada. For as long as I can remember, that newspaper clipping hung in the centre of our living room, with its image of my father in the centre, flanked by two of his friends, looking directly

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<sup>1</sup> Somalian is an incorrect term used to reference the peoples of Somalia as it “refers only to the citizens of Somalia” (Akou 2011, p. 124) which fails to include broader Somali territories and Somali speakers outside of colonial borders.

out at us. My mother chose another way, moving far from other Somalis as she encouraged us to forge our own paths. I see her silence as serving a particular purpose; silence was protection. It is the duality of my father's haunting words and my mother's silence that guide this research. As Geraldo Campano notes,

"[o]ften immigrant and refugee children bear witness to the suffering of their parents, as well as their own suffering. It is difficult to isolate hardship to any individual psyche; it spills, so to speak, onto the fabric of the diaspora. A child, being at once removed and part of what his or her family had endured, may be in a unique position to make new sense out of what has happened. The passage from silence to voice may be achieved through intergenerational storytelling" (As cited in Sheftel, A., & Zembrzycki, S., 2013, p. 117).

These differing silences encounter one another throughout the MRP, leading me to explore how the simultaneous examination of both can allow for a more robust analysis of Madhibaan silences. The article symbolizes the suffering of my parents that I have born witness to over years of my life. It is no coincidence that my parents' respective forms of resistance continue to provide me with a starting point for my personal and intellectual interest of my broader research on the Madhibaan.

Though I've theorized on the interview itself and made arrangements to have the newspaper-clipping image ordered and delivered from the archives, I have never asked my father about that interview. In the years I have mentioned the clipping he chooses to tell me about his friends in the picture. He never tells me the circumstances leading up to the interview and why he agreed to it in the first place. He never talks about his habit of hanging the framed original newspaper on the walls of every home in which we have lived.

I interviewed my father, a Madhibaan Somali man as part of an assignment for the graduate course entitled “Life History Research Methods and Applications” in December 2015 using oral history methodology. The study of life histories within scholarly literature began as an anthropological pursuit (Goodson and Sikes, 2001), a way in which to collect the stories of those whose histories and cultures were being erased by ongoing global colonialism. The more recent scholarly shift to life histories can be seen as a reallocation of power for those historically unable to speak to their own experiences. Goodson and Sikes (2001) tell us that “the life historian can see his life history...as a link in a chain of social transmission' (p. 5)." The argument life historians interested in this power shift have made is that without researchers examining the specificity of human experience generalities become the way in which we imagine social realities. "[T]he individual [is a] window into broader social and societal conditions" (Cole and Knowles, 2001, p. 12) Life histories in using the individual to examine systemic relationships does the work of reallocating power, in effect moving from the margins to the center. Oral history then, as Creswell (2007) argues, “consists of gathering personal reflections of events and their causes and effects from one individual or several individuals (p. 55, as cited from Plummer, 1983).

Dr. Naomi Norquay, an associate professor in the Department of Education, York University as part of a lecture in Fall 2015, notes “...life histories research is always engaging the autobiographical – our experiences frame research, and research never remains neutral.” Both my personal and familial memories inform the ways in which I both analyze and theorize for the MRP. A memory is not a story, as Norquay reminds us, a memory becomes story only when it is narrated and in some respects documented. Secondly, all memories are subjective, filtered through the interpretative lenses we have available to us. I define orality as a communicative

process through which stories, memories and various other narratives are shared. This includes word choices, intonation, gestures, language, even the way silences become used to emphasize any given point. I argue that the process of orality can be helpful in the interpretation of memory and story. As I explore my interview with my father, it is this definition of orality that makes sense of his story making.

During the interview, he is at once hesitant and proud of my memory of this artifact turned archive. In tracing this story from a nostalgic childhood memory of an artifact hanging on the wall to the interviewing my father, I am better able to understand the movement and subsequent challenges faced by Madhibaan Somalis in Canada. I find Helgren's concept of nostalgia useful here as a way to "connect the past and the present to criticize social conditions and the process of change" (2015, p. 68). To interrogate the places where we remember fondly can help us make sense of the context in which our memories, lives and experiences have taken place. When I ask my father who put the newspaper clipping into a frame and then on the wall, he tells me he did. He explains,

"My kids were all very small, I put it there because I needed to make sure my children knew what happened to me, to us from A to Z. All the information is written, I told my kids many times over the years. I did this so that tomorrow this wouldn't be a surprise for them and they wouldn't say *how come this happened*. Everything was on there, my kids grew up with it, and they read it. Every house I moved to, it would be on the wall."

His story helps guide the framing of my own memory work and is crucial to understanding and positioning myself within this research as well as providing spaces of counter narrative. I substantiate his oral tellings with my own memory work pulled from the context of my personal

experiences. The orality of the stories is critical because it speaks to what I know, what I remember and what I use as part of my discursive analysis.

The tone of the conversation I have with my father changes significantly when we talk about my mother. I am clear that I want to know about her involvement, and my father is equally insistent on minimizing it. His responses move from rambling and long to terse and short. It would be easy to say that he simply does not want to speak of my mother except that there is pain that lurks beneath his words. It is my observation of him that provides further clues.

Q: did you tell Hooyo (mom) about the interview?

A: yes she knew

Q: did you tell her what happened?

A: yes she knew, everything she knew.

Q: what did she say?

A: she said we have to protect ourselves, she knew. She wasn't involved, she stayed home, and she didn't care.

Q: the Somali women were around too, how come Hooyo didn't get involved?

A: she didn't leave the house she was busy with the kids, she didn't go out, when she went out she usually went with me.

Q: she didn't like going outside?

A: no, she used to be nervous around people she didn't know

My father grimaces when I mention my mother's name, he shifts in his chair. But the telltale give away is his hands clenching into one another, the way they do in prayer. It is a clue that perhaps only those closest to him are aware of. He is praying, in between his responses, something he only does when he feels disoriented and nervous. Goodson and Sikes note, "Life history work is interested in the way people do narrate their lives, not in the way they *should*" (2001, page 16, emphasis part of quote). This precisely is where the tension lies: in order to better understand the historicizing of silence of Madhibaan Somalis, I must also be more sensitive to both the narrating and my underlying assumptions of how this narration takes place. I am also their daughter; these hitches in the telling remain critical for me to tease out.

What I know for certain is that these silences are not only endemic of a larger socio-political narrative of Somali hegemony, but also a strategic silence employed by both my parents whenever I ask for details of their relationship. Our historicized understandings become implicated in our interpersonal dealings with one another. My parents have been divorced since I turned seven and despite attempting a brief three-month reconciliation, there is little love lost between them. When they separate the first time my father asks for the artifact, my mother refuses to give it to him. This artifact for whatever reason has been allowed to construct a particular meaning within the confines of my home. My parents, in making sure this image was present, produced an active story of injustice for their children. The suffering of my parents, of my family, of my community do as Campano notes above, spill over onto the fabric of the diaspora. Their suffering becomes my suffering, their pain my pain, and subsequently their strive for justice, mine. This for me is shakier ground. Somewhere along the way this artefact and the stories it carries become deeply implicated in how I examine my own identity. It forces me to consider the ways in which I have spent my personal and professional life adamantly vocal

against injustice. It forces me to consider how I look for experiences from the margins, from nooks and crannies, from folktales, and myths and stories. It forces me to think about how an image hung on the wall of every home I have ever lived has shaped my sense of accountability and responsibility to the world. Forgetting, remembering, silences and their negotiations become crucial to identity formation (Norquay, 1999, p.3).

Theorizing these stories thus becomes the site through which one can render visible what has taken centuries to render invisible – to make audible what has been kept silenced. In this case, it is the contestation within Somali communities with regards to an essentialized Somali identity. And let me be clear, this kind of theorizing goes beyond the consideration of simply stories; these ideas I attempt to situate have material consequences for peoples' lives. I carry the weight of a family members' tears when they share the story of a bride where months before her wedding, the groom's family calls it off refusing to have her 'Midgaan'<sup>2</sup> blood spoil their lineage; the solemn looks passed between aunts when Somali elders tell the origin myth as a joke to alleviate tension at a crowded party; my father's face when he tells me only two Madhibaan people have ever held a government post in Somalia since Independence; the Minority Rights Group International report<sup>3</sup> documenting abuse after rape after forced marriage where Madhibaan Somali women describe themselves as the people "who nobody cries for" (Hill, 2010, p. 21). My inherited silences suddenly begin to make sense: this is the reason my parents

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<sup>2</sup> Members of the Madhibaan clan are often referred to as the 'midgaan' which is a derogatory slur laden with socio-political histories of subjugation, genocide and clan majority sanctioned violence. Though Midgan is understood to be a derogatory term, many Madhibaan Somalis are still referenced in both the oral and colonial archive as such. I use Madhibaan throughout my MRP except as part of oral tellings.

<sup>3</sup> This report published by Minority Rights Group International in 2010 documents abuses suffered by numerous minority groups in Somalia, most explicitly by the Somali Bantu and the Madhibaan. The Somali Bantus are a persecuted minority-power group from Somalia that lived along the Juba and Shabelle River as agriculturalists.

are quick to disabuse me of notions of Somalinimo and to point to the internal Somali communal fragmentation. They intimately know themselves to be hyper erased and yet highly visible.

This is what I think about most as I sit and write about what it means to be Somali—what it means to be Madhibaan—my father being silenced as he challenged the rigidity of a homogenous Somalinimo; and my mother and her choice to remain silent. In choosing to engage in this research, I hope to make better sense of the differences in the tactics of silencing that my mother and father are subjected to and situate these intensely personal experiences as part of a larger discourse of power. Further, I hope to imagine how changing oral narratives can help us map a more flexible notion of power.

### #CadaanStudies & Decolonial Ruptures

Somali storytelling and orality can be used as the method through which to examine the formation, maintenance and transmission of power within hegemonic systems. For the purposes of this paper, I theorize on how oral narratives serve to recreate and reinforce hegemonic and colonial perceptions of an imagined Somali community. This imaginary continues to be the lens through which the contemporary Somali diaspora examine themselves and by extension, their communities. I look particularly at origin myths that explain the existence of the Madhibaan, an outcaste group within Somali society. It is through the deconstruction of both the colonial archive and oral narratives we can better understand how the Somali subject becomes constituted. To be clear, this MRP is preoccupied with examining the stories told of the Madhibaan as opposed to the stories the Madhibaan tell about themselves.

Somali orality has preserved different kinds of stories and history particularly since the onset of the civil war in comparison to the information anthropologists have collected and continue to collect. Although it has been argued extensively that colonial research, through its methods and

practices has been an integral part of the political-economic-cultural project of colonialism; its central role in codifying stories and defining the lines of discourse necessitates our engagement with what have been constructed as foundational texts. As Ali Jimale Ahmed suggests, what these foundational texts profess to know “must in time change” (Ahmed, 2012, p. 2). These texts have been instrumental in perpetuating the power imbalances and structures that persist across the Somali territories and bleed into a contemporary diaspora. The deconstruction of these anthropological texts has been limited, as evidenced by the texts that involve the Madhibaan; instead, much of the work coming from Somali Studies uses and takes up these texts as truth.

Somali Studies as a discipline has tentatively entered post coloniality<sup>4</sup> - while there are some scholars (Ali Jimale Ahmed, Abdi Kusow, Mohamed and Omar Eno etc.) that have heavily critiqued early anthropological texts, much of what is produced still remains under these historical shadows that present Somalis as living within monolithic, static and rigid social stratifications. This representation largely reflects white colonial scholarship and a lack of self-reflexivity within anthropology. Safia Aidid, in examining Ioan M. Lewis’s work, challenges the colonial epistemologies of Somali Studies by noting it “reduced the complexity and heterogeneity of Somali society as a whole to a monolithic, nomadic pastoralism even though it was based on his fieldwork observations in only one region of Somaliland.” (2015) Lewis’ research is often used to speak for all Somalis, though his research was only done in a small subsection of Somaliland, less than a tenth of the size of the Somali territories. Again, I am not the first to levy these critiques or challenge the legitimacy of the Somali Studies canon (Besteman, 1998; Kusow, 2004; Aidid, 2015).

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<sup>4</sup> Safid Aidid argues in a recent opinion editorial that “#CadaanStudies has revealed a Somali Studies in crisis, trapped within a colonial imaginary in a postcolonial, postmodern world” (2015) as a way to highlight the colonial parameters still encapsulating much of Somali Studies.

The question then becomes, why this research and why now? In 2015, the Somaliland Journal of African Studies (SJAS) was launched. Although it mentioned Somaliland as part of the title, it had a complete absence of Somali academics and researchers on the editorial and advisory boards. In addition, it claimed to have been founded in collaboration with the University of Hargeisa – this claim was later denied by the university. Safia Aidid, in response, started #CadaanStudies for Somalis to speak to larger “questions of power, authority and knowledge production about the Somali territories and how Somalis continue to be marginalized in academic and policy studies concerning them and the Horn of Africa more broadly” (Aidid, 2015). The subsequent racist and derogatory comments from Markus Hoehne, a German anthropologist who questioned the legitimacy and interests of Somalis as researchers exploded the hash tag’s reach and response. What was at first a small conversation grew to thousands of responses from Somalis both in the diaspora and on the African continent. These spawned lengthy published articles, and an open letter signed not only by hundreds of Somali academics, but non-Somali, mostly African allies, also concerned about the ways in which Somalis continued to be represented through the use of a colonial knowledge production.

What has yet to be unpacked within the context of the creation of #CadaanStudies, is the room it managed to wedge open for those of us broadly interested in the way that power moves within the context of the Somali territories and diaspora. What I proposed as a research subject in the early stages of my MRP, to examine divergent experiences of Somali women, contained faint remnants of what it has since become. The room created over the past year, is an opening of sorts. Not simply of the subaltern as ‘Somalis’ speaking back, but the very contestation of ‘Somali’ identity in and of itself. In looking at white supremacy and the disjuncture of a colonial archive, there is a smaller leap to deconstructing power more broadly. Somali academics though

preoccupied with examining external forces of power that have engaged with the Somali territories, have not often dedicated time to deconstruct Somali hegemonic processes. This is perhaps where a decolonial rupture of #CadaanStudies cannot yet imagine itself as contributing to a Somali hegemonic process.

My Somali colleagues have received my academic work on the Madhibaan over the course of this two-year degree mostly with tension. In April 2015, I presented a portion of my final MRP at the Reimagining Somali Studies: Colonial Pasts, Postcolonial Futures at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. This workshop happened as a result of #CadaanStudies conversations that had taken place amongst Somali scholars and was spearheaded by Safia Aidid, a PhD student in the History Department at Harvard. It looked to interrogate the colonial histories and epistemologies underpinning the academic field of Somali Studies, and formulate new interdisciplinary thinking and analysis about Somalis and the Somali territories, with an emphasis on critical theory.

In presenting my paper and through subsequent conversations with esteemed colleagues, and Somali community members, something became exceedingly clear. While my proposition that Somali orality could be configured as a methodology was received openly and without hesitation, it became difficult for other Somalis to reconcile themselves with my work on the Madhibaan. This feeling of being both welcomed and simultaneously unseen persisted. My position in this work is negligible, I have not directly experienced trauma when identifying myself as Madhibaan. I am able to engage in dialogue in a way that differs substantively from family members who know the feeling of being denied access or treated as subhuman as a result of their identification. But in that room, in that moment, I witnessed a dissonance. What could be understood as a methodology around understanding Somali orality could be heard, but the

intimacy of exposure to Madhibaan experience itself could not be understood. It was a brief conversation with Catherine Besteman, and her recounting of experiences witnessing fellow scholars Mohamed and Omar Eno (who have done extensive scholarship on the Somali Bantu—a minority-power clan) that helped formulate my thinking as not simply a reaction, but as response to what had blanketed the room. As Besteman summarized of our dialogue, “*the #CadaanStudies movement has yet to take on the hierarchies within Somaliness that have their roots in Somali oral stories (as well as colonial narratives) that continue to have force in diasporic imaginings*” (Besteman, email correspondence 2016).<sup>5</sup> And as Besteman notes, it becomes increasingly more complex to critique Somali hegemonies even as I navigate the Black Muslim experience of the Somali diaspora in the West, that sense of otherness outside of our home.

Nothing produces a more profound sadness than to dig into the stories that give solace and say: ‘Hey those erase me.’ I hope to never be cavalier about the continual labour of writing Madhibaan stories into existence despite the aching erasure. This labour requires constant reminders to Somali community members that whenever they choose to use the word midgaan they perpetuate the traumatic nature of these experiences and words on people's real lives. There is an aching sadness of both bearing witness to the complication of being accepted in my defense of the Somali diaspora and bearing the contradictory silence when reminded not to share private secrets in public.

What #CadaanStudies allows for a disjuncture to do critical work in Somali studies, that makes it becomes possible to see other fissures of (un) belonging from which to challenge and

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<sup>5</sup> This quote comes from the email body of Professor Catherine Besteman, who sent me her comments upon both hearing and reading the conclusion of my working paper for the Harvard Somali Studies Workshop in April 2015.

formulate new stories. To date, there is no substantial body of work that explicitly examines the Madhibaan, let alone Madhibaan Somali women's stories. This presents a large challenge for my research. From where do you begin when there is nothing?

An elder approaches me after I present an earlier version of my Masters Research Paper at the Critical Ethnic Studies Association Conference titled 'Sovereignties and Colonialisms: Resisting Racism, Extraction and Dispossession,' in early May 2016 2015 at York University, Toronto.

Ceebta qaari habo, she tells me.

Hide our shame, auntie.

She goes on to explain to me that we know these things to be true and she cannot disprove them, however, is this the story we really want others to know about us? Especially considering the ways we are already being targeted as Muslims in a post 9/11 world. She admonishes me as she reminds that this information should not be shared publically. I know what she isn't able to share out loud. These are the conversations, as Somalis we have in the private sphere. To name the trauma is to also name those complicit in its production. There is no real answer for me in these moments. Throughout this, I remain perpetually surprised by how often I become silenced.

My colleagues also ask: are you sure you are being silenced? Are you sure this is happening? I am. I know the tenors of absenting. In writing these absences and presences, experiences and histories, I attempt to destabilize these power imbalances particularly at the expenses of communities who have been historically erased. There cannot be a resurrection of decolonial knowledge production without also a reckoning of what that history tells us about the historical subjugation and absence/presence of Madhibaan women. I start with challenging that which is believed to be the foundation of how we understand our selves – the Somali oral archive. I do this above all else, aware that this archive is not a monolithic, many have spoken back to this in

both formalized academic scholarship as part of contemporary community practices.

This MRP broadly examines the contestation of a monolithic Somali identity within a contemporary Somali diaspora. I am interested in how Madhibaan Somali women are written into a European colonial scholarship and the subsequent Somali oral narratives that reinforce an ongoing social boundary (Kusow & Eno 2015). Through the mapping of the presence/absence of Madhibaan Somali women in Somali studies and orality (in both scholarly discourse and the contemporary Somali diaspora) I will explore how an in depth analysis can disrupt colonial and hegemonic renderings of the Somali figure. In order to do this I must first examine what exists more generally in both colonial scholarship and oral narratives about Madhibaan Somalis.

My research explores the ongoing social boundary<sup>6</sup> between Somalis and the Madhibaan. It unpacks how "national stories, narratives or narrations enable members of nations to think of themselves as part of a 'community.' I am interested in showing how stories make it possible for individuals who are unknown to each other to imagine that they share a common bond" (Razack, 2000, p. 182). This work theorizes a Somali national imaginary that exists in diaspora-led imaginative storytelling spaces. In order to do so, I put into conversation both the colonial and oral archive. This analysis then uncovers the ways that Somali storytelling and orality can be used to examine the formation, maintenance and transmission of power within clan systems.

I study kinship formations and various forms of social organization in order to show how outcaste groups<sup>7</sup> (like the Madhibaan) in the Somali territories are written into a European colonial scholarship. This process, then, legitimizes hegemonic oral narratives. I am fascinated

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<sup>6</sup> Kusow and Eno (2015) use Madhibaan specific origin myths to look at how Somali hegemonic narratives become used to create social boundaries for minority clan groups.

<sup>7</sup> This is a term developed by Virginia Luling to refer to those of minority clan status to make clear that these groups are often referred to as the function and role they provide in terms of work as opposed to being presented as a group with membership.

by how this process is used to reify and reinforce social boundaries. Through the mapping of Somali studies literature and an examination of Somali orality in scholarly discourses about the contemporary Somali diaspora, this MRP offers that the development of a decolonial Somali oral epistemology can disrupt colonial renderings of the Somali figure.

My scholarly goal is to bring together several scholarly traditions in order to make sense of the way that critical race theory post coloniarity, and Somali studies shapes contemporary knowledge production and make a significant contribution to a Somali Studies field. For, ultimately, my goal is to explore the way that Somali stories and orality can allow scholars to theorize differently the way that silences are both present and absent in social life.

### **Discursive & Methodological Framework**

My discursive analysis for my MRP is undertaken primarily using the concept of absence/presence. I borrow and build upon Stuart Hall's concept of presence/absence Africaine that he uses to explore the always-present yet never named Africa that manifests in multiple ways within Caribbean culture. "Presence Africaine is the site of the repressed... silenced beyond memory by the power of the experience of slavery." (Rutherford 1990, p. 230) It is Hall's own experience in the discovery of his own transnational Blackness outside of the Caribbean in the 1970's that steers him towards this conceptualization. What is important in Hall's thinking is how the absence/present only reveals itself in moments of disruption. It is Somali movement and resettlement that provides opportunity to see and imagine differently. Hall suggests that Africa is always present, and with it the Middle Passage, the transatlantic slave trade and the movement of Black bodies across oceans. Africa's presence illustrates the power of the unsaid and the usefulness of the duality of absence/presence in establishing a particular narrative of power. Hall's assertion that "[e]veryone in the Caribbean, of whatever ethnic

background, must sooner or later come to terms with this African presence" (p. 231) is crucial here. There is a fundamental tension in remaining absent and present, at some point not only must there be an appearance, but the ways in which bodies appear or disappear become methods of marking in and of themselves. The stories about these absences and presences, Africa and the Caribbean, and how we tell them (and when) matter. Silence itself becomes the story.

Toni Morrison's (1992) work in *Playing in the dark: Whiteness and the literary imagination* presents a methodology from which to examine how the 'Other' is required to remain in a state of absence/presence. In exploring this she states "[f]or them, as for me, imagining is not merely looking or looking at; nor is it taking oneself intact into the other. It is, for the purposes of the work, becoming." (p. 5) Looking at stories, orality, and hegemonic texts as sites of imagining and thus becoming, Morrison offers a way to understand how actors within a particular story become present or absent. This approach examines the functions that their presence may serve within story. As we look for signs and bodies, Morrison leads us through a particular line of inquiry that focuses less on where presence/absence takes place, but asks us to theorize why and what is then made possible through that presence or absence. Attending to Hall and Morrison's work, I ask: where, when and why do the Madhibaan show up in Somali stories? What does this absence/presence make possible?

Absence/presence is both unsettled and unsettling (Morrison, 1992, p. 6), precisely because the making of personhood is an ongoing process, which can only remain ongoing if there is a group to mark as non-persons. The civilized can only remain so if there are those who are known to be uncivilized; and similarly Morrison makes clear that the American literary canon can only exist if Black bodies remain as part of the imagining marked as savage. This paper begins to work to understand how Madhibaan Somalis exist within an imaginary and whose presence is

required for the construction of the ‘Somali figure’. If we assume that Madhibaan Somalis are always present, we can begin to reconfigure what it means precisely to build a Somali national imaginary. Through the specific examination of Madhibaan Somali women’s absence/presence in both colonial texts and Somali oral narratives we begin to ask fundamental questions to this end. Where do they show up? When do they show up? Why do they show up? What does this absence/presence then make possible?

To properly attend to this presence/absence, and get at the nuances that make the violence of omission permissible, I consider how theoretical frameworks of diasporic oralities and African/Black feminisms work together to foreground a Somali imaginary that becomes reinforced by differing and/or similar hegemonic systems.

### **Oralities as Imaginaries**

“Once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world... [s]o you have to be careful with the stories you tell. And you have to watch out for the stories that you are told” (King, 2003, p. 131)

Modern day Somalia remains a site of contested border making, with areas with predominant Somali populations absorbed into other nation-states (Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti), and parts of ‘Somalia’ itself seeking to secede (Somaliland, Puntland). I use Somali territories and Somalia interchangeable to note Somalis, those who engage in similar language and cultural practices, as expansive and encompassing. Somalia is difficult to understand as a post-colonial African state, not simply because of its fractured and complicated history as a state created and then sectioned off by various occupying powers but because of Somali unwillingness to tie identity to the conceptualizations of land. Sada Mire, a Somali anthropologist, argues that Somalis maintain

cultural heritage by preserving it through orality (TED, 2014)<sup>8</sup>. It is not merely the physicality of place that anchors Somali belonging, the saliency of the stories transferred and told also determine identity.

I remain interested in diaspora as a category insofar as it creates an opportunity for the examination of dispersed Somalis linked together by some sort of ‘community formation’ (Brah, 1996, p. 193) Brubaker (2005) defines diaspora as an on-going category of practice as opposed to a predefined entity or group. He outlines three clear criteria for what a diaspora entails which include: dispersion; homeland orientation; and finally boundary-maintenance (p. 6) Diaspora as a category of practice can help us understand the dialogical nature of the Somali imaginary as a necessary space through which the diaspora constitutes itself. Because the states within the Somali territories are relatively young, there is more opportunity for more specific nuance and historical expansion when the states themselves are examined along lines of belonging or cultural storied membership instead of citizenry. Examining Somalis using cultural, linguistic, historicized and self-ascribed membership based on similarity and retention of specific stories (even within their contestations) is useful in considering the diaspora. This dispersion of Somalis is the point of departure for my development of a Somali imaginary that can be described as a woven tapestry of stories that serve to provide a common identity for Somalis living outside the Somali territories. It is the causality of the unexamined stories that live on in this imaginary that I am interested in examining more closely.

Boundary maintenance is defined as a process through which diaspora preserve a

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<sup>8</sup> Sada shares this as part of a 2014 TEDxEuston lecture where she examines orality as a site of knowledge preservation in reconstructing anthropological record.

“distinctive identity vis-a`-vis a host society/[ies]”; more specifically “a …‘community’, held together by a distinctive, active solidarity, as well as by relatively dense social relationships, that cut across state boundaries and link members of the diaspora in different states into a single ‘transnational community’” (*ibid*).

The homogenous nature of diaspora communities is what supports in boundary maintenance. Conversely it is this myth of homogeneity that allows for an erasure of diversity in the interests of constructing a singular subject. This provides insight into the conflicting ways Western host countries construct identity as part of entry, which allows for the erasure of other forms of social stratification. Origin myths produce a homogenous Somali subject, and the origin myths themselves function as a boundary maintenance tool requiring the absence/presence of the Madhibaan people. Brubaker defines homeland orientation as “the second constitutive criterion … the orientation to a real or imagined ‘homeland’ as an authoritative source of value, identity and loyalty” (p. 11). The homeland exists as part of these oral narratives within the Somali imaginary, bringing together these three key criteria to better interrogate the imaginary as a site where the on-going reconstitution of self takes place.

Benedict Anderson, in examining national imaginaries, defines a nation as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (1991, p. 6) and posits a definition that is not devoid of a socio-political and historical context. His work is useful for bridging the conversations of diaspora, nationalism and identities that exist outside the formal conventions of state governance. While Anderson argues an imagined community uses print culture through which to build nationalisms, I suggest that the Somali imaginary requires orality, specifically the production and incubation of stories through which to create a sense of community. In the same way the boundaries between story and history remain blurred, so do the

imaginary and reality. It is, as he notes, as limited as it is sovereign. This blurring of space is done through the use of nostalgia, a yearning for a homeland, and common stories that feel good in their familiarity. In order for a diaspora to sustain a notion of home, they must be able to produce a longing, or nostalgia for the place that becomes left behind. It is the nature of perpetual diaspora that produces a static place to create memory and therefore story. It is nostalgia that keeps alive the Somali imaginary. Conversely, nostalgia also functions as a limitation because it can serve as a “potential site through which to connect the past and the present to criticize social conditions and the process of change” (Helgren, 2015, p. 68)

This concept of the imaginary is critical. Simply because the geographical space is no longer present does not render it disappeared. The stories, the connections, and the nature of the creation of this space, continually remake ideas of home. In the same way Muslims practice Haji, a recurrent mandatory pilgrimage and subsequent return home, Somalis rehearse preparation for return through the practice of orality. The parameters of the Somali imaginary that I refer to must be understood to extend beyond Somali territories spatially to include a liminal in-between transition space for the contemporary Somali diaspora. This is an attempt to examine the idea of ‘going home’ when there is no home to go to. This isn’t done to diminish continental Somalis across territories that still have citizenry, but to theorize a Somali imaginary<sup>9</sup> that exists in a diaspora-led imaginative storytelling space. The power of the diaspora lies in its ability to make visible its stories, for multiple truths to emerge, and to theorize what has and continues to happen. Brah’s description of diasporas as “contested cultural and political terrains where

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<sup>9</sup> Though many academics and scholars have spoken to an idea of a Somali imaginary or ‘collective imagination’ (Hashi, 2016), what I do differently is speak to how this imaginary becomes mobilized through diasporic oralities, an imaginary developed as a result of movement and resettlement by Somali communities in the diaspora.

individual and collective memories collide, reassemble and reconfigure" (1996, p. 193) means that they also remain sites of possibility. This is the place where a Somali subject cannot only be seen in its complexity, outside the imagination of a nation-state, but can be a site of contestation of singular normative identities.

### **diasporic oralities.**

"so much of how we remember is embodied: the scent of home; of fresh-baked bread; of newly grated coconut stewed with spice (we never called it cinnamon), nutmeg, and bay leaf from the three (not from the bottle). Violence can also become embodied, that violation of sex and spirit. Assimilation is another kind of violation that can be embodied, assimilating alienation, one's own as well as others." (Alexander, M. J., 2005, p. 277).

Orality or oral narrative has often been relegated to the realm of the irrational, imaginative and fiction. By contrast, history is known as the realm of the rational, reasonable and intellectual (Hirsch and Dixon, 2008, p. 189). Thomas King explains further noting that, "oral-history testimony was [seen as] unreliable and at odds with the authentic, written, historical record that had been created" (King, 2003, p. 121) The European canon has operated often on the belief that orality or oral narrative is only useful or used insofar as it substantiates the written word. By contrast, Somali orality offers "solutions to existential problems... [that] help the community formulate a map, a blueprint of a sort ... the stories explain how, for example, things came into being, and why they are what they are" (Ahmed, 2002, p. 3-4).

I argue that it is the story presented as part of oral narrative that allows for new ways of analysis to occur. Western stories as they become written, become fixed and thus harder to change. This allows for ease in their deconstruction. As Morrison's deconstruction and analysis of the American literary canon makes clear, the figure of the Other is easy to understand because

the text itself is static; it is never modified. One could argue that this stasis welcomes an analysis of absence and presence. Stories on the other hand are fluid and not fixed. Christian alludes to this as describing her method as unfixed, arguing that instead we need a “tuned sensitivity to that which is alive and therefore cannot be known until it is known” (1988, p. 78). Stories require a continual deconstruction and analysis that shifts and modifies according to social conditions and context. But most importantly their deconstruction changes depending on social context, condition of the reader and/or writer. Deconstruction becomes both method and disruption. In the work to deconstruct power, this becomes far more useful to examine. Power too is constantly remaking itself. The fluidity of story not only helps us better understand the current climate of the Somali diaspora, but to understand the mobility of power itself.

Mapping the different ways in which stories can be read can produce multiple alternative narratives. This is precisely what also makes the deconstruction of stories so dangerous. Stories track power. Storytelling, orality is an extension of that which is political. Stories tell us about power, and that power they are imbued with is what we understand about ourselves. Stories are a site from which discourse is shaped. Stories form the discursive.

Kamari Maxine Clarke (2004) in *Mapping Yoruba Networks* describes how anthropological record can be used to excavate an on-going analysis of transnational power relations. She looks at how identities and nationalisms rely on the interplay between institutional and hegemonic understandings of the Yoruba, both within the context of Nigeria and transnational Black communities, to develop a structured sense of identity. Clarke critiques the first prerogative of African diaspora literature to assume “identity as embedded within the individual” (p. 161). Instead, she argues for focusing on how identity becomes ascribed based on competing and oft times conflated notions of power. The usefulness of her work is in her articulation that a rigorous

knowledge production requires that written texts are subject to the same questions of authenticity as oral tellings. There is no value searching for authenticity in both the written and the oral (p. 163), rather it is the multiplicity of knowledge(s) that they produce that serve the purposes of my analytic.

We cannot reproduce these arguments of the written versus the oral in a rush to prove that one is more authentic than another. Kidane (2015) in her critique of Swedish filmmakers creating (— without centring those involved) —the narrative of African decolonisation for the film Concerning Violence: Nine Scenes from the Anti-Imperialistic Self-Defense argues, “[o]ur own archival practises, modes of cultural production, and knowledge production, do not exist outside the problematic power relationships within our communities” (Kidane, 2015, p. 121). This mirrors what I’ve insisted upon above— orality become as necessary to deconstruct as do inheritances of the colonial for both are complicit in re-perpetuating power imbalances. In the same way storytelling enters the colonial archive, the colonial archive too enters orality. Examining Somali orality requires a simultaneous look at a colonial anthropological canon because of the way we are then able to further understand and differentiate between the movements of power. Somalis in diaspora, because they are not in their physical home, oftentimes use the anthropological record to understand their own identities in conjunction with Somali oral narratives. The diaspora use these records as a way to delineate their own identities, perhaps as Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1998) explains as “a mirror, which although made from European linguistic glass, was still something that the entire continent and diaspora could claim as their own... see their faces clearly and hear the genuine voices of their own culture and history” (p. 105).

It is Somali oral stories that map and add complexity to Somali identities. Those of the contemporary diaspora use lineage passed from family and/or clan members through orality to make tangible ‘a coming into’ Somali personhood through the carrying of past into present. Who we are and where we are from is only made possible through these stories. This imaginary is also a site of resistance, constantly being remade and challenged by the movement of diaspora. This definition distinctly shapes my analysis and on-going relationship to the Somali territories and a contemporary Somali diaspora. These stories continue to be the lens through which contemporary Somalis examine and define themselves and by extension, their communities. It also works to support the conditions that necessitate the formation of a Somali subject.

It is stories that I argue within a migratory process that build the frontier of a Somali imaginary and act as an ongoing site to produce persistent hegemonies. What is troubling is the singular nature of these narratives attempting “to construct a homogenous category of what it means to be “Somali” and, in this, conceal[ing] the silences and pluralities that enunciate different ways of being and belonging” (Hashi, 2016, p. 9). Orality remains a crucial way to examine Somali experiences and contest monolithic understandings of the Somali subject and particularly as it relates to the experiences not only of women but their invisibilized contributions to the Somali territories. Orality has been documented in the colonial archive as a male-dominated space, with little focus on how Somali women take up these spaces in an effort to resist these inscriptions. Safia Aidid (2010) in her article *Haweenku Wa Garab (Women are a Force): Women and the Somali Nationalist Movement, 1943–1960* argues that women have historically used oral spaces to resist, subvert and change the dominant narratives they found themselves restricted by. She notes the “poetic traditions continue to maintain an important

social function in the daily lives of Somalis, often employed as a pedagogical tool for communication, consciousness-raising, and preserving history.” (p. 110)

How does orality produce geographies and proximities, and how we can point to orality as a core method through which imaginaries become produced? Imagining diasporic oralities as a space of disruption does the work to destabilize the various hegemonic systems at play even while looking at diasporic oralities as a way through which power/social boundaries become configured and reconfigured. Examining orality as a methodological and pedagogical framework may do the work to “destabilize existing practices of knowing and thus cross fictive boundaries of exclusion and marginalization” (Alexander, 2005, p. 7)

### **African Feminism(s)**

“Can one theorize effectively about an evolving process... What are the philosophical assumptions behind my praxis? I think how the articulation of a theory is a gathering place, sometimes a point of rest as the process rushes on, insisting that you follow” (*Christian, 1985, p. xi*)

I use African<sup>10</sup> Feminist epistemology as a tool to excavate the silencing of Madhibaan women. I argue that Black feminisms and African feminisms on their own do not provide sufficient complexity because so few attend to the realities of diasporic African women living in Canada without over-centralizing a Black American experience or essentializing an African one. This is a gap within the literature and as an African feminist thinker and activist, I am looking to contribute scholarship to this using African feminist theories. It is in attending to this gap in

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<sup>10</sup> I include here Africans who are not Black (i.e. Yara Salaam, an Egyptian activist while not Black does identify as African). My naming of African includes Black feminist epistemologies and frameworks and look to expand our conceptualizations of Black feminist thinking to include continental African experiences without creating false dichotomies.

African feminist epistemology where the grappling work of looking at how orality can function as an inherently feminist act through the movement of diaspora takes place. As Christian suggests above, perhaps part of the work now in examining the silence and erasure of Madhibaan women includes the reframing and re-creation of new theories in an effort to resist hegemonic Somali practices that have historically erased Madhibaan women. In this case, I refer to both the hegemonic practices embedded within the colonial and oral archive. The oral narratives I deconstruct later in this paper are not only laden with gendered colonial inheritances but also gendered Somali hegemonic systems that live intact and are at twists and turns reinforced or disavowed by the omnipresence of white supremacy<sup>11</sup> in North America. It is the specificity of Madhibaan women's experiences that provides an entry point into the examination of larger systems of ideology, dominance and subjugation, as well as a critical standpoint from which to examine patterns and trends in Somali studies. In the case of Madhibaan Somali women: gender, clan, race, class and the subsequent removal of these women's agency through institutional and systemic practices can be seen through Somali oral narratives and colonial scholarship that proliferates.

Though there are multiple arguments about the monopoly of North American feminism as divorced from the realities of African women and communities (Essof, 2001, p. 124), Amina Mama (2001) notes that Western feminist thinkers have always used African conceptualizations of gender and feminism(s) to ground earlier feminist framings. Mama in fact argues that Africans need to "retain the concept of feminism and make it our own by filling the name with

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<sup>11</sup> For the purposes of a forthcoming co-written paper, Nadiya Ali, Lucy El-Sherif and I define inheritances of empire as hegemonic processes that come with diasporic communities as they settle/resettle in new locations. Upon occasion these hegemonic processes fit into those of their new places of settlement but on occasion exist outside as shadowy presences.

meaning” (p. 125) as a method of advocacy for African women. Mama’s work highlights the importance of understanding how the

“collective African experience – being conquered by the colonizing powers; being culturally and materially subjected to a nineteenth century European racial hierarchy and its gender politics; being indoctrinated into all-male European administrative systems, and the insidious paternalism of the new religious and education systems; and facing the continuous flow of material and human resources from Africa to Europe-has persistently affected all aspects of social, cultural, political, and economic life in postcolonial African states” (p. 47).

She very clearly links Euro nation-making with patriarchy. Madhibaan women are not erased simply because of a hegemonic Somali state that demands a monolithic identity, but also by the very nature of the imposed colonial visions of the nation-state. Both Somali hegemonic discourse and Western anthropological colonial hegemonic practices work in tandem to create a dual barrier for Somali women. In fact these colonial visions of the nation-state become the way through which to understand all those who live within the Somali community which makes it difficult to provide understanding or analysis on the workings of intra-communal hegemonic practices. This is another way value and hierarchy becomes established even within already disenfranchised groups, providing additional layers of complexity. In this thesis I will focus on how the two hegemonic systems reinforce one another to the detriment of Madhibaan women.

African feminist epistemology focuses primarily on how women themselves begin to formulate and speak to their own experiences (Collins, 2002). The practice of using theory for self-recovery and survival has been well articulated by bell hooks who writes: “[w]hen our lived experiences of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice.” (1991, p. 61). Theory becomes the place

from which praxis can be developed and utilized. Theorizing allows Black women to begin to heal and within that space she suggests is enough room to begin to “imagine possible futures, a place where life could be lived differently... [where]... theory could be a healing place.” (p. 61) Theorizing becomes a place from where to make sense of Somali stories in a contemporary world. Theory presents itself as life raft, as support, as a little red bobbing flotation device on the water from which to holler at those on shore. Theory is visibility. It attends to silence. And more importantly, theory is the site from which we begin to reconstruct anew, the world we hope to live in. Theorizing perhaps becomes the site of possibility in the places where as Mariama Ba notes "African women constantly struggle both within and against their official inscription." (1981, p. 7)

African feminist theories and literature not only work to formulate new theories but to explicitly examine the intersecting and layered nature of oppressions for African women (Collins, 2002; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1981; Mama, 2001). Crenshaw (1991) in creating and defining the principle of intersectionality was particularly concerned with examining the various ways in which race and gender intersect in shaping structural, political, and representational aspects of violence against women (p. 1244). This rendering of interlocking systems (Collins, 2002) forces us to look at how gender analyses become impacted by both Somali hegemonic and Western hegemonic processes.

As many other women the world over, Madhibaan women are rarely mentioned at all in the canon. Somali women’s’ contributions to oral histories have historically been erased and silenced (Jama, 1991; Hassan, 1995; Hashi, 2016; Kapteijns and Boqor, 2009). They are never spoken of in the archive beyond their roles as mothers, wives, sisters and daughters (Lewis, 1955; Jama, 1994; Jama, H. A., 2005). This absence of Somali women in scholarship has

ramifications – men become overly centralized in stories while the silencing of women’s voices and experiences becomes normalized. In being removed from men’s forms of poetry, Hassan et. al (1995) explain that Somali “women developed their own poetic forms of expression which belongs to them only: buraanbuur and its sub-categories of which the hoobeeyo, the royal and the sitaat (religious song) are the main ones” (p. 174). We can see this as demonstrating the ongoing impact of white colonial anthropological scholarship and Somali hegemonic systems.

African feminist thought becomes the place of intervention to begin to create a Somali feminist epistemology, a way of looking at the experiences of Somalis through a gendered lens. This by no means is a new theorization – in 1995 three Somali women writers theorize “early Somali nomad feminists expressed their protests with the means at their disposal—poetry, work songs, children’s lullabies—and tried to change things by addressing both men and women” (Hassan, 1995, p. 167). While the contributions and resistances of Somali women to the maintenance and formation of a Somali nation-state cannot be understated, it is important to consider which Somali women’s contributions are considered of value. The only place where the earlier 1995 definition of Somali feminisms stumbles is in its reification of a homogenous definition of Somali women, thereby again erasing the particularity of Madhibaan Somali women experiences. A presumption of a uniform Somali women’s experience begins to be regarded as the norm disregarding the complexity of the multitude of intersections that make up a myriad of experiences. In fact, what is regularly left out is the clan hierarchies that inform Somali hegemonic practices that work to create stark economic disparities for women which further make challenging the ability to mix as freely as has been claimed. These are not the only scholars (Ingris and Hoehne, 2013; McMichael, 2002; Gardner & Bushra, 2004; Hopkins, 2010) to make assumptions about Somali women as homogenous and uniform. This is important

because not only does this render Somali women invisible in the particular time in which the history is written but creates an ongoing generational silencing that propagates itself.

Black feminisms become the gathering place, the point from which I begin the analysis that foregrounds my MRP. It is from feminist scholars/thinkers that I am able to articulate the silencing of women despite their laborious contributions to hegemonic processes of state.

### **The Madhibaan Figure in the Archive**

*“For them, as for me, imagining is not merely looking or looking at; nor is it taking oneself intact into the other. It is, for the purposes of the work, becoming.”* (Morrison, 1992, p. 5)

This paper hopes to make clear the mobilization of both colonial archive and orality to make the same hegemonic claims about the Madhibaan as a minority-power clan. Specifically that both sources assert the Madhibaan as a minority-power, though their intentions in providing these assertion may be differing in nature. What is important to understand is how the colonial and oral archive are mutually constitutive and how together they inform and enforce the rules of the national imaginary even outside of physical location. Madhibaani Somalis become configured as part of both the oral and colonial archive. I cannot look at Madhibaani Somali women’s stories and experiences without first looking at what creates the conditions under which these experiences and stories become understood. Somali historiography focuses primarily on men’s pursuits and does not centre women’s contributions to orality besides the work of a few scholars (Ahmed, 1995; Adan, 1981 etc.). Instead, it regularly reflects a colonial patriarchal vision of nation rather than looking at the intersections of race and gender. In addition, research on Madhibaani Somalis is limited, and often only examines group members in accordance to the role or function they provide to the understanding of a Somali hegemonic imaginary. Placing into conversation both the colonial archive and Somali oral narratives makes possible a further

examination of how Madhibaan Somali women become configured as part of this imaginary. I'm intrigued by the questions posed by Ali Jimale Ahmed—in particular is there a “discrepancy between the “object/subject” … and the Somali perceptions of self and other” (2012, p. 1). What are the ways in which the colonial archive cannot account for Somali perceptions of self and other, even within the confines of Somali identity?

### **Introduction to the Madhibaan**

*“Midgaans make bows, arrows, saddles, spoons...; they also possess the secret for the preparation of wabayo, poison for arrows. They form, so to speak a separate caste, never touching the things of other Somalis, nor do others eat or drink from the vessel of a Midgan. Some ceremonies, e.g. the circumcision of girls, can be performed only by a Midgan woman”*

(De Larajasse, E. (1897).

Madhibaan elders share with me that the term ‘midgaan’ speaks to the historical oppression faced by Madhibaan Somalis. As the story goes, the Madhibaan, the original inhabitants of the Somali territories after prolonged fighting with nomadic Somalis were overtaken. After defeat, they were placed within a concentration style encampment. As they died, their enslavers would yell out mid-go, which literally translated into one has died, or one has fallen. This story has particular significance, finding itself even as part the etymology of the derogatory word ‘midgaan’ used towards the Madhibaan. This telling is one of injustice, and one that Madhibaan clan members use to foreground their relationship to the Somali territories vis a vis claims to land.

The Madhibaan are often also referred to as Gabooye, a collapsible term that includes the Tumal, Yibir and Madhibaan. Madhibaan is derived from the Somali phrase qof ma dhib aan translated to mean those who don't bother others. I only use midgaan in the retelling of oral

narrative but otherwise refer to the Madhibaan by their chosen name. A great number of stories are told that describe the origins of the Madhibaan that range from: the finding of them in the bush and their subsequent incorporation into varied tribes (Lewis, 1955, p. 53); their scattering as wanderers and thieves (Kirk, 1905, p. 184); a poor subservient group of shoemakers and ironworkers dependent on the good grace of upper caste Somalis; and finally a people without a tie to lineage or land. The Madhibaan are regularly described as part of the “sab”, an occupational minority-power caste group that also include the Yibir<sup>12</sup> and Tumal. Specifically the Madhibaan in the anthropological literature are known to provide specific occupational services (Cassanelli, 1969; Lewis, 1965) such as metal-working, shoe making, hunting, metalwork and leatherwork, pottery and woodworking as well as circumcisers. The colonial literature pre-1960’s ethnography often refers to the Madhibaan as bush-men, herders and hunters, critical to providing access to large game.

The Madhibaan are not in fact referred to as a minority clan, but as an occupational caste group. This is an important distinction because while other groups are referred to as a part of a segmented clan system, occupational caste groups are referred to based on what skills and services they provide. The Madhibaan are considered the ‘Untouchables’ of the Somali territories. When I ask my father in a recent interview why he uses the word ‘untouchable’ to refer to the Madhibaan, he shares with me that the Somali phrase used is qof ah nasab dhiman which translates to those of inferior birth and/or blood. Untouchable is the closest thing within the English language that captures this phrase for him.

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<sup>12</sup> It is important to note that as other minority-power clans (Yibir, Tumal, Somali Bantu) are referred to using similar oral narratives that police the parameters of their belonging within the context of Somali subjectivity.

The Madhibaan have maintained through orality that they are amongst the original inhabitants in the Somali territories well before the introduction of Islam. Present day nomadic Somali camel herders have only occupied the Somali regions since the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Gallo and Vivani, 1992 p. 256, as cited from Piga de Carolis, 1980). The Madhibaan have been linked to the Bon, who have been “connected to the pre-Negritic populations of hunter/gatherers who were the first inhabitants of the open terrain of North and East Africa” (p. 260).

Similarly to the Somali Bantu, the Madhibaan have never been pastoral, in fact there are many indications that demonstrate their prowess at hunting and gathering (Burton, 1856; Smith, 1897, p. 137). These stories of prowess show up as early as the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century in colonial European archives, notably in publications from agents of the British crown. Richard Burton explains that “many Midgans employ themselves in hunting and agriculture. Instead of spear and shield, they carry bows and a quiver full of diminutive arrows, barbed and poisoned with the wabaio weapon used from Faizoghli to the Cape of Good Hope. . .” (1856, p. 34).

My elders also recount stories of a secret poison that only Madhibaan Somalis know how to create. This poison, placed on arrow tips, as the story goes, was used by Madhibaan bush men to kill large game. The use of arrows to kill animals intended to be eaten goes against a Quranic edict which requires that animals to be eaten are slaughtered through the slitting of their throats. Animals that are not killed in this way are believed to be haram, and violate Islamic law.

Madhibaan Somalis are a "peripatetic group" which Bollig (Berland, 2004) explains are periphery groups of hunter-gatherers who have “escaped the ethnographic eye, which was conditioned to look for pristine modes of existence as foraging and pastoralism, for discernable social entities such as tribes and states” (p. 196). Bollig goes on to query whether “they [were] to be addressed as occupational groups, castes or ethnic minorities...they were all 3 and none of

them" (*ibid*). The small amount of literature on this group despite their active and engaged survival as part of the very landscape of the Somali territories is curious, particularly when their absence figures heavily within the archive.

Madhibaan Somalis are the only group that can now be found across the Somali territories, from Somaliland through to the Northern Frontier District (contested as part of Kenya). In fact they can be found "distributed among other Somalis in every region. [and] do not reside in a separate enclave of land." (Jama, 2005, p. 98) Even today in urban areas within the Somali territories, Madhibaan Somalis are often pushed to the outskirts of a city relegated to live in slums. What remains in perpetual question is Madhibaan connection or legitimacy to being Somali, even with both the oral and colonial archives suggesting they have connections to an indigenous population and "may be derived from the land's original population" (Gallo & Viviani, 1992; Lewis 1960; Kirk, 1905)

### **Madhibaan in Origin Myths**

In this section I examine further how oral narratives serve to recreate and reinforce hegemonic and colonial perceptions of an imagined Somali community by examining the history of the Madhibaan, a minority-power group within the Somali territories. There are two things I explicitly explore moving forward: first the use of Somali oral narratives to produce social boundaries<sup>13</sup> and the formation of the Somali subject; and second the places where anthropological record and Somali hegemony work to reinforce and create an ongoing social boundary for the Madhibaan. These narratives become the place from which the Madhibaan are used to construct a Somali subject and by extension a Somali imaginary; threads of which

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<sup>13</sup> Kusow and Eno describe the "Somali formula narratives" as oral narratives that become entrenched in institutional systems of power to create social boundaries used to perpetuate inequality which also function to produce socially acceptable boundaries (2015, p. 4-6)

continue and constitute the experiences of Madhibaan Somalis as part of a contemporary Somali diaspora. I only use midgaan in the retelling of oral narrative but otherwise refer to the Madhibaan by their chosen name.

The oral narrative story that remains the most central to most Somalis about the Madhibaan is an origin myth that tells a tale of two brothers following a father's instruction. This story is a long-standing Somali origin myth frequently shared amongst Somali communities. We must look more carefully at this as a story of power, of conquest and most importantly of continued dominance over a particular group of people.

As with all Somali stories, the storyteller has license to modify, so I share only the details that remain consistent across the storytelling. In realizing a shortage of water is forthcoming, a father beckons to his two sons. He asks them to go on a journey in search for water. Before they depart, the father imparts upon them critical advice that he insists they must take seriously. He tells them that if they run out of rations, food and water they are permitted to eat the carcass of a dead animal. But as soon as they find proper food they must then immediately throw up whatever it was that they had eaten. The two brothers set off on their journey through the hot baking sun and dry soil. After considerable time on their journey, they run out of all of their rations. Shortly thereafter, they stumble upon a dead animal, and following their father's advice they eat what they can and continue on. Not long after they reach a place where there is fresh food and water. Immediately the younger brother does as his father has advised, and throws up the spoiled dead meat he just recently ate. When the younger brother presses the elder one about throwing up the meat he has eaten, the elder brother refuses to do so. In doing this, the elder brother fails to follow his father's advice. From that day forward, the brothers were separated, the elder brother disowned by his family and his descendants were from that moment forth known as the Midgaan.

This origin myth is defined as a formula narrative, part of other oral narratives that have become entrenched in institutional systems of power to create social boundaries and used to perpetuate social hierarchies. These formulations provide a new theoretical place from which to question what has been, until now, an impenetrable documentation of Madhibaan Somali historiography. Kusow and Eno (2015) examine how Somali orality is a site through which to reify and institutionalize Somali hegemony and use the structure of origin myths as a place of social othering. The central argument these two scholars pose is that academic literature is too focused on personal or ideological level grand narratives (p. 1), which again doesn't see narrative as being constantly remade and reinforced. In order to deconstruct an oral narrative such as the one posed above, we need more flexible methods of analysis that account for the function of the narrative itself and the tools used to achieve that function. Kusow and Eno suggest that stories and/or narratives in their incompleteness (2) are "continuously vulnerable to subversive stories" (p. 2) which "allows the excluded to find a mechanism for resistance" (p. 1). This incompleteness is defined as a counter narrative, more specifically described as "stories that continuously attempt to defy, even if unsuccessfully, the inequality structures that the Somali formula narratives erect and impose on those they exclude from the social boundary of Somaliness" (ibid). It is the changing nature of the oral that allows for differing possibilities of how the social may come to be. However, their argument of counter narrative is too simplistic because they do not account for the way oral narratives become substantiated and legalized through colonial anthropological records. Simply suggesting that a singular counter narrative can destabilize orality does not take into consideration the dynamic nature of discourse—which is constantly in flux and ever changing.

My intervention argues that orality and narratives represent a particular kind of power that can always be contested or provided with counter revisionist narratives—in the plural. However, when western discourse or colonial scholarship then institutionalizes these narratives, it codifies this social stratification into scholarly discourse. “Colonial anthropology both normalizes and rationalizes the subjugation of the Madhibaan” (Besteman, 2016)<sup>14</sup>. This creates the legitimacy for the re-perpetuation of the same ideas thereby making it more difficult for Madhibaan Somalis to contest or challenge these characterizations. It is nowhere near enough to simply offer counter revisionist narratives, the destabilizing requires more thoughtful practices of accountability. Kidane is perhaps not mistaken in insisting that “[h]olding the flawed archives of our past is not enough to change historical narratives, as decolonising the archive requires that we establish processes of accountability and consent” (Kidane, 2015, p. 121).

While Eno and Kusow would argue that this story describes a general delineation between Somali “noble and non-noble castes” (Eno & Kusow, 2015, p. 95), in its oral retelling the descendants of the elder brother are most commonly known as the Madhibaan. Contemporary diasporic and continental Somalis use the slur “midgaan” as a way to denote inferiority. In the analysis of this origin myth, it is first critical to understand that the eating of ritually impure meat is considered unclean because it goes against the principles of Islam. Kusow and Eno note that in “the case of the occupational caste groups, the Islamic identity of the ancestor was used as a strategy to impose otherness on those who allegedly insisted on retaining their pre-Islamic identities and values” (p. 7). The story is careful to stress that the Madhibaan remaining in a “condition of perpetual ritual impurity (najaiasi)” (Lewis, 1955, p. 53) is reason for their ongoing

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<sup>14</sup> This quote comes from the email body of Professor Catherine Besteman, who sent me her comments upon both hearing and reading the conclusion of my working paper for the Harvard Somali Studies Workshop.

subjugation. It is najaiasi (or the correctly spelled najasat), translated from Arabic to mean unclean or impure, that functions as the entry point to the boundary making system. Kirk (1905) also names the uncleanliness of the Madhibaan, noting that “they profess to be Mohammedans<sup>15</sup> like pure Somalis, but the Midgaans are very lax in their religion, being unclean in the matter of the meat they eat” (p. 184). Islam holds that there are two different kinds of najasi, that which is inherent and that which is inherited. If the story was of the elder brother worshipping a deity or committing a major Islamic sin the boundary of difference would be easily demarcated. This is a story that involves murkier boundaries. The najasat here is not inherent, but inherited, meaning the Muslim subject has come into contact with an object that carries impurity. If the najasat were to be discarded there is opportunity for redemption i.e. if the elder brother had thrown up the spoiled meat, he would be redeemed. The act of najasat here (i.e. the wilful disobedience of a Islamic edict through the consumption of spoiled meat) is what allows for the elder brother to become Other. It’s important to note that this otherness is not an outright rejection of the elder brother as a non-believer. What it permits however is an ongoing Otherness that must always include the possibility of redemption. This is what is required to ensure an ongoing social boundary. And finally, the elder brother not only defied his God, but defied his father as well, a double assault on the patriarchal heads of family. By stepping outside the boundaries of respectability he has therefore transgressed the boundaries of Somali subjectivity. He is now in a position subservient to his father and younger brother by the very violation of his Lord’s decree and one could go so far to argue, as a result in servitude to.

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<sup>15</sup> Kirk (1905) uses the term Mohammedans to refer to those who follow or practice within the religion of Islam. Mohammed (SAW) within the Islamic faith is the Messenger of god.

The “journey motif” (Ahmed, 1996, p. 51) sets up the context and conditions under which the elder brother becomes scrutinized. The journey does not only provide an assessment of character that “reveal themselves after a few days walk in the harsh Somali terrain” (*ibid*) but provides the justification that the Madhiban have created the circumstances in which appropriate justice becomes meted out, or as Ahmed notes reifies the “belief that people have in themselves: an amelioration of their existence is always and squarely in their own hands” (p. 42). You cannot remain within the familial boundaries so long as you actively transgress a direct order from paternal figure(s). The myth relies on a sense of righteous justice, the kind framed as necessary for survival within the context under which the brothers live. The elder brother was given ample opportunity to follow directive that he alone made a choice about not following. It is important to consider that “[t]he geographical movement of most Somali narratives is from the known to the unknown and then back to the known” (p. 50). When looking at oral narratives of the Madhibaan while this is a fundamental theme in the story – the brothers leave home (the known) to search for water (the unknown), only to find rations (the known) there is never even the possibility of the elder brother’s reincorporation into the group. The oral narrative stops the moment the younger brother completes his geographical movement, and in fact the movement from the ‘known to the unknown’ is what produces the distance for the younger brother (the ‘Somali’) from the elder brother (the ‘Madhibaan’). There are other known-unknowns that reside as part of this movement that become hidden in plain sight, the practice of disobedience, the erasure of women, children etcetera.

The understanding then to be inferred from this myth is that to be Somali is to be a ‘pure’ Muslim. Therefore Madhibaans, having engaged in unclean behaviour and practices, cannot be considered Somali though they are still considered impure Muslims and not yet nonbelievers.

This myth is central precisely because of its illustration of dominant ideology critical to the development of a Somali imaginary. Not only does this secure a position of subjugation for the Madhibaan, but also Lewis (1955) and Kirk (1905) in their documentation and allusion to particular stories codify them as institutional knowledge. This is further compounded by other parts of the colonial archive that write the Madhibaan into the record by invoking that which immediately reminds of the animalistic (Smith, 1897; Drake-Brockman, 1910).

#### An 1897 text notes

"I had just shot an oryx, and we were cutting it up, when the smallest Somali I have ever seen came running up to say he had just observed five lions under a tree close by. This man belonged to the low-caste tribe of Midgans— people who do not live together in one tribe but are scattered all over Somaliland in different villages, where they are chiefly engaged in killing antelope for meat, other Somalis, as a rule, thinking it beneath their dignity to do anything but go out occasionally on looting expeditions." (Smith, p. 138)

All of these archives tacitly frame and make use of the human/animal dichotomy to produce exclusion logics, what is more of use to note is this is not just done to produce the Somali versus the European (i.e.: noble versus savage dialectic) but the Madhibaan versus the Somali. All of these enact logics of exclusion that still make sense within colonial rhetoric. Burton notes that he "[a]gree[s] in expelling the Midgan from the gentle blood of Somaliland (1856). Smith's description of the Madhibaan as "the smallest Somali I have ever seen" (p. 138) is curious to consider approximately 40 years later. While the text does not deny Madhibaan claim to Somali identity it does juxtaposition the Madhibaan next to the "Somali" who has brought the British colonial officer to visit and hunt wildlife. Here we can make sense of the shifts in the colonial archive by looking at earlier anthropological texts as these oral narratives are in process of

codification. The subtle shifts as part of the colonial archive are important to consider particularly because they help us understand how othering as a process is not black and white, but includes complex layers that still help to maintain systems of power. Luling notes that the Madhibaan are “outside the framework of Somali traditional society… they do not link up with this ‘total genealogy’ hence they are held to be of different descent from the majority Somali”<sup>16</sup>. The latter colonial archives work to position Somali and Madhibaan as separate groups, which bear similarity to Somali oral narratives. It is the push-pull of the Madhibaan as Somali and yet never Somali enough that is intriguing to consider. The origin myth refers to the two men as brother, ostensibly from the same mother and father. What function does it serve for the Somali to acknowledge the Madhibaan as kin, and yet distance themselves from the familial relationship? What function does it serve for the colonial archive to take up this narrative as factual rather than contested? It is important to consider that the construction of the Other allows for a more substantial identity formation of the Somali. Stories of the powerless serve to highlight the stories of those who hold power—for both the Somali and the colonial archive.

What is also worthy to note is that humans showing up in texts about animals produce a particular kind of story, and reinforce a particular kind of social stratification. This works to demonstrate how these records work alongside Somali hegemonic practices to solidify a specific Somali identity that continues to shape Madhibaan experience in contemporary Somali diasporas. These very simple excerpts in texts become the way representation becomes managed. We begin to see how stories play out and shape an imagined notion of the parameters of Somali subjectivity. In addition we begin to see Hall's rendition of the European presence as he notes

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<sup>16</sup> This text is part of an unpublished report written by Virginia Luling titled ‘Report on Caste Groups in Somalia’ in 2010. It was provided to this author by another scholar.

"interrupts the innocence of the whole discourse of difference ... by introducing question of power" (Rutherford, 1990, p. 232) as codifying a hegemonic Somali story within these institutionalized documentation. To write into texts social hierarchy as normative identity is precisely the social hauntings Gordon refers to. What becomes permissible is made evident by what becomes hidden in plain sight. This analysis offers insight into the contestation of identity within a contemporary Somali diaspora community. It is here where the uses of orality come up against the edges of western knowledge production, where power in both Somali and western hegemonic institutions begin to find ways to mutually reinforce one another.

It is important to note that these rules only apply in the actual oral narrative itself, they do not extend into the real world, where the social boundary enacted upon those believed to be descendants makes superfluous the decision-making power of Madhibaan Somalis in the diaspora. In fact, as I narrate this story in increasingly public ways, my choice to dispute and share the story becomes taken up as the shattering of a private narrative in public space which results in reprimands about what is permissible to be shared and what is not. The myth itself has rules that are followed and believed but only so long as they stay within the context of the myth itself. Sada Mire, a Somali anthropologist, notes that Somalis "have an indigenous way of managing cultural heritage, in our society, regardless of ornaments and artefact...we preserve it in an intangible way, it's an oral culture, people value the knowledge rather than the position of the object" (TED, 2014) This extends to the knowledge transfer of oral narratives as well. Our distance from the physical location of Somalia also makes possible both the preservation and the speaking of the myth. The myth becomes sacred and difficult to dispute. It is nostalgia that perpetuates a dominant narrative while even still being a mode of resistance. Nostalgia is what perpetuates the myth of return thereby reinforcing a sense of having to maintain and transfer the

stories to subsequent generations to ensure the modes of power don't shift too drastically in the case Somalis are able to return. Nostalgia then becomes fundamental to this imagining. What becomes created is a perfect homeland made for the perfect (i.e. returning) subject. The unworthy subject in this case is understood as an unclean Muslim and always male.

### **Oral Tellings and Hauntings: Missing Voices of Madhibaan Somali Women**

*“Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name? Although she has claim, she is not claimed.”* (Morrison, 1987, p. 323)

In the same way Besteman (1998) argues that the Somali Bantu's position of marginality affords them a unique look into the Somali nation state in the 1980's. She notes that “it was exactly their marginalized position on the political and cultural edges of the Somali nation-state that made them such astute observers of the regime, of patterns of hierarchy, of political domination, and of economic stratification” (p. 115-116). I argue along the same lines that the ongoing position of Madhibaan women's marginality offers a unique look into the analysis or interrogation of the systems in which they live. And though I do not interview Madhibaan women as part of this MRP, my voice and the stories of my mother and grandmother remain central to my analysis. How do Madhibaan women become absent/present through orality and storytelling? How do they become absent/present in colonial anthropological record, how does the ways in which Somali hegemony and Euro centrism reinforce one another to write Madhibaan women outside of their own lives? Where do they show up? What are the links here to the intersections of their identities?

The stories about the Madhibaan Somali in their erasure of Madhibaan Somali women not only map a historiography of European colonial scholarship but also of patriarchy. Madhibaan Somali women are only allowed to be present in discussions of children, marriage or reproduction. If we understand the figure of the Madhibaan to always absent women, how do we look for clues for where women may exist?

What becomes critical to query then is the way in which absence/presence plays out within Madhibaan Somali men and women. It becomes crucial to theorize that Madhibaan Somali women by their proximity to these men are then reconfigured as part of the same myth. For Lewis (1955), Somali women show up only as extensions to the narratives of men. Somalis, he notes, “have a well-defined patrilineal genealogical structure” (p. 17) It is a history not only told from the perspective of white colonial patriarchy but reinforced as truthful objective anthropology often reached for as defining documentation. Madhibaan Somali women show up as both performers of infibulation, also known as female genital circumcision, and in the determining of the legitimacy of children. Madhibaan women are also present during childbirth of other Somali women (Hanley, 1971). To continue the earlier line of thinking regarding uncleanness, it is curious to consider that the Madhibaan Somalis, who are considered perpetually impure perform the act of making others ‘clean’ or ‘pure’. Madhibaan Somali women are able to provide purity for others though they cannot retain it for themselves. Again, this makes clear: the role that young Madhibaan Somali woman are denoted as having; their inscription of powerlessness; and a reminder of where power is centralized, or at the very least how colonial renderings of power are demonstrated through the text.

In focusing on infibulation as a site of absence/presence, we learn more about the role of Madhibaan Somali women. Lewis (1955) notes that “[t]he operation of infibulation which all

Somali women undergo in childhood, is traditionally performed by a Midgan woman who may be called in to undo her work at marriage if the husband requires assistance” (53). Madhibaan women are then ascribed a primary cultural role and are significant not only to the measurement of womanhood, but perform the customs and rites associated with womanhood. They remain both present as performers of these ceremonies, in fact instrumental, while also remaining largely absent.

I would argue that the origin myth is used as a method to mark Madhibaan Somali men as unclean while performance of infibulation becomes the way in which to re-inscribe Madhibaan Somali women as the ones who do the ‘cleansing’ that is infibulation. Here is where there is a disjuncture between the literature and Somali orality. Infibulation is traditionally considered to be an inherently cleansing process, while the texts suggest otherwise. Why would you go to an unclean person to cleanse you? The origin myth in its original form holds hegemonic power but has yet to hold institutional power.

The customary service provided by Madhibaan Somali women is crucial to the maintenance of Somali social norms. Madhibaan women’s power in the performance of infibulation can be seen as a challenge early on to anthropologists’ documentation. What then is the role of the westerner in casting Madhibaan Somali women as forever unclean even while culturally this is a role that provides opportunity for purity? If the Madhibaan Somali woman has the power to cleanse, how does that also make her someone to isolate, fear, and despise? Was this a Somali idea or was it a Western one? European white colonial scholarship may in fact be reifying sex and gender as a place from which to “disciplin[e] … the body and control … the population” (Alexander & Mohanty, 2013, p. 65), therefore Western anthropologists disgust over infibulation may in fact mean that these accounts render both Madhibaan Somali women and men as unclean.

This contrasts sharply with more traditional Somali ideas of infibulation as a cleansing process. How much has western anthropological descriptions of infibulation helped to render Madhibaan Somali women as worthy of disregard and disgust, given their role in infibulation? The idea link made between Somali-Islam and therefore cleanliness can only operate if infibulation performed by Madhibaan women is considered unclean and the disruption of this link clearly articulates the imbalance of power in white colonial anthropological documentation. Gallo and Viviani (1992) note again that "[t]raditionally it was a Midgaan woman who infibulated the young female "nobles" in Somalia (Cerulli 1959). Even today, the local expression "to take one's daughter to the Midgan," means to have her circumcised." (p. 256)

The presence of Madhibaan women as infibulators in the text tells us more about colonial anthropology than it does the women themselves. Lewis's text can now be used to constantly remark Madhibaan Somali women as unclean because of their connection to infibulation. This presence serves to reinforce a wider socio-political understanding of the role and position of Somali women. It is precisely the codification of this story as part of these texts that present a new institutionalized understanding of social hierarchy and stratification.

To understand the absenting of Madhibaan Somali women as endemic even within diasporic imagination, I present both Aman's story and Black Mamba Boy written by Somali author Nadifa Mohamed as a way to understand a contemporary Somali diaspora. An examination of their texts reveals how both the oral and colonial archive are mutually co-constitutive and argue that the Somali subject cannot be described with Madhibaan subjugation.

Aman (Barnes and Boddy, 1994), as part of her story, shares the same origin myth I offered above. She then goes on to note the following:

"There are many people that life makes low-- people make them low, the system makes them low, and it's terrible. She believed that since all of us Somalis have one language and one religion, we should all be equal, even if many people don't see it that way. Life is hard, she said, and one person can't survive alone. Everybody needs help. We should love each other and care for each other and help each other, so Allah can help us." (Barnes & Boddy, 1994)

The Madhibaan become consumed into the narrative of the Somali, the assumption that the other becomes the Self creates the possible conditions under which the absence can take place. Though it is widely known that the Madhibaan speak their own secret language (Kirk, 1905) this becomes irrelevant in the telling. Aman first positions and substantiates the narrative of life being unfair with calls for unity in the face of devastation and again utilizes religious discourse to provide her with moral legitimacy. Where is the love and care she refers to in her earlier explanation of the inferiority of the Madhibaan? This statement in and of itself tells us of a haunting, what Gordon describes as "an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes directly and sometimes more obliquely" (p. xvi). It becomes permissible to render invisible the Madhibaan's experience of violence at the hands of the Somali subject because the Madhibaan is the unspoken, the un-human. For Aman to dig too deeply into the desires and wants of the Madhibaan contests her own identity. It also makes less possible to produce the image of the perfect Somali subject. I focus on this because Aman's story requires the origin myth from which to draw weight, without it, the story itself doesn't allow us to draw these connections and subsequent make meaning. Her explanation is not unlike the ways in which Somali contemporary diasporas explain away the violence inherent in the origin myth.

A brief examination of Nadifa Mohamed's *Black Mamba Boy* (2010) highlights how this rendering of the Madhibaan continues to be the lens through which contemporary Somalis

examine themselves and by extension, their communities. Nadifa Mohamed, in pulling from the story of her own father, writes about a young orphaned Somali boy, Jama. Jama and his mother live in Aden, Yemen and shortly after her death he is escorted to Hargeisa, Somaliland to live with his grandmother, Jinnow. What I am most interested in here is the references made to the Madhibaan, references that immediately happen when Jama enters Somaliland. In an initial short scene where Jama, having just arrived in Somaliland, is taunted and called names by the other children (p. 51) he retaliates by insulting the mother of the children taunting him and her response is to shout out to his grandmother, “come and get this boy of yours, such a vile mouth, you would think he was a Midgaan, not an Aji. No wonder he was thrown into the streets.” (p. 52) It becomes quickly apparent the narratives she is accessing have a particular resonance and understanding for those of us of the contemporary diaspora. More important than character deconstruction is Mohamed’s inadvertent line of thinking, these references only begin once the story enters the imagined realm of the Somali territories, when Jama’s mother dies and he is sent to stay with relatives in Somaliland. I’d argue that this site of recounting occurs within the Somali imaginary and the immediate response when an entry is made into this imaginary is the positioning of the Madhibaan as necessary to the creation of the Somali subject. Mohamed continues to have Jama observe everyday social interactions where butchers remind Madhibaan young boys the only jobs they can do are “clean[ing] some latrines” and Madhibaans are marked as “undesirables” (p. 67). These descriptions allow for Jama to see that his position isn’t so fraught in the social hierarchy of Somaliland. He is not the lower rung, even as a young orphaned poor Somali boy.

While anthropological record and Somali hegemony concern themselves with male characters, I find myself primarily invested in Madhibaan women and how these stories render

them silent. Where Madhibaan Somali women show up in scholarly discourse and consequently where and how do they show up in contemporary orality and literature. I am curious about the ways that these appearances reinforce and rein-scribe colonial scholarly discourses and become entrapped in the ways Somalis begin to imagine themselves. This line of thinking isn't restricted to how Madhibaan Somali women envision their identities but seeks to look to theorize not only how the identity categories of Somali and Madhibaan can be seen as dialectic; but how the subject is always male and women are referred to as objects that produce a particular function. If the Madhibaan is the other through which Somaliness becomes defined and produced, where does that leave Madhibaan Somali women?

Both Aman's story and Mohamed's work come to us in differing ways. Aman's story has been narrated to the authors who have transcribed the conversation while Mohamed's work is fictional. What I demonstrate in using both Aman's story and Mohamed's work, despite their difference, is that the narration of the Madhibaan does not drastically differ. The Madhibaana is crucial in order to build a particular Somali subject within the boundaries of the Somali imaginary. Without their presence, who is left to point to? Who is left from which one can compare and contrast the Somali self? Somalis regardless of their own social location require the positioning of the other through which to understand themselves and subsequently their own stories. The imagined community thus becomes the place this self becomes constituted. The origin myth continues to form the basis of Somali personhood and tells us about how people construct themselves in relation to the story and therefore in relation to the structures of power.

The Madhibaan haunt both the colonial and oral archive of Somalis, and interrogating this haunting is critical in connecting nodes of social life to larger structural patterns of social violence. Gordon notes "that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on

and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities” (p. 8). The Madhibaan are the seething presence of a contemporary Somali diaspora.

While looking at the archive (oral and colonial) makes it possible to see the absence but it's important to see the continual absenting of these narratives. The external absenting eventually impacts the internal move to quiet the stories, to see them as less apparent or critical to the overall. Even as I fall into the trap of absenting Madhibaan Somali women in this paper, by focusing on my father's story. This paper lays the groundwork and context to reveal the context that allows for the absenting to take place. In some cases the central question of my paper must remain unanswered because there are other answers that must first become revealed. As Morrison reminds us above, that despite the claim Madhibaan women are entitled to, nowhere are they claimed, nowhere are they made present in the fullness of themselves.

## Conclusion

“The space of convergence and endless possibility; the place where we put down and discard the unnecessary in order to pick up that which is necessary. It is that imaginary from which we dream the craft of a new compass” (Alexander, 2005, p. 8).

This paper was birthed the moment my father hung the 1992 article on our living room wall, and my mother refused to acknowledge its existence. I have learned well the tenors of absenting. It is my hope at the conclusion of this MRP to explore more concretely the crossroads that Alexander refers to above. It was never enough for me to simply write how Madhibaan women are silenced and erased. I have continued to ask: where are the places of endless possibility or the imaginary from which to create a new compass? How can new oral narratives or other forms of

ethnographic record lay the terrain through which Madhibaan Somali women can contest their socially ascribed status as part of the diaspora? How can I continue to excavate the experiences of Madhibaan Somali women in a way that allows for new stories to purposefully contest those already provided and codified?

While this is a paper about the seeming erasure of Madhibaan Somalis from historical and contemporary Somali discourse, it is also a reminder of the ways in which power works to blanket the voices of some, even as it refashions itself as absolved from the violence(s) committed. There cannot be a critical way forward in a post-colonial Somali Studies without also a reckoning of the historical subjugation and absence/presence of Madhibaan Somali women. These critiques are produced in the hopes that by making it possible to create the conditions from which origin myths, and the analysis of their codification become a site to imagine and create critical, relevant and more expansive notions of personhood. There is never just one imagining - there are always multiple stories and multiple imaginings, with communities multiply imagined. Simply because the official story of the Madhibaan is the story of the more powerful doesn't give us cause to ignore or minimize the ways in which theorizing becomes the site for Madhibaans to reclaim their power. These stories exist within the discursive, by bringing them into the light, and taking them apart bit by bit, there is a power to be gained just as there is a power to be dismantled. And more importantly for me, these stories force us to consider the ways in which a contemporary Somali diaspora can use orality to challenge the imaginary of a nation.

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