MEMORY AND RESETTLEMENT:
Somali women in Melbourne and emotional wellbeing

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ABSTRACT

This thesis derives from ethnographic research that explored the lives of forty-two Somali women who migrated to Australia as a result of the Somali civil war. In particular, it explores Somali women’s experiences of depression and emotional well-being. Studies of refugee mental health are frequently premised on an audible discourse that construes refugees as suffering predominantly from war, persecution and trauma. Further, the mental health ‘problems’ of refugees are firmly situated within the bodies and minds of those classified as refugees. The experiences documented in this thesis have a different focus, reflecting the ways in which Somali women’s narratives encompassed their histories, changing social relations, and idioms of home and exile. Their accounts of depression lay partly within the language and experience of war and persecution, but emotional distress was frequently attributed to contemporary realities of family separation, loss of community cohesion, marginalisation, isolation, and the hardships of resettlement. Accordingly, this thesis is not an ethnography of a fixed place or social and cultural life, but provides a longitudinal account of a refugee population in Australia. The underlying focus of the research has been ‘refugee mental health’, however, analysis of the research findings has involved engagement with broader theoretical areas of historical memory, identity, community, home and exile, and transnationalism. The chapters that follow give an account of the idioms through which Somali women situate and give meaning to depression. In so doing, this thesis frames refugee mental health within the broader processes and interconnections of histories, displacement and resettlement, as well as the socio-political context of war.
DECLARATION

This is to certify that

(i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD,
(ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,
(iii) the thesis is less than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

Celia McMichael
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**GLOSSARY**

**Acronyms**

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<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABS</td>
<td>Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATM</td>
<td>Automatic Teller Machine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBO</td>
<td>Cross Border Operation</td>
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<tr>
<td>DIMA</td>
<td>Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>DIMIA</td>
<td>Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>DSM</td>
<td>Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders</td>
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<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>Gross Domestic Product</td>
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<tr>
<td>GNI</td>
<td>Gross National Income</td>
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<td>GST</td>
<td>Goods and Services Tax</td>
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<tr>
<td>IDP</td>
<td>Internally Displaced Persons</td>
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<tr>
<td>IHSS</td>
<td>Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRO</td>
<td>International Refugee Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>MRC</td>
<td>Migrant Resource Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NFD</td>
<td>Northern Frontier District (of Kenya)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NILS</td>
<td>No-Interest Loan Scheme</td>
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<tr>
<td>OAU</td>
<td>Organization of African Unity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PASTT</td>
<td>Program of Assistance for the Survivors of Torture and Trauma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTSD</td>
<td>Post-traumatic stress disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTSS</td>
<td>Post-traumatic stress syndrome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RRAC</td>
<td>Refugee Resettlement Advisory Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>SAC</td>
<td>Special Assistance Category</td>
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<tr>
<td>SHP</td>
<td>Special Humanitarian Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>SNA</td>
<td>Somali National Alliance</td>
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<td>TIS</td>
<td>Translating and Interpreting Service</td>
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TPV  Temporary Protection Visa  
UN  United Nations  
UNHCR  United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees  
UNITAF  Unified Task Force  
UNOSOM I  United Nations Operation Somalia I  
UNOSOM II  United Nations Operation Somalia II  
US  United States (of America)  
USC  United Somalia Congress  
VFST  Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture and Trauma  
WHO  World Health Organization  

Somali Terms  

Habash  Agriculturalists  
Ishahadal  Talking to oneself  
Murugo  Sad  
Murugodaada  Sadness, depression  
Waliasho  Crazy  
Qoxoti  Refugee  

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INTRODUCTION

Displacement is a defining feature of the contemporary world. Vast numbers of people have become disengaged or dislocated from national, regional, and ethnic locations (Kaplan, 1996: 101). Indeed, the numbers of people affected by labour migration, homelessness, and forced displacement through war, famine and disaster are so large that they can no longer be regarded as marginal to a supposedly stable international social framework. As Gonzalez suggests, one of the primary characteristics of the changing global order is that peoples everywhere are ‘on the move’ (Gonzalez, 1992: 19).

This movement of people includes enormous numbers who are broadly classified as refugees. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that in 2002, the total number of official refugees and displaced people in the world stood at around 20 million (UNHCR, 2002) (see Appendix 1). In addition to those who fall under the protection of UNHCR, it is estimated that a further 27 million internal refugees have fled their homes and communities but have not crossed international borders (Kane, 1995; Leopold and Harrel-Bond, 1994). There is now an increasing production of knowledge about violence and refugees (Das and Kleinman, 2001; Kleinman, 1995). A new geography of the world has been brought into existence through images that are generated by the media and reports prepared by judicial commissions, citizens’ committees, and human rights groups in response to the question: What happened? (Das and Kleinman, 2001). Current media coverage depicts refugees and asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Iraq, Sudan, Angola, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Sierra Leone, and elsewhere. Malkki (1995b) suggests that one could easily conclude that the term ‘refugee’ denotes a self-delimiting field of study for anthropologists.
However, forced population movements have diverse historical and political causes and involve people who, while all displaced, encounter very different situations and circumstances. 'It would seem', Malkki writes, 'that the term refugee has analytical usefulness not as a label for a special, generalizable ‘kind’ or ‘type’ of person or situation, but only as a broad legal or descriptive rubric that includes within it a world of different socioeconomic statuses, personal histories, and psychological or spiritual situations' (Malkki, 1995b: 496).

This thesis presses for a historically specific representation of displacement and resettlement. It chronicles the narratives and experiences of Somali women who have migrated to Melbourne, via the Australian Government's Refugee and Humanitarian Program, in the years following the eruption of the Somali civil war in 1991. Modernist discourses mystify the terms of processes such as displacement and resettlement, masking economic, historical and social conditions to create a homogenised 'multiculturalism', a 'refugee experience', and a generalised state of exile. Further, there are strong compulsions within the media to focus on the dramatic or sentimental potential of people's stories, human rights groups are constrained by people's immediate needs, and judicial systems are anchored to a mode of storytelling that follows models of testimony and confession (Das and Kleinman, 2001). There is rarely opportunity to explore everyday life in 'communities of survivors', and scant attention is paid to the long-term and 'little' consequences of violence (Das and Kleinman, 2001). This thesis contributes to a growing body of literature on how people experience and create meaning in the intersecting spaces of dislocation and resettlement (Appadurai, 1988; Appadurai, 1990; Bhabha, 1994; Malkki, 1992).

In April 2000, I started fieldwork – talking and spending time with Somali women in Melbourne. I also began to volunteer at the Migrant Resource Centre North East as a settlement case-worker, assisting particularly with the resettlement needs of refugees and humanitarian entrants from the Horn of Africa. At this stage, I had a broad interest in
displacement, resettlement and depression. While little research has been carried out concerning mental health amongst Somalis in Australia, some studies suggested that depression was a widespread concern amongst this population (Iredale et al., 1996; Paul, 1999; Ssengaaga-Ssali, 1998; Tommassi and Camilleri, 1995). Early conversations with service providers emphasised further that depression is one of the most serious health issues that affects Somali women. Women’s Health West, for example, identified depression as a major problem for women from Somalia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Iraq.¹ Further, many Somali clients at the Migrant Resource Centre indicated that they suffered from depression and related anecdotes about their experiences of sadness. This raised the questions: Why are so many Somali women depressed? Who are the women who are depressed? How is depression experienced and how is it talked about?

As often happens to anthropologists, the women who were the focus of the study soon pulled the research into areas I had not anticipated. I found that it was impossible to explore contemporary experiences of depression and emotional well-being without talking about women’s histories and hopes. Women’s narratives turned to nostalgic memories of spaces and social worlds of Somalia, the horror of war, experiences of flight and exile, expectations about life in Australia, dissatisfaction with the reality of everyday life in Melbourne, erosion of community, and hopes for the future. Aman, one of the women I spoke with at length during the research, is in her early sixties and has been living in Melbourne for several years. She suffers from loneliness and depression. Aman’s account illustrates the way in which women located current experiences of depression in the broader framework of their lives, histories, and personal and collective experiences:

In Somalia life was really good. My family was very big. There were seven boys and five girls in my family, and we were brought up really well. I was born in the bush. Our bush-land was near a small town. Some of us used to come to the town, some of us used to stay in the bush. And we had animals like camels, goats, sheep. My job

¹ Women’s Health West is a community health service in Melbourne. Their research project culminated in the Talking Health Resource Kit (Women’s Health West, 2001).
was to look after the goats. In the morning you go out to the goats, and then you
come back at midday and have lunch and then you go back to the goats. Life in
Somalia was so happy. People were really happy. Very good weather, fresh milk,
fresh meat, happy people. People used to shop in the mornings, eat lunch, lay
around, have a tea. Life was very stable and very happy. People were very generous
and hospitable. But that has changed now in Australia . . .

Before the war everything was OK, but the bullets and the guns started to
erupt and the houses were pulled down on top of you. In the war, there were two
major tribes and they were killing each other. There were a lot of people caught in
the crossfire and a lot of people died, young and old, pregnant, weak. Everyone had
to flee because it was indiscriminate. So we left Somalia and were on the road for
twenty days . . .

I hope to go back home because I like the weather and the way things are
over there. The neighbours in Somalia used to talk to each other. But it can be lonely
here. In Somalia all the neighbours used to talk over the fence, people would chat,
you could go outside and people would walk past. You’d have lots of people to talk
with and to occupy your time. But look at our surroundings now! You don’t even
know who lives next door. And you can be inside all day and not go out unless you
go in the car. It can be really quite depressing.

In Aman’s account, depression is entwined with memories, hopes, and contemporary
experience. Emotional suffering is given meaning through relational themes such as
belonging and exile, or social connectedness and loneliness. These themes were recurrent
within women’s accounts of their lives and experiences of depression. Through detailing the
ways in which women situate and give meaning to depression, this thesis offers a view of
‘refugee mental health’ that challenges conventional understandings.

Within much literature on mental health and refugees, an audible discourse construes
refugees as suffering predominantly from war, persecution, trauma, and flight (Watters,
Refugee mental health is seen to have specific empirical and psychiatric features that are an aspect of a generic refugee experience. As Winter and Young write in their discussion of refugee mental health, ‘many refugees have endured premigration traumata, such as war, repression, and torture, before leaving their homelands’ (Winter and Young, 1998: 349). Diagnostic categories of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and depressive episodes triggered by experiences of war and exile are widely applied to refugees in both clinical and research settings. While researchers have acknowledged the ‘stresses’ of adjusting to new cultures following resettlement, these stresses are framed as ‘daunting postmigration or resettlement issues’ or as problems that compound mental health problems arising from pre-migration experience. They are rarely approached as a primary source of depression and emotional suffering (see Winter and Young, 1998). Further, the copious literature claiming refugees as its object of study locates their ‘problems’ not in the political oppression or violence that produces massive displacements of people, but within the bodies and minds of those classified as refugees (Malkki, 1995a: 8). I argue, however, that Somali women’s emotional distress is significantly entwined with migration, resettlement, and social marginality, as well as the socio-political context of war and persecution (see Farias, 1991: 167).

In their introduction to the edited volume *Culture and Depression*, Kleinman and Good (1985a) argue that there are important differences in the cultural organisation and expression of depressive-like experience among various populations. Drawing from medical anthropology, I was interested to explore alternative idioms for depression. Unlike formal psychiatric models of depression, Somali women’s narratives encompassed social relations, moral concerns, history, and contemporary experience. Their accounts of depression lay partly within the language and experience of war and persecution. However, women also attributed their emotional distress to contemporary realities of family separation, loss of community cohesion, marginalisation, isolation, and the vicissitudes of resettlement. The narrative construction of depression, sadness and isolation was frequently given meaning by reference to social networks and interpersonal relationships. Women’s claims of depression
were often an expression of disordered social and community relations. The strong community networks in Somalia were recalled as a source of support and happiness. War and flight were framed in terms of disintegration of this idyllic community. And accounts of resettlement in Australia were permeated with a sense that there has been a dissolution of supportive social and community relations, even as women maintain and recreate social interactions. It is the interstitial position of women as refugees who are caught up in processes of remembering, displacement and resettlement that makes their experiences of depression clarifying for anthropological thinking around the connections between sadness, community, personal experience, and movement.

Mahler (1995: 5) writes that so often researchers offer snapshots of immigrants after they have crossed borders, but provide little insight into the forces that uprooted them in their home countries. Accordingly, I have chosen to write not an ethnography of a fixed place or social and cultural life, but to provide a longitudinal account of a refugee population in Australia. In exploring women’s recollections of life in Somalia, the war and flight from their homeland, and arrival and resettlement in Australia, migration is represented as a process, rather than as a fixed state of being a ‘refugee’ in exile or an ‘immigrant’ in a new country. This approach allows more meaningful exploration of transnational processes in relation to the flow of resources and information, and changing identities and social forms. This thesis draws out the powerful nostalgia for homeland, the suffering of the war and exile, the hardships and challenges of resettlement, and the ways in which women are able to find a home in a new environment, particularly through Islamic practice and ideology. In so doing, it offers an anthropologically informed account of women’s understandings and experiences of emotional suffering. In this thesis, I argue that women’s emotional suffering and well-being are a product of the interplay of war, displacement and resettlement, and are closely tied to historical memory and social relationships.
‘THE REFUGEE’ AND SEMANTIC NETWORKS

As the term ‘refugee’ is both complex and politically volatile, here I provide a critical mapping of the discursive construction of refugee identity. The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees defines a refugee as:

Any person who is outside the country of nationality . . . because he has or had well-founded fear of persecution by reason of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion and is unable or, because of such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of the government of the country of his nationality (UNHCR, 1951).

This definition incorporates two key discursive constructs: the first relates to the geopolitical status of refugees as outside of their country of nationality, and the second denotes the moral-experiential domain of the persecution and suffering of refugees.

The geopolitical discourse around refugees is highly audible within the language of international conventions and treaties, western states, the United Nations (UN), and non-governmental agencies. In this discourse, the term ‘refugee’ evokes concepts of borders, nationality, and migration; a key characteristic of the refugee is that he or she is displaced beyond the borders of their nation-state (Hyndman, 2000: xvi; Zarowsky, 2000: 179). Following a border crossing, refugees then fall (theoretically) under the protection of an international refugee regime that depends on the endorsement, financial support, and humanitarian migration processes of individual nation-states (Hyndman, 2000: 7). The primacy of borders and the nation-state is underscored not only in international law, but also in the very definition of the refugee. Border crossings are not a backdrop to the

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2 People displaced by conflict, violence, and natural disaster, but who do not cross a national border, are known as internally displaced persons (IDP). Humanitarian law and refugee law, draw a clear distinction between the rights and entitlements of refugees and those of internally displaced persons.
circumstances of refugees; they are, instead, the very thing by which people become a refugee.\footnote{However, the definition of refugees at UNHCR is no longer predicated necessarily on the crossing of international borders, and UNHCR’s role has increasingly focused on assisting people to avoid such crossings. For example, in 1991 UNHCR assisted Iraqi Kurds in Northern Iraq (Hyndman, 2000).}

It is not surprising, then, that the metaphors employed to describe the movement of refugees and asylum seekers refer to fluidity, as opposed to the territorialising metaphors of roots, soil, and homeland that convey settlement and stability (Malkki, 1995a: 16). They come as floods, waves, flows and streams (Camino and Krulfeld, 1994; Knudsen, 1995: 14). Such metaphors resonate with a perception that the border crossings of refugees threaten to overpower and wash away the culture and orderliness of the space into which they move. Refugees are seen to haemorrhage or weaken national boundaries, and pose a threat to ‘national security’. They are constituted as dangerous and polluting (Malkki, 1995a: 7).\footnote{As Malkki (1995a) notes, this corresponds with Mary Douglas’ (1966) notion of purity and pollution, in that refugees are regarded as polluting the purity of national boundaries.}

The fear that is generated through images of being submerged and inundated is frequently exploited to justify a discourse and policy of exclusion.\footnote{Discourses on fear have been revealed to be central to colonial violence and the practices of dominant groups. Taussig’s (1987) work on rubber collectors in Columbia in the early 20th century shows how talk of fear of the dominated Other in colonial contexts can be used as a means to justify the suppression of those their rhetoric of fear implicitly paints as powerful and threatening to erupt.}

Alternatively, the term refugee is constructed as denoting the moral-experiential, having to do with the self, experiences of persecution, suffering, and dependency (Zarowsky, 2000: 179). For example, Farwell’s (2001) paper, ‘Onward through Strength’: Coping and Psychological Support among Refugee Youth Returning to Eritrea from Sudan’, explores the coping strategies of Eritrean refugees as they suffered and survived extreme circumstances during war, flight, and exile. The sources of trauma that are cited include violent conflict, slaughter, fear, death threats, sexual abuse, fear of capture, burning of houses, beatings by camp guards, and subsistence crises. These sources of trauma and suffering are identified as common to many refugee populations. This picture painted of the
refugee focuses on vulnerability, struggle and hardship, and problems adjusting to new situations.

Kleinman and Kleinman (1997) argue, however, that representations of human suffering have troubling implications, in that social and political processes are depicted as individual suffering. ‘Images of suffering are appropriated to appeal emotionally and morally both to global audiences and to local populations’ (Kleinman and Kleinman, 1997: 1). Within the international media, images show displaced peoples in extreme and desperate situations (see figures 1, 2, 3 and 4). These photographic representations of refugees frequently centre on powerlessness and suffering. The classic refugee image is of a woman and child, gaunt and weak from starvation, their faces pleading and filled with sadness. Malkki writes ‘perhaps it is that women and children embody a special kind of powerlessness; perhaps they do not tend to look as if they could be “dangerous aliens”; perhaps their images are more effective in fund-raising efforts than those of men’ (Malkki, 1995a: 11). Alternatively, there are images of masses of nameless and homeless refugees, clamouring for food and shelter in refugee camps, or on the road to asylum.6

Hyndman (2000: xxii) warns that while good intentions often fuel these representations, the politics of representation have become, in some cases, more important than humanitarian operations. Donor governments understand that aid has strategic value, and public funding of assistance to refugees depends on representing their plight as urgent and deserving. As Barbara Harrell-Bond observes, ‘outsiders view African refugees as helpless: as needing outsiders to plan for them and to take care of them. This assumption is the cornerstone of nearly all appeals for funds’ (Harrell-Bond, 1986: 11). It is important, however, to avoid essentialising, naturalising, or sentimentalising suffering. Kleinman and Kleinman (1997: 2) argue that there is no universal shape to suffering, and warn that through the

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Figure 1: A starving refugee child with mother

Figure 2: Somali refugees in Ethiopia
Figure 3: A refugee camp in Africa

Figure 4: Waiting for water at a refugee camp in Africa
representation and globalisation of suffering, experience is remade, thinned out, and distorted. As Hyndman powerfully writes, ‘this strange invocation of charitable humanity illustrates a kind of semio-violence, a representational practice that purports to speak for others but at the same time effaces their voices’ (Hyndman, 2000: xxii).  

This discourse surrounding refugees collapses the lives of individuals into an indistinguishable crowd. Refugees are often seen through disembodied statistics or are homogenised and silenced under the rubric of voiceless refugees (Hyndman, 2000: xxii). Zarowsky (2000) argues that refugees are seen as a global category with a common ‘refugee identity’, and amenable to generic solutions. The refugee has become a figure who comes with a package variability including the ‘refugee experience’ (Stein, 1981; Turner, 1995), the ‘refugee mentality’ (Bernard, 1986), and the ‘refugee problem’ (Daniel and Knudsen, 1995). There is a generalised understanding of refugees as having identical experiences, needs, outlooks and (most importantly) problems (Jupp, 1993: 157).

For example, the refugee is characterised by dependency, not resourcefulness and strength. Dependency is seen as a negative psychological state, akin to laziness and learned helplessness (Zarowsky, 2000: 181). The outcomes of ‘refugee dependency’ are seen to be despondent helplessness, isolation, lack of initiative, depression, and organised demands for continuing agency response. ‘Refugee dependency’ is regarded as the inevitable product of receiving rations and other forms of support from the UNHCR and aid agencies. Although refugees have little choice but to accept survival supplies and the control of population movement characteristic of many refugee settings, ‘dependency’ is assumed to be located in the refugee and to be a negative thing (Zarowsky, 2000: 186).  

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7 Hyndman (2000: xxiii) writes that the absence of representation can also constitute violence, as events - such as the killing of several hundred Somali civilians by UN peacekeepers – are edited out of the Western script.

8 Some social scientists have challenged this view. Harrell-Bond (1986) documented how relief was imposed in southern Sudan and refugees avoided camps settlements wherever possible. Malkki (1995) found that many Burundian Hutu refugees in Tanzania avoided the refugee label in favour of more diffuse and diverse identities. Hyndman (2000) found that Somali refugees in Kenya also avoided refugee camps in favour of living in Nairobi.
In her critical theorisation, Malkki (1992; 1995b) examines the ways refugees are represented, written about, and situated in academic and humanitarian circles. She argues that the problematisation of displacement and resettlement locates the problem in the bodies and minds of the refugees, not the political oppression and violence that produces massive displacement of people (Malkki, 1995a: 8). Similarly, Zarowsky (2000: 178) argues that the international rhetoric of the ‘refugee experience’ situates suffering and experience within the realm of the individual, the private, and the psychological, thereby obscuring the root causes of individual experience – social and political processes. The emergent discourse constructs refugees as isolated from history, politics and international relations, and in so doing, the structural links between the plight of the refugee and the rest of global society are not acknowledged.

When ‘refugeeness’ is depicted as a concrete and constant form that is isolated from history, politics and international relations, it can act like the concept of ‘race’, in that it builds an image of a different, essentialised and homogenous social group (Balibar and Wallerstein, 1991: 21). In the contemporary moment, the constitution of cultural and ethnic units as having insurmountable differences and positing essentialist characteristics for pre-given groups of people provides a forum for new racisms that centre around immigration laws, alien-ness and policing of difference (Malkki, 1995a: 14).

Within Australia, refugees are regarded – at best - as contributing colour to national identity, in the form of new foods and music. However, a climate of fear and discrimination has recently been made explicit within Australia. Along with the media and federal government-fuelled panic about ‘out-of-control’ borders, anti-immigration racism has culminated in government-sponsored measures aimed at asylum-seekers, such as new immigration bills, the ‘Pacific solution’, an increase in coastal surveillance, and mandatory detention. These

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9 The ‘Pacific solution’ refers to the setting up of asylum-seekers detention centres in island-states in the Pacific region by the Australian Federal government. In return for agreeing to these detention centres, Pacific island-
are acts that serve further to demonise refugees and asylum-seekers. At a time when the so-called free and democratic world is quaking with fear that the Islamic world will attack—a right previously reserved by the US, Britain, and other powerful Western nations—the arrival of refugees at Australia’s shore is met with even greater cold-heartedness. This cold-heartedness and fear is audible in the following excerpt from talkback radio that was included in the Four Corners\textsuperscript{10} report, ‘The Queue Jumpers’. In relation to asylum-seekers held in detention, a talkback caller asks, ‘What eruptions are they going to cause for our dear little South Australia? It’s going to turn out to be very ugly if these people are let in our community, which the stupid Government’s letting them in.’ The talkback host responds, ‘Well, we do things differently in this country.’ Refugees are presented as different and threatening; they could be criminals, supporters of Osama bin Laden, or ‘queue-jumpers’ with no authentic grounds for claiming refugee status. In the Australian imagination, the figure of the border and the fearful image of refugees and asylum seekers inscribes the racialised boundary of citizenship and the nation-state.\textsuperscript{11}

The refugee label is a discursive strategy that shifts the topic of debate from material and social inequality, to geographic status and psychological and moral weakness. Concepts of refugee identity are defined by juridical and political apparatuses and premised upon the borders of nation-states and the experiential suffering and vulnerability of individuals. Refugees are constructed as a problem, a generic figure, out-of-place, a threat. As discussed above, there is the real possibility of being consistently seen as victims, objectified, and depersonalised. They are marked as different, and constantly reminded that they do not belong. Through the outside gaze, refugee life-worlds are given a fixedness; they are transformed from embodied experiences to an imposed label imagined by people who define themselves as different. These discursive strategies obfuscate the diversity and

\textsuperscript{10} Four Corners is an investigative journalism program that is screened by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. ‘The Queue Jumpers’ was screened on 16 October, 2000. The transcript for this program is available at <http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/stories/s200031.htm>.

\textsuperscript{11} Fregoso (1999) also writes of the Mexico-US border as a racialised border.
contradictions of historical, geographical and social experience, and the politics of the borders that define refugees (Hyndman, 2000). In response to this inattention to individual lives and experiences, this thesis explores Somali women’s memory of their homeland and their accounts of displacement and resettlement. My aim is to bridge some of the distance between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

In chapter 2, I discuss the research methods and locate the study in place and time. I describe the salient aspects of where, when, and how the research took place, and explore some of the problematic issues that emerged during the course of the research. My position as a researcher is made transparent by discussing the ways in which my identity and positioning affected the research. I also sketch out the identities of the women interviewed. Key ethical considerations that arose in the development and conduct of the research are considered, namely issues of consent, confidentiality, and potential benefits for the women involved in the study. Finally, I discuss data management, analysis, and representation.

Chapter 3 outlines a historical, political and social background to Somalia and the Somali people. It explores ethnographies and literature about Somalia, charts the political and social conditions that compelled Somalis to flee their homeland following the war, and gives a brief account of the Australian Humanitarian and Refugee Migration program, through which many Somalis have entered Australia. I also provide demographic information about the Somali population in Australia, and specifically Melbourne.

Chapters 4 to 7 are structured chronologically, charting women’s movement from Somalia to Australia. The ordering of these chapters does not necessarily mirror women’s own accounts of their lives. Many of the interviews jumped back and forth between spaces and times, in order that women could compare and reflect upon different experiences. However,
I have chosen to organise women’s accounts temporally in order to provide a fluid narrative line.

In chapters 4 and 5 I engage with theoretical literature around social and historical memory, and explore how women remember and imagine their past. Chapter 4 focuses on nostalgic memory of everyday life in Somalia prior to the war. In chapter 5 I turn to harrowing accounts of war, flight from their homeland, and life as a ‘refugee’. These two chapters depict the transformation of idyllic community and social networks to a disordered and unintelligible social world. They also provide a background for exploration in subsequent chapters of how the past, imagined or otherwise, enters into women’s present lives.

Chapters 6 and 7 explore women’s accounts of resettlement in Australia. Chapter 6 focuses on the supposedly dichotomous experiences of being in exile and being at home. Migration shapes the way that people construct history, boundaries and identity (Malkki, 1995a: 1). There exists a tendency in the literature on migration to treat migrant groups as if they were either caught in exile or successfully able to make a home for themselves in a new country. I challenge this characterisation by documenting the ways that women’s everyday lives incorporate qualities of being both at home and in exile. Following resettlement, women have to live in new social, political, linguistic, economic and other situations. It is important to understand how the worlds of the women caught up in these shifting currents are transformed, and how this affects their lives and well-being. For many women resettlement gives rise to a sense of being in exile or out of place, yet women find concurrent ways of being at home.

Chapter 7 explores the construction of the Somali community and social networks following resettlement. Here, community is not reified as a monolithic structure to which women can turn to and depend on; rather the multifaceted character of social networks is brought to light. The chapter reveals that resettlement does not necessarily or readily lead to new forms of community. Women’s disillusionment and disappointment with social networks is
underscored, yet the resilience and continuity of social networks in many facets of everyday life is also discussed.

In chapter 8, I focus on depression and emotional well-being amongst Somali women. This chapter reiterates many of the experiences and circumstances elaborated in chapters 4 through 7. In so doing, I explore women's mental health and emotional well-being in the broad context of war, displacement and resettlement. I explore how the remembered past, contemporary life, and imagined futures are inextricably entwined, and provide a framework for women's experiences of depression and emotional well-being. In particular, I draw out the significance of interpersonal and community relations and how their absence or dissolution impacts on women's well-being. In chapter 9, I set out some concluding comments to the thesis.

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The chapters of this thesis do not march towards a single conclusion or theoretical insight. They echo the disjointedness of the lives of Somali women, and register their movement between spaces, contexts and times. However, through chronicling women's memories and experiences, I am able to provide an ethnographic account of the forces and experiences that come into play in processes of war, displacement and resettlement. The narrative constructions and experiences with which Somali women weave together history and contemporary experience tell a story about the links among individuals, experience, social worlds, society, and emotion. Accordingly, this thesis seeks to make an anthropological contribution to an understanding of memory, displacement, and resettlement, and through engaging with theoretical notions of home, exile, and community, the effects of these processes on the emotional well-being of Somali women.
- 2 -

APPROACHING AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DISPLACEMENT AND RESETTLEMENT

Ethnographic studies conventionally entail a descriptive account of arrival in the field and dramatic first impressions. Clifford (1997) notes that fieldwork has been based on a distinction between home and an exterior place of discovery. Introductions to field sites are often predicated on this distinct transition from ‘home’ to the ‘fieldwork site’. Return to Laughter, written by Laura Bohannan and first published in 1964, documents ‘the tribal life of a primitive bush tribe in West Africa’. Bohannan documents her arrival in the field:

The truck alternately jounced and slithered over the dirt road; after last night’s rain, the first of the season, it was a lake of mud with occasional reefs of laterite. To either side spread the grassland, dead gray grass patched with the green of yam fields and the brown of newly cleared land. Dotted about were their homesteads: circular clusters of round huts with thatched roofs like dinner bells, domed and golden in the sun. Men and women were out in the fields, hoeing and pulling grass. They straightened at the noise of our coming, shouted, and shook their fists at me. Sackerton had thought to tell me that this was their form of greeting. I shook my fist in return (Bohannan, 1964: 1-2).

In a similar vein, Michael Taussig begins the ethnographic section of Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man (1987), with the following words:

I first met Jose Garcia in December 1975 when he joined a group of us waiting to drink yage with Santiago Mutumbajoy, an Indian shaman of repute in the Putumayo foothills where the eastern slopes of the Andes blend with the rain forest of the upper Amazon basin in Colombia (Taussig, 1987: 139).

The epistemological advantage of this distinction between home and a site of fieldwork is that it offers a clear spatial parameter for research. Another important feature of the distinction between ‘home’ and ‘abroad’ (or the field) is that it is based on cultural difference (Hadolt, 1998). Accordingly, the anthropologist in the field has a privileged
position of insight into a new cultural world, and he or she reveals the findings to the distantiated reader.

In this research, however, the distinction between home and fieldwork site was uncertain. The suburbs where the research took place were only a few train-stops north of my home. Shopping malls, the local market, women’s houses, and services such as the Office of Housing and Community Health Centres: many of these sites were places that I went to or travelled past in my everyday life. The field-site turned out to be not only spaces inscribed and used specifically by Somali women, but Melbourne (see map 1), its institutions, and structures. Despite the ambiguity of the spatial parameters of the field-site, a description of a few spaces and places can provide some sense of the research setting.

Map 1: Australia
Australia has a total population of 19,603,500. Approximately 28 percent of Australia’s population were born overseas, and 21 percent speak a first language other than English. Melbourne is Australia’s second largest city, with a population of 4,038,766 (ABS, 2002c).

In April 2000, I started to work as a volunteer for two days per week at the Migrant Resource Centre North East (MRC). I worked with Malyun Ahmed, the Horn of Africa worker, and focused on resettlement issues and community development amongst Somali people. Twelve such Migrant Resource Centres and Migrant Service Agencies in Victoria are funded by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA). The MRC where I worked provides services to a large catchment area in the North East region of Melbourne, including the Cities of Yarra, Darebin, Banyule, Whittlesea, Nillumbik, and Moreland. Services are provided by the Aged and Disability Service, the Employment Services Unit, and the Settlement Team, and these services comprise of around sixty staff members. The Settlement Team provides direct services to a large number of Somali clients.

The MRC is located on a busy high street in a north-eastern suburb of Melbourne. It sits at the beginning of a long stretch of community service offices and shops: a local DIMIA office, a Centrelink office where people seek welfare payments, a regional government-funded emergency housing service, halal butchers, Iraqi and Turkish kebab shops, second-hand clothes and furniture stores, and the local market. The daily thoroughfare at the MRC

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12 Throughout this thesis, I refer to the Migrant Resource Centre North East as the MRC.
13 Malyun Ahmed gave me permission to use her real name.
14 Namely, the Geelong MRC, Inner Western Region MRC, Hoppers Crossing Outreach Service, Gippsland MRC, North West Region MRC, MRC North East, Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne), Northern Metropolitan MRC, South Central Region (Prakan) MRC, Oakleigh Outreach Service, South Eastern Region (Dandenong) MRC and Westgate Region (Altona) MRC.
15 Victoria is divided into 78 Local Government Areas, and these areas are known as ‘Cities’ and have elected councils.
16 The Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) was known as the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) until 2002. Although effectively the same government body, throughout this thesis I refer to both DIMIA and DIMA depending on the time frame.
17 Centrelink is the government service that manages social security/welfare payments in Australia.
18 Halal refers to food that is permissible according to Islamic law, especially meat from animals that are slaughtered in the prescribed way.
is busy with ‘newly-arrived migrants’, most of whom have emigrated in the past six years from the former Yugoslavia, China, Iraq, and Somalia. The settlement team provides assistance with resettlement through a drop-in service that runs between 1pm and 4pm on weekdays, and through an appointment system for people who present with more complex issues. Every week 20 to 25 Somali people, approximately two-thirds of whom are women, seek assistance with settlement issues including housing, health care, income support, settlement information, and immigration advice.\(^\text{19}\)

Omidian writes that ‘much field work is accomplished just by being in one place over time’ (Omidian, 1994: 155). Working with Malyun, I focused on resettlement issues and community development. Over the first few months, Malyun taught me the basics of settlement support case-work: how to assist with Office of Housing applications, where to refer people for material aid such as second-hand furniture, what kind of No-Interest-Loan Schemes (NILS)\(^\text{20}\) are available in the region, how to secure government rebates for utility service bills, how to sponsor family for refugee and humanitarian visas, and how to use the Telephone and Interpreting Service. Soon I gained enough confidence to help ‘clients’ through the complex maze of social services. This provided a concrete way in which to offer something to the women with whom I hoped to conduct research.

The beginning of my voluntary work at the MRC marks the start of the research phase:

Field-note excerpt – May 2000

This is a new world for me, but I am learning slowly. Sounds I hear repeated in language – *haye* (yes), *miu* (no), *sweye tata* (how are you?), *wa fia anahai* (I’m fine). I am struck by the confused contrasts in my mind. There is a too-easy romantic picture of Somali women as strong and colourful nomads making their way in a foreign city; the rhythms of the language, the swish of women’s henna-dyed hands

\(^{19}\) These data are based on a twelve-month period over 2000-2001, and are generated from the MRC North East client data-base.

\(^{20}\) NILS are primarily available for white-goods such as washing machines and refrigerators, and educational courses.

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when they touch in expressive gestures, the colours and weave of cloth readjusted and folded around faces. Then sometimes I feel so sad. Stories are hard to hear. It is difficult to read the brutal details written in visa applications of being forced to watch family members being raped and killed at gunpoint, the pain of leaving behind one’s home and life, the hardship of flight and living in refugee camps.

As I continued to work at the MRC, I became accustomed to spending time with women. They were no longer mysterious figures defined by the war and the associated suffering. I learnt about different women’s histories, became aware of the hardship and trauma of war that many women suffered, assisted with resettlement, and began to appreciate women’s resilience and strength. In turn, women came to recognise and know me. During lunch breaks, Malyun and I talked about my intended research. I explained my interest in disrupted lives, identity, community and depression, and she told me about the prevalence of sadness, loneliness, and depression amongst Somali women. The research themes started to become clear. I was happy to find that Malyun was not only enthusiastic and supportive of the research, but wanted to be involved. We began to spend time visiting Somali women’s homes, and Malyun invited me to events so that I could interact with women outside of the MRC setting.

One evening soon after I began working with Malyun, we visited Amina at her Office of Housing low-rise property – a ground floor flat in a block of six built from weathered red-brick. She was at home with her children, feeding them rice while the television played. The living room floor was covered with large Persian carpets. A wooden cabinet was pushed against one wall and decorated with plastic flowers, a painted china tea-set, and plates inscribed with Islamic texts; the other walls were adorned with prints covered with ornate gold Islamic calligraphy. The smell of sweet-cardamom tea and incense hung in the air. We gathered in the kitchen to make sambuusas. Amina spoke on the phone while she made the pastry, Malyun crouched down to pound a paste from onion and garlic with a wooden pestle.

21 Sambuusa are a Somali adaptation of Indian samosas.
and mortar, and I stirred the meat and vegetables in hot oil while Amina's children clamoured and pulled my clothes and necklace. Then we formed an assembly line, rolling out pastry and filling it with halal mince and vegetables and deep-frying the pastries until they turned golden. Malyun and Amina spoke in Somali, their conversation interjected with the occasional English terms of '3-bedroom house' or 'the problem is . . .': they were talking about housing troubles. After we finished cooking, Amina got me to try on a silk dress and some beautiful orange cloth, shot with gold thread, that she wanted me to wear at an upcoming party. They laughed when they saw me, but thought that the clothes looked better than my 'Australian' ones. Shared times, such as this, allowed women to become accustomed to me, and me to them. Malyun agreed that as women grew used to my presence, they felt more comfortable talking with us.

The paragraphs above give some flavor of the spaces in which the research process took place. Despite the blurred boundaries between home and fieldsite, a cursory glance at these spaces suggests that I had entered a site for the research. Historically, anthropology has centred upon conducting fieldwork with a view to producing an ethnography of a socio-cultural space. Numerous ethnographies have focused on understanding defined spaces and face-to-face modes of interaction: the production of locality, the ritual maintenance of boundaries, and the ways in which space is localised through performance, representation, and action. Here, I give just a few examples from the vast range of anthropological studies of situated culture. In Nuer Religion, Evans-Pritchard (1956) explores cultural symbols and concepts of religion amongst the Nuer of East Africa. He writes 'the Nuer are undoubtedly primitive people by the usual standards of reckoning, but their religious thought is remarkably sensitive, refined, and intelligent' (ibid.: 311). Evans-Pritchard discusses Nuer concepts of God, spirits, ghosts and souls, sin, and sacrifice in an attempt to describe and classify the Nuer religion, and he argues that social order can be better understood through the study of religious thought. In The Empty Place, Weiner (1991) gives an account of poetic tradition and notions of space amongst the Foi of Melanesia and suggests that the Foi landscape is created through local linguistic forms. Women's songs, for example, create the
Foi world as ‘ancestrally constituted places over which are inscribed the currently creative movements of the present-day Foi’ (ibid.: 197). Weiner argues that the world of the Foi is constituted as a humanised space that acquires its significance through performance, speech and the aesthetic dimensions of poetry. And in his ethnography *The Victim and its Masks*, Hamoudi (1993) explores the Sunni Muslim feast of sacrifice as it is locally practiced among North African Berbers and the masquerade that follows the sacrifice and closes the ritual cycle.

These studies seek to arrive at an aggregate description of social structures by illuminating local dynamics and activity. Their authors conceive of cultures as localised universes of meaning, with people and communities as their representative components. More recently, images of separate and contained worlds have been criticised as offering little more than a representational tool and ideology (James et al., 1997; Rapport and Dawson, 1998b). Migration and the movement of people unravel the notion of socio-cultural places bound in space. As Olwig (2002: 124) notes, the interconnected and mobile lives that people lead today due to globalisation and migration can not be captured through fieldwork in local sites. With migration and displacement, Somali people contest the notion of the nation and community as bound in space. There is also no ‘little Somalia’ in Melbourne, no exclusive space where the Somali community can be found and researched.

For a diasporic community such as the Somali in Melbourne, a focus on the immediate fieldsite obscures the dispersed domains of transnational relationships, displacement and migration. Conversations with women included talk of their homeland, ongoing relationships with family overseas, refugee camps and exile, and comparison of immediate lifeworlds with nostalgic recollections of Somalia. In this research, the field was not confined to the tangible parameters of an immediate setting, and accordingly this thesis

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22 There are some notable early examples of ethnographies that move away from studies of localised cultural worlds. For example, Leach’s *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (1964) argued that local systems must be situated in the wider political and social worlds of which they are part. Leach recognised that communities are shaped by the interplay between internal forms and external conditions.
focuses the ethnographic lens on relations, movement, and memory as much as on situated community and spatial location.

Prior to beginning fieldwork, I wondered how I would find women willing to talk with me. Would my lack of Somali language and necessary dependence on an interpreter present a major problem? Would women feel comfortable talking with me about deeply personal experiences? Would they resent being studied? Malyun could be regarded as the ‘gatekeeper’ to the community. The term ‘gatekeeper’ is often used to describe someone who holds a pivotal role in providing and controlling access to members of a researched group. Burgess argues that in ethnographic research, ‘access’ to a community or group of people depends on the relationships that are established between the researcher and the researched (Burgess, 1991: 45). However, as an emerging migrant community, Somalis have been the target of a number of research projects and are tired of being researched. I was therefore unwilling to recruit women through impersonal ‘random sample’ techniques. The selection of people to participate in interviews was based on relationships I formed with women through my work at the MRC, women’s willingness to participate, and - most importantly - through Malyun’s extensive network of friendships and acquaintances. For many interviews, Malyun made the initial contact to ask women if they would talk with us. She also introduced me to women, took me visiting at their homes, and invited me to events and celebrations that were attended by many women, such as engagement parties, picnics, wedding celebrations, political events, and religious ceremonies.

Conversations with African community workers and Somali males suggest that many men, as well as women, have emotional and mental health problems. However, the core participants in the research were women. Recent studies in the construction of suffering have shown that the establishment of gender categories in connection with suffering, illness, loss, grief, and pain are profoundly political acts, which draw boundaries and determine

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23 Because of their circumstances of migration and cultural distinctiveness, Somalis are often called upon to represent their community in focus group discussions for broader research into migrant needs.
‘appropriate’ expressions of suffering (Todeschini, 2001). In this thesis, the focus on women risks perpetuating the stereotype of the refugee as a vulnerable and victimised woman or woman with child. Here, I acknowledge that refugees can not be characterised as vulnerable females, and that it is not only refugee women who suffer. The reason for the focus upon women was largely pragmatic; their lives were more open to me than those of men. Many activities among Somalis are gender-segregated, including engagement celebrations, routine gatherings in women’s homes, outings, and other social events. Women maintain a level of modesty in both veiling and behaviour when men are present. As a female, I was able to spend time with Somali women at social events and in their homes and my presence did not constrain interactions. By contrast, my conversations with men were often more restrained and formal and I could not be involved in their everyday lives. Further, as Somali women more frequently access MRC services than men, the majority of my clients were women.24

The ages of the women who participated in the interviews ranged from 19 to 65. The average age of women was mid-thirties. All the women who participated in the research had come to Australia after the beginning of the civil war in 1990. Most entered Australia via the Humanitarian and Refugee program and some were nominated for Family visas25 by relatives who had previously gained entry as a refugee. Despite their common ‘refugee’ status, women’s backgrounds were diverse; some had lived as nomads, others grew up in Somalia’s cities, and their socio-economic background and levels of education were varied. Malyun selected most of the women for interview, and she was mindful of choosing women who also had different life-circumstances in Melbourne. Some women had arrived in Australia only a few months prior to interviews and others had been resident for several years. Some women had extensive family in Australia and others came here alone and had no support from a partner or family. All of the women who participated in the study were

24 Two-thirds of MRC North East Somali clients are women (source: MRC NE database).
25 Family visas are offered predominantly on the basis of the family relationship to a sponsor in Australia. Immediate family, such as spouses, dependent children, and interdependent partners, receive priority in this stream. Parent visas are subject to capped annual levels (DIMIA, 2002a).
practising Muslims and, as I describe later, Islam was central to their sense of self and the ways that they managed their lives.

RESEARCH METHODS

Traditional ethnographies have been based on the pretence that the researcher is an invisible screen through which data are objectively filtered and recorded (Schepet-Hughes, 1992: 23). Authorial objectivity masks the vagaries of ethnographic encounters behind polished and neat constructs. The publication of Clifford and Marcus’s edited collection, Writing Culture: The Poetics of Politics and Ethnography (1986), is regarded as a turning point in anthropological representation. There is now a strong concern in much ethnographic writing to document the path, presence and impact of the ethnographer in fieldwork and representation of ‘data’ (Abu-Lughod, 1986; Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Crapanzano, 1980; Punch, 1998; Schepet-Hughes, 1992; Rabinow, 1977). In the following account of the research methods, I explore some salient factors that set the boundaries of what I could and could not explore.

The aims of the research were best suited to qualitative approaches. Oakley suggests that qualitative methods are not concerned with quantities of experience, but allow exploration of the quality of experience through the study of meanings and processes (Oakley, 1992: 17). The methods I discuss below – interviews, group discussion, observation – are the bread and butter of much anthropological and other social research. Each method informed and supported others, to create an iterative process that could produce an ethnographic understanding of women’s lives.

In ethnographic research, the practices, tools and methods used are entwined with and shaped by contexts and circumstances. The pace of research ebbed and flowed as circumstances changed. For example, Islam shaped the course of the research on a daily
level. Interviews were frequently halted so women could pray. During the month of Ramadan, which in 2000 took place between November 27 and December 27, we carried out few interviews as women were focused on religious practice, and were fasting between dawn and dusk. The research methods unfolded with the setting of each day and as the fieldwork progressed. They were altered to best suit each situation and adapted as I gained new understandings and began to see weaknesses or difficulties with my original research intentions.

**Interviews and group discussions**

In September 2000, Malyun and I began interviews and group discussions in which we explored women’s experiences of displacement and resettlement. The narratives that emerged form the core of this thesis, and provide a focus and thematic framework for other data. Byron Good states:

> Narrative is a form in which experience is represented and recounted, in which events are presented as having a meaningful and coherent order, in which activities and events are described along with the experiences associated with them and the significance that lends them their sense for the persons involved (Good, 1994: 139).

Part of the appeal of collecting women’s narratives lies in the simple view that we learn about people through the stories they tell us about their lives. This is because narratives are built around lived experiences and present the ways that people understand their own lives (Kirkman, In Press; MacIntyre, 1981). As Kirkman (Kirkman and Rosenthal, 1999; Kirkman, 2002) writes, narratives give meaning to our identities, the life we have already lived, and the life we hope or expect to live.

Narrative theory has been broadly used across disciplines and thematic areas. Its origins lie in literary criticism, but narrative theory is now used and developed by psychologists, philosophers, historians, sociologists, and anthropologists. This vast body of work can not

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26 Prayer, five times each day, is one of the five duties of Islam (the others being declaration of faith, giving of alms, fasting, and pilgrimage to Mecca). The prayers comprise of prescribed verses recited in Arabic at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and nightfall (MRC North East: 1999b).
be reviewed or analysed here. However, a stream of writing on narrative has emerged within anthropological research, in particular amongst those who explore narratives of health and illness. Early’s (1982, 1985, 1988) work on ‘therapeutic’ narratives in Cairo focused on stories about illness and care-seeking told by women in the traditional quarter of Cairo. Early argues that by listening to everyday stories of illness, she allowed women to develop an interpretation of health and sickness in relation to a local explanatory logic and the biographic context of illness. Mattingly (1989) uses narrative theory to explore how American occupational therapists organise their practice and clinical encounters. She argues that clinicians give shape to their work and clinical experience by placing the illness experience of patients and their therapeutic work within a narrative structure. Kleinman (1988) argues that cultural values and social relations shape the experience of the body and sickness. Consequently, illness is organised in narrative forms that are concerned with local moral worlds. His work on sickness in North America and China demonstrates the importance of narrative as a framework for illness experience. As a final example, Good (1994) argues that ‘disease as embedded in life can only be represented through a creative conceptual response. Its “thereness” in the body must be rendered “there” in the life. And this process, even more that the referential or “locutionary” processes of biomedical representation, requires an aesthetic response, an active, synthetic process of constituting in an effort to grasp what is certainly there but is indeterminate in form’ (Good, 1994: 163). In other words, much of what we learn about culture and illness is reflected in the narratives that people tell to make sense of their experience.

Narrative-based research has also been used in anthropological studies of refugees. The narrative mode of thought allows people to organise the disrupted experience of exile and resettlement. Narratives enable a creative and moral interpretation of disruption, and this helps people to make sense of the world by drawing together disparate aspects of experience into a coherent whole (Becker, 1997: 25). For example, Hones’ (2001) study of Hmong refugees in the US explores narrative identity and the connection between religion, language, and culture. Through narrative research, Hones teases out the impact of
conversion to Christianity to Hmong family relationships. Kuza (1997) explores the narrative mode of thought in the story of a man who tries to emigrate from communist Czechoslovakia. Kuza focuses on the man’s attempts to construct a worthy social identity and explores the contradictions within his narrative. And in her study of Hutu refugees, Malkki (1995a) uses narrative theory to explore the ‘narrative construction of their historicity’. She suggests that all the different, specific tellings of historical events can be read as variations on shared grand narratives.

Following from narrative research, such as those examples cited above, I approached interviews as a method for collecting women’s narratives about their lives. I refer to narrative as a mode of thought through which accounts are constructed to make sense of experience.27 The interviews took place over eleven months, from September 2000 to July 2001, and were conducted with forty-two women. Four women spoke with us on two or more occasions. Interviews with thirty-three of the women were conducted in Somali; Malyun acted as an interpreter on twenty-nine occasions and a family member interpreted for the other four. The other nine interviews were conducted in English. Interviews took from forty-five minutes to six and a half hours, depending on the amount women wanted to talk and the number of interruptions and breaks. The composition of interviews included individuals, pairs, and a few larger groups of three or more women.

All the interviews were unstructured, but followed key themes set out in a loose interview-guide (see Appendix 2). The interview guide was initially developed through consideration of relevant literature, discussions with Malyun, and some informal conversations with Somali women prior to beginning the field research. As the research progressed, the interviews became increasingly open-ended, allowing women to direct the course of conversations, and thereby enabling new issues to come to light.

27 Kirkman (2002a) and Bruner (1986) discuss the narrative mode of thought.
The majority of interviews were conducted in women’s homes, their own or a friend’s. Many of the women we spoke with knew about the research topic before the interviews; people who had been involved in an interview let others know about the research, and some knew about my research interests through conversations with me at the MRC. Nonetheless, before beginning each interview Malyun explained the research themes: their lives in Somalia, their experiences of displacement, resettlement in Australia, and how their experiences affect their emotional well-being. Malyun also asked whether I could tape-record or take notes during interviews. A few women preferred that I take notes only, but some later insisted that I put on the tape-recorder in order that everything would be documented. During interviews, I was occasionally asked to stop recording. These intervals were usually short and occurred if issues were considered too private or volatile to be documented, as was sometimes the case with respect to sexual relations, dissatisfaction with the current immigration program, or community politics. This negotiation around documenting and recording interviews suggests that women had an awareness of the research process, a sense of presenting their stories to a wider audience, and an understanding of issues of consent in that they decided what aspects of their lives to share.

I began the interviews by asking an initial question such as, ‘Can you tell me your story of coming to live in Melbourne?’ or ‘Can you talk about your life in Somalia?’ One afternoon Malyun and I dropped by Isir’s house to see if she had time to speak with us. She welcomed us in to her living room. While we sipped cups of tea, Malyun explained the themes of the research. Isir carefully curled her feet up underneath herself on the chair, checked that the tape recorder was running, and began:

   My story is worth the story of ten women. Life was good until 1990. From the beginning of the civil war that went from 1991 to 1998, all I can say is that I have died . . .

The narratives that emerged in this interview and others were a significant source for learning about women’s lives.
Many women talked without hesitation and their narratives were based around themes and events that held importance for them. I prompted other women with questions about certain themes or events, so as to maintain the flow of conversation if they became uncertain about the course their narratives should take. The non-directive nature of conversations and the open-ended questions allowed women to form accounts in their own words, around themes and events that they deemed most interesting and central to their lives.

At the end of interviews, I asked women if they had anything to add or any questions to ask. Many women were curious about my own life - whether I had a partner, how large my family was – and their questions were sometimes around quite ‘private’ issues such as sex and love. Others asked about the research process. I answered these questions openly (just as I had hoped women would talk with me openly), often resulting in funny situations as women teased me, for example, about having a partner and still not having children. A number of women simply thanked us for listening.

During interviews, Somali women were given the opportunity to tell their own life stories. Omidian worked with Afghan refugees in California, and writes that case studies28 'illustrate the rapid changes in social identity and role shifts that refugees undergo from a personal perspective and with contextual information' (Omidian, 1994: 158). Somali women talked of life in Somalia, and their accounts included not only information about memorable events, but also information about their socio-economic status, family, and household compositions. Women spoke of their endurance of the civil war, fleeing Somalia, and living in refugee camps and other countries of asylum. Women also spoke of their expectations and the realities of life in Australia. Their narratives not only ordered and attributed meaning to past experiences, but were also about their hopes and imagined futures.29 The

28 Omidian (1994) writes that a ‘life history’ gives personal background, historical context, and the details of individual lives. She defines a ‘case-study’ as a shortened version of a life history, which can be used to illustrate specific issues. The notion of a ‘case-study’ is also used to translate people’s accounts of lives or experiences into a disciplinary discourse (e.g. medicine, psychiatry), thus stripping it of its humanity and originality.

29 In his discussion of ‘subjunctivising’ Ricoeur (1980) explores this idea of imagined ends in depth.
account I was given by each woman was only one of a range of possible narratives that she could have told. Women could have told their stories differently, or could have focused on different events of meanings. The important thing is that their narratives were important and meaningful at the time of telling.

Numerous casual or informal conversations took places over the research period in women’s homes, in cars while driving around Melbourne, and at the MRC. These conversations were often about everyday topics and personal circumstances and led to a broader understanding of women’s lives. I also went to a number of information sessions for Somali women, organised by Malyun. The themes of these discussions included parenting, discrimination, understanding the Goods and Services Tax (GST),

30 housing issues, and depression. Each information session was attended by between seven to twelve women. They were good fora in which to hear women talk about specific issues in an environment and context that was different from that of the formal interviews.

**Group discussions**

Focus group discussions are widely used as a method in qualitative research. Writers on research methods suggest that the purpose of focus group discussions is to obtain general information about beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour (Dawson et al., 1993; Hudelson, 1994; Patton, 1990) and to inform and confirm other data (Bernard, 1994). As mentioned previously, on a few occasions we spoke with a number of women at a time. These group discussions, however, were not ‘focus group discussions’ with explicit methodological aims such as those referred to above; rather, they were haphazard, the product of circumstance. Sometimes we went to a woman’s house and the too-many pairs of shoes at the door and sounds of talking gave away the presence of more women than anticipated, and so we took the opportunity to hold a group discussion. On other occasions, a discussion that started with one woman became a group discussion as family and friends arrived and offered their own

30 The GST was introduced to Australia in 2001, and the prices of many goods and services changed, and this lead to much confusion about the expected cost of daily living.
views and experiences. The composition of groups changed as people arrived at and left the house, went to the kitchen to prepare food, or unrolled mats on the floor and began prayers.

Further, group discussions could hardly be described as focused. The conversation veered between general commentary on life in Somalia before the war or views of Australian society, to people’s individual experiences of displacement and resettlement, to aspirations for the future. Sometimes I directed discussions by asking broad questions such as: ‘What was life like in Somalia?’, ‘What are the hard things and what are the good things about life in Australia?’ or ‘What is a refugee?’ Other times, topics of discussion were only tangentially related to the research themes, but I was happy to listen to the natural course of conversation rather than trying to maintain a focus upon specific themes. Some of the women’s words were inevitably lost as Malyun tried to translate the animated and often overlapping conversation. Even so, in all of the group discussions, as in interviews, each woman was given the opportunity to tell her own story of life in Somalia through to life in Melbourne.

Impromptu group discussions encouraged women to talk about their experiences. Women felt comfortable and open, particularly as friendships within the groups were established. Further, I avoided the logistical arrangements of recruitment, finding an appropriate time and place, and anxiety that people would not show up. The emergence of differing views, however, was especially fruitful and group discussions provided an opportunity for women to tease out divergencies in their experiences. In one instance, a number of women began to present their memories of Somalia as a harmonious and beautiful nation. Hawa interjected their conversation in outrage and told me:

Somali people don’t tell you true, I tell you true . . . People are lying about how life was. Women would get pregnant and would have to carry water, the shopping on their shoulders. There were other children in the house to care for. The services were really poor, especially health services.
She continued to describe how Somalia was a society that fostered inequality and violence, and where women were oppressed. The emotion of the ensuing tussle in the conversation revealed the importance of the nostalgia that many have for Somalia. After Hawa’s accusation of dishonesty, the conversation remained unresolved, the other women committed to their memory of Somalia as a beautiful place.

**Listening to women’s narratives**

Interviewing was not a tool that I used to produce an ethnographic account of the truth of women’s experience. Bruner argues that reinterpretation is constantly taking place in narrative accounts which makes people’s stories unstable; susceptible to cultural, interpersonal and linguistic influences (Bruner, 1987). Research that explores narratives must allow for changes in meaning, experience and explanations (Crapanzano, 1980; Kirkman, 1997; Kirkman and Rosenthal, 1999; Scheper-Hughes, 1992; Wikan, 1996).

Accepting changes and reinterpretations is particularly salient in relation to narrative research with refugee populations. When people apply for refugee and humanitarian application visas for Australia, they are required to write about their experiences of persecution, how they left their country, and what they think will happen to them if they return. If they are selected, they go through a rigorous interviewing process to ascertain the truthfulness of their accounts. Narrative research is very different from this process; it accepts multiple meanings and interpretations of events (Bruner, 1987; Kirkman, 1997; Kirkman, 2002). Women’s narrative versions of their lives involved selecting, omitting, and ordering elements of experience. I was not concerned, however, with the veracity of women’s accounts, but to explore the way in which women gave meaning and order to their lives.

Further, these narratives were produced in the interactive encounter between me, Malyun (usually), and the Somali women with whom we talked. This study is consequently
saturated with and defined by the relationships, imagination and understandings of all involved:

The story-of-a-life as told to a particular person is in some deep sense a joint product of the teller and the told. Selves . . . can only be revealed in a transaction between a teller and a told, and . . . whatever topic one approaches by interviewing must be evaluated in the light of that transaction (Bruner, 1990: 124-25).

As a result of the nature of qualitative methods, research is shaped by personalities, political and social location of informants and researchers in the community, research agendas, values and sympathies, and methods (Abu-Lughod, 1986: 10; Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Omidian, 1994). In their edited book *After Writing Culture* (1997) James, Hockey, and Dawson explore the links between theory, research, and political positioning and argue that anthropology is institutionally, historically, and politically-situated writing.

In Gadamer’s formulation, ‘the standpoint that is beyond any standpoint . . . is pure illusion’ (Gadamer, 1975: 339). Accordingly, the standpoint, perspective, and identity of a social researcher always have bearing upon the research process and findings. Multiple levels of identity impacted on this research. Sometimes I was a guest to be entertained, at other times a researcher who was willing to hear about the horrors of the war. Many of the tales that women told me arose because I am an outsider to Somali culture: women explained the traditional life of nomads, traditional Somali food, and the reasons for generosity and support in social interaction amongst Somalis. Some women were happy to participate in interviews, as they valued education and sought to assist me in my research degree. Being seen as young, a few older women took me under their wings, and my questions came across not as threatening or invasive, but as curious and naïve. I heard that some of these women referred to me as ‘the little white girl’ (a name for which I had ambivalent feelings at best). I also had a sense of rapport with younger women because of the commonality of our age. Many women knew of and noticed my friendship with Malyun and her two young girls, and this led to their placing greater trust in me. As a woman, I was also able to participate in social events that preclude men. Some women framed their narratives in ways
that enabled them to later request help from Malyun and me at the MRC. James, Hockey and Dawson write that 'the making of anthropological representations can... be seen as the final outcome of a complex process of liaison between the informant and the researcher' (James et al., 1997: 11). In this research, my many identities referred to above – guest, researcher, settlement support worker, young woman, friend, female – all came into play in shaping the course of the research.

Women presented their narratives in the understanding that, as a listener and researcher, I was taking in and interpreting their accounts. As Kirkman (2002b) emphasises, narrative is both an interpretation for oneself and a presentation that is negotiated with other individuals and groups. Accordingly, people have different emphases and versions of narratives within different contexts. A few women expressed concerned that their narratives of war would be traumatic for me, and suggested that they change topics after seeing the distress in my face. Others wanted to present a rosy picture of life in Somalia and tensions arose if someone spoke of a grimmer reality. In an interview with two women, Zaynab began to describe the Somali civil war, saying:

When the people started to fight it spread and everyone became involved. The fighting touched us all – looting, killing, rape, inter-tribal relationships turned bad. The warlords started to fight, then their tribes fight and it goes to everyone. We were all affected.

At this point, Ifrah became visibly agitated and she and Zaynab began to argue. Ifrah did not want to present Somalia and Somali people in a bad light, but Zaynab argued that I knew about the war already so it made no difference. Ifrah started to put things in her handbag, readjusted her veils, and shuffled in her seat. Zaynab continued to talk, but she turned the topic to life in Australia. After several minutes, Ifrah regained her calm and began to speak again.

Narrations are inter-subjective processes, requiring narrators and audiences. In order to constitute narrative, a story must be appropriated by a reader or audience (Good, 1994: 143).
Iser (1978: 21) argues that, 'the reader “receives” [the message of the text] by composing it.' As a listener, I added a layer of interpretation and composition to narrated tales by entering imaginatively into the story and reading meanings and signification. For example, when women told me of the civil war in Somalia, their experiences of violence were not comprehensible to me in practical terms. My mind played out their stories in imagined landscapes and located them in moral terms of injustice and violation. Silences within women's narratives were also created by my selective focus on certain themes and aspects of women's lives. And so, I left my own fingerprints on women's accounts.

**Silence speaks volumes**

In the discussion above, I have explored how women gave voice to their experiences. It is also important to think about the significance of silences: what women did not to say, and what they could not say. Poland and Pederson (1998: 305-9) suggest that the silence of interviewees may arise because topics are deemed irrelevant, a person may lack the words to articulate something or lack the requisite understanding in which to frame things, or because some issues seem so obvious that they 'go without saying'. In neo-positivist methodology, the researcher's role is to discover that which is hidden, deemed irrelevant, or kept secret, and to illuminate these discoveries with scientific scrutiny (Mitchell, 1991: 97). A classic text on ethnographic interviewing states explicitly that a principle of interviewing is to 'keep informants talking' (Spradley, 1979: 80). During this research, many women's narratives were punctuated by silence, particularly around the civil war and refugee camps. However, I did not seek to draw out the 'data' behind silence and determine what was left unsaid, but respected women's right to decide whether, and to what extent, to relate experiences. Here, I reflect on the possible significance of silences in women's narratives.

Ardener writes of muted ideologies that refer not to verbal silence, but to speech that masks alternative ideologies that can only be heard by paying attention to other spheres of expression (Ardener, 1975). For example, in *Silencing the Past*, Trouillot (1995) writes that where there is silence, there must also be silencing. He cites the silences around the
revolution in Haiti at the turn of the 19th century. While the revolution is historically recorded as the result of the singular struggle of the African-born slave – Sans Souci – against his French master, it was in fact a fragmented saga with many different factions and trajectories. Trouillot argues that any historical narrative is a ‘particular bundle of silences’, and the result is a text that lies somewhere between truth and fiction. Along these lines, Batalia (2000) draws upon feminist historiography to give an account of the Partition of India. She writes, ‘there is little doubt that in the history of Partition, the stories of women, children, scheduled castes and many others have been silenced both at the level of the State and at the level of history writings’ (Batalia, 2000: 278). Both Batalia and Trouillot argue that beneath accepted and monolithic versions of history, there are muted voices with their own stories and perspectives.

Silence is not simply non-speech or the product of muting; it can also be an aspect of communication. Tannen writes, ‘silence can be a matter of saying nothing and meaning something’ (Tannen, 1985: 97). Swedenburg, for example, has remarked on the omissions in narrative accounts when conducting interviews with Palestinian men who fought in the 1936-39 anti-colonial revolt. Interviewees were unwilling to talk of certain topics because they feared retribution from Jewish colonists, and because they wanted to revise the conflict as directed strictly against British colonialism and not the Jewish people (Swedenburg, 1995). In his ethnography of violence in Sri Lanka, Charred Lullabies (1996), Daniel writes of the silences around the complexity of ethnic identity. The ‘Estate Tamils’ of Sri Lanka include actual or potential Indian citizens. Jaffna Tamils choose to include the Estate Tamils under a single Tamil rubric only in times of crisis in order to force Indian intervention during anti-Tamil riots. By contrast, the Sinhalas always view the Jaffna and Estate Tamils as having a single stereotypical identity. Daniel argues that the Sinhala and Jaffna Tamils maintain silence around the complexity of identity in Sri Lanka to serve their own political purposes. Studies of popular memory and history as a cultural construction, such as these, suggest that narratives, and the silences and omissions they entail, play an essential part in
the construction of people’s past and identities (Malkki, 1995a; Swedenburg, 1995; Wright, 1985).

In this research, many women presented a nostalgic view of a past moral order, tradition, community, and culture. In chapter 4, I describe how daily life in Somalia was widely recounted as infused with solidarity, sharing, and support:

In Somalia life was good. I come from Mogadishu. We went to the cinema, visited friends, ate out almost every night at people’s houses, gathered to talk. We have beautiful beaches in Somalia that stretch up the coast, and we went swimming. We used to play games. In the evenings all the neighbours would bring stools in front of their houses and talk to each other. The kids would play together. As women we also used to become part of our husband’s world and spend time with his friends and became friends with their wives. It was relaxed. But here we have no husbands. Many are lost or gone. (Ayan)

I recurrently heard narratives of community, connectedness and social support. The silence around hardships in Somalia, in contrast, was striking. Few women mentioned social inequality, difficulties, clan rivalry, or experiences of sadness in Somalia, despite reference to these in earlier ethnographies and histories. The refrain, ‘in Somalia, life was good’, was constant. This configuration of life in Somalia provided a social and moral framework with which to compare the hardships of everyday life in Melbourne. Silence and omission offered a way to bring the force of imagination into narratives, a way to rework and revise memory to create a more acceptable and desirable past.

There were also silences around specific experiences that women found difficult to recount, share, or talk about. Recollecting the war was sometimes distressing for women. Others avoided describing their experiences of war, moving swiftly from narratives of pre-war Somalia to arrival in Australia. Kristeva suggests that, ‘not naming the nameable’ is a way to prevent experience from becoming grafted onto identity. When people are faced with monstrous and painful sights and experiences of war and conflict, there is a feeling that
silence alone is appropriate. She writes, ‘our symbolic means find themselves hollowed out, nearly wiped out, paralysed. On the edge of silence the word ‘nothing’ emerges, a discreet defense in the face of so much disorder, both internal and external, incommensurable’ (Kristeva, 1987: 223). In one interview, Naima whispered that she couldn’t talk of her husband, killed before her eyes in the war six years ago. She talked only of her loneliness, her lack of support, the hardship of raising children without a father. Other women who wanted to talk about the war did so with startling detachment, describing it as a series of events and processes entailing generalised and abstract details, without emotional edge. Even with this verbal silence around emotional experience, the sadness, trauma, and memory of terror was often manifest as tears, or visible efforts to re-order memory into a less disturbing sequence.

Women’s narratives are not historical testimonies of the totality of their experiences of displacement and resettlement. I accepted silences within narratives out of respect for women’s integrity. I also understood silence as a form of communication that enabled women to construct their narratives in meaningful and acceptable ways.

**Working with an interpreter**

Due to the time constraints of doctoral research, I was unable to learn Somali to a level that would be adequate for conversation and to carry out interviews. My rudimentary knowledge of Somali and the limited English language skills of many Somali women meant that I relied on Malyun to interpret for most of the interviews. The use of interpreters is widely regarded as fraught with difficulties (Edwards, 1998: 197). There are concerns about the accuracy of translation (Baker et al., 1991), losing control of the interview situation, and the effect of the position of the interpreter within an ethnic group on the responses of interviewees (Freed, 1988). At first, I found my dependence upon Malyun to act as an interpreter frustrating and ‘fraught with difficulties’. Conversations seemed to be significantly structured by the possibilities and constraints of interpreting. I could become peripheral to conversations, could not understand everything, and it seemed that not everything being said was
translated. There was some solace in reflecting on the ways in which my own experience of
being unable to understand or join in with conversations mirrored that of non-English
speaking Somali women and their engagement (or the lack thereof) with other Australians.

Literature on interpreting includes various suggestions to minimise technical problems with
interpreters. These include interpreter-interviewee ‘matching’, assessment of interpreter
skills, and a training or induction process to ensure that issues of confidentiality and the
interpreter’s passive role are understood. In order for a researcher to maintain control during
interviews, a triangular seating arrangement is suggested, and the researcher is encouraged
to maintain eye-contact with the interviewee in order to prevent a ‘psychosocial coalition’
forming between the interpreter and the interviewee with the researcher becoming isolated.
It is also recommended that the interpreter use first person (direct speech) and maintain

The aim of such approaches is to control the interpreter and to render her or him invisible.
Edwards critiques the typical terms of ‘interviewing through an interpreter’, the interpreter
as ‘a conduit’, ‘a neutral mouthpiece’, and an ‘agent for transferring messages’ (Edwards,
1998: 202). The aim behind this approach is to maintain a supposedly detached and value-
free research position. Reflexive social research critiques this model, and argues that
researchers should acknowledge their own role and influence in fieldwork and textual
representation. This critical reflexivity should be extended to the role of interpreters.

Malyun did not merely act as an invisible interpreter, but also as a key informant and a co-
researcher. She was able to pursue sensitively issues that I might have left, or reframed my
questions so that they were more appropriate. We discussed research questions, and I asked
her to talk me through comments (and silences) that I felt I hadn’t grasped. I was not using
an interpreter, but working with an interpreter, informant, and co-researcher.
Acknowledging this enhanced the interview process, as Malyun and I were able to work
together and bring different skills to the research. Her presence gave many women the
confidence to talk to me. She also remained involved in analysing the interviews, as we compared our views of women's narratives and talked about issues we regarded as important to the research.

However, as a member of the 'Somali community', Malyun suspected that some women might be reticent to divulge sensitive details about their lives in her presence, such as clan divisions, family conflict, or mental health concerns. Malyun encouraged me to talk alone with a number of women who spoke English. These were generally younger women who had learnt English on arrival, or older women who spoke some English before migrating to Australia. On these occasions, women's narratives did not take on an openness that had not been possible with Malyun acting as interpreter. The dynamic changed to some extent – for example, women took more time to explain the details of their homeland and culture – but there was no new narrative emphasis upon clan conflict or personal lives. This suggests that Malyun's presence did not constrain the responses of women during interviews.

**Observation**

Conventional anthropology has dictated that participating in a community is integral to understanding the meanings and experiences that constitute a cultural world. Abu-Lughod (1986: 22) argues that living in the social world that one is studying allows the researcher to come to grasp more immediately how social worlds work and how members understand it. Participation in community and social activities brought richness to my understanding of women's lives. Amongst other things, I went to women's gatherings and celebrations, shared meals in people's homes, attended information sessions for Somalis, and helped women negotiate Office of Housing applications. These activities were not a means to collect data about specific individual's lives, but the conversations, observation, and emergence of relationships with different women led to broader understanding and reflection.
Most of the interviews were conducted in women’s homes, and greater depth of understanding was gained by watching aspects of women’s lives take place around me. After most interviews, I wrote notes about aspects of conversations that could not be captured through transcription of words alone – women’s gestures, activities that took place around me, and things I felt and thought about what had been said or done.

(Field-note excerpt – November 2000)

Yesterday I spent hours in a room full of women, sitting amidst dynamic and raucous talk and laughter, but I was sad that I didn’t understand the meaning of their words. I tried to be patient, to sit back, drink the interminable cups of too-sweet milky tea and eat a plate piled high with pasta and meat. I played with the kids who looked at me with their beautiful and curious big eyes, while the baby dribbled milk down my top. Sometimes I found myself being distracted by the background noise of television. I watched women come and go. Hakimo’s son came in, unrolled the prayer mat, and carried out his prayers, children careered between outstretched arms, the women talked and laughed. Moments of frustration passed as I listened to Somali words that registered as familiar but largely non-meaningful sounds, but then I remembered the value of being able to watch part of women’s lives going on around me.

The opportunity to share informal time in women’s homes and social spaces was invaluable. Working in social settings of displacement and resettlement, however, invites questioning of anthropological concepts of participant observation. A significant barrier to participant observation is that, as refugees, Somali women’s life-worlds extend to spaces and experiences beyond the reach of ethnographic observation or participation. I could never share the traumas and hardships of civil war, displacement, and resettlement, be subject to racism as they are, or live in the knowledge that I could not return to my country and life as it was before war. One evening, Ismahan asked me about my family, and I explained that they live overseas. She responded:

If you haven’t got a family here, then you still feel distressed because they are not around you, there is no person that is there for you in the country. And that is also
why many Somali women get depressed. Imagine, though, if you face civil war, or your sister or family is dead from the war, or you lost your family. Women feel this stress. You left places by choice and you can go back someday, but with a civil war it is different. This one is without choice.

Ismahan suggests that while I could empathise with Somali women’s experience of family separation, I could never have a participatory understanding. My participant observation was limited by the reality that refugees are displaced; a researcher from a non-refugee background can never share many aspects of their lives.

ETHICS AND ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Conducting social research always involves ethical issues and dilemmas. Ethics clearance for the research was obtained from The University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee. In this ethics submission I addressed a broad range of issues. Here, I discuss informed consent, confidentiality, and benefit to participants.

Informed consent
In accordance with the requirements of the Human Research Ethics Committee, I developed an information sheet about the purpose and themes of the research and a consent form and these were translated into Somali (see Appendix 3). However, ethnographic research involves unpredictable activities and evolving relationships, and during this research the formalised ethical procedures often turned out to be inappropriate. The unplanned nature of many interviews and group discussions made it difficult to maintain formal and rigorous ethical procedures for consent. Sometimes we would visit a house to talk with one woman and in the course of a conversation, others would arrive and contribute their own tales and opinions. Other times we went to women’s homes to visit, and they began talking about their lives spontaneously. Nonetheless, Malyun and I always explained the purpose of the research, ensured that women understood their identity was confidential, and asked their
consent to either tape-record or take notes during interviews. Women preferred to give consent by verbal agreement, particularly during group discussions when the changing composition of a group as visitors and family came and left the room meant that the flurry of consent forms would have been disruptive and overly formal. As illustrated earlier, women signalled their awareness of the consent process through negotiation about taping and documenting interviews and through their determination of the course of conversations.

While women gave consent to participate in the research and were keen to talk about and share their opinions, experiences and memories, I understood that this did not mean women had consented to answer all my questions or discuss all the research themes. Sometimes questions were too difficult for women to discuss, or the silence around a topic indicated that it would be inappropriate to ask women to talk about it. While I rarely reiterated women’s right to withdraw from an interview, I respected their discretion in deciding whether, and to what extent, to participate in conversations.

Confidentiality
Maintaining the confidentiality of women’s identity has been important, particularly as many Somali women living in Melbourne’s northern region are known to each other and their narratives were often personal and sensitive. During interviews, many women talked of a loss of trust since the war, and their reluctance to share the details of their lives with other women. This underscored the importance that women not be identified by name in written analysis. The interviews were conducted in the privacy of women’s homes, save for two that were conducted in interview rooms at the MRC. During group discussions, women made their own choices about the details they wanted to share. Women were invited to choose a pseudonym to replace their real names in the written transcripts and in this thesis, and identifying details have been altered. Confidentiality has been protected in the use and storage of data.
Benefit to participants

At the very least, we have to confront the complexities of our relations to our subject, texts, and audiences – especially because the impact of our work is never fully foreseeable. This not only demands a serious regard, once again, for contexts, our own as much as those we study. It also calls for a careful consideration of the real implications of what we do, a consideration that must go far beyond the now routine recognition that our writings are potential instruments of ‘othering’.

(Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992: 12)

Social research should benefit the population or group of people on whom it focuses. During the research and writing phase, I often asked myself how the study might benefit the women with whom I worked, and more broadly, how it might benefit the Somali community in Melbourne. I anticipate that the research findings will increase awareness about Somali women’s experiences of displacement and resettlement. In writing this thesis I have tried to honestly present women’s narratives and aspects of their lives. Key findings have been presented verbally to various service providers. I have also presented papers based on the research findings at three conferences, and I have written a number of articles and chapters for publication. On completion of my doctorate studies, I plan to develop a summary report that will be disseminated to service providers working with Somali people. Through this thesis, papers, reports, and presentations, I have documented and disseminated the research findings.

Further, I have viewed the research not only as an anthropological study culminating in analysis and presentation of the findings, but also as a field of action. Scheper-Hughes

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11 These include the Women’s Mental Health Network, the Migrant Resource Centre North East Settlement Team, and NEAMI.
critiques a view of ethical anthropological method as being potentially transformative of the self, but not the 'other' as the subject should be 'reached without showing itself touched' (Schepet-Hughes, 1992: 24). She asks, 'How can people interact without leaving any trace? And should anthropology be a disciplinary study that aims to leave communities and fieldwork sites untainted?'

The World Health Organization (WHO, 1999) report, *Putting Women First: Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Research on Domestic Violence against Women*, states that one way to ensure that participants benefit from research is to involve direct service groups from the outset. Through our work at the MRC, Malyun and I were able to respond actively to some of the themes and concerns raised in interviews. Accounts of resettlement in Melbourne were often coloured by hardships, loneliness and depression. When women talked about specific resettlement concerns, such as housing and immigration, we offered assistance in our capacity of settlement caseworkers. We also used the research findings in community development programs that aimed to strengthen social networks and address resettlement problems. Malyun organised and ran a number of information sessions and group discussions for Somali women on specific themes, including parenting, emotional well-being, and discrimination. Malyun and I also organised social outings, such as picnics and lunches, in response to women's sense of isolation and loneliness.

Many Somali women have experienced the trauma of war and loss of family. I anticipated that the interviews could be an opportunity for women to give voice to their experiences in a safe and supportive environment. Psychiatric literature suggests that for survivors of torture and trauma, simply recounting their experiences can provide effective symptomatic relief (Thompson and McGorry, 1995; Young, 1993). Young (1993), in his study of the Institute for the Treatment of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder for US Veterans, discusses how therapists refer to the act of narration as 'processing an event' or simply 'working'. These therapists view the transformation of disordered psychic structures to acceptable and ordered narratives as central to the therapeutic process. Other analyses of trauma have also
characterised narrative as a means by which survivors of war work through experience and painful memories and recover meaning. In his recent work on Holocaust memory, LaCapra (1994) argues that in working through traumatic pasts, 'one component of the process is the attempt to elaborate a hybridized narrative that does not avoid analysis . . . it requires the effort to achieve a critical distance on experience'. Felman and Laub (1992) insist that traumatic memories need to be legitimised and narratively integrated into people's lives in order that they lose hold over the person who suffered the traumatising event. Sturken (1999) writes that the work of confronting traumatic memories is to give them representational form and to integrate them into one's life narrative. And Herman writes, 'The goal of recounting the trauma is integration . . . The fundamental premise of the psychotherapeutic work is a belief in the restorative power of truth-telling' (Herman, 1992: 181). Conversely, Kristeva does not view voiced elaboration of emotional worlds as a cathartic process, but as one that forces the person to return continually to an awareness of their depression, so that 'they keep turning it over, helplessly' (Kristeva, 1987: 46). Similarly, some clinical research suggests that the retrospective questioning that is characteristic of psychiatric therapy causes post-traumatic symptoms to intensify (Boehnlein et al., 1985).

Given this uncertainty around the benefit of recounting traumatic experience, I did not push women to talk about distressing themes or events. Many women welcomed the opportunity to talk about difficult experiences, but others avoided distressing events entirely, and others still spoke of the war in a tone that sounded as if they were compelled but gained neither benefit nor relief in so doing. It was important to offer women the chance to talk about trauma and war; the decision to do so was theirs.

The effect of research on the researcher

Social research always involves ethical issues in relation to study groups and populations, however the impact of research upon researchers is rarely discussed. Omidian writes, 'work with refugees has special problems for the researcher because of the trauma that population
has experienced’ (Omidian, 1994: 171). There were many times during the research when I was distressed by stories of war, loss, death, and struggles with resettlement in Melbourne. However, I felt that talking about my distress would undermine the significance of women’s experience. I found that I was often thinking about the stories I heard, having nightmares, and imagining myself in the same situations. I sometimes cried during interviews and later, while transcribing interviews and notes, and felt guilty that there was nothing I could do to change women’s histories of enduring war and violence. This experience is not uncommon amongst people who work with refugees. Omidian writes of similar reactions when recording Afghan refugees’ stories:

My reactions to the interviews mirrored those of the refugees. I started having trouble sleeping and could not keep from thinking about the stories I had heard. I found myself bursting into tears whenever I tried to transcribe notes (Omidian, 1994: 172).

An extensive literature has emerged on the secondary traumatisation that is caused by clinical care of refugee survivors (Mollica, 2001). Secondary trauma can be an issue for researchers working with refugees as well as for clinicians and therapists. Dunn writes that researchers working with traumatised people can be traumatised themselves, and they should take steps to prepare in coping with the data they are collecting (Dunn, 1991). There were a number of ways that I reduced my anxiety and distress. Writing field-notes was a good way to express my reactions. I sometimes talked about interviews with my partner, supervisor, and Malyun, all trusted people who allowed me to ‘debrief’. Ongoing work at the MRC warded off feelings of helplessness, as Malyun and I worked to ensure that the research had applied benefit. Participation in positive aspects of Somali women’s lives also helped to maintain perspective, as their lives were shown to be much broader and richer than suggested by the horror of war. Further, women’s narratives involved much more than war, violence, loss and death. They included nostalgic memories and accounts of resilience, times of enjoyment and happiness, and good experiences of resettlement. These aspects of women’s lives were much more audible in interviews when I was not emotionally strained.
MANAGING AND ANALYSING THE ‘DATA’

During the research, I kept notes around events and thoughts that seemed significant (and insignificant). These notes primarily focused on things I was learning about Somali women and social relations – their past histories and current circumstances. Fieldnotes assisted me to maintain a level of awareness of what I was seeing and hearing, and provided a space to be honest and reflective about emergent themes and my own feelings about the work and research. I continued taking notes throughout the course of the research. I also went to meetings with numerous service providers and organisations that work with Somali people, such as the state branch of the Red Cross, the federal Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, Emergency and Public Housing agencies, and ethnic support workers from other organisations. I took notes about the opinions and issues raised in these meetings.

Tape recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and notes from interviews were typed up soon after the event and stored on computer files. After the first twenty or so interviews, I carried out a preliminary analysis to pull out key themes and ascertain if there were any issues that needed specific focus. The final analysis at the end of the interview phase was a way to make sense of the material and transcriptions. In analysing the interviews, I identified both chronological themes, such as memory of Somalia or experiences of resettlement, and longitudinal themes, such as identity, community and religion, and took note of both divergences and thematic unity. This process of analysis took several weeks and formed the framework for this thesis. I was ever conscious of the difficulty of reducing almost one and a half years of conversations, stories, transcriptions, memories, and field notes into a thematically coherent thesis. At some level, the process of analysing this experience felt like a violation of shared experiences, fraught with the possibility of misrepresentation and misunderstanding. Resisting this, I have tried to ensure that the final product is an honest interpretation and representation of the research findings.
PRESENTATION OF NARRATIVES

As the research progressed, I was struck by the degree of thematic convergence that emerged in women's narratives about life in Somalia, displacement and resettlement. The recurrent themes represent a kind of collective history. This collective history was not the outcome of 'oral testimonies' with common descriptions, evaluations, and details of events and processes. Rather, women's narratives encompassed shared moral and social themes. I also came to understand these collective histories as a way of validating and legitimising memories. For example, while women's memories of war were individual stories, they also entailed recurring themes that were cast in moral terms – the breakdown of social order, loss of trust within communities, chaos and danger. Certainly, there were many instances where women's narratives were filled with the specificities of their own experiences and interpretations. Where women's words on given themes or events were notable by their repetition, I wondered how best to represent their recurrence.

In Malkki's study of Hutu refugees in Tanzania, she writes that a compelling aspect of collecting narratives was the repetition and thematic unity with which refugees constructed a past and history with moral attachment to territory and the links between people, polity and homelands (Malkki, 1995a: 1). In this thesis, I draw upon Malkki's idea of using panels to represent thematic unity. Malkki describes panels as 'extended narrative passages clearly demarcated and set apart from the rest of the text'. These panels present a 'standardised historical narrative' and are a composite of either one person's words or several people's accounts of the same theme (Malkki, 1995a: 56-7). The panels presented in this thesis are constructed from various women's narratives and can be read as a composite of women's accounts on the same theme. The particular composition of each panel is explained in the footnotes. The narrative panels are presented here as blocks of writing set against a shaded background.
The panels are a useful device for emphasising the narrative construction of shared memory and experience, and representing the uniformity of utterances around some themes. The use of panels, however, has the disadvantage that it betrays the ‘dialogical’ ethic of acknowledging the presence of the researcher. Further, the panels present various narrative accounts as if there were a uniform standard version, and give little indication of variations within women’s words, experiences, and memories. I hope that the utility of panels in representing the prevalence of shared memory around some themes will outweigh the disadvantages.

The use of panels, however, should not undermine the advances made by more recent cultural and subaltern historians who challenge the very categories through which histories, particularly colonial pasts, have been constructed. Theorists of history - such as Ginzburg (1989), Jean and John Comaroff (1992), Davis (1995) and Guha (1997) - have argued that all social domains are sites of contest, culture is often a matter of dispute, and historical narration is always subject to the uneven social and political conditions of people’s lives, knowledge, and perspectives. History is made from the struggle between the diverse life worlds that coexist in given times and places (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992: 17) - between, as Bakhtin (1981) reminds us, the ‘tendentious languages’ that play against one another and against shared ‘totalities’.

In turn, anthropologists have taken great pains to reveal culture as a shifting semantic field, fluid symbolic production, and material practice as produced in ambiguous and complex ways. For example, Good’s study of people suffering from seizure disorders in Turkey shows how people’s stories of illness and healing experiences represent distinct, fluid, and often competing ways of composing the illness (Good, 1994). And Josephides (1997) explores the ways in which the Kewa people of Highland New Guinea construct their culture. She writes that the Kewa describe themselves in long and untidy narratives that bring together self-accounts and observations of other’s everyday lives. These accounts make untenable any singular or generalising picture of ‘Kewa culture’. As these examples
illustrate, from the view of contemporary anthropology, the thing to underscore in ethnography and other social representation is fluidity and sites of contest.

Alongside women’s systematic and consensual account of their histories and contemporary lives, were accounts of experience that diverged, mapping out alternative meanings and moralities. For example, women had different understandings of the meaning of the refugee label, diverse experiences of community following resettlement, and varied accounts of the causes of their emotional distress. In these instances, I have tried to retain the integrity and diversity of women’s accounts by presenting individual narrative excerpts. This is particularly important when representing research with ‘refugee’ communities, as refugees are often depicted as waves and streams with generic experiences, rather than as individuals with personal stories. Accordingly, throughout this thesis I include excerpts from individual narratives, and these pick out individual experiences and underscore points of difference and contention between women.\(^{34}\) In addition, I describe scenes and events that I have observed during the research process. This approach resonates with the project of ‘writing against culture’ that retains the diversity of individual voices as an alternative to essentialist claims about cultures or groups of people (Abu-Lughod, 1986).

More so than any other aspect of Somali women’s recounted experiences, I have wondered how to understand and present the hours of transcripts relating to the civil war. In Daniel’s account of violence in Sri Lanka, he asks, ‘how does an anthropologist write an ethnography or – to borrow a more apt term from Jean-Laul Dumont – ethnography of violence, without its becoming a pornography of violence?’ (Daniel, 1996: 4). Similarly, in the introduction to *Mirrors of Violence*, Veena Das writes, ‘a crucial issue here is whether the form evolved in writing about survivor experience is simply used to titillate’ (Das, 1990a: 33). In writing of the violence and war in Somalia, I am troubled by how to give an account of these events without attempting to shock or ‘titillate’. Anthropology recognises that it is a

\(^{34}\) Transcriptions derived from individual narrative accounts are indented and set within quotation marks, following conventional writing practice.
literary form that is plagued – or should I say challenged – by issues of representation (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992; Feldman, 1991; Schepers-Hughes, 1992). In writing about violence, the challenges of representation seem particularly marked. While reluctant to present a ‘pornography of violence’, I present women's narratives of war just as I treat narratives concerned with other themes. I have used panels where recurrent themes emerge, and where women’s experiences and interpretations of war are diverse, their narratives are presented as individual quotations.

How, then, to make sense of the narratives I have heard? Women's narratives paradoxically entailed both the coherent authoritativeness of shared themes, and the fluid diversity within individual narratives. Further, recurrent themes within narratives did not always fit with actual experiences and interactions. Jean and John Comaroff write that, 'with a sufficiently supple view of culture, we may begin to understand why social life everywhere appears dualistic, simultaneously ordered and disorderly' (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992: 30). Layne (1994), for example, writes that the tribes-people of Jordan construct their own self-images through a dialogic relationship between unified representations of themselves created at a national level and commentary around this construct that is filled with local content and interpretations. It is unnecessary, then, to make a choice between the modernist perspective that searches out unity and systems within 'culture', and a post-modern perspective in which the world is a partially integrated mosaic of narratives, images, and contested signifying practices. Social research is not an ordered and constant exchange; it contains both a certain measure of predictability, and also the uncertain, indeterminate, and creative. Ethnography, then, must be capable of capturing the simultaneous unity and diversity of social worlds.

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Gallmeier writes, 'the process of disengaging from field settings is just as important as the process of gaining entry' (Gallmeier, 1991: 230). While the formal research phase ended in August 2001, I have remained involved with Somali women through ongoing work at the MRC, visiting women's homes with Malyun, and attending occasional celebrations. These activities have enriched my understanding of the themes of this thesis. While continuing involvement could be framed as a problem of disengagement, I prefer to think of these ongoing relationships as keeping me grounded and linked to the women I write about in this thesis.

In this chapter, I have introduced the site of the study, and discussed the research methods and key ethical considerations. The sensitivity of the research themes necessitated sensitive and adaptable research methods. Accordingly, the research did not revolve around a determination to uncover the 'truth', but on a willingness to allow women to direct the course of the research and interviews. Malkki writes that, 'sometimes what is called for is not an "investigator" at all, but an attentive listener' (Malkki, 1995a: 51). I did not view myself as an anthropologist trying to piece together a cultural puzzle about refugee experience through the collection and analysis of data. Much of the research was accomplished by spending time with women, listening to stories and the things that women deemed as important, and understanding that women are not only refugees but people with diverse histories and lives. Finally, richness was brought to the research through ongoing work at the MRC and through collaborating with Malyun.
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND SOCIAL LOCATION OF THE SOMALI PEOPLE

Discourse lives . . . beyond itself in a living impulse toward the object: if we detach ourselves completely from this impulse, all we have left is the naked corpse of the word, from which we learn nothing at all about the social situation or the fate of a given word in life. To study the word as such, ignoring the impulse that reaches out beyond it, is just as senseless as to study psychological experience outside the context of the real life toward which it was directed and by which it is determined.

(Bakhtin, 1981: 292)

Both to write and to read about the personal stories, experiences and meanings of women’s circumstances and location in Melbourne, it is necessary to have some understanding of the historical and social context of their emigration. Without this background, women’s narratives are in danger of remaining merely ‘stories’. Accordingly, in this chapter I provide a brief summary of the history, politics and culture of the Somali people. I pay particular attention to the civil war that began in 1991, and the events leading up to it. This chapter does not offer an original analysis of Somali society, history and politics, but is a summary of research done by others. I summarise the historical and social background to Somalia, then provide an outline of Somali migration to Australia, which has taken place predominantly through Australia’s Refugee and Humanitarian program.

Somalia is situated in the north-east of Africa (see map 2). It borders Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti, and is one of the group of countries referred to as the Horn of Africa. It has a population of approximately 8 to 10 million,\(^{36}\) and covers almost 640,000 square kilometres (Buchler and Talaricio, 1999). Somalia has a coastline that extends for 3,030 kilometres, but it has few harbours. In the main, it is semi-arid, with desert grasslands suitable only for grazing livestock. Some land is suitable for agriculture around the two southern rivers, the

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\(^{36}\) Somalia’s first national census was taken in February 1975, and no further census has been conducted. The reliability of the 1975 census is questioned because those conducting it may have overstated the size of their own clan and lineage groups (Metz, 1993). More recent population estimates are complicated by the large movement of nomads and, more recently, refugees from famine and war.
Shabelle and the Juba, and in the valleys in the north with higher rainfall and richer soils. Somalia has few natural resources and is predisposed to famine and drought. The temperature averages 27.8° C, but may be as low as 0° C during the colder months in the northern mountains and as high as 46.7° C along the coast. The rainy season lasts from March to May, and the average annual rainfall is only 279 mm.

Over more than a century, various accounts and depictions of Somalia have built a cumulative image of the country as inhospitable, hot, largely arid, peopled by needy and violent primitives, and racked by conflict. As I discuss later, this representation is vastly different from the Somalia that was recounted and described by the women I talked with during my research. In *First Footsteps in East Africa* (1894), Richard Burton describes his exploration of Somalia as one of his ‘most splendid and dangerous expeditions’. In his famous account, Somalia is described as ‘a low glaring flat yellow sand, desert and heat-reeking, tenanted by the Isa, and a meet habitat for savages’ (Burton, 1894: 8-9). More recently, Metz (1993), in *Somalia: A Country Study*, describes it as ‘a land of limited contrast’: the northern plain is depicted as ‘scrub-covered, semiarid, and generally drab . . . crossed by broad, shallow watercourses that are beds of dry sand except in the rainy seasons’, and this plain rises to ‘precipitous northward facing cliffs’ that descend in the south to ‘an elevated plateau devoid of perennial rivers’ (Metz, 1993: 60-66).

Representations and writings of the recent civil war have done little to improve Somalia’s image. James Schofield’s first impressions, documented in *Silent over Africa*, were of Mogadishu in the height of the civil war:

> The sheer scale of devastation in the city took me by surprise. The scars of recent fighting merely added to the ruin inflicted by the struggle between Barre and the USC. Trees and lamp posts in the devastated streets were drilled by bullets, and

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37 Somali was not established as a written language until the early 1970s. Many Somali names and words do not have standardised spellings. For example, the Shabelle and the Juba rivers are also spelt as Scebeli and Giuba.

38 USC is the acronym for the United Somali Congress, one of three main militia organisations responsible for the overthrow of the dictator Siad Barre at the beginning of 1991 (Pendergast, 1997).
overhead the signboards advertising Somalia’s national airline hung crazily askew (Schofield, 1996: 11).

The official web-site to Scott Ridley’s film *Black Hawk Down*, released in 2001, states that ‘[the film] is the true story of the Oct. 3, 1993, Battle of Mogadishu during the Somali Civil War. This battle was the longest sustained ground attack involving American soldiers since the Vietnam War. The mission to abduct two of Somali warlord Mohamed Farrah Aidid’s lieutenants was designed to take 60 minutes but ended up lasting 15 hours. The attack resulted in two UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters being shot down and the deaths of 18 Americans and hundreds of Somalis’ (Sony Pictures, 2001). The film focuses on the camaraderie and suffering of American troops, and their moral commitment to ‘leave no man behind’. The pain, suffering, and grief of American soldiers are depicted in detail. Background images reveal Mogadishu, destroyed by violence, and the Somali people with faces filled with hatred and anger. The ‘brutality’ of the Somalis is graphically shown in scenes of men and children dragging the body of an American soldier through the streets of Mogadishu. The violence *against* Somalis is muted, with Somalis depicted only as distant figures that crumple under the assault of gunfire.

Photographic images of the civil war, starving children, and violent clashes have been circulated to the wider international community. These images are more than the product of a dispassionate observer; they can be analysed as any text (see figures 5 to 10 overleaf).

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39 Dan Eldon was assigned by Reuters to capture images of Somali’s civil war, and was killed on assignment. His photographs are some of the best known, and have been reproduced in a book called *Images of Conflict*. The introduction states: ‘Dan’s reputation as a photographer was made the same way his short life ended – bringing Somalia’s agony to the attention of the world. He was one of the first photographers to go to the famine areas last summer and helped put ‘the land God forgot’ on the world agenda’ (Clayton, 1993).
Figure 5: Somalis in flight and a Black Hawk Helicopter

Figure 6: Women shopping, barbed wire and the UN presence
Figure 7: Somalis in hospital, wounded from war

Figure 8: Somalis reaching out to a UN 'peacekeeper'
Figure 9: Somali women shopping and UN presence

Figure 10: Somalis gathering to collect food supplies
These images do not depict the Somali people as participants in a modern conflict. They tell less of the Somali people than of the culture that has constructed them as vulnerable and tribal primitives. Many of these photos rely on the opposition between Western power and modern technology, and African primitivism. UN soldiers clad in bullet-proof vests, automatic weapons, military uniforms, and driving armoured tanks, are depicted in contrast to bare-foot and veiled Somali women carrying baskets through the streets, and clamouring crowds with arms outstretched begging for food from UN soldiers. In such images, the vulnerability and neediness of the Somali people is emphasised, justifying the UN’s role of ‘peacekeeping’. As Jean and John Comaroff note of Mozambique warriors, they ‘will never be more than primitive rebels, rattling their sabres, their ‘cultural weapons’, in the prehistory of an African dawn’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992: 5). Similarly, photographic documentation of the Somali civil war feeds off the dualism between the West and the rest, caricaturing the empirical realities they claim to reveal.

**SOMALI PEOPLE AND CULTURE**

Appadurai observes that anthropology tends to develop ‘theoretical metonyms’ about places that come to stand as the quintessential and most critical aspect of a given region (Appadurai, 1996). Since I. M. Lewis’ (1961) account of northern Somali pastoralist society was first printed, descriptions of Somali society have focused on the segmentary lineage system, a way of life that is overwhelmingly pastoral, and Islamic faith (Boddy, 1994; Cassanelli, 1982; Hassig, 1997; Lewis, 1994; Samatar, 1988). Lewis is the best known of academics who have analysed Somali kinship and lineage organisation (1961, 1994). According to his accounts, kinship permeates Somali visions of the social, political and personal world, and provides the basis of cultural and individual identity. Somali society is described as consisting of six patrilineal clan-families - Dir, Darood, Issaq, Digil, Raxanwayn and Hawiye - each of which has ties to a common patrilineal ancestor (Lewis,
The clans range in size from around 20,000 to 130,000 people (Lewis, 1994: 19). Members of a clan-family can often trace their genealogy back for some thirty generations to a common ancestor (Lewis, 1994: 20). Lewis writes that in addition to clan-families, there are other points of unity and division at which political solidarity emerges (see diagram 1).

![Diagram 1: The Somali Segmentary Lineage System](image)

Diagram 1: The Somali Segmentary Lineage System
The primary lineage is a subsidiary component to the clan, and it is traced back six to ten generations to a common forefather (Lewis, 1994: 20). This is a smaller group through which moral, social and material allegiances are forged. Somali people also act as a member of a diiwa-paying group that collectively pays compensation for wrongs committed by any group member (Besteman, 1999: 4; Lewis, 1994: 20). The term ‘diiwa-paying group’ became common in British administrative usage, and derives from the Arabic word diiwa, meaning blood wealth (Lewis, 1994: 20).

While most writings present a homogeneous picture of Somalis as a unified ethnic group with a clearly structured and organised lineage model, more recent revisionist ethnographic studies have revealed that Somali kinship structures are less clear-cut than previously presented, and that relationships other than clan-based ones are important to daily life. Besteman (1999), for example, comments that lineages are not irrevocably ascribed at birth, and people may switch clan for protection, through marriage, and for grazing rights. Further, minority clans and groups have been under-represented. A significant number of Somalis are not members of any clan, but have Arab-Persian or slavery heritage. Somali society also contains minority clans identified by their ancestry. These minority groups were some of the most victimised during the civil war. The presence of these diverse affiliations and social groups creates greater complexity than is suggested by the segmentary lineage model (Besteman, 1999). Women alluded to the complexity of the Somali clan structure during my own research, and spoke of minority clans, such as the Midgaan, that suffered terrible persecution during the civil war.

40 A mythical account of the origin of the Midgaan is given in Aman (1994: 4-6), an oral history of the life of a Somali woman. I heard a similar mythical tale in various interviews: Two brothers go out into the desert in search of water for their animals. Their father tells them that if they are very hungry, they should eat meat from dead animals they find in order to stay alive. But as soon as they come across people who will feed them, they must disgorge the impure meat because it is not halal. The brothers go for days without food and are eventually so hungry they are forced to eat meat from a dead animal. Then they meet another tribe who offers them food and drink. The younger brother vomits the impure meat before eating, the other does not. The older brother is impure and become outcast. He is the forefather of the Midgaan clan.
Prior to colonial divisions, the northern Somalis predominantly lived as nomadic pastoralists (Lewis, 1988; Samatar, 1989). As indicated above, Somalia has a semi-arid climate, drought is frequent, and rainfall is localised, so these pastoralists moved in small groups with their herds of cattle, goats, and sheep to remain near the sparse supplies of water and vegetation. Sheep and goats were kept close to the group, and camels, which can go without water for a longer period of time, were taken some distance away to graze. Young boys lived in camel camps containing the camels of a few close agnates (Lewis, 1994: 26). The pastoralist way of life in Somalia is regarded as providing both a livelihood and an ethic from which to develop a social order. It is characterised as communal, as a number of families would cohabit in a *reer*[^1] and share labour and tasks (Samatar, 1989: 24). Today, around 60 percent of people in Somalia still live as nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists in the deserts (Shawcross, 2000).

A substantial number of southern Somalis practice agriculture (Besteman, 1999: 21). They live in the valleys of the Juba and Shabeelle rivers, and many are descendants of pre-Somali inhabitants of the area (see map 3 overleaf). The Somali term for agriculturalists is *habash*. While these people are often overlooked in writings on the Somali people, some of the major processes that have shaped Somali society are inscribed in the marginalised spaces of southern Somalia. Most agricultural communities have some attachment to a Somali lineage and speak Somali as a first language. However, intermarriage between *habash* and nomadic pastoralists is frowned upon as nomadic pastoralists regard *habash* as inferior, and farming and cultivation as dishonourable. Over the past 150 years, the *habash* have had their land taken over by colonial plantations, the people have been claimed for colonial forced-labour schemes, they lost their rights to land through President Siad Barre’s socialist nationalisation laws, and suffered from capitalist-inspired commodification of the 1980s and Cold War state militarisation. Since the civil war erupted, this southern region especially has been the site of massacres and famine, and many inhabitants have fled to refugee camps.

[^1]: A *reer* signifies a group unified by an element of kinship. The smallest unit could be a nuclear or extended family. The largest unit would be a group unified by lineage (Besteman, 1999).
Map 3: The Jubba Valley of Southern Somalia (Besteman 1999: 6)
TRADE AND CULTURAL EXCHANGE

The Somali people have been involved in trade since before the 10th century (Simons, 1994). In pre-colonial times, the Somali people bartered pastoral and wild products such as ghee, gum, incense, ostrich feathers, ivory, and livestock for grain, clothing, iron and weapons (Lewis, 1994; Samatar, 1988). The barter for grain was primarily with people from eastern Ethiopia. From about the 10th century, Muslim Arab and Persian settlers developed commercial coastal centres from which they exported local products in exchange for commodities such as clothes and weapons (Lewis, 1994).

Through maritime trade and contact with Arab and Persian peoples, the Somali people were introduced to Islam. While Islam has been an integral part of the history of the Horn of Africa from the 7th century (Kapteijns, 1999: 13), the wider conversion of Somali people to Islam took place in the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries, as Muslim patriarchy and ethos began to replace indigenous Somali social organisation (Metz, 1993: 6). The majority of Somali people are now Sunni Muslim (Metz, 1993). 42

With British, French and Italian colonial intervention in the mid-19th century, the political and economic context of Somali society altered radically. Colonial administrations made only limited efforts to develop the Somali economy, however, as the country was regarded as strategically valuable but with limited potential to strengthen the colonial coffers (Samatar, 1989). Nonetheless, there was a move from subsistence pastoralism to commercial livestock production, a strengthening of trade relationships between the pastoral economy and outside markets, intensification of labour migration, and the emergence of an ‘urban’ economy as people moved to the colonial towns on Somalia’s coastline (Kapteijns,

42 The primary sectarian schism within Islam is between the Sunni and Shi’ah. Historically, the schism emerged over conflict as to who should be the rightful leader of the Islamic community. The Sunni Muslims comprise the mainstream sect of contemporary Islamic culture (see Waines, 1995).

In 1960, Somalia gained independence, and from this time until the early 1990s, efforts to diversify and modernise the economy were directed by the government through a series of development plans, assisted by foreign grants and loans. With these transformations, merchants and state elites arose as powerful groups within Somalia. A ‘tribal’ capitalist politics emerged that was dependent on the ongoing exploitation of rural and pastoral producers. The old communal order was replaced by a system of social stratification that had the potential for accumulation of wealth and exploitation and domination of others (Bradbury, 1993).

Somalia is now one of the world’s poorest countries. In the late 1980s, almost half of Somalia’s gross domestic product (GDP) consisted of official development assistance. Somalia also received emergency food, and refugee and military assistance (Hyndman, 2000: 151). There are no current data available relating to GDP or Gross National Income (GNI) per capita, however the present value of Somalia’s debt stands at 2.3 billion US$ (The World Bank Group, 2002). There are many known mineral deposits in Somalia, including oil, copper, manganese, gypsum, iron, marble, tin, and uranium, but these have not been exploited. Since the Somali civil war began in the early 1990s, the economy has been in a state of collapse. Previously, the economy was based primarily on livestock, which accounted for 40 percent of the GDP. Droughts in recent decades have contributed to the death of herds. In 2000, the number of livestock was estimated at about 12 million sheep, 11 million goats, 5.8 million camels, and 4.5 million cattle. The principle crops in 2000 were sugar cane, maize, and sorghum. In 1999, Somalia’s exports totalled US$190 million; the main export products were livestock and bananas, and other exports included frankincense, myrrh, foodstuffs, chemicals, machinery, textiles, petroleum, and fish.43 However, most

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43 In 1999, Somalia imported products to the value of US$311 million.
manufacturing facilities, such as a cement factory, a cotton factory, a meat and fish cannery, and a textile plant, have been shut down because of the ongoing civil war.

Somalia lacks crucial elements of physical and social infrastructure such as transportation, communications, and health facilities. There are no national armed forces, and militia groups fight for power and control. As a result of the civil war, the educational system collapsed and most schools, including the Somali National University in Mogadishu, were, and remain, closed. The state health system has also collapsed and health care is now provided intermittently by foreign-aid workers.

NATION, POLITICS, WAR

The Somali people are not contained within the national borders that were drawn through the politics and ink of Ethiopia, the colonial powers of Britain, France, Italy, and reinscribed at the time of independence. Until the colonial period, beginning in 1839, the Somali people did not form a single political unit. Their governance and organisation was based on clan and region (Hyndman, 1999). Initially, the colonial powers only maintained a maritime presence, but in the late 19th century, the ‘scramble for empire’ among European nations accelerated the colonial partition. Britain, France and Italy and the Ethiopian Empire divided the land of the Somali people into five zones of control, and the borders of Somalia were drawn with European interests in mind rather than indigenous settlement patterns or pre-colonial politics (Besteman, 1999: 11; Hyndman, 1999). Britain ruled Kenya and Northern Somalia, France controlled Djibouti, Italy occupied Southern Somalia, and Ethiopia ruled the Ogaden region (Laitin and Samatar, 1984; Simons, 1994).

44 The first European power in the region was Britain, which took possession of Aden on the Arabian coast in 1839, in order to protect British trade routes and provide safe anchorage from ships.
45 Hyndman (1999) provides an account of colonial policy and motivations for setting borders of Somalia.
In 1960, British Somaliland in the north and Italian Somalia in the south joined to create an independent Somali Republic. The Somalis took over all political and administrative functions from the Italians (Tripodi, 1999). However, the Ogaden in Ethiopia, the National Frontier District in Kenya, and French Djibouti were not under sovereign Somali control and the large Somali population in these regions remained outside the borders of the Somali nation-state (Simons, 1994) (see map 4).

Hyndman writes, ‘the imagined pan-Somalı nation has never corresponded to the colonial nor post-colonial borders of the country’ (Hyndman, 1999: 159). The difference between the imagined Somali nation and the Somali nation-state has been the basis of geopolitical conflict in the region throughout the colonial, Cold War, and contemporary periods. Since independence, there have been numerous struggles for reunification of a Somali nation. The Somali Government sought support from the Organization of African Unity (OAU), founded in 1963, but while the OAU conceded that the borders of post-independence African states were artificial, it was committed to retaining them as a compromise to achieve peace (Hyndman, 1999). Today, almost one third of the Somali population live in adjacent Djibouti, the plateau region of Eastern Ethiopia known as Ogaden, and the Northern Frontier District (NFD) of Kenya. Many have congregated in refugee camps or been accepted to countries of asylum, including Canada, US, Britain, Denmark, Australia, New Zealand, Yemen, and Egypt.

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46 See Tripodi (1999) for an account of the antecedents and political processes of Somali independence.
47 Soon after independence, a United Nations Commission found that ethnic Somalis in Kenya overwhelmingly preferred unification with the Somali Republic to their status as nationals of Kenya. The British Colonial administration in Kenya, in an attempt to placate the Kenyan president to be Jomo Kenyatta who made it clear he did not wish to cede Kenyan Somaliland, did not follow the UN Commission’s recommendations (see Hyndman 1999: 163). Consequently, the government of the Somali Republic severed diplomatic ties with Britain and an insurrection amongst Somalis in Northeast Kenya began. Between 1964 and 1967, some 2,000 Somalis are estimated to have been killed by Kenyan security forces (see Hyndman 1999: 163). The surveillance and expulsion of Somalis by the Kenyan government remains current practice.
Map 4: Territory of ethnic Somali concentration (Hyndman 1997: 160)
For the first nine years of independence, Somalia had a succession of democratically elected governments, but political parties were firmly entrenched in loyalties to kin and clan-families (Bradbury, 1993). Independence was marked by increasingly splintered political parties, as Somalis formed dozens of clan-based parties (Besteman, 1999: 12). At the time of the 1969 parliamentary elections, there were sixty-four parties contesting for seats to represent a population of under four million, each party representing not divergent ideologies but one of the key lineages or sub-lineages (Boddy, 1994: 335; Samatar, 1988). In these elections, the combined forces of Somalia’s army and police force seized power under the leadership of Major-General Mohammad Siad Barre (Samatar, 1988).

Barre’s intention was to turn a ‘nation of nomads’ into a ‘modern state’ through the introduction of ‘scientific socialism’ (Samatar, 1988). With substantial military aid from the Soviet Union during the 1970s, Barre set out to foster nationalist sentiment and a socialist dictatorship (Besteman, 1999: 12; Shawcross, 2000). Clan factionalism was regarded as a barrier to national unity and economic, social and political progress, and the government attempted to stamp out clan allegiances. Barre stated:

Tribalism and nationalism can not go hand in hand. . . It is unfortunate that our nation is rather too clannish; if all Somalis are to go to Hell, tribalism will be their vehicle to reach there (cited in Samatar, 1988).

As part of his scientific socialist package, Barre inaugurated social programs: these included a literacy campaign in 1973-75, establishment of the first written script for the Somali language, women’s participation in nation-building, introduction of laws that gave women greater rights, and outlawing of female infibulation (Besteman, 1999: 13).

Barre’s regime was initially supported by a class of people who were grappling with the move from a pastoral society to a modern nation state. However, it did not provide solutions to Somalia’s political instability and Somalis remained divided along lineage lines into competing factions. To ensure that the Somali people followed the law and gave their loyalty only to the state, Barre set up government bodies to punish disloyalty under the
National Security Laws of 1970 (Besteman, 1999: 12). Disloyalty could include tribalism, nepotism, lack of revolutionary zeal, and treason (Lewis, 1988: 212). Prominent secular and religious people who spoke out against the regime were publicly executed, sending a clear message as to the fate of those who did not support the regime.

The dictatorship of Barre and the limited circle of political leaders who supported him, resulted in a dysfunctional state that could not give effective direction for social and economic development (Hashim, 1997: 127). Over the course of Barre’s rule, Somalia had an escalating foreign debt, primary foodstuffs were no longer available for domestic consumption, and the environment was degraded through drought. Both the public and private sectors were ill equipped to manage a stagnant economy and they failed to expand the productive base of the economy. In 1974, Somalia suffered one of the worst droughts in recorded history (Bradbury, 1993: 9). This, in addition to the disorganised political and economic infrastructure, led to competition for scarce resources among groups. Hashim (1997: 126-7) argues that Somalis no longer felt in control of their lives, and the direction and motives of the government were unclear. He continues ‘it was this lack of national purpose or ‘collective consciousness’ – Asabeya (will of the people) – that enfeebled society allowing it to drift into economic collapse and anarchy’ (ibid.: 127).

Regional tensions continued in the Horn, particularly between Ethiopia and Somalia in relation to the Ogaden territory. The regime of Haile Selassie in Ethiopia had been overthrown in 1974, and the country struggled with internal crises. In 1977, taking advantage of Ethiopia’s weakened state, Barre – supported by most Somali people - launched a war to reclaim the Ogaden region. However, this war was caught up in the Cold War politics of the US and the Soviet Union. Somalia’s location near the oil-rich Middle East made it strategically valuable to both the US and Soviet. Since the 1950s, Ethiopia had benefited from massive amounts of US military assistance and the US had a well-
established base in what is present-day Eritrea. In 1974, Somalia signed a ‘friendship’ treaty with the Soviet Union and obtained substantial economic and military assistance. By 1976, there were almost 4,000 Soviet military and civilian advisors in Somalia (Ogenga, 1992). The tension between the Cold War superpowers in the region intensified. Hyndman writes that, ‘superpower rivalries in these strategic postcolonial proxy states became the major external influence both politically and economically in the region by the late 1970s’ (Hyndman, 1997: 164).

In 1977, the same year that Barre launched the war on Ethiopia, the US withdrew military forces from Ethiopia; Ethiopia then requested and received Soviet assistance. Cuba and the Soviet Union showed their support of the new Marxist government in Ethiopia by providing troops and one of the largest armament airlifts in African history. Somalia’s attack was held off by the Ethiopian army with the aid of the Soviet Union and Cuba, and in 1978 Ethiopia defeated the Somali military attack. The Somali Government was angered by the Soviet betrayal of the ‘friendship’ treaty and there was a breakdown in relations between Somalia and the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was forced to leave its military base in Northern Somalia; the base was taken over by the US who wanted to retain influence in the region (Hyndman, 1997).

The defeat of Somalia, in its bid to reclaim the Ogaden region, caused fissures within the government to become visible. Social, economic and political problems emerged, and the regime became unpopular amongst the Somali people. The Ogaden war precipitated a huge influx of Somalis who had been living in eastern Ethiopia into Somalia. In early 1981, the Somali government estimated that there were more than 1.3 million Somalis from Ethiopia in refugee camps and an additional 700,000 to 800,000 living as nomads or in towns and cities in Somalia. Many Somalis regard the loss of the Ogaden war as the starting point for the present conflict (Bradbury, 1993; Hyndman, 1999). Cassanelli writes that domestic politics began to disintegrate in the face of ‘blame and recriminations as to who lost the Ogaadeen’ (Cassanelli, 1993). A further legacy of the Cold War rivalry in the Horn of
Africa was that large quantities of armaments were transferred to the region. In 1976, Somali had one of the best-equipped and largest armed forces in sub-Saharan Africa.

Since the late 1970s, Somalia and other areas of the Horn where Somali people live have been in an almost perpetual state of violent conflict. In 1978, a group of army officers of the Majerette clan, dissatisfied with the conduct of the Ogaden war and the defeat of Somalia, made an attempt to overthrow the Somali government. The government responded by waging war on the clan. In May and June of 1979, over 2,000 Majerette died at the hands of government troops. In 1981 disaffected Isaaq of the north-west regions formed the Somali National Movement and began attacks against the government (Bradbury, 1993).

In 1986, Barre was re-elected as president of Somalia, gaining an unlikely 99 percent of the vote. Despite his anti-clan rhetoric, Barre attempted to hold onto his own power by ensuring that control was entrenched in his immediate clan and family. His government rapidly lost internal support as increasingly brutal methods of political control emerged. International support was also largely withdrawn in reaction to the brutality and abuses of human rights. Resistance to the regime saw violent reprisals at the hands of the government's troops. Governmental retaliation was particularly directed towards the more powerful clan groups, but smaller clan groups were also victims of violence and war. One of the most brutal conflicts occurred in the months following May 1988 when the Isaaq-based Somali National Movement launched an armed opposition to Barre's government in the northern cities of Burco and Hargeisa. This opposition was brutally suppressed by Barre's forces. 50,000 Isaaq are estimated to have died and up to 600,000 fled to Ethiopia in 1988 and 1989 (Bradbury, 1993; Hassig, 1997). In July 1989, a riot in Mogadishu began as a result of disaffection with the poor economy, the flow of displaced people into the capital, and the government's brutal response to the Isaaq uprising. 450 people were killed, and this was followed by mass arrests and executions. Any remaining loyalties to Barre's regime were shattered (Samatar, 1988).
Between December 1990 and January 1991, battles between government forces and clan-backed rebel groups resulted in the collapse of Siad Barre’s twenty-one year rule. Civil war and anarchy emerged in its place (Hashim, 1997). Somalia became divided into semi-autonomous regions, controlled by clan-based military organisations and administrations. Conflict flared up between clan leaders and warlords in many areas. As Shawcross writes, ‘throughout 1991 [the clans] fought among themselves as government, civil society and basic services collapsed. Law and order disintegrated, and by the end of the year there was anarchy. Gangs of heavily armed thugs careered along the roads on light trucks or jeeps fitted with machine guns, terrorizing, killing, looting food and other aid provided by the international community’ (Shawcross, 2000: 67). The Somali author Mariam Arif Gassef writes, ‘throughout the country many tribal factions were active. The militia’s factions, together with genuine criminals and bandits, were creating chaos and insecurity in the country. These forces of greater darkness seemed to rejoice in causing unjustified killings and violence’ (Gassef, 1994: 113).

Despite years of conflict, it wasn’t until the early 1990s that Somalia became a site of international concern. In order to maintain relations with the Kenyan Government, UNHCR initiated the Cross Border Operation (CBO) to reduce the number of refugees fleeing to Kenya and to encourage Somalis in Kenya to return to Somalia. There were sustained efforts by UNHCR to rehabilitate communities in Southern Somalia and to encourage refugee repatriation. However, a politically-induced famine continued to take its toll on the Somali population and the civil war continued. Somalia was seen to be imploding, and the humanitarian needs of its people were regarded as grave enough to warrant multilateral intervention (Hyndman, 1999). In 1992, Somalia was subject to a terrible drought and the nomadic and pastoral people of the interior – the vast majority of the population – began to starve. It is estimated that more than half a million Somalis died in 1992 as a result (Shawcross, 2000).
Journalist’s accounts of the war revealed the suffering of Somalis and captured the attention of the international community. The Security Council decided that ‘the magnitude of human suffering’ in Somalia constituted a threat to peace and security (Shawcross, 2000). In 1992, the UN appointed a Special Envoy to Somalia named UNOSOM I (United Nations Operation Somalia). Five hundred Pakistani military personnel were sent to Somalia as ‘peace-keepers’ to protect the delivery of humanitarian assistance. UNOSOM I was not mandated to use force; it depended entirely on the consent of warring factions. This peace-keeping operation was the first that intervened in a sovereign state where that state did not present a military threat to its neighbours. However, this UN envoy could not restore peace. The security force was unable to protect the aid supplies as armed looters made it impossible for them to carry out their mission (Shawcross, 2000).

The Bush administration in the US determined that the only organisation capable of meeting the needs of the Somali people was the US military (Shawcross, 2000). In December 1992, the United Nations Security Council authorised a Unified Task Force (UNITAF) of 37,000 US-led peacekeeping troops to enter Somalia to ensure the delivery of relief supplies: this intervention was named ‘Operation Restore Hope’ (Roberts, 1999; Samatar, 1988; Shawcross, 2000). The UN Security Council declared the situation in Somalia to be intolerable and authorised ‘all necessary means’ to establish a secure environment for the delivery of aid. Washington declared the mission ‘non-political’, but eventually made efforts to get warring factions to disarm voluntarily. This altered the balance of power in Somalia, as negotiations between US commanders and faction leaders gave those leaders additional power and stature (Shawcross, 2000).

In May 1993, the US mission ended and a second UN envoy, UNOSOM II, was sent to Somalia. There were serious problems with the hand-over from UNITAF to UNOSOM II. The number of troops reduced from 38,000 to 28,000, the new troops came from 31 different countries, and the soldiers were ill-prepared. The role of UNOSOM II was broader and more dangerous than the previous mission. Soldiers were expected to protect the
delivery of humanitarian assistance, disarm warring factions, assist in the establishment of a police force and judicial system, repatriate refugees, and lead the country to reconciliation (Shawcross, 2000).

However, the UNOSOM II forces were soon perceived within Somalia to be the enemy when they made the mistake of taking sides in the civil war – in this case against Mogadishu warlord General Mohammed Farah Aideed, after his supporters ambushed a UN contingent and killed 24 Pakistani UN peace-keeping troops (Roberts, 1999: 64). This ambush was considered retaliation by Aideed and his supporters for a UNOSOM II weapons sweep in the Mogadishu neighbourhood he controlled (Hyndman, 1999). For the first time, the UN invoked the right it has within its mandate to use ‘coercive measures’ to restore peace (ibid.: 4). The Secretary-General was given the power to ‘take all necessary measures against all those responsible . . . including those responsible for publicly inciting armed attacks, to establish the effective authority of UNOSOM II throughout Somalia; including measures to secure the effective investigation of their actions and their arrest and detention for prosecution, trial and punishment’ (Schofield, 1996: 54).

From this moment, the UN mission was dominated by the imperative to capture Aideed (Shawcross, 2000). On 12 July 1993, with President Clinton’s specific authority, sixteen missiles were fired by the US ‘Quick Reaction Force’ at a so-called ‘major SNA’/Aideed militia command and control centre’ in Mogadishu. The victims were unsuspecting clan leaders and religious elders, making questionable the role of UNOSOM II as a humanitarian peace-keeping force. In October 1993, US forces launched an airborne attack against a suspected stronghold of Aideed. Two Black Hawk helicopters were shot down, and eighteen American soldiers were killed in fighting that lasted into the next day.\(^{50}\) Between five hundred and one thousand Somalis are thought to have been killed during this fighting. Time magazine ran a photograph of one dead American soldier being carried around the streets of

\(^{49}\) SNA is the acronym for Somali National Alliance (Tripodi, 1999).

\(^{50}\) It is this event that is the subject of Scott Ridley’s film *Black Hawk Down*, which was released in 2001.
Mogadishu by anti-UN Somali protestors. This image of the dead American soldier was shown recurrently on American television (Shawcross, 2000). Its effects were enormous. Within days, Clinton announced that all US troops would be withdrawn from Somalia. The US returned to the principle that it should not enter a war unless it served US national interests and the conflict could be won (Shawcross, 2000). The Somali cause lost support abroad and funding for humanitarian projects in Somalia dropped significantly. In March 1995, UNOSOM II withdrew from Somalia. Civil conflict in Somalia continues, fuelled in part by the massive transfer of arms provided to Somalia by both superpowers during the Cold War. These arms are available to, and used by, members of the Somali population.

The civil war in Somalia and other local conflicts within Somalia are often attributed to clan politics and the ‘violent nature’ of the Somali people. They are seen to ignite from the dry tinder of ethnic rivalry. In 1894, Burton wrote:

In mind the Somal (sic) are peculiar as in body. They are a people of most susceptible character, and withal uncommonly hard to please . . . They have the levity and instability of the Negro character; light-minded as the Abyssinians – described by Gobat as constant in nothing but inconstancy – soft, merry, and affectionate souls, they pass without any apparent transition into a state of fury, when they are capable of terrible atrocities (Burton, 1894: 77-78).

Almost ninety years later, Fitzgibbon writes:

Proud and erect, the Somalis are known as ‘The Irish of Africa’ in that they are extremely generous yet fierce and war-like simultaneously. Of penetrating gaze and easy manner, they are people to be reckoned with, as history has clearly revealed (Fitzgibbon, 1985: 3).

Media reports during the civil war have continued to evoke a sense of the inevitability of inherent and ancestral violence in Somalia: ‘The clans of Somalia have regularly battled one

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51 Consequently, Clinton withdrew peace-keeping forces from Haiti and many opponents of the military were killed. In Rwanda it refused to send peace-keeping troops and hundred and thousands of people were condemned to death by genocide (Shawcross, 2000).
another into a state of anarchy' (Time Magazine, 1992); 'ancient clan enmity pursued with the modern weapons that are so abundant in Somalia is at the root of the country's conflict' (Washington Post, 1993); 'instead of fighting with traditional spears and shields, the clans have more recently conducted their feuds with mortars and machine guns' (New York Times, 1992). Similarly, Samatar states that 'modern Somali state politics is nothing but traditional clan politics writ large, with the difference that the society is today armed with modern mass-destructive weapons' (Samatar, 1988).

Such writing collapses the Somalis into images of a people controlled by violent, primordial instincts: unable to move beyond destructive clan rivalries, their propensity for conflict inherent. In the popular imagination, the civil war is evidence of fully-fledged primitivism, despite that Somali clans have existed for centuries without giving rise to social disintegration. This view was used to justify US involvement, as Somalia was painted as a tribal society, incapable of handling the crisis that subsumed them (Butler, 2002). As Bill Clinton said to the US soldiers returning from Somalia, 'you have shown that the work of the just can prevail over the arms of warlords' (Clinton cited in Butler, 2002: 5). A more critical perspective recognises that colonialism, Somalia's move into the global economy, the legacies of Cold War rivalries in the Horn, and the development of an inappropriate state model have all had repercussions that resound in the spaces in which people inter-relate. Political instability can not be pinned upon the segmentary kinship system; broader processes have contributed to the breakdown of pastoral society and the emergence of the political and social situation as it stands today.

Somalia has now been in a state of civil war and conflict for over ten years. It was hoped that the 15th Peace Conference, held in Djibouti over nine months in 2000, would bring an end to ongoing conflict. An interim assembly of 245 members voted in a new president and prime-minister for the Somalia Transitional National Government. However, the Transitional Government has not been able to achieve stability; neither the president nor prime minister is recognised by the breakaway regions of Somaliland and Puntland, and the
state is still without official governmental rule. The main political parties operating in Somalia are the United Somali Congress (USC), the Somali National Movement, the Somali Democratic Movement, and the Somali Patriotic Movement. These parties are aligned to clan ideology. For purposes of local administration, Somalia is now divided into 18 regions and 84 districts.

Somalia remains without basic public services. Violence and fighting continues in many regions, as clan-based militias continue to compete for control of key regions in the capital and along the coast (Hyndman, 2000: 152). This ongoing conflict precludes the possibility of repatriation for many Somali refugees. UNHCR has assisted refugees with repatriation in more stable areas, but by 1997 this movement had slowed, with only 200 Somalis repatriated during the year. Humanitarian efforts within Somali have also been seriously undermined by the lack of security. Further, the political economy of the country is not attractive to people considering returning to Somalia, nor indeed, to many people who remain there.

BORDER CROSSINGS

Gonzalez (1992: 20) writes that the motivations underlying any particular act of migration have always been a difficult research topic, but that a good proportion of migration throughout history has been the product of violent conflict. The massive exodus of people from Somalia is a direct product of people’s flight from conflict and danger, and the uncertainty and political insecurity of the past decade. Hyndman writes, however, that the ‘politics of mobility’ in Somalia depends on historically specific configurations of geography, politics, culture, and economic relations of power (Hyndman, 1997: 151). While civil war and displacement has characterised the landscape in Somalia over the past decade, the politics of mobility intersect with a broader framework: colonial histories, the drawing and construction of borders, Cold War politics, ethnic allegiances, economic alliances, and international relations of power.
By the end of 1992, it was estimated that the civil war had led to the death of over 500,000 people, well over a million Somali citizens were internally displaced, and 600,000 had fled to the harsh life of refugee camps and exile in Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Yemen and any other country that would accept them (Hyndman, 1999).\(^{52}\) Despite efforts in the 1960s to forge a pan-Somali state, the Somali nation has dispersed on a scale unimaginable in the neo-realist framework of conventional geopolitics (Hyndman, 2000: 164). As Homi Bhabha contends, certain groups of people are themselves the shifting boundary that contest the boundaries of the modern nation (Bhabha, 1994: 164).

By 1999, UNHCR had assisted a total of 23,200 Somali refugees to return to north-west Somalia; smaller numbers were repatriated to the north-east and south with UNHCR assistance (UNHCR, 1999). However, hundreds of thousands of Somalis remain in exile, either in refugee camps, border areas, or in other locations in Africa. UNHCR estimates that in 2001 there were approximately 439,000 Somali refugees living in countries of asylum, the main countries being Kenya, Yemen, Ethiopia, US, and the United Kingdom (UNHCR, 2002).\(^{53}\) Also in 2001, 21,300 Somalis are documented to have fled to Yemen, Kenya, Eritrea, Zambia, and Malawi, and 51,300 Somali refugees were repatriated to Ethiopia (UNHCR, 2002). Kenya receives the highest number of Somali refugees; many who have fled there live in refugee camps and others live illicitly in Kenya’s capital city, Nairobi. Nairobi is the consulate capital for Eastern Africa, and it is therefore a compelling place for asylum seekers and refugees from countries such as Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, Uganda, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania. All Somali refugees in Kenya are required to live in the UNHCR-operated refugee camps (Hyndman, 2000: 59). In 1995, UNHCR estimated that

\(^{53}\) In the absence of a Somali government and given the dangerous and changeable conditions that continue in Somalia, there are no recent statistics available concerning population movement and mortality rates.

\(^{54}\) While DIMA frequently claims that Australia is in the top ten countries of resettlement for refugees, in fact it is in the top ten countries with formal resettlement programs. In reality, countries such as Yemen, Kenya, and Pakistan, who do not have formal resettlement programs, receive the highest number of refugees and asylum seekers.
110,000 Somali refugees lived in the north-east province camps, and 75,000 lived in the coastal camps (Hyndman, 2000: 158).

The Government of Kenya has an open dislike of Somali refugees living in Kenya and for Kenyan nationals of Somali ethnicity (Hyndman, 1997: 161). They have prohibited refugees from seeking employment or moving within the country. In 1992 and 1993, Kenyan authorities rounded up Somalis living in urban areas and relocated them to remote camps. In 1994, as in previous years, Kenyan authorities threatened to arrest any refugees living outside of designated camps and conducted sweeps in urban areas to find Somali refugees (Hyndman, 2000: 87). Somali asylum seekers therefore have not found sanctuary in Kenya, but are the target of racism and persecution. The requirement that refugees remain in UNHCR-operated camps is further enforced through the governmental regulations of host countries. For example, until recently, Australia required that applicants for humanitarian visas provide a UNHCR refugee registration number, and these are assigned within refugee camps.

Somali refugees generally have limited resources to fund their own movement. They face the difficulty that movement between borders is restrictive and immigration policies are increasingly selective. Tighter measures are being put in place to control border crossing; refugees require identity documents, fingerprinting, and UNHCR numbers. There is increased surveillance of borders, new visa requirements, and more exclusive terms of citizenship. For example, there are numerous hurdles that must be overcome in order to attain refugee visas to Australia: DNA testing may be required to check maternity, there are generally long waiting-times for the processing of visa applications, and applicants offered Special Humanitarian visas rather than refugee visas must pay for their own airfares. Formal resettlement routes out of Africa are few as the quotas for government-sponsored refugees in some of the major host countries decline (see Table 1 overleaf).
**Table 1: Annual Resettlement Quotas for Government-Sponsored Refugees**

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<tr>
<td>U.S.A</td>
<td>142,000</td>
<td>121,000</td>
<td>110,000</td>
<td>90,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>13,000</td>
<td>11,000</td>
<td>7,300</td>
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<td>Australia</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>12,000</td>
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Sources: Refugee quotas for U.S.A and Canada obtained from Hyndman (Hyndman, 1997: 170). Refugee quotas for Australia obtained from DIMIA fact sheets (DIMIA, 2002c).

Many Somali people remain in refugee camps in Africa and hope for the unlikely event that the humanitarian visa lottery will fall in their favour. Refugees are presented as inundating countries that offer asylum, but in fact less than one percent of refugees are accepted for resettlement in countries of asylum, such as Australia (Hyndman, 1999). Hyndman claims that the odds are further stacked against African refugees. Compared to the unfettered flows of humanitarian assistance and dollars from donor countries into the Horn of Africa, refugee movement in the opposite direction is unremarkable (Hyndman, 2000: 54).

Resettlement quotas are decreasing, and the allotment of refugee places for Africa still remains a small proportion of the total. African refugees comprise around 36 percent of the world refugee population, yet no country that receives refugees through formal immigration programs provides a comparable proportion of places. In 1994/95, the U.S ceiling for African refugees was 7,000, less than 7 percent of its refugee intake; in the same year Canada provided 1,520 places for Africans, around 20 percent of its refugee intake. The 1994/95 refugee intake for Australia stood at 13,000; 800 places were offered to Africans, which is around 6 percent of the total intake (Hyndman, 1997). In 2001, 25 percent of Australian off-shore humanitarian visas were granted to people from Africa, specifically

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54 Canada’s 1994/95 refugee quota did not include the special programs for refugees from the Former Yugoslavia and Afghanistan. In 1995/96 the ‘3-9’ refugee programs were included in the general refugee program with a total quota of 7,300. While appearing to be maintained at the same level, Canada’s refugee quota has actually dropped.
from the Sudan, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. An additional 116 onshore visas were granted to African nationals (DIMIA, 2002b).

Table 2: Australian Offshore Resettlement Program, grants by region, 1997-2001

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>5 307</td>
<td>4 736</td>
<td>3 424</td>
<td>3 462</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East &amp; SW Asia</td>
<td>2 952</td>
<td>2 919</td>
<td>2 208</td>
<td>2 155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>1 473</td>
<td>1 552</td>
<td>1 736</td>
<td>2 032</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>685</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Americas</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>10 467</td>
<td>9 526</td>
<td>7 502</td>
<td>7 992</td>
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Source: Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs ‘Fact sheet 60: Australia’s Refugee and Humanitarian Program’ (DIMIA, 2002b).

**MIGRATION TO AUSTRALIA AND THE HUMANITARIAN PROGRAM**

Humanitarian programs have been in operation in Australia since the Second World War. In 1947, Australia became a signatory to the constitution of the International Refugee Organization (IRO) and accepted obligations in international law and practice, including a commitment to resettle some of those people seeking a new place of residence for humanitarian reasons (Iredale et al., 1996: 2). Since 1950, almost 600,000 refugees and displaced people have been formally resettled in Australia (DIMIA, 1999). Initially, Australia was open only to displaced persons from Europe in order to fulfil its international humanitarian obligations in immigration policy. Between 1947 and 1953, 170 000 displaced people from Europe were accepted (Iredale et al., 1996: 2; RRAC, 2000). This enabled

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55 In fact, ‘refugees’, such as Jewish people from Russia, did enter Australia prior to the Second World War, but at this time the ‘refugee’ was not a recognised political category. The gold rushes of the 1850s also saw a massive influx of economic migrants from Europe and China.
Australia to increase its population rapidly at a time when it was economically and politically expedient to do so (Nsugba-Kyobe and Dimock, 2000).

It is only since the overturn of the 'White Australia' Policy in 1966 that there has been any political readiness to accept black African migrants (Castles et al., 1992; Nsugba-Kyobe and Dimock, 2000). In the 1980s and early 1990s, humanitarian immigration policies coincided with increasing public empathy for those escaping environmental and social problems in Africa. There has been, however, a concurrent growth of right-wing politics that voices opposition to immigration and humanitarian ideals.

In January 1993, the Australian Government detached the Humanitarian Program from the Migration Program (Iredale et al., 1996: xii). Australia now accepts an annual quota of around 12,000 people per annum from areas of conflict around the world through the Humanitarian Program (see Table 3). Approximately 8,000 places are allocated to people from overseas, and 4,000 for people who are already in Australia and require protection through the Onshore Protection Program. The Humanitarian Program currently comprises four categories:

- **Refugee**: For people who have fled their country of nationality, were subject to persecution, and have been identified in conjunction with UNHCR as in need of resettlement.

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56 Australia has had three models of settlement policy: assimilation, integration and multi-culturalism (Jupp, 1997). From 1901 to the mid-1960s, immigrants were expected to assimilate to the cultural and linguistic conventions of Anglo-Australia. The over-riding assumption behind assimilation policy was that the best society was one in which citizens were as similar as possible (Jupp, 1997). One of the first Acts of the new Parliament of Australia in 1901 was to pass the Immigration Restriction Act, popularly known as the 'White Australia' Policy, with the intent of keeping non-Europeans out of Australia (Castles et al., 1992). Until 1966, the selection of immigrants was based upon this racist policy.

57 This is well evidenced with the recent events of the so-called 'Tampa Crisis', in which Australia refused entry to hundreds of Afghani and Iraqi asylum seekers whose boat was sinking in Australian waters and who were then picked up, under the orders of the Australian Government, by a Norwegian ship. This crisis saw widespread public support for tighter control of Australia's borders, detention for 'illegal immigrants', and reduced rights and assistance for asylum seekers.
• **Special Humanitarian Program (SHP):** For people who have suffered discrimination amounting to gross violation of human rights, and who have strong support from an Australian citizen or community group in Australia.

• **Special Assistance Category (SAC):** For people who, while not meeting the refugee or SHP criteria, are nonetheless in situations of discrimination, displacement or hardships. Most SACs require proposers of applicants to be close family members resident in Australia.

• **Onshore Protection Visa Grants:** For people found to need protection in accordance with the UN Refugees Convention and who are granted protection visas in Australia.

In addition, the Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) was introduced in October 1999 in response to the large numbers of Afghani, Iraqi and Iranian people seeking asylum in Australia without being granted a visa prior to entry. TPV holders are refused the assistance and services offered to all other refugee and humanitarian entrants. They are not able to access DIMIA funded services, are unable to sponsor their family for migration, and cannot re-enter Australia after visiting their home-country. TPV holders are generally granted three-year visas, and have no assurance that they can remain in Australia after this period finishes. In a speech Minister Ruddock gave in 2001, entitled ‘Ensuring a Fair Go for Those Most in Need: Australia and Refugees’, he states, ‘I make no apology for generously helping those whom we resettle to become part of the Australian community as soon as possible. Nor do I make any apology for refusing to provide an incentive and reward for those who use organized crime and trade on their refugee status to achieve residence in Australia’ (Ruddock, 2002).

Australia’s general migration program has two components: a skilled stream and a family stream. A ‘points test’ operates within the skilled migration program, and applicants are awarded points for age (the younger the better), vocational English skills, post-secondary qualifications, nomination of an occupation on the ‘Skilled Occupation List’, recent work
experience, Australian qualifications, relationship to an Australian citizen, and the ability of their spouse to pass the points test (DIMIA, 2002c). While the criteria of the points test do not apply to humanitarian settlers and refugees, or people hoping to reunite with family, Australia is nonetheless able to select humanitarian entrants at its own discretion. There is an expectation that they will become economically and socially effective members of the 'Australian community'. Jupp states that 'humanitarian settlement is not an act of charity alone but is governed by most of the imperatives shaping intake policy in general' (Jupp, 1994: 2). The majority of humanitarian entrants are selected by Australian authorities, and spontaneous movement is strongly discouraged through processes of detention, repatriation and stringent laws for granting asylum.

Table 3: Australia's Humanitarian Program Visa Allocations

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Refugee</td>
<td>4 010</td>
<td>3 988</td>
<td>3 902</td>
<td>3 997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Humanitarian</td>
<td>4 636</td>
<td>4 348</td>
<td>3 051</td>
<td>3 116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Assistance</td>
<td>1 821</td>
<td>1 190</td>
<td>649</td>
<td>879</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Onshore Protection</td>
<td>1 588</td>
<td>1 834</td>
<td>2 458</td>
<td>5 577</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporary Protection</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>164*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>12,055</td>
<td>11,360</td>
<td>9,960</td>
<td>13,733</td>
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</table>


Applications for Australian refugee and humanitarian visas far exceed the number of places available. At a DIMA consultation I attended in 2001, Humanitarian Program staff stated that at any one time there are approximately 60,000 applications in the pipeline for offshore humanitarian and refugee visas for Australia. In 2000-2001, Australian High Commission

58 In April 2001, Minister Philip Ruddock announced that the allocated size of the 2001-02 Humanitarian Program would remain at 12,000 places, the same number as in 2000-2001.
posts in Africa were allocated 1,970 places within the offshore program. During this period, the Australian High Commission in Nairobi had 4,561 applications for an allocated 1,050 places, and Cairo had 4,209 applications for an allocated 720 places. Further, the decrease in the Family Stream migration has been a source of considerable distress to people who hoped for their family members to be reunited with them in Australia.

PROFILE OF SOMALIS IN AUSTRALIA

Between 1983-1990, fewer than 60 Somali people were given refugee and humanitarian visas to Australia. The majority of Somali people have arrived since the advent of the civil war in 1991. The 2001 Census of Population and Housing found that on the night of the census there were 5,007 Somali people living in Australia, of whom 48 percent were female (ABS, 2002a). Melbourne has approximately 65 percent of Australia’s Somali population (ABS, 2002a; ABS, 2002b). Somali constitute one of the fastest growing ethnic communities in Melbourne, increasing from 1,391 in 1996 to at least 3,226 in 2001. They have settled primarily in the suburbs of Heidelberg, Preston, Broadmeadows, Essendon, Northcote, Brunswick and Maribyrnong.

It has been estimated that 92 percent of Somalis entered Australia through the Refugee and Humanitarian Programs (MRC North East, 1999a). Many women have entered Australia through the ‘Women at Risk’ refugee and humanitarian visa subclass, a category designated for women who are ‘without the protection of a male relative; and in danger of victimisation, harassment or serious abuse because [they] are female’ (DIMA, 2001) (see also Manderson et al., 1998). It is difficult to give reliable or representative data regarding

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59 Between 1983 and 1988, only 39 Somali people were given refugee and humanitarian visas (MRC North East, 1997a) and between 1989-90 the DIMIA Statistics Section states that 16 Somalis arrived in Australia.

60 It can be assumed that the Census results under-estimate the Somali population in Australia. Individuals are required to fill in census forms personally, and some people with non-English speaking backgrounds and who are unfamiliar with the Census process do not complete their forms. Many Somali workers have expressed concern about the low statistics for the Somali population in Australia.

61 The ABS found that on the night of the 2001 census, Victoria’s Somali population was 3,239, of which all but thirteen live in Melbourne.
refugee background, however, as many Somalis have entered Australia via New Zealand’s Humanitarian Program and others through Family Reunion visas. Further, most Somalis have a ‘refugee background’ regardless of the route by which they entered Australia.

It is difficult to provide an accurate picture of Somalia and the Somali people because the instability arising from the civil war means that circumstances change quickly and estimates and statistics are unreliable. Further, in a world of migration the Somali people can not be encapsulated in space or characterised by unaltered traditions and social structures. Many people have fled Somalia, and growing numbers are trying to make a living in cities, or live in refugee camps, or as immigrants outside of their homeland. The background to Somalia and the Somali people provided in this chapter is therefore partial. Nevertheless, it provides some context within which to locate the following ethnographic account of memory, displacement, and resettlement of Somali women in Melbourne.
REMEMBERING SOMALIA

The ‘worlds made’ through narrations of the past are always historically situated and culturally constructed, and it is these that people act upon and riddle with meaning.

(Malkki, 1995a: 104)

While I set out to speak with women about resettlement and emotional well-being, memories of homeland and life in Somalia were unmistakably entwined with everyday life in Melbourne. Women consistently made reference and comparison to Somalia and their lives there. Thus, in order to understand women’s lives in Melbourne, it is necessary to explore not only how they remembered and imagined their past, but also how this past, imagined or otherwise, enters into their present lives.

Women’s pasts could never be a physical site of ethnographic fieldwork, and so I listened to the narratives through which individual and social histories were created. Accordingly, this chapter presents an ‘ethnography’ of women’s histories. It documents nostalgic memory of Somalia, focusing particularly on women’s idyllic accounts of community and landscape. In subsequent chapters I reflect further upon how these histories come into play in women’s everyday lives in Melbourne.

HISTORICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Several decades ago, Nadel drew the attention of anthropologists to a distinction already much discussed by social theorists and philosophers between ‘ideological’ and ‘objective’ history (Nadel, 1942: 72). ‘Ideological’ history referred to that past as told by people in
order to account for the contemporary shape of their world, and 'objective' history referred to a factual chronicling by uninvolved observers. Jean and John Comaroff warn that any historical anthropology that sustains a polarity between the ideological and the objective is destined to run aground on the problems of 'brute empiricism', and they eschew the very possibility of an objective or realist history (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992).

In accordance with this line of argument, many theorists of social and historical memory argue that histories are reproduced and legitimised by agents of memory, collective recollection practices, and through formal spaces for the articulation and public depiction of memory (Middleton and Edwards, 1990: 3). Connerton (1989), in his much cited book on social memory, How Societies Remember, writes that memory is intentionally mediated by people and embodied in performance practices that can alter the meaning systems of the present. He relates the mutual influence between historical reconstruction and collective memory of social groups: historical reconstruction can be guided by the memory of a social group, and alternately the nature of official historical narrative can profoundly shape a social group's memory and identity (Connerton, 1989). Similarly, in an article on violence and memory in Northern Ireland, Feldman writes that, 'history is not a neutral milieu within which people act, but rather the constructed object of social action, situated performances, and symbolic mediation' (Feldman, 1998: 202). For example, Cheungsatiansup (2001) examines the social production of marginality among the Kui, an indigenous people residing in the borderlands of Thailand. She relates how their memories have been taken away not only because their history has been incorporated into that of other states and written in languages not their own, but, more importantly, because official historical records take no notice of the Kui, either as a people, a race, or a nation (Cheungsatiansup, 2001: 37). As writers of historiography suggest, history is not that which happens, but that which is narrated (Koselleck, 1985; Ricouer, 1980; White, 1978). History is produced in the space in which events and ideologies meet.
The following historical narratives are personally and socially mediated constructs that speak as much to the present as the past. In listening to women’s narratives, I was concerned not with ‘historical truth’, but in understanding the ways that women ordered their past using moral and social categories, and drew upon these categories to give meaning to their contemporary lives. Thus, Somali women’s historical memory is not a reconstruction of what happened. The more interesting way to view their narratives is to try and understand what is taken as history and why, and to explore the place of historical narratives in women’s moral, social and political worlds in Melbourne. In this chapter, I consider how women construct their pasts, and how past events become meaningful.

**NOSTALGIC MEMORY**

The ultimate uncertainty of the past makes us all the more anxious to validate that things were as reputed. To gain assurance that yesterday was as substantial as today we saturate ourselves with bygone reliquary details, reaffirming memory and history in tangible format.

(Lowenthal, 1985: 191)

Accounts of pre-war Somalia were built around nostalgic memories of daily life, community, collective identity, and the landscape. ‘The social dynamics of remembrance and commemoration’, as Paul Gilroy (1994) puts it, act as a thread of continuity and a source of identity formation in the context of migration. Through nostalgic memory, Somali women historically situate themselves in an idyllic social and physical landscape. Their memories of their national past and individual lives depict ideal moral frameworks, a sense of belonging to a land (and a beautiful one at that), a unified Somali identity, and reference to strong and supportive community.

I set the tone for this chapter with a narrative excerpt from an interview with Naima. Some months after I first met Naima, Malyun and I visited her at home. Naima arrived in
Melbourne several years ago. She has suffered from depression and loneliness for much of this time, and has recently been prescribed anti-depressants. Her two teenaged daughters and I chatted while Naima prepared tea, and rice with sauce. After we had all eaten, I asked Naima to talk about her life in Somalia. She started a long tale, interjected with sound effects to enliven descriptions, and physical demonstration of daily activities and events:

After the civil war, everything went bad. Everyone had to start their lives all over again. It was horrible after the war. But before that, there were no problems. I grew up as a nomad. My role was to look after the goats and camels. We used to wake up very early in the morning. First we would clean the home; we would put smoke inside the pots to clean them. Then I went to the goats and milked them and the boys went to the camels. The girls would take it in turns; sometimes, milking the goats, and sometimes staying back to cook for everyone. We only ever had semolina, goat or camel milk, and tea. We drank a little hot milk in the morning and then we didn’t eat again till the evening. The boys had special treatment. They learned to read the Qur’an. The girls used to follow the goats in the hope of meeting boys. All day we would sit under trees and weave and look out for boys. We were just like the Aborigines. We carried stuff in bags made from skins and collected wood, we did each other’s hair. When we went out from home, we would only take a little water or milk. When we came home, we would eat a little semolina. Sometimes in the evening we would sit around and weave. We also made jars made from wood, and we would leave milk in them overnight and then the next morning we shook the milk and made ghee, and then cooked the ghee to make oil. The oil from different animal milk tastes different. Goat’s milk ghee is the most healthy. It is good to remember about those times.

When I was thirteen my father chose my first husband. He was sixty. He had his first child when he was sixteen. Now he has 50 children and 178 children and grandchildren. I was his fourth wife and had two children with him. All the wives got along. When I was sixteen I went to different towns – Luuq, Bismayo. I sold things in the towns. Life was good. I was able to work. The weather was good. I was
out there working to support my children. Life was really good, and the income was really good. I can’t complain. It is alright to do that, to run away from your husband. My mother did the same with her first husband.

Running away from family in Somalia is different from how it is now, being separated from your family. The distance is so much bigger and you can’t go back to your family. My family all lived in the same area in Somalia. Some of them live in Australia now, but we don’t live close. I feel depressed now when I am alone.

In this account, Naima elaborates her memories of Somalia with a strong yearning and nostalgia for the past. She recalls some aspects of life as very hard, but looks back warmly upon her life in Somalia. Even daily difficulties were recalled as part of a way of life to which Naima was accustomed.

The French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs wrote that one of the greatest benefits of nostalgia is that it offers an ‘escape from the present’. Nostalgia, Halbwachs argued, liberates people from the constraints of time, by allowing them to stress positive experiences and aspects of the past (cited in Spitzer, 1999: 91). However, nostalgia is not dissociated from the present. Somali women’s interpretation of the past as golden is a means of coping with a disrupted and difficult present. It also presents a contrast to their contemporary world.

Spitzer argues that as a retrospective mirage, nostalgia serves an important comparative purpose; it sets up the positive from the world of yesterday as a model for creative inspiration, and possible emulation, within the ‘world of today’ (Spitzer, 1999: 92).

Zemon Davis writes that memory can be understood as a response and a symptom of a rupture, or a ‘substitute, surrogate, or consolation for something that is missing’ (Zemon Davis and Starn, 1989: 3). The particulars of something that is absent, and how or why it has come to be experienced as no longer continually present, are part of what characterise and distinguish the shape and texture of memories (Bardenstein, 1999: 149). As Pierre Nora (1989) points out, where there is a break with the past, sites of memory highlight discontinuity. In speaking of everyday life in Melbourne, Somali women describe the
rupturing impact of displacement: a loss of proximity to a loved and familiar homeland, and altered social networks and relationships. By contrast, women’s memory of the past is infused with nostalgia for Somalia, its landscape, community relations, and daily life.

Take, for example, Nurta’s recollections of her life in Somalia. Nurta lived in Mogadishu, came from a wealthy family, and managed an import and export business with her husband. She said:

I grew up in Mogadishu. The boys went to school, but the girls didn’t go to school. We stayed at home and listened to the Qur’an. But we didn’t learn to read or write the Qur’an like the boys, we only listened to it. When I was fifteen my father arranged for me to marry someone. He was a few years older than me. We started to live together. I didn’t really mind whether I got married or not. But after we got married I used to hide when he came home because he would want to take me to bed. But then I got used to it. [Nurta laughs as she explains this.] He would bring me presents – chocolates, clothes, jewellery. After a while I would wait at the door for him and watch his arms when he came through the door to see if he would bring me anything. I spent all my life in Mogadishu. We were a rich family. We had a good life. My husband and I had a business importing and exporting cloth. We used to go out of the country – India, Italy, France – and buy cloth and bring it back to Somalia to sell. The business was very successful, and Mogadishu was beautiful. On the weekend we all went to the beach and swam. The beach was very beautiful. I had my first child when I was sixteen and I had five children. After five I didn’t want to have any more so we stopped having children. In Mogadishu we had lots of money, a big house, and servants. I didn’t have to do anything; there were people to clean and cook. We had time to just enjoy our lives.

Nurta’s life in Somalia contrasts with Naima’s recollections (presented in the introduction to this chapter) of life as a nomad and working in the city. However, despite the differences, both women’s narratives are filled with nostalgic remembrances of Somalia and the lives they led there.
In 1668, Johannes Hofer first coined the word *Heimweh*\textsuperscript{62} (homesickness/nostalgia) in a Swiss medical thesis. At the time, *Heimweh* was an emotional state associated with exiles and soldiers yearning for home. Hofer identified *Heimweh* as a medical condition, and through formal identification and inquiry he hoped that a cure could be found. Physicians began to observe that the ‘melancholic’, ‘debilitating’, ‘sometimes fatal’ symptoms of homesickness and nostalgia could be triggered through associations of memory – sounds, smells, tastes, and sights – with the homes and environments that individuals had left behind. No cure could be found, save for a ‘homecoming’, a return to the familiar (Spitzer, 1999). By the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, nostalgia was transformed ‘from a geographical disease into a sociological complaint’ (Lowenthal, 1975: 2). No longer a medical condition, nostalgia came to be seen as a state of mind that focused on absence and loss. Nostalgia has since been the subject of reproach by many critics, and is characterised as escapist, romanticising, and sentimental (the temporal equivalent of tourism), or criticised as an unproductive and regressive longing for an idyllic past that never was (Bal, 1999: xi).

Nostalgia is presented, however, as a common affliction that affects refugees and migrants, characterised as a yearning for the homeland. Fortier (2000), for example, describes an annual procession performed by Italian migrants in the United Kingdom, as a testimony to Italian identity and continuity. She writes that the procession is a moment of nostalgia; ‘memories flow into the air, weaving a net of nostalgic remembrances that wrap the procession and tie it down as a moment of attachment’ (Fortier, 2000: 145). In his essay, ‘Back Through the Future: Nostalgic Memory and Critical Memory in a Refuge from Nazism’, Spitzer (1999) argues that nostalgia can be empowering and productive as it permits people to accentuate positive experiences. For thousands of Central European refugees in Bolivia, nostalgic memory served as a creative tool of adjustment, helping people to ease their sense of cultural displacement and alienation: ‘nostalgic memory,

\textsuperscript{62} Literally translated, the German work *Heimweh* means ‘home hurt’ or ‘home ache’ or the English term ‘homesick’ (Spitzer, 1999).
creatively reconfigured, became one source through which they built a new communal culture and constructed a new collective identity to serve their changed needs’ (Spitzer, 1999: 92).

**Nostalgia: landscape, people, community**

Women invoke Somalia as the site of their common culture and identification. A notion of what it means ‘to be Somali’ draws extensively from narratives and interpretations of the past. In recollections of their daily life, women spoke of the specificities of where they worked, how they spent time, their relationships with friends and family, what they ate, and where they lived. Their lives were revealed to have great diversity; some were rich, and others poor, some were nomadic, others lived in the cities and towns. Threaded throughout the specifics of individual lives, however, were common memories (or rather constructions) of an idyllic homeland and a community founded on moral and social harmony. All women remember their lives in Somalia nostalgically and recall their days there with warmth, and sometimes sadness at the loss brought by migration.

The immediate ‘people-land’ bond is at the heart of women’s memory of Somalia. The weather and landscape figured prominently in women’s construction of homeland. Women recall their ‘beautiful life’ in Somalia, before the war, as though it were the natural order of things and existed in a state of constant harmony.

**Panel 1: Nostalgic Memory of Homeland**

Before the war Somalia was a very good and beautiful place. Hot and beautiful, but not too hot or too cold. Where I grew up, when it was rainy season around the rivers, it was all very green and then there was a hot season which was sunny. It used to look beautiful in the rainy season when the grass has grown, and everything is green, and all the animals have babies. It was beautiful. Every day it might be 40 degrees. The weather was always warm and mild. When the weather was hot, the country looked like volcanic red sand. Mogadishu was

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63 Composite of five women’s narratives.
beautiful, the houses were beautiful. We had a beautiful life. I was happy staying in my country.

In the novel *Aman*, there is a passage describing the Somali desert landscape that is imbued with a similar yearning for an idyllic landscape:

> It was late in the day – the time when the heat of the noon is gone and the land looks beautiful in the long, low, rays of the afternoon sun . . . And then it began to rain. When it rains in the desert, everything smells good. When you look around – everywhere – the plants begin to grow. A lot of different flowers were there, flowers that nobody planted – Allah planted – whites ones, red ones, purple ones – wildflowers all around (Aman, 1994: 20-21).

Women recall Somalia as secure and beautiful, and as not yet marred by the civil war. They make no reference to drought and famine, nor to earlier conflicts preceding the eruption of the civil war. In the face of actual displacement, recollections of Somalia’s landscape and weather are assertions of natural belonging to the land, as the landscape is portrayed as being in sympathy with Somalis.

Metaphors of nurturing were threaded into many accounts, and the associated imagery emphasised the naturalness of living in Somalia. These metaphors were often tied to recollections of food and cooking, with intent to illustrate the sense of content and the wholesomeness of everyday life. Rowdo grew up in Baidoa, a large town in northern Somalia, with her mother, brothers, and sisters. Her family was ‘neither rich nor poor’, and ran a small business, but she explained that they were comfortable and happy. She remembered fondly:

> Everything we ate was fresh. We didn’t have anything frozen or refrigerated, everything fresh. If it were peaceful in Somalia, I wouldn’t live anywhere else. The food and the weather are beautiful. These are the things I love best. In the mornings

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*Aman* documents the oral history of the life of a Somali woman who now lives in the US.
we had *enjeero* with olive oil or a tea or *enjeero* with some sauce or some liver. And also, at lunchtime we had spaghetti, rice, semolina, camel meat, and camel milk. We had choices, but these were the main dishes.

Many women spoke of the food that was grown and produced in Somalia as delicious, and more natural and healthy than any other. They described the wonderful tastes and traditional ingredients and cooking methods, and evoked a sense of being nurtured by traditional foods, and of belonging to a homeland where things taste good. These descriptions were an especially literal assertion of belonging, insofar as the consumption of food grown from the soil of their homeland was a way to ensure good health. Aman, for example, recalls that the food in Somalia could heal you:

> In Somalia, I might have been sick once a year. I might have got a cold. But I would drink fresh milk, and soup with fresh meat and vegetables, and then the cold goes away. But here it is another story.

- *What do you think of the food in Australia?*

The food here is different. We used to drink milk, any milk, and it would be like a treatment because the animal would go out into the bush and eat all sorts of trees and some of them were herbal treatments. So in return if you drink the animals’ milk, then that can be like a treatment. But here, the animals only eat grass. Their milk is not worth drinking. Back home we ate goats, but here there is a lot of lamb that it is too fatty, and that can be really dangerous. But back in Somalia, even if you eat the fatty area of the animals, that can be really good for you. If I could find a way to go back I would do it straight away: everything is fresh, the weather isn’t freezing. Whereas the food here, the milk, the meat, the weather, it is no good.

Somalia is recalled as a place of purity. Australia as a site of resettlement holds danger and threat. Taken together, these themes establish and continually reinforce the relation of

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*Enjeero* is a traditional Somali flatbread made from fermented semolina. It is frequently cooked in Melbourne when there are celebrations and shared meals.
opposition between Somalia as nurturing and natural and Australia as dangerous and unnatural.66

The best thing that I remember was the weather, the food, the fresh of the air. The women, when they come here their faces change. Maybe once a month my face changes, my skin colour changes. In Somalia you look like a million bucks because you are breathing in the very fine air, and the weather isn’t very cold. We would walk down the street sometimes when it is raining and you don’t really feel like it is raining, you don’t feel cold when the rain comes. The tap water, you don’t need hot and cold water, it is always warm and you can shower as it is. Everything about Somalia is very natural. Everything about here is very artificial. (Isir)

Despite recurrent reference to warm weather, delicious food, and the beauty of pre-war Somalia, I was surprised that detailed recollection of the country and landscape escaped articulation. I had expected women to talk at length, and in fond terms, of their homeland. But recollections of Somalia’s landscape were often devoid of any detail. Heidegger writes, ‘the more urgently we need what is missing, and the more authentically it is encountered in its unavailableness, all the more obtrusive does that which is available become – so much so, indeed, that it seems to lose its character of availableness. It reveals itself as something just occurring and no more’ (Heidegger, 1962: 103). Perhaps women needed a memory of homeland coloured by beauty, so much so that even 40-degree days were remembered as lovely and mild. But the detailed physicality of homeland often seemed just out of reach and unavailable.

The haziness to descriptions of Somalia’s landscape was countered by the clarity and detail of women’s recollections of social worlds. The Somali people and community figured prominently as cultural symbols of an idyllic past. A number of studies of communities in exile suggest that the recovery of meaning and identity centres upon the recollection of

social worlds in the homeland. In *Mistrusting Refugees*, Daniel and Knudsen suggest that, 'the refugee’s self-identity is anchored more to who she or he was than what she or he has become' (1995: 5). Fanon writes that the construction of identity amongst the displaced is 'passionate research . . . directed by the secret hope of discovering beyond the misery of today, beyond self-contempt, resignation and abjuration, some very beautiful and splendid era whose existence rehabilitates both in regard to ourselves and in regard to others’ (Fanon, 1963: 210). Similarly, Somali women’s recollections of social worlds in their pre-war homeland described a sense of unity and shared identity. Social worlds in Somalia were recalled with a compelling drive to hold onto a 'beautiful and splendid era'. Women paid much attention to elaborating idyllic social forms and interactions in Somalia.

Women frequently emphasised the unity that existed among the Somali people. As Luul said, 'all Somalis have one culture, one religion, one people, one language, one identity, one skin colour. They were very kind to each other.' The Somali people are described as having shared the Somali language, and religion – Islam, and as being recognisable by their common mannerisms and clothing. Women could have spoken of the proliferation of political parties founded on clan alliances, or the differences in socio-economic status. The underscoring of social unity, however, allows a concrete form of emotional allegiance and identification. Daniel suggests that through nostalgic memory, 'the nation-state promises to restore to the chords of collective discontent atunement with a collective consciousness, to recover for its people a moral order where there is only disorder, and to return its nationals to the path of their intended destiny' (1997: 310). In the wake of the catastrophic events of the civil war and the subsequent social schisms, perhaps memory of unified social worlds promises to provide refuge and direction to those whose lives have been disordered.

Women articulated a strong social and moral order, stable values, and reliable inter-personal relationships. An image emerged of a people recognisable through their hospitality, warmth, and friendliness. Women emphasised that the Somali people were united in their
commitment to sharing, and supporting each other, as everyone valued the importance of community, friendships, close-knit family groups.

**Panel 2: The Somali people**

The Somali people are very good, they are people who respect each other, they respect their neighbours. Somalis are hospitable, generous, friendly, tolerant people, they socialise well, they are good at welcoming people, there is ongoing relationships with people they meet. They are good with friendship. When there is a sadness, when there is a sickness, when there is a death, they are supportive of each other. I mean, they are interested to have the best in their lives, to raise their kids well, to have a good life. Somali people are good.

The hospitality and generosity of people in Somalia was animated by reference to the nomadic culture and Islamic values. Tales were recounted of how nomads wandered for days in the bush, dependent only on the people they came across for food and shelter. As Naima explained:

> In the old Somalia we always put other people ahead of ourselves. If you had one cup of rice and guests came, you would give it to your guests first. Our culture became like this because we were nomads. People would walk for miles and take only a little water. They knew that when they met others they would be given food and accommodation. Everyone was expected to share.

Other women emphasised that Allah demands that people must care for each other. Shared Islamic ideology and practice was recalled as the foundations for an ethic of sharing and support:

> If you are ever cooking, as a Muslim woman you don’t cook just enough for your family to eat. In Somalia I used to cook a big pot of food and sometimes my kids would run out and they would miss the first lot of food and I would have to cook for them again. Sometimes, before my kids even came from school, my neighbours and the people that came visiting would have eaten it all and I had to recook. In Somalia,
in Ramadan, you know how we have sambuusas to break the fast? I would cook that many! And some people couldn’t afford the meat and the flour and all that. I cooked plenty for the neighbours and all the people that were fasting. And throughout all the year, you would just cook and cook and cook and speak to your neighbours and find out who wasn’t eating and then they would join us.

Recollections of daily life in Somalia were filled with examples of the strong sense of community, supportiveness of neighbours, and the ethic of reciprocity. In this way, women’s accounts of social interaction defined a golden era in which Somali people formed a unified and moral community.

Panel 3: Community in Somalia

There was a community sense before the civil war. Elderly people used to get people together. We used to communicate with the neighbours – weddings, births, if somebody gets sick. The sense of community was like that. You know the people, people would know you, you would laugh with them, you would smile with them, share a conversation. It was just like being with friends. You would understand them. There is no barrier at all. There are different customs there. While you are working, or while you are on the road working, ten or fifteen women would come together in one restaurant and you would eat together. And the first one that goes, pays. There is no ‘you pay your share, you pay your share.’ You would look out for each other, and help each other. No problems. It is not the same culture that you have here. It was very relaxed. The days were long and easy. In the evenings, people would bring stools out into the street and neighbours talked with each other. We often visited friend’s houses and ate with each other in the evenings. Our family lived together easily – eating together, we went to bed around the same time. We all had lots of family and support. I had my whole family, my aunts and uncles and brothers and sisters around me. I never had an issue of separation. My parents, my grandparents, my brothers, my sisters, my kids. We all lived in one big area and there wasn’t anyone that I couldn’t

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68 Composite of four women’s narratives.
reach. Even my kids when I had them, my mother used to just take over them and look after them. Some of them I didn’t even breast feed. My mother took over. Living within that big circle, that was our family. Their grandmother used to give them the breast milk, she hadn’t had a child for ten years but they used to think that she was their mother. It was a big circle of family. Before the war, we were all just Somali. We were all the same, and we cared for each other.

Women’s historical narratives provide powerful moral commentaries on community and interpersonal relationships. Community solidarity in Somalia was highlighted through recollections of neighbours sharing food and eating together. Maryam recalled cooking and sharing traditional foods:

What I miss the most is to wake up early in the morning and have the flatbread. Enjeero. Have you ever had that? Not the Ethiopian one, the Somali one, we have a different one. We had a ghee, a type of oil that you eat with it, and it smells so good because it is from an animal and they make it differently there. And we ate it with tea. Now I am talking about it my saliva is starting up. It is a flatbread for the morning, made with semolina, a traditional bread. The best thing is that at lunchtime you come home, and if you don’t like what there is then you go next door and say ‘what did you cook?’ People exchanged food. You would keep on knocking on doors until you find one that you really like. All the neighbours were like that. This is the first time ever that I have seen a closed door. Here, everybody has closed doors.

Nostalgic memory of community and social relations in Somalia helps women to transcend their recent history of war, loss, separation, and displacement, by reconnecting them to shared values and social practices that emphasise support, generosity, reliability, and trust. These recollections of the warmth, strength and generosity of social interactions in Somalia are now reified in quasi-official documents, such as the various ‘Somali Community Profiles’ available from organisations and centres around Melbourne. One cultural profile,
written by Somalis, states that, 'the family is very important to the Somalis, reflecting a sense of unity and security ... Generosity is highly valued in Somali society. It is seen to reflect one's personal integrity and pride in oneself. The extent of Somali generosity is such that a host may leave his bed or house to give shelter to his guest' (VICSEG, 1997). And so, nostalgic memory of community provides both a connection to the past, a template for living in the present, and the continuity of continued expectation and practice. As Spitzer (1999: 96) suggests, creative communal reconstruction engendered by nostalgic memory can be a manifestation of cultural resistance and cultural survival.

However, nostalgic memory and the selective emphasis on the positive from the past was not the only level of recall. The narrative organisation of the past as a place of harmony – through nostalgic stories of family, home, community, people – was sometimes questioned. Middleton and Edwards (1990: 3) write that social memories are variable, and that variability can lead to discord in conversations about views of the past. During one group discussion, I was listening to women tell me familiar historical narratives of their idyllic everyday lives in Somalia, when Fahia loudly interjected, annoyed that everyone was talking about Somalia in such glowing terms. She said people were not being honest about how life was:

In Somalia, we had three different classes. I was in the third class, and then there were people even lower than that. The first class, even John Howard [the Australian Prime Minister] doesn't live like that; they were so rich. Becoming rich wasn't by being educated. It was by chance, by luck. The country didn't have a lot of money and whatever there was went to particular families. People in the first class would eat the best food – steak, lasagne, a lot of vegetables. The second class was someone who had a big villa, had maids to help in the house, had business outside, they had helpers to rear the children. The second class would eat rice, spaghetti, milk, cheeses – but not as much as the first class. A lot of their drinks were freshly squeezed. The third class was the single mothers where the father refuses to help raise the kids, the watchmen who works for the second and first class, the orphaned children. Third
class people wouldn’t even have anything to drink. Even the normal water, they didn’t have access to it. The kids would drink the water and then they would have diarrhoea.

But although there were three classes, people used to support each other. If a neighbour were rich, they would look after the poor one next door. If your cousin or relatives had some money and you couldn’t provide for your family because there was something wrong, then you could go and ask money from them. So people helped each other.

Fahia’s account undermines the idyllic construction of life in Somalia as unified and harmonious. She describes Somalia as a socially stratified country, where the lives of the lower social classes involve hardships and struggle. But even here, her account turns to the supportiveness of neighbours and family, and the strength of social networks. Fahia pulls down what she views as the myth of Somalia as idyllic, yet she describes nonetheless how inequality and social stratification was coupled by an ethic of the supporting those who were more needy.

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Women’s nostalgic memories often centred upon the ‘lived experience of locality’ (Brah, 1996: 192): tastes and sounds; the long hot days and beautiful beaches; the towns and cities where everyone shared the same language and religion; the ethic of sharing and reciprocity that was universally understood. At first glance, these nostalgic memories serve to conjure up a past to which women can not return. Recollections of ‘home’ in Somalia can be seen to constitute a mythic place of desire in what Brah refers to as the ‘diaporic imagination’ (1996: 192).
However, nostalgic narratives offer more than shards of histories. Women maintain an attachment to the homeland and their pasts through the clarity of remembered spaces and daily activities. Nostalgic memory reconnects women to broadly shared values and social practices that are recalled as characterising life in Somalia. Further, memory of Somalia provides a framework for ordering and recreating social worlds in a country of resettlement. In *Habits of the Heart*, for example, Bellah et al. (1985) examine how Americans talk and think about individualism and commitment. They suggest that in addition to the moral discourse of the ‘self-reliant individual’, people also articulate a ‘second language’ of tradition and social commitment as transcendent of an ahistorical individualism. Bellah et al. write that ‘communities . . . have a history — in an important sense they are constituted by their past — and for this reason we can speak of a real community as a ‘community of memory’, one that does not forget its past’ (ibid.: 153). They emphasise that when ‘a community tells its story’, it sets out a moral framework for the present by highlighting instances of people who have embodied and exemplified the meaning of community, setting out conceptions of good character and personal virtues, and relating the shared experiences and sufferings that create deeper identities. They write, ‘the communities of memory that tie us to the past also turn us toward the future as communities of hope’ (ibid.: 153).

Similarly, women set up comparisons between recollections of community and belonging in Somalia, and contemporary life in Melbourne. They present Somalia as a place where the social and moral order was understood, people were good to each other, and everyone had a sense of belonging. The nostalgic imagery of Somalia is a way to afford metaphorical and comparative contrast with their new country of residence. The comparison between life ‘there’ and life ‘here’ underscores the sense that things aren’t quite as they should be. In other words, the past is inextricably bound up in what Malkki calls the ‘social imagination of exile’ (Malkki, 1995a: 105), and serves as a comparative model for giving meaning to the present. The tensions between home and exile, belonging and otherness, can be heard in the comparison between life in Somalia and living as displaced people in a new country. As I discuss in subsequent chapters, memory of life in Somalia is upheld as an ideal to be
recreated, and a moral code to be adhered, following resettlement in Melbourne. The moral code is made explicit through statements about what people used to do; they used to share, they used to help each other, they used to focus on social interactions.

Further, women's contemporary experiences of depression, sadness, and loneliness are often entwined with their histories and memories of the past. As I discuss in subsequent chapters, women articulate the meanings and causes of emotional distress in Melbourne through comparison to a nostalgically remembered past. For example, women frequently represented resettlement in Melbourne as a source of loss, alienation, and loneliness, and this was juxtaposed with the sense of belonging and the supportiveness of family networks in Somalia. Depression and sadness amongst Somali women is given meaning through situating experiences in Melbourne against the background of their histories and nostalgic memories. The perceived differences and deficiencies of their contemporary lives serve to structure women's remembering and historical narratives (Malkki, 1995a: 106). This illustrates that nostalgia does not offer just a connection to the past, but also a moral discourse about how to live in the present, a framework by which to give meaning to contemporary experience, and a response to contemporary circumstances.
TRAUMATIC MEMORY:
WAR AND BORDER CROSSINGS

‘Helpful memories’ are a way of countering the destructive effects of collective and individual trauma.

(Bal, 1999: xii)

Literature concerned with the Somali civil war largely has the goal of documenting political frameworks, abuses of power by the government, the role of the UN forces, and the reasons for and workings of clan rivalry. In such literature, accounts of the war are conveyed as realist documentation or ‘objective history’. This approach, however, does not adequately represent the impact of the civil war on the people who experienced it. Here, I present a view from some women who lived in Somalia during the civil war. I discuss the ‘cultural construction of terror’. In her exploration of Mayan understandings of la violencia, Warren (1993) refers to the ‘cultural construction of terror’ in relation to the ways that people shaped their understanding of the militarisation of civilian life and the tortures, disappearances and killings that became a daily occurrence in Guatemala. For the purposes of this chapter, the ‘cultural construction of terror’ can be taken to refer broadly to the ways in which people give shape and meaning to the emergence and presence of war, violence, torture, and fear in Somalia.

69 La violencia refers to the confrontation between military and guerilla forces in Guatemala during the 1970 and 1980s (Warren, 1993).
Nostalgic memories of life in Somalia reach a stark end with the beginning of the civil war in 1990 and women’s subsequent flight from Somalia to various countries of asylum. Their accounts elaborate the breakdown of moral order with the advent of the civil war: severed links between people, disintegration of community networks, and loss of a sense of safety and belonging to their homeland. In women’s narratives of wartime Somalia, recurring themes emerged that represented a cultural or collective history. There was an unmistakable oppositional process in memories of pre- and post-war life in Somalia. Where accounts of pre-war Somalia were based around nostalgic memory of community and daily life, this was categorically distinct from memories of the civil war and flight that sprung from fear and horror and the chaos of moral and social breakdown. Women’s memories of war, flight, and becoming refugees entailed themes that were cast in shared moral and social terms - the breakdown of social order, loss of trust within communities, chaos, and danger.

Having assisted with reams of refugee and humanitarian visa applications through my work at the MRC, I knew prior to beginning interviews that many of the women with whom I would talk had experienced atrocities and the terror of the war – murdered family members, persecution, rape, starvation of children. I had no way of knowing whether women would choose to talk to me about these experiences, so I steeled myself in preparation of hearing harrowing accounts of violence and the horror of the civil war.

For some interviews, this hardened resolve was unnecessary. Women described the war as a series of events and processes, and stated details as simple facts, without need of further elaboration. Such accounts of traumatic memories often entailed an ambiguous subjectivity in which women were neither subject nor object of the events.⁷⁰:

When the civil war started, you were worried that people might kill you. It was an entirely different thing. People killed each other, things went bad. All the small tribes were really doomed because the big tribes overtook them.

⁷⁰ In his chapter ‘Anguished Memory’, Langer (19990) discusses testimonies of survivors who have 'split' their personas in reaction to what happened to them in camps during the Holocaust. They ascribe their memories to somebody else.
Other women spoke of horrific ordeals, but with a striking detachment, the details of personal lives spoken as an unanimated enunciation of 'facts':

Sometimes I had one kid on my shoulders, and two on either hand, and when the guns started, the noise, we all fell down and sometimes the trees around the road had spikes and my kids and I would have blood all over us. We fell, and then I had to push the kids to run more. There was a form of torture on the road. The militia would stop you and say, 'what's your name, where do you come from, what's your tribe?' And every checkpoint had boiling cement and they put children and people in it. At every checkpoint they had that boiling cement and they took people's eyes out.

Several contributors to the edited volume *Acts of Memory: Cultural recall in the present* (Bal et al., 1999) argue that 'traumatic memory' is impossible, as trauma remains in the present and resists integration into historical life narratives. For example, Ernst van Alphen (1999), in 'Symptoms of discursivity: Experience, memory and trauma', examines the historical trauma of the Holocaust, and asks why inmates of Nazi concentration camps were unable, at the moment traumatic events took place, to have meaningful experiences of these traumas that could later be remembered and integrated. He writes, 'the Holocaust has been so traumatic for so many, precisely because it could not be experienced, because a distance from it in language or representation was not possible' (Van Alphen, 1999: 27). Van Alphen states that experience is the product of a discursive process. However, he views traumatic experience and traumatic memory as impossible, because both evade discursive representation. The representational problems of trauma are a continuation of the impossibility, during the event itself, of placing trauma within a symbolic order. Many women's narratives entailed a stalling of the discursive process of traumatic experience. Their narratives frequently entailed gaps, perhaps because of an inability to discursively represent personal experiences of trauma and war.

Other women, however, spoke not only of the physical impact of the war on the cities, towns and other physical spaces, the percussive sounds of fighting, bullets in the air, but
also of their distress, and the fear and suffering of others. Their accounts were filled with emotion and explicit details of suffering:

Some women couldn’t find their kids. It was so horrible. There was one woman that I knew very well and she had seven kids. She kept the baby at home and the rest she sent to school, but they never came back. You know how the Somalis tie their kids on the back? She had that baby for seven day tied to her back, and she never remembered to feed it. She was running around trying to find the other children. She never remembered to feed it, she was mentally absent. And the baby died on her shoulders without her knowing it. She came to us, and we actually held her and told her the baby had died and took the child off her back. But she felt that her shoulders were empty, and she would try and take us and carry us on her shoulders. She wanted to put things on her shoulders. It was really bad, it was really hard. Thank Allah that is all behind. Thank Allah now it is all over. (Fatuma)

Women’s ‘traumatic memories’, such as Fatuma’s account above, had similar qualities to the way in which people speak of their experience of pain. In reference to people’s accounts of pain, Scarry writes, ‘the narration as a whole has the quality of a sketch: the experience it describes is utterly clear in its outline but all the emotional edges have been eliminated’ (Scarry, 1985: 32). The similarity between description of pain and memory of war and violence is more than metaphorical, and it is not surprising that some women’s efforts to describe the horrors of war were devoid of ‘emotional edges’. Many Somali women described the war with an air of detachment, a focus on corporeality over emotion, and with a sense of the pointlessness of description.

I can not be sure whether some women’s willingness to describe experiences in greater detail was because they sensed that I was learning to cope with the details of violence, I had formed more trusting relationships with these women, or because I inadvertently began to
coax women to talk in more detail of their personal experiences. Some accounts, however, took on a more personal aspect, focusing on the particular experiences of the narrator and people they knew. Even in these instances, women were reluctant, or unable, to describe the intimate details of experienced atrocities:

- *Were you in Somalia when the war started?*

  Yes

- *What happened between the start of the war and coming to Australia?*

  I have seen everything, all the problems. I had a gun pointed at my head once. The gun was pointed at my head and my mother just put the prayer mat over my head. I thought, this is not going to stop the bullet from entering my head, and she said that Allah would stop it. I saw dead bodies in the street. I saw people in a big hole. There were a lot of bodies, a terrible smell.

**NARRATIVES OF WAR**

They gathered everyone, they had kept two men alive and they killed everyone else. Most of the men from the south had either died or had to run away. They had only two men remaining alive. They gathered all the women and children in a clinic. Some of the women’s husbands were lying there dead. When the women from that area gathered, they realised they were widows. Their innocent husbands had just been walking around and now they were dead. They couldn’t dare to look at their bodies, because if they look at them and the militia say ‘is that your husband?’ they would have to say no or else the militia would know that they weren’t Isaak. The women didn’t even dare to cry. They just looked around quickly and said they didn’t see their husband. The militia brought the two men and they started cutting them into

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71 In *Charred Lullabies* (1996), Daniel also writes of an increasing openness in his informants.
72 None of the women with whom I spoke described incidences of rape, though several recounted the threat of rape. This is not surprising. Rape is widely regarded as an unspeakable trauma. However, the majority of the refugee and humanitarian visa applications that I have read included details of rape.
pieces in front of us. The guns had a knife on the ends, and they took their eyes out with the knives. I vomited. I was sick. I vomited. The militia thought that I was related to them, but I just knew the boys. The man who was in charge said that the women and children would not be touched and we should go back to our homes and cook. But after that man left another one, the second in charge, said ‘That is not true. All the women have to go back home and wash yourselves seven times and we will be your husbands tonight.’ One of them pointed at me and said, ‘I don’t care what you men do, but don’t touch that one, she is mine.’ I was so scared. I was going to be raped. (Fatum)

Narratives of war present an absolute contrast to women’s nostalgic memory of pre-war Somalia. Some women left Somalia as soon as the civil war began; others stayed for several years. Women talk of the war as the beginning of danger, fear, violence, chaos, loss of trust, and social breakdown in Somalia. The immediacy of the war was evoked by descriptions of people dying of starvation, dead bodies outside women’s homes, soldiers raping women, and children going missing only to be found with their throats slit. The violence of the war is inscribed on the bodies of unnamed people, and the spaces where women lived are shown as transformed through the sounds of guns, bullets overhead, and radio announcing the arrival of militia groups in town. The economic effects were also substantial. Women and their families lost their businesses to looters and through the breakdown of trade links, and there was no food available in the cities. Luul recalled her fear and horror during the war, and particularly her fear for the safety of her children:

We were afraid for our lives, afraid for our children’s lives. In the street, there were dead people. It was terrible. When we were on the run, we would all be running in the street, and then ahead you would see that they had brought a big mortar gun and they would blast it at us. I looked back behind, and everyone behind me was dead. There was no-one there, just the bodies in the street.

I left Somalia. I was waiting outside of town for the others to join me after we ran out, but I forgot my son’s kids. I had to go back. There were checkpoints, and
they terrorised us when we were going back in. There were dead bodies everywhere in the street when I got through the checkpoints. I had to go and grab the kids and crawl out through the bodies with my head down to hide from the guns firing over my head. I had one kid hanging on my front and one on my back. That was why we left. We were always happy, but then it got bad.

Women spoke of the beginning of the war as if it came from nowhere, without warning. Many women evoked the sudden intrusion of the war in their lives by reference to the unexpected sound of bullets flying overhead:

When the war started in Somalia everything changed. I had no inkling that it was going to begin, just one day there were suddenly bullets flying overhead. There were lots of soldiers from the government in the streets and they were raping women, taking them from their houses and the streets. My mother was so scared for me and she wanted me to leave. I left Somalia alone. I didn’t know where I was going. (Halima)

The social climate was one of great uncertainty, as relationships of support and trust began to break down. Women’s accounts documented a process of profound disruption of the social order and the moral community of Somalis:

Before the war I never saw anyone with a hard life. I saw people who couldn’t cope, but I never saw anyone die from starvation or hunger. After the civil war though, a lot of people died from starvation and hunger. Before the civil war people used to lean on each other for support. But when the civil war started that fell out, and people died because they didn’t have anything to eat. I left in 1992. My husband got killed. I had two kids.

Khadija related the breakdown the trust, and explained that distrust and antagonism is still strong, even within her immediate family:

Before the civil war broke out I was in Hargeisa. That is where the whole war started. Barre went up and wiped out the whole Isaak tribe. Ten of my family
members were killed, including my brother. That was my own trauma before the war even started. That was in 1988. One day they took my family and they tortured them and then killed them. When we found out that my brother had been captured, my husband sent a man to telephone the people that captured him. Through that call, an order went to keep him, not to kill him. But it was a couple of hours too late. His shoes were there, but we were told that he had been taken. And that was the last that anyone saw of him. My brother was killed by Siad Barre’s people. And then one of my cousins, who was Isaak as well, he was working for Siad Barre’s government, and then the other people in my tribe killed him because they said he betrayed his tribe. So in my family I had children from my brother who hate anyone who comes from the south. And then I have my cousin’s children who hate the Isaak tribe because they killed their father. So that is what happened. In my family some children hate Isaak, and others hate Siad Barre. You can hear them arguing with their grandmother because they don’t want anything to do with each other.

Malkki writes that accounts of atrocity, remembered and retold, are acutely meaningful themes within people’s mythic-history. They have an order that is incorporated into the overarching moral framework expressed in mythical accounts of history (Malkki, 1995a: 94-95). The disintegration of social networks was a central theme in Somali women’s accounts of war. Whereas prior to the war people had shared food, childminding, and conversation, during the war people died of starvation, children were stolen and killed, and there was fighting. In marked contrast to recollections of the pre-war unity of Somalis, women spoke of the emergence of distrust between people and clans:

Before the war everything was OK, but the bullets and the guns started to just erupt and the houses were pulled down on top of you . . . In the war, there were two major tribes and they were killing each other. But in the meantime there were a lot of people caught in the crossfire and a lot of people died, young and old, pregnant, weak, and everyone had to flee because it was indiscriminate. The sense of trust got lost because the two tribes were fighting. The people that belonged to those tribes
don’t trust each other. And they still don’t. Even now in Australia. So that sense of helping each other is not really there anymore.

In the pre-war era, Somalia was recalled as a source of stability, yet during the war it became a site of anguish, chaos, danger, and instability. This chaos can be heard in descriptions of people running in all directions, the difficulty of keeping track of who had been killed, the murder and breakdown of family units, and people’s frenetic movement between places in search of safety:

I was a kid when the war started. I was with my parents, and then some months later when I was nine years old and the war started . . . Well, I grew up with my brother, my elder brother. My brother had two children. My sister-in-law was pregnant, and then my brother was killed in 1993. I had a little brother, but I haven’t seen him since the war. He was there when the civil war started, but he went with another family. We were running everywhere. Because of the civil war, we couldn’t stay in the same place. That was my life until we went to Kenya. What I can remember now is that when the civil war started, the people used to say, ‘these people they got killed, and someone else, someone else, someone else.’ They used to talk about that a lot. And it happened in our own place, and I saw it with my eyes. That is all I know. I can’t take my mind from that, I can’t take from my mind what happened in my country. What I saw. I am still having those dreams. I am trying to tell myself that I am in this country, where there are nice people. But still I think about my country and what has happened. (Medina)

Nurta described how her family was torn apart by the war. Her sisters and brothers fled their homes, but she was resistant to leave and hoped things would improve. Nurta gave her children to her sister to take to safety until the violence stopped. But the violence did not lessen, and she watched Mogadishu descend into chaos and danger:

There was no money, no food. There were looters all round the city. We had to hide the gold in the paste that we used for cooking. The looters would come and turn the
house upside down and search us and never think to look in the paste. We started a business where we hid gold for people. When we went outside in the morning, people would be dead outside the door and we had to step over them. We had to go to the well every day for water and step over dead bodies outside the house, and there were bodies in the well. We had to pull those bodies out of the water before we could pull up a bucket of water. Then we would drink that water. It was horrible. We still wanted to stay on in Somalia. We hoped that the fighting would stop. But eventually we had to leave.

Nurta’s recollection of the war entails harrowing imagery of bodies in the streets, looters invading homes, her life coloured by the horror of war, and the water she drank polluted by dead bodies. Nonetheless, she stops short of recalling the gritty details of smells, and fears and sickness. Nurta records the factual events with little expression of distress, repeating the happenings almost mechanically.\(^73\)

Amidst the chaos and danger, women felt they lost control of their lives; things became circumstantial, women couldn’t predict what would happen, and they couldn’t control the outcomes. Local politics were volatile and people had guns. Amina describes the dangers that her children faced. She did not articulate the violence and cruelty of the war by setting up a categorical distinction between herself and her family as good and the perpetrators of violence as evil, but attributed their survival purely to luck:

My daughter was sitting with three children. The other three of them died, she was the only one left. Lucky. There was a man who started to shoot – bla, bla - but my daughter had just left. The children all died. Shukri was very lucky. We had a war in that area. If the kids started arguing, then the kids might go to their mother, father or brother and say what had happened. The families had guns, and if they were angered, they would come out and start to shoot everyone – gra-ra-ra-ra-ra. This time, the fathers came to the area after their daughters had fought, then there were

\(^{73}\) Similarly, Van Alphen (1999) relates a Holocaust survivor’s recollection of the drowning of a new-born baby: “It seems as if a voice without subjectivity is speaking. Or, to formulate it more pointedly: it is not Joan B. who is speaking, it is just her mouth.”
two fathers arguing with guns. Shukri was very lucky. When the fathers with the guns were coming, Shukri felt like she had to move some plastic bags in the lane, the bags for the water. While she was moving them, the fathers came and started shooting. So she was very lucky. The other girls were shot. She was 13. She got lucky. Her time is not finished yet. And my other daughter, she was standing in the street and she turned and just after she left, the bullet hit the ground just where she was standing. It is very lucky.

Khadija recalled how she tried to prepare for the eruption of warfare, but it came so suddenly that she could not even protect her own family:

People said, 'when it is close to boiling point, wear everything you have. Wear a couple of dresses, and new ones, because if you wear old ones they are going to wear out. So wear a couple of dresses, wear new shoes, put the kids' jacket on. Then you have to sleep in them. Don't even take them off, because if you have to leave immediately, you won't have time to look for anything. And put all your jewellery and gold around your waist.'

The gunfire started and we ran to the other side of the house. The guns came through the house, and they took a lot of the wall off. My mother had eye surgery and she couldn't go. The baby, the youngest one had just had a shower. She was naked and I had to grab a curtain off the railings to cover her. I was breastfeeding. I had to leave my mother at home, and I was torn because she couldn't make the journey. We walked.

Causes of the civil war

A number of writers and theorists have focused on the ways in which war and violence leads people to construct a social map that defines the evil perpetrators in opposition to the victims (Feldman, 1998; Malkki, 1995a; Swedenburg, 1995). In his study of political terror in Northern Ireland, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland*, Feldman describes how indissoluble categorical differences are constructed between opposing groups, and the bodies of individuals become representative
of these categories. He writes, ‘the ethnicity of the body is built in its dismemberment and disfigurement. Violence constructs the ethnic body as the metonym of sectarian social space’ (Feldman, 1991: 64). Similarly, Malkki (1995a) writes that one of the central axes of the Hutu mythico-history was to establish and demonstrate the differences between the Hutu and the Tutsi at the level of the cultural, social, political and physical. In conversations with Hutu refugees, she found that the Tutsi were cast, amongst other things, as thieves, foreigners, less intelligent, evil, physically distinct and weak, and parasitic. Malkki writes that ‘they’ are therefore regarded as the source of unimaginable evil and the destruction of the natural (Malkki, 1995a: 52-95). Feldman and Malkki illustrate how strong ethnic or social categories are regarded as the cause of violence, created through violence, and a means by which people make sense of violence.

Following this, I anticipated that Somali women would have a clear sense of the causes of the war, and would construct a social framework in which different groups were characterised as evil perpetrators. However, few women talked of the war in causal terms. Indeed, their accounts entailed scenes of hardship and horror, but with no clear sense of the reasons behind the violence or clarity as to the identities of the perpetrators:

Who do we ask? The people who are fighting we have to ask, we weren’t fighting. Just suddenly one day we heard – bam bam bam – I don’t know. We didn’t have any warning. We had something like thieves then. People come, the police came round to the house and come and they rob the house. It started that way. And then after three of four days we heard – bam bam bam – in two areas. *(Fahia)*

The war was described as a time of disorder, fear, chaos and loss of control. It was something that women were caught up in, but not of their making. It was common to hear women describe the sound of bullets, the crash of missiles, the lack of food; they described the material impact of people’s actions instead of their own or other people’s role in the perpetration of violence.
Many women spoke of their memories of war through a ‘dehumanising gaze’, using ambiguous terms. They rarely spoke of the identities and characteristics of individual perpetrators or clans. Rather, their language was oblique, describing faceless looters and thieves, and unspecified peoples. As Kaafoyo described:

I was thirteen when the war started. Fear. It was a fearful time. I left Somalia when I was nineteen. I was there for six years of the war. I stayed mainly in Baidoa and Mogadishu. The food was limited from the war. You wouldn’t be able to get even three meals a day because the food wasn’t getting into the cities as there were barricades. It was a really difficult time. You could still live with the kids, but there were a lot of problems with the thieves coming in at night. You couldn’t lose the children because you had no chance to find them. There was a lot of robbery and a lot of fights at the time.

Medina spoke of the fighting as a product of human condition and misunderstandings, and compared the Somali civil war to the violence in Bosnia:

The war started because people didn’t understand each other. Nobody was getting what they wanted, they thought they had to fight, that is what they thought. They thought that fighting is a good way to get what they wanted, but it is not. There are a lot of people suffering there, innocent people. It was no good the civil war. I always pray that nobody gets hurt in this world. I can’t forget about the civil war, it was like Bosnia is now. I really feel sorry for them now because they feel the destruction of fighting. When you are in a civil war you don’t feel that, you always think that you are going to get killed. It is something really terrible. It is not good to suffer like that. It is always good to live your life in a safe place... They were fools, it is not good to fight. You can’t finish something if you are not talking, and you can’t finish it by fighting. People don’t understand, they are emotional, they just want to kill everybody. It is not actually good. Peaceful is something beautiful. But everybody was involved in the war, children, everybody.
Women’s accounts illustrate that the causes of war were obscured by chaos and disruption. I suggest further that women found it difficult to define the perpetrators of the war because, in so doing, the conception of Somalis as unified and harmonious would be threatened and torn apart. Outside of the framework of war, women spoke of the Somali people as a unified and admirable. They often repeated that, ‘all Somalis have one culture, one religion, one people, one language, one identity, one skin colour. They are very kind to each other.’ To present the war as the product of clan-based rivalry and hatreds, women would be forced to deny Somalis their humanity and collectivity as an ethnic group. Further, women from the more powerful clans may have been reluctant to acknowledge the involvement of ‘their side’ in the horrors of the war. Historical narratives underscoring collective Somali identity appeared particularly urgent in the context of resettlement, as many women emphasised that ‘clan is not important. We are all Somali, we are all the same.’

However, a few women did speak of the war as a product of clan warfare. These women were from minority clans and were particularly subject to persecution during the war. They had less investment in the construction of a shared Somalia identity, as they have a long history of exclusion and disempowerment. The causes they offered for the war concur with the analysis of the civil war presented in many books and articles, simply stated that the Darood and Hawiye wanted to claim control of Somalia and bring down the government (Bradbury, 1993; Cassanelli, 1993; Hassig, 1997):

All these problems were just caused by a fight for who was going to be president. All these problems were caused. The people who were fighting were the two largest clans in Somalia so that was difficult to be between. My sister died, my auntie died. The problem was that those two powers were fighting and we were in the middle of the clash. My clan was one of those that suffered the worst. One family was centred in one area and the other in another area and the fire from the guns was just crossing over our heads. The gunfire was so loud, whistling over our heads. The houses would shake from the noise. People who were having problems were those in between. We copped it. People died out of hunger, starvation, swallowing fevers,
people were dying from vomiting blood, all sorts of disease that weren't really known started to emerge from the condition that everyone was in. There wasn't any aid coming to us. My father was just a normal worker. There was no money coming into the house, there were no banks, no school, no police. People were ripping each other off. There was no law against that.

Amina, and her daughter Deeqo, also spoke together about the involvement of clans in the war. They belong to a minority clan in Somalia that had little political power. Deeqo said:

Before the war, we had one religion and one language. But then the religion started too many groups, and then clans started too many groups, and then they fought. We were all the same. But then people said ‘I do things this way’ and ‘I do things the other way’ and they made different groups. There were groups fighting outside of the city. They started to say, ‘you have to follow me, you have to follow me, we will do something big.’ When the groups got strong and powerful, then they came to the city. Then Siad Barre said we had to get a plan, and the police came to the areas and they fought with them, but everyone followed the groups and stuck with their clans. So the groups they got stronger. But we didn’t have any clan so we had to run away. We didn’t have support. We had to run away from them. Before we never had something like that.

Amina continued:

Before the war, they told us on the radio that Somali are only one people. Then we heard that the Darood are coming and they are taking the houses, taking the children, killing the children, and killing all the people, and raping the women. They started like that and then the war got big. The Darood didn’t start the war though. The Hawiye started it. They came to the Darood area and then killed people; the people who were Darood, the Darood women who had married the Hawiye men, they killed the Darood women! Very hard. Our clan was big, but it wasn’t strong enough. Before the war, we only knew each other as one people, we didn’t decide to be different groups. But the Hawiye got stronger. Our clan didn’t get stronger. And then
when they heard that the Hawiye were coming and fighting in Somalia, the Darood ran away, with their children and all. And when the Darood ran away the Hawiye came, and they fought with the remaining Darood. And the Hawiye got bigger. But the Darood kept fighting. The Hawiye killed a lot of Darood. They didn't get stronger, a lot of children and women were killed. And when the Darood saw that the Hawiye killed their women and children they got stronger. They were angry, very angry. My brother, he left seven children. He and his wife they were killed. They were killed in Baidoa, he was in the police. They killed him like a dog, he didn't do anything, and then they killed his wife.74

Many women presented the horror of the war without clear cause; only a few attributed it to clan rivalry. By identifying the conflict as a product of clan rivalry, these women did more than provide an account of the causes of a war, violence and suffering: they challenged the construction of Somali people as having a shared identity, and questioned the possibility of maintaining trusting relationships. In considering the causes of the war, women inevitably reflected upon the fabric of their society, power relations, trust, and social connectedness.

For all women, regardless of their understanding of the causes of the war, the civil war marked the end of an era, the end of social harmony. Recollections of war focus on sudden disruption to daily life, dissolution of social networks, and the destruction of physical surroundings. The narrative images of war are somehow incomprehensible, and disconnected from any meaningful framework: a murdered brother and only his shoes left behind, a woman so distressed by the loss of her children that her baby dies of starvation on her back, dead bodies in the street. Brison writes, 'the undoing of the self in trauma involves a radical disruption of memory, a severing of past from present and, typically, an inability to envision a future. And yet trauma survivors often eventually find ways to reconstruct themselves and carry on with reconfigured lives' (Brison, 1999: 39). Even though accounts

74 See Bradbury (1993) for an analysis of the involvement and actions of different clans during the first years of the civil war.
of war were often disjointed and incomplete, they were assimilated into broader themes of, for example, community and displacement.

**FLIGHT FROM SOMALIA**

Narratives of war were often a preface to women’s descriptions of flight from Somalia. The following account details Aman’s experience of flight, and the dangers and suffering it entailed. Aman was fifty-five when she fled Somalia. While Aman describes her individual experience, her account is representative of the chain of events and circumstances shared by many women as they fled Somalia:

If the gunfire starts here now – bam bam bam - you can never know what to take, what to carry. My sister had just prepared food, and they were just about to eat. And before they could even take the lid off the pot, a missile came through the roof. They left the house without taking anything. No food, fancy that. You are preparing food, and just . . . boom. She didn’t even take clothes. You feel that the next one [missile] will hit you. That was what happened to my sister. And when we were on the run, she was asking everyone if she could borrow a scarf. She didn’t have anything. She was naked. We were quite wealthy. But it was a funny thing, that she didn’t take a scarf. Everyone had one of their own, but no-one had a spare scarf. Twenty days in between Somalia to Kenya. No food. We were on top of a lorry. It was very overcrowded. Some kids were on my back, one on my lower back, one on top of my head, and one on either hand. And we walked for miles. They were that heavy! I can never talk about that. It was the worst thing ever.

Every night I dream this, every night I have dreams of running away. I dream about being under the trees with no shelter. I remember. I dream about cooking out nowhere, under the trees with no shelter. We were stolen from ten times. We ran away and we set ourselves up anew near the border, but then we were invaded again. That was the worst. We had nothing to cook. And even if you killed animals in the wild there was nothing to cook with. We slept on the earth. There was nothing to eat,
nothing to cook with. Nothing. Rain. Cold. So cold when it rains. Sometimes when
the rain ended there was a little bit of sun. Everyone put their hands on the kettle to
keep warm. Then the kettle went. After that there was nothing to cook with. I could
hear the hyenas everywhere. It was so scary. The wild animals. We entered the
border of Kenya and there were a lot of wild animals. But we couldn’t do anything.
Whatever you’ve got, you sleep on. You sleep on the earth. There was nothing. No
mats. That is how it was.

While women recall the war as the beginning of the breakdown of their socio-political
world, the flight from Somalia marks the final transition into a disordered and unintelligible
life-world. This is vividly illustrated as women describe a world where people lose their
family, relationships are confused, women do not even have the resources to cover
themselves appropriately, and they are forced to travel through strange terrain as ‘naked’:

There was a small child in Kismayo, and we saw him and gave him food. His
mother, she ran away from the war, from the Hawiye. I don’t know where her
husband went, but she and her child tried to run away. And then she was trying to
get away on the truck. And the car came and she was run over and the child was on
the truck with us. He stayed with us, but then I don’t know where he went. There
was no meat, only cold tea. You can’t remember anything when there is war, you
can’t see anything. It is very hard. There are people everywhere. You just run away
by yourself.

With flight, the remnants of a recognisable and intelligible physical and social landscape are
supplanted with dangerous spaces. As women and their families entered into new
landscapes, between their hometowns and countries of asylum, they recurrently referred to
the threat and presence of wild animals – snakes, lions – and the hostility of the terrain –
lack of water, cold, rain, bushes that tear your skin. The flight from Somalia was described
in corporeal terms, often focusing on descriptions of how their bodies felt as they fled
Somalia, rather than their emotional state; women talk of being cold, hungry, exhausted,
pursued, and carrying the heavy weight of young children and belongings. Similarly, in Malkki’s documentation of Hutu refugees’ accounts of flight, she writes that ‘accounts evoked the picture of momentary but total suspension of everything social, and of the violent condensation of all life into the body as an utterly physical organism’ (Malkki, 1995a: 110). As Brison (1999: 42) writes, a distinguishing factor of traumatic memories is that they are tied to the body, and can be viewed as a kind of somatic memory.75 When talking about war and flight from Somalia, Faiza said:

There are a lot of wild animals. There are lions. There are lions and men and a lot of things on the way to Kenya. The branches of the trees and bushes scratch and scratch us when we walk. See these scars.

She lifted up her skirt to show me the scars criss-crossing her calves. While I looked at Faiza’s scars, her daughter continued to talk.

There were so many trees to get through, and when the truck stops you have to get off and cook something close by the car, but then if the Hawiye are coming you have to jump on and get away or run. It is very hard. There is no water as well. You have to drink the water from hollows in the mud that the trucks make, and the water is dirty and there are a lot of people sick from drinking the dirty water. And malaria. A lot of sick people died.

During one interview, a woman produced a packet of photographs of her relatives and gave me a guided tour of the injuries they had sustained: a mangled hand taken close up, the fingers unable to open after being crushed by the butt of a gun, gunshot wounds scarring people’s arms and backs. These photographs were vehicles for bearing political and social witness to acts of violence. The woman told me that her family was innocent, caught in the cross-fire, persecuted by soldiers. She showed me a portrait of her family taken in a house in Nairobi, their clothes still in suitcases even after years of exile ‘because they are on the run’, their faces unsmiling because ‘they have no hope.’ Women’s recollections had a materiality,

75 Brison writes, ‘in the aftermath of my own assault, body and mind became virtually indistinguishable. My mental state (typically, depression) felt physiological, like lead in my veins’ (1999).
where altered and deformed bodies and places revealed a social and political world torn apart by violence.

Recent scholarship in the social sciences and humanities is replete with references to the body as a text upon which social realities are inscribed (Butler 1990; Csordas 1994; Warren 1993). Csordas writes that an inescapable transformation of the body in the contemporary world is being wrought by the incredible proliferation of political violence (Csordas, 1994: 3). Accordingly, the violence of the civil war is revealed through physical scars on Somali women’s bodies, the sicknesses contracted from unpotable water, and physical displacement from the homeland; these are the corporeal result of conflict. While the physicality of flight and exile was central to many accounts, women also had strong concern for the impact of war and flight on their social worlds. They detailed the transformation and breakdown of their social landscape, the loss of meaningful relationships, separation from family members, and erosion of social support as people struggled with the realities of war and flight. Reference to embodied hardships was not so much the suspension of the social (Malkki, 1995a), rather the physicality of experience was a material form for constructing and representing social and political memory.

BEING A REFUGEE

I begin this section with Amina’s account of the years she spent in a refugee camp in Kenya:

We were lucky that nobody died in my family. When we were walking on the roads to Kenya, we saw that there were children dying. I remember one woman walking with us, she had two children, two boys, and when she got to Nairobi the two boys died. We were very lucky that nobody died in my family, and we had 14 children. We were together when we got to Kenya.

In the refugee camps it was cold and raining, always raining. The night is very cold and the day is very hot. It is very hard to live in the refugee camps, with no house, no clothing, and there are a lot of snakes. We spent four years in the camps,
from 1991 to 1995. It was very hard to live in the camps. It was too small — there was no water and no light and that was a problem. The people had those insects, hookworm, that you get inside your feet. If you got them, you had to put fire on your feet and then cover up again. They were everywhere.

When we went through to Nairobi, it was very hard to live as the police chased us because they wanted money. All Somali people suffered that. It was very hard to live in Nairobi without an identity card. We didn’t know how hard it would be. It was harder living in Nairobi than Somalia. Nairobi was nine miles away from the camp, walking on the road.

Anthropological analysis of the refugee can be illuminated by Turner’s discussion of liminality:

Transitional beings are particularly polluting, since they are neither here nor there; or may even be nowhere (in terms of any recognized cultural topography), and are at the very least ‘betwixt and between’ all the recognized fixed points in the space-time of cultural classification. (Turner, 1967: 97)

The ‘betwixt and between’ nature of being a refugee is audible in women’s accounts. Women tried to confine their ‘refugeeeness’ to the temporal and spatial site between their histories in Somalia and contemporary life in Australia. However, the temporal and spatial boundaries of being a refugee are porous. In accordance with Turner’s discussion of liminality, women’s accounts highlight the transitional nature of their ‘refugeeeness’. They suggest that they are still regarded as refugees, and more significantly as polluting, by the wider Australian population.

Women’s accounts of being a refugee contained three principal components. First, women spoke of living as refugees in first countries of asylum. They described the impact of border crossing, the suffering entailed in the ‘refugee experience’, the hardships of refugee camps in Kenya and life in first countries of asylum, and people’s resilience in the face of difficult circumstances. Second, women described the process of applying and waiting for refugee
and humanitarian visas. Their accounts refer to the structuring of authority, the control of mobility, and the impersonal organisation of visa-processing. Finally, women described their reception in Australia and their sense that they are viewed negatively as refugees by the wider Australian population, even as they strive to move beyond this identity. While women’s accounts of living as refugees appear as memories about their recent pasts, here it will become clear that refugee experience and identity is intrinsic to women’s contemporary circumstances in Australia.

Panel 4: What is a Refugee?76

A refugee is someone who has had to leave their country, who lives in a refugee camp or is living in a country other than his country of origin, and who doesn’t have any rights in that country. If you want to see a refugee then go to those camps in Kenya where the people are always starving and living without shelter. There, it is like a system where no-one is above each other. They don’t have any food, they don’t have any shelter, they don’t have any status. So that is a refugee. They have no shelter. The people who are refugees are people who are living in something like a jail, like I used to. Prisoner, prisoner.

Somali women’s definitions of ‘the refugee’ resonate with many of the features of refugee identity discussed above. Women define refugees through geo-political status, characterised by border crossings and displacement, and ‘refugee experiences’ are seen to include vulnerability, lack of resources, hardship, and dependency on UN assistance. As Zarowsky suggests, the meanings of the Somali term for ‘refugee’ - qoxoti - indicates a close relationship to ‘Western’ notions of the refugee: border crossings, destitution, and the right to protection and assistance from international bodies (Zarowsky, 2000: 180). The term qoxoti has only been in use since 1978, when Somali people living in the Ethiopian Ogaden region began to flee back to Somalia following the eruption of the Ogaden war between Ethiopia and Somalia (see chapter 3). Zarowsky writes that the term qoxoti refers strictly to ‘people who flee before the mouth of a gun’ (Zarowsky, 2000: 180). The women I spoke

76 Composite of five women’s narratives.
with confirmed that *qoxoti* are people who flee from violence, including from guns. They also said that the term *qoxoti* refers to ‘people who are uprooted from their homes,’ loss of belongings, displacement, poverty, and fear of being killed.

Women’s understanding of being a refugee locates this identity in the time between flight from Somalia and migration to Australia. Their ‘refugeeness’ was expressed in terms of fear, danger, fleeing from war, being outside of their homeland and not belonging, and having no official documentation to authorise movement across borders. Women suggest that the categorical identity of refugee refers both to their geographical and political status, and their experiences of war and displacement:

I felt like a refugee when I was not in my country, as soon as I left my country. We had a civil war, I was scared of everything, I was seeing a lot of people dying, killing. When I got to Kenya it was not my country, it was a country where I didn’t belong, and I stayed there as a refugee. If you leave your country to go to another country and you don’t have a passport, you don’t come as a tourist, you don’t come to visit, you’re not on business, then what are you? I just felt like that. I was a refugee. I didn’t have any other choices. It was to save my life, to look for help.

(*Medina*)

In the details of individual accounts of living as refugees, themes emerged of persecution, vulnerability, fear, hardship, dependency on the UN, and resourcefulness. Maimun’s story touches on many experiences of refugee camps that were also recounted by other women – makeshift homes, sickness, and worries about their children’s well-being:

I left Mogadishu and came to Kismayo near the Kenyan border, and then went over the border to the refugee camp. I entered three different refugee camps over a few years. Liboi\(^7\) is situated on the border between Kenya and Somalia. In early 1991, I

\(^7\) Liboi camp, very close to the Somali border on the Kenyan side, grew rapidly and haphazardly as large influxes of refugees crossed the border. Problems of crowding, poor sanitation, and related disease plagued the camp in 1992. Mortality rates soared while relief staff tried to improve conditions and stabilise the health of the camp population (Hyndman, 2000).
came to my first refugee camp. It was a good refugee camp, the climate was cool and there was food given to the refugees. Liboi was just on the border and the camp was open to persecution because it was close to Somalia, so then the UN moved us and we went to Ifo.

Ifo camp was really harsh. During the day the sun is like it is just here [Maimun holds her hands just above her head and squints her eyes as she looks up]. The sun is very close to you, it is hot. But during the night it is very windy and all your plastic and your tent would fly away. In addition to that, there were snakes, very deadly snakes, and they used to eat people. People used to have diarrhoea and get really sick, between at least 100 and 150 people used to die daily.

- How many people were at Ifo?

It was more than the population of Mogadishu. The people from Mogadishu and all around and all the other towns, they all had to leave Somalia. Our diet changed dramatically. The food that people ate was so different from home, and people started to get sick. Wealthy people, rich people, educated people, everyone was in the one spot. There weren’t a lot of doctors to care for people.

One day I went crazy for two hours. When we came to the camps, I saw people dying every day. I thought some of my children were going to die. I had seven children with me. People died from sickness, snakes, sun, or the wind. When I saw all that, I started to talk to myself. Next door to us there were twelve people. Each week a couple of them died, until they were all wiped out from sickness. I started to get really afraid. I had no relatives there, and I started to talk to myself. One day, I went out and when I came back, I said to my kids, ‘Who is your mum, where is your mum?’ and they said, ‘You are my mum.’ I said, ‘No no no no no no, I’m not your mum. Who is your mum?’ No-one could convince me, I was asking my own kids ‘Who is your mum?’ I didn’t know where I was. Finally, one of my younger sons came and sat on my lap and said ‘Mum, what is wrong with you?’ Then, all of a sudden everything came back to me, all of a sudden I was not insane. I cry when I remember that.
Kenyan people made a big business from taking people to the town and other places. A woman who had permanent residency in Kenya promised to take us to the camp near the coast. Only people who came by sea were going to it. That camp was different, without snakes and the hot weather. This woman took us, and in the middle of the night she took all our belongings and called the police. We ended up anyway at the coast camp, Utange. When we reached Utange camp it felt very safe, better for the children. My sister had been in Australia since 1992. When we reached Utange she sent a sponsor form for me and the kids. We were in Utange for five years.

- Did you have to wait for five years after you put your application in?

Four and a half years we had to wait. Utange was alright for the first few months, but then it turned into a danger zone because the Kenyans used to come and take everything from us and search us. They used to kill men, women, children. It was a terrible camp in the end. They used to ask for bribes, they wanted money. They aren’t used to seeing money. They used to ask us to take our feet off their ground because we are walking on their land. What would we do? Fly?

The UN had a system there. They gave people a little food card for each family. The UN used to give rice, spaghetti, sugar, and oil. But there were no vegetables, meat or milk. So we used to sell half of the grain or the maize or whatever has been given in exchange for vegetables from the Kenyans. We had to buy the vegetables from them.

On April 4, 1995 they closed the camp. They deported people back to Somalia. Some of the people ran away from the camp. They closed the camp.

- Did they say why they closed it?

Usually when people are settled the UN moves them to another camp. They sent people back to the snakes and the sun. They usually said that they only bought the land up to this or that time, or that they are renting and they have to take the people back to another camp. When they moved refugees, the resettlements were even worse. People had to just uproot again to another harsh environment that they
were not used to. So there was a lot of death. When they moved the camps they
demolished all the houses. Some people built houses with their hands, they
demolished those houses, they cut the water pipes. It was a big issue, it caused a lot
of problems. People lost a lot of things, including live children. When the UN said
they were deporting people, the Kenyans used to come and steal the children. So
there were a lot of women crying that they couldn’t find their children. Before the
Utange camp was moved, I came here.

Rogge (1993: 24) asserts that UNHCR is careful not to make refugee camps too attractive to
potential refugees by maintaining minimum facilities, an approach that he calls 'humane
deterrence'. Just as Maimun describes the refugee camps as desolate and dangerous,
Rogge's article on the camps in Kenya describes these authorised sites for the displaced as
'bleak and insecure holding camps along the Kenyan-Somali border' (Rogge, 1993: 24).
Administration of the camps in Kenya involved a number of surveillance practices, through
which refugees were repeatedly mapped, marked and monitored (Hyndman, 2000: 24).
Take, for example, the opening paragraph of UNHCR's Country Operations Plan for Kenya
in 1995:

The Branch Office has addressed the intractable problem of discrepancies between
feeding figures, registered numbers, and total populations, by camp site as well as by
overall caseload and nationality, through physical headcounts and registration of
refugees in the camps. These discrepancies are due to acts of refugee sabotage;
double registration within camps and between camps; and inflation of the number of
dependants on ration cards in a bid to maximize their entitlements to food and other
relief assistance distributed in the camps (UNHCR, 1994).

As is made explicit in UNHCR documents, refugee populations in Kenya were constructed
as subjects, figures, and numbers, and as untrustworthy, legitimising the focus on
surveillance and monitoring. In her analysis of refugee camps, Malkki contends that they are
'a standardized, generalizable technology of power in the management of mass
displacement' (Malkki, 1995b: 498).
Maimun’s account details a sense of vulnerability in the refugee camps: weather conditions so harsh they would blow people’s flimsy homes away at night, sickness and death, and uncertainty as to who could be trusted. She mentions the UNHCR systems in place for food distribution and provision of basic housing materials, yet she also recalls frustration at the unfathomable decisions and practices of the UNHCR. Maimun makes explicit the chasm between the needs of refugees in the camps, and the policies and approaches of the UN. As Hyndman writes, ‘the geography of refugees’ lived experience stands in stark contrast to the order of the camps and to the neat categories of assistance, destitute populations, and research concerned with refugee mobility’ (Hyndman, 2000: 149). Women explained that living in the camps meant being isolated from others, being reliant upon aid – medical supplies, food rations, building materials, and trying to evade rules and regulations in order to make a better livelihood. Within women’s accounts, refugee camps can be seen to embody the tension between the material expression of approaches to international refugee assistance, and the particularities of individual needs and situations.

As previously discussed, refugees are constructed as dependent and needy. While dependency forms part of women’s understanding of their ‘refugee experience’, they also recalled the initiatives, resourcefulness and resilience of refugees in camps. These included collective rotating credit unions, bartering of goods, small businesses and shops set up within the borders of the camps, and provisions of assistance and support to neighbours and family:

The funny thing was that of all the people that arrived in Utange, everyone started up small businesses. They sold ice-cream, they sold gold. Refugees, they weren’t used to sitting around. So they started to sell things, even though it is illegal. (Sahra)

Further, many women did not remain in the refugee camps, dependent on UN handouts and other aid agencies, but sought to make a living in cities and towns while awaiting decisions on humanitarian visa applications. Hyndman (2000: 150) writes that the ambitious, often risky, journeys of refugees beyond the camps attests to the fact that refugee camps are

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untenable as anything more than an immediate response to crises of human displacement. Accordingly, women defied the categories and locations to which they were assigned, by avoiding the spaces and structures in place to assist and monitor them.

Through an agreement between the Kenyan government and UNHCR, refugees with sufficient funds to maintain a household and pay school fees have a good chance of being authorised by UNHCR to stay in the city. This agreement creates privileged spaces for refugees with money (Hyndman, 2000: 160), and emphasises the importance of remittances from abroad. However, many women without funds or UNHCR authorisation also elected not to remain in camps. In 1995, UNHCR estimates of the number of illegal urban Somali refugees in Nairobi ranged from 20,000 to 100,000 (Hyndman, 2000: 158). These women attempted to manage their displacement outside of official channels, by seeking refuge in the cities and towns of (primarily) Ethiopia and Kenya. Some women recalled that the citizens of Kenya and Ethiopia were hostile to those people who attempted to live outside of the confines of organised refugee camps. Amina spent three years in Nairobi:

In Nairobi, it was very hard to sleep. It was very scary. The police used to come into the house, and you had to hide under the bed. When you are in the city, you have to hide when they come, the police. You have to hide. When you went outside, you had to have $100 US so if they catch you, you can give it to them. If you don’t have the $100 US and they catch you . . . you can’t go outside. If you don’t have the cabana (ID card) and no money you couldn’t go outside. If you were born there you can get an ID card, but if not you can’t move. It was very hard. If you were a refugee and staying in Nairobi, it was very hard.

Not all people fleeing the civil war went to Kenya and the refugee camps there. Many people fled to countries such as Ethiopia and Yemen. Others moved overseas prior to 1991, and when the war began their dreams of return were crushed and new countries of residence became countries of asylum. Saynab, for example, went to Italy before the war erupted:
I always used to dream of going home, and I would tell myself, 'I'm going home, I'm going home.' And then the war happened and that dream was gone. All the lines of communication were disconnected, so we couldn't communicate.

- How did you feel when you heard about the war?

I was so afraid, it was so shocking. I felt that I would never see anyone that I know, or anyone who was a relation to me. Given what happened and how things went... I couldn't communicate with my family. Two months after the war started, we started to hear who died, who was alive. If you wanted to send money, you didn't know where to send it. You didn't know which side of the country, or which country to send the money to. We were given permanent residency to stay in Italy for two years, all the Somalis were given visas.

While Saynab never lived in a refugee camp, she regarded herself as a 'refugee' during her time in Italy because she was unable to return to her homeland due to war:

I never had been out of my family home. I always lived with my family. My friend in Italy mentioned to me that life could be a bit difficult, but that I would be able to find work there. But I didn't realise how difficult it would be. I went to this man's house where there were masses of Somali people. There were people sleeping on the coffee table, people had to sleep ten or so lengthways across the beds so that you could only have half your body on the mattress and the rest was hanging on the floor. Everywhere that you looked there were bodies. Everyone was there because they had left Somalia for fear of the war. They wouldn't help you. Everything was expensive. The sun came from a different direction. When I was a child I used to always pray, I never missed prayer. I started to ask people 'where should I turn to pray?' and everyone started laughing because they had all given up because life was so harsh.

For three years Saynab remained in Italy, working as a maid in people's homes. While in Italy, she married a Somali man who was accepted as a refugee in Australia, and eventually she migrated to Australia. Saynab has not seen her family or returned to Somalia since she left for Italy.
VISA APPLICATIONS

The significant majority of the women I spoke with had migrated to Australia through the Refugee and Humanitarian Program, and had gone through the process of applying for visas. Many refugee resettlement applications were processed in situ at the Nairobi-based Australian High Commission. Following the submission of a visa application through the Australian Refugee and Humanitarian Program, the applicant is interviewed by Australian High Commission protection officers to assess and verify their claims. Benedict Anderson (1983) asserts that the census, map, and museum constituted the grammar of the colonial state and were instruments for coding and controlling the colonised. Similarly, these interviews are used to code people as genuine refugees or inauthentic claimants, and to control their movement between borders.

The rigid rulings and ordered processes of visa allocation stand in contrast to women's experiences of the visa process and the gritty details of their lives as they await a decision on their applications. Women spoke of the long wait, and their confusion about processes such as medical check-ups and eligibility criteria:

When I lived in Kenya I was a refugee. I lived in camps there; then I was a refugee. We lived under the trees, homeless under the trees, the rain came through the trees. There were no mats on the floor. We just slept under the trees for shelter, for nearly one year. Sometime there was the rain and other times it was hot weather and the sun was strong. We were living under Allah. Sometimes in your life you are in difficult circumstances, and then in other times you can move on. With Allah’s help we moved on. The process of getting a visa took three years. Five times they sent me for the medical check-ups. They wouldn’t tell me if they had any problems with my health, but then they were sending me again and again. I had burns for treatment,

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you know how you burn the body? And they thought that was a problem. It was three years all together. (Aman)

After the civil war started in Somalia, Hakimo fled to Ethiopia with her children, mother, and other family members. She was originally included in her mother’s visa application, but the Australian High Commission said that as she was older than eighteen, and therefore not a dependent child, she had to submit an application of her own. Hakimo talked of the desolation of being left behind when her family had their refugee visas for Australia approved:

They split the family. I had a family of my own, children of my own. We had one application but they split it. My mother and father and her other children went, and me and my children had to stay behind. When I learnt that they were leaving me I got really disheartened. I got really sick. I started vomiting and I had to be hospitalised. I was in shock. I felt lonely in Ethiopia when the family left. Language was a difficulty. I didn’t know how to shop. I started talking to myself, and I stopped eating the food. The hospital had to give me blood because I stopped eating and started talking to myself. I started having short breath whenever there was too much noise and all the kids started to talk. When I started talking to myself it was because I was anxious, I would get short breath. I stopped eating and the doctor gave me intravenous blood. But I went into a coma. Just for that. I went into a coma. I was unconscious. I was in hospital for one and half months. The main thing was that I wasn’t really happy. I felt isolated. I didn’t want to eat. I was depressed. It lasted for one year. All of that just because my family and I were separated.

78 Burning the body is a treatment traditionally used in Somalia to cure illness and disease.
In this chapter, I have explored the ways in which Somali women remember and produce war, flight, and being a refugee. Their historical narratives are not objective claims about facts and events, but thematically and morally organised accounts permeated by personal and social meaning. The civil war is recalled as violently rupturing the social harmony, trust and connectedness. This is followed by flight into unintelligible and disordered landscapes. Finally, women cross over Somalia’s borders and become refugees. Their recollections of being a refugee – or qoxoti – reflect broader socio-political discourses of refugee identity, namely border crossing and suffering. Women also speak of social losses, the control placed on their mobility, the persecution they were subject to by Kenyan authorities, loss of rights, and uncertainty that their basic human needs of food and shelter would be met. In this way, Somali women take the different representations of the refugee and use them as a framework that is then filled with local content and interpretations.

In chronological terms, women’s experiences before the war and in the years following the beginning of the civil war in 1991 exist only in the past, or the ‘already lived’. However, neither women’s nostalgic accounts of Somalia, their memories of war, nor their flight from Somalia sit comfortably within a chronological framework that places a marker between past and present. Women’s memories are an essential dimension of the present moment of their lives. As I argued in chapter 4, accounts of pre-war Somalia play an important role in configuring and giving social and moral meaning to everyday life in Melbourne. Women interpret everyday life in Melbourne, by direct comparison to nostalgic depictions of Somalia and the evocation of shared and individual memories. Accounts of war, atrocity, social breakdown, and flight are also employed to make sense of the contemporary social landscape in Melbourne. I discuss in chapter 7 the ways in which some women attribute the loss of trust amongst Somalis, the breakdown of family groups, the sadness of leaving family behind, death of family members, and ongoing trauma and sadness to their individual and collective experiences of war. As Clifford puts it, memory of ‘there’ is rearticulated and makes a difference ‘here’ (Clifford, 1994); it gives contemporary life meaning and provides frameworks for current situations.
Resettlement does not engender a break from the past. Rather, women re-examine, remember, produce and consolidate the past in the context of life in Melbourne. Their histories are necessary for everyday lives and provide a foundation for ongoing situations and processes. As Mieke Bal writes, 'neither remnant, document, nor relic of the past, nor floating in a present cut off from the past, cultural memory, for better or for worse, links the past to the present and future' (Bal, 1999: vii).
EXILE OR HOME:
RESETTLEMENT IN MELBOURNE

Exile... is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted.

(Said, 2000: 173)

The displaced do not experience temporary absences only to be confirmed in the well-ordered structure of normal life. Theirs is a more or less permanent experience of not being in situ as they negotiate a diversity of experiences in a deterritorialized world.

(Olwig, 1997: 34)

In this chapter, I turn to women’s accounts of resettlement and their everyday lives in Melbourne. Prior to arrival, women held hopeful and idealised visions of the lives they would lead in Australia. As daily life in Australia unfolded, women found that it entailed many hardships. Women described how they carry with them a sense of being out of place, or in exile, in a new land.

The theme of exile is clearly audible in contemporary writings in anthropology (as well as critical theory, cultural studies, history and other disciplines) in relation to the study of diaspora, deterritorialisation, multiculturalism, migration, racism, ethnicity, and related
topics (Malkki, 1995b: 514). In ‘Reflections on Exile’, Edward Said (2000) draws upon the images of refugees, linking their experience of displacement to the conditions of exile. He writes that our era is ‘the age of the refugee’, the displaced person, mass immigration. ‘Is it not true’, Said asks, that exile ‘is produced by human beings for other human beings; and that, like death but without death’s ultimate mercy, it has torn millions of people from the nourishment of tradition, family, and geography?’ (Said, 2000: 174). For Said, exile is emblematic of estrangement and yearning, as well as being an inhuman and intolerable condition. The condition of exile is permanently underlined by the loss of something left behind forever (Said, 2000).

A key theme within studies of refugee populations is that to be uprooted from community and homeland is to lose one’s identity, traditions, and culture (Malkki, 1995b). Various authors imply that through processes of displacement from home and homeland, culture and identity are extracted from the refugee. In her introduction to the edited book, Migrant Women: Crossing boundaries and changing identities, Buijs (1993: 2-18) writes that in the context of life in alien and often oppressive circumstances, immigrant women struggle to retain continuity and control of their lives. Eastmond (1993) argues that amongst Chilean refugee women who have been ‘uprooted’ from their homeland and relocated in the United States, their sense of identity is shaken and decontextualised. She notes that, ‘the commonality of the refugee experience may be seen to lie in the forced uprooting from familiar patterns of everyday life, involving multiple losses and a struggle to recover continuity and control’ (ibid.: 35-36). Knudsen (1995: 13-35) describes how Vietnamese ‘boat people’ experience profound uncertainties about life and culture, unpredictability of life in countries of asylum, and the radical breakdown of relationships of trust. And Stein (1981) asserts that refugees ‘will confront the loss of their culture – their identity, their habits. Every action that used to be habitual or routine will require careful examination and consideration’ (1981: 325). Studies such as these describe the difficulties of living in a new country, and suggest that the process of displacement necessarily leads people to the conditions of exile and alienation.
Adorno’s autobiography, *Minima Moralia*, written while in exile in North America, is subtitled *Reflections from a Damaged Life* (Adorno, 1974). In his writings on displacement, Adorno describes the ‘mutilations’ of exile from Germany as including the expropriation of language, estrangement from culture and place, and an awareness that the new world will remain incomprehensible at certain levels. While faced with the harsh conditions of exile, Adorno nonetheless writes that the ‘intellectual in emigration’ must forge a new critical consciousness around the notion of home. Adorno writes that ‘the house is past,’ and declares that ‘dwelling, in the proper sense, is now impossible.’ His solution is to make a home in writing: ‘for a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live.’ Adorno’s autobiography underscores the tensions between home and exile, and foreshadows the emergence of new ways of theorising these seemingly oppositional conditions.

Recent writing on diaspora, transnationalism, creolisation, hybridity, and post-colonialism questions the analytic chasm that is so often set up between the conditions of ‘home’ and those of ‘exile’. These writings do not assume the purity and naturalness of origins, identities, communities and homelands, nor the alienation and unnaturalness of displacement. Instead, both emplacement and displacement are revealed as ‘historical products, ever-unfinished projects’ (Malkki, 1995b: 516). In the introduction to *Migrants of Identity*, Rapport and Dawson (1998b) criticise the conceptualisation of migrants and refugees as moving from localised images of home, to exile in foreign lands. They argue that contemporary movement in the world overwhelms and relativises the image of home as grounded in socio-cultural ‘spaces’.

The ubiquitous experience of exile and movement brings attention to the ways in which people recreate lives, homes, and community.⁷⁹ Extensive social-scientific research has

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⁷⁹ In addition to the exile from war and persecution, emigration, labour migrancy, tourism, urbanisation, and counter-urbanisation are also ubiquitous forms of movement.
devoted attention to the ways in which migrants and refugees make a home in new countries. Summerfield (1993), for example, compares the patterns of adaptation between Somali and Bangladeshi women in Britain. She discusses women’s political mobilisation and improvements to their social status, employment opportunities, and language skills. Alund (1999) writes that Yugoslavian women in Sweden employ the cultural symbolism of their histories to create new solidarities. Centred around the family, the household and local community life, female networks nurture cultural dispositions and give birth to new forms of social organisation (ibid.: 151). In other words, women deal with current social problems through social networks that are embedded in the values and social relations of their homeland, Yugoslavia. Writings such as these highlight the resilience and adaptability of displaced peoples as they create homes in new places.

Further, recent work in various theoretical domains has shown how diffuse the concept of ‘home’ can be (Bammer, 1992; Peck, 1995). In a migrant age, the concept of home must be flexible enough to encapsulate different localities, modes and identities that may be multiple, situational and paradoxical. From this view, ‘home’ is not a protected, stable, physical place where domestic life is realised (Douglas, 1991). John Berger (1984) writes that, in a quintessentially migrant age, the idea of ‘home’ undergoes dramatic change. Olwig (1997) argues that home may be found in the contested spaces of social relations or in knowledge of self and community. A broader and more mobile conception of home is necessary, as something ‘plurilocal’ (Rouse, 1991: 8), something to be taken along as individuals move through space and time.\(^\text{80}\)

In his article ‘Café, Culpa and Capital: Nostalgic Addiction of Cuban Exile’, for example, Ortiz (1997) writes of Cuban exiles in Miami who retain their Cuban identity, and temper the ‘unhomely’ experience of exile through their capacity to enjoy a cup of café cubano. Similarly, Lipsitz’s (1999) chapter “‘Home is where the hatred is’: Work, Music, and the

\(^{80}\) See also Gitroy (1991a, 1993), Rouse (1991), Rushdie (1991) and Rutherford (1990) for discussion around the ways that people carry a sense of home through processes of displacement.
Transnational Economy’, suggests that banda music amongst Mexican immigrants in California creates a sense of ‘homeliness’. Banda music originated in the 19th century and remains popular in Mexico. In California, banda dances draw large crowds of Mexican immigrants and there are over 800 banda clubs in Los Angeles alone. Lipsitz writes, ‘banda music signals a new cultural movement, one that challenges traditional categories of citizenship and culture on both sides of the border, that generates distinctive forms of social organisation and style, of dance and dress, that speak to the unique and singular realities facing migrant low-wages workers in California’ (Lipsitz, 1999: 195). Banda music helps maintain familiar social spaces and ritual practices, even in the face of dramatically new political, economic, and social realities in California.

Berger (1984) writes that, for migrants and exiles, home comes to be found in a routine set of practices, a repetition of habitual interactions, in styles of dress and address, in memories and myths, in stories carried around in one’s head. The conceptualisation of home as grounded in individual practices, interactions, and ways of being, resonates with Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus. Habitus refers to the historical and cultural production of individual practices, in that contexts, laws, rules, and ideologies all speak through individual practice. Bourdieu defines habitus as ‘the durably installed and generative principle of regulated improvisations . . . [which produces] practices’ (Bourdieu, 1977: 78). He suggests that people come to live by the principles of an ideology through their bodies - their use of space, their practices (Bourdieu, 1990). In other words, the body is conditioned by the world, shaped by the material and cultural conditions of existence (Webb et al., 2002). To draw upon Bourdieu, migrants and exiles bring a habitus - produced and shaped by the conditions of existence in their homeland - to a new country of resettlement. Following resettlement, lives may be reshaped by new circumstances, as people adapt and respond to a different setting. However, the contexts, laws, rules, and ideologies of the homeland are sustained through habitus – a cup of coffee shared amongst Cuban exiles in Miami, the writing of an exiled German-Jewish writer, the routine ablutions before Islamic prayer - and in this way habitus provides a home.
Following displacement then, are migrants and refugees in a state of exile, or do they carry with them a sense of home? An extensive literature explores the relationship between home and exile amongst migrant and refugee populations (Matthews, 2002: 71). This relationship has been predominantly analysed from four perspectives (DeSantis, 2001: 3): 1) the exile identifies with the old community and hopes to return; 2) the exile identifies with the country and wants to stay; 3) the exile is unstable or unbalanced, and the dualistic understandings of his or her life is illogical; or 4) the exile swings like a pendulum, vacillating between identification with ‘old’ and ‘new’ countries.

DeSantis (2001: 3) argues, however, that a common problem is that research has either ignored or been unable to supply a satisfactory interpretation of the prevalence of contradictions, simultaneities, and dialectic tensions found in the lives of exiles. He argues that the experience of displacement can best be understood through Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogical theory of language and human action that accounts for contradictions within communication. That is, displacement may simultaneously entail the contradictory domains of exile and home. From a Bakhtinian perspective, displacement may be reconceived as an ongoing dialogue between the possibilities of starting over in a new land, and the desires for the sameness and stability of the old land. The challenge, then, is to take account of the way that the lives of migrants and refugees might incorporate the tensions between being both ‘at home’ and ‘in exile’. This approach allows people to be heard and understood on their own terms, not manipulated to fit a simplistic template of either loving or hating their ‘new’ and ‘old’ countries.

The ethnography that follows is theoretically framed by an exploration of ideas of exile and home. In chapters 4 and 5, I explored the ways in which women engage in recollection and imagination of Somalia and their histories. The narrative production of their pasts focused on descriptions of the beauty of the landscape and the social harmony that prevailed prior to the war, and the dissolution of these physical and social worlds with the eruption of the war.
These historical narratives provide a discursive framework through which domains of everyday life in Melbourne are compared, configured, and morally weighed (Malkki, 1995a: 105). In what follows, I discuss women’s expectations of life in Australia and their experiences of resettlement. I focus specifically on the simultaneous, and often contradictory, experiences of feeling exiled or out-of-place, and of maintaining and creating a sense of home in a new country. Identifying themselves as displaced from their homeland and out-of-place, women respond to their exile by maintaining other modes of belonging and emplacement. What emerges in this chapter is an exploration not just of displacement or homelessness, but of exile, home, and memory, and how they are intimately connected in women’s lives.

EXPECTATIONS OF AUSTRALIA

The women with whom I talked had migrated from Somalia and countries of asylum, such as Kenya or Ethiopia, either with minimal knowledge or with idealised and distorted visions of Australia and the lives they would lead here. Prior to arrival, women’s knowledge of Australia was based on little other than having seen an outline of the continent on a map, and knowing that it was a country without war. The ideas about Australia of those living in refugee camps were generated almost exclusively through communication with earlier Somali migrants, the media, and people’s imagination as they awaited visas. Tales of countries of refuge began to filter back to people still living in refugee camps or in exile. Women recall that refugee camps became sites of fantastic stories as people put together an imagined Australian nation, without possible correction, as they did not receive pre-embarkation information about Australia from The Australian High Commission in Nairobi or elsewhere.
Panel 5: Imagining Australia

I only saw Australia on a map. I didn’t know anything about it, what it would be like. It was just a picture, just a country somewhere else in the world. I heard about Australia when I was at school and I remembered Australia and all the countries. I thought that it would be peaceful and better, a good place. It would be a place where we could recover and rebuild our lives, a great place to live, a great place for the kids. We heard from other Somalis people that it was a better standard of living. That is what I pictured it to be.

Accounts of Australia and the life women expected to find here were often utopian visions, but they also held the possibility of disillusion and hardship. Fahia told me about the stories she had heard about Australia from other Somalis living in the refugee camps:

They said that when we arrived at the airport the money is everywhere in boxes, and some of the taps have milk running. They also used to say that the government has lots of goats and sheep, and they make you look after those goats and sheep. It would be very lonely, but they paid you well. Before I came, after I got the visa, I used to worry thinking about the goats. You know in Somalia, when you look after the sheep, it is a very lonely process. You sit there on your own, under the trees, and you get bored. Only little girls do that. And there were wooden sheds near the Australian Embassy in Nairobi. People used to say that they are like the houses in Australia that people live in. I used to think, ‘if I go out and mind the sheep all day and stay in a shed all night, then how am I going to live?’ When I came, there was no money in the airport, there was no milk running in the taps, and there were no sheep. My ideas changed. I had to go to school when I came. I had to go to Centrelink. I realised that what they were telling me wasn’t true.

As she waited in refugee camps in Kenya, Fahia imagined that Australia was a land of wealth and excess, but also a land of loneliness and struggle. Mahler (1995: 83) argues that beliefs amongst economic immigrants of utopian fantasy are not so surprising when understood as one of many manifestations of the material fetishism that erupts when people

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81 Composite of four women’s narratives.
from commodity-poor societies enter industrialised, consumer societies. Because many women knew of Australia as a ‘first world country’, it is unsurprising that they hoped to come to a land of wealth. Parallel to this utopian vision, however, were contradictory and hazy views of Australia and fears that everyday life would be lonely and hard.

For those few women who are accepted to Australia, safety is central to their expectation and experience of resettlement. DIMIA states that the Refugee and Humanitarian Program offers the option of resettlement to those who are in the greatest need of protection (DIMIA, 2002a), and that ‘the Australian Government is strongly committed to helping refugees and people who face serious abuses of their human rights’ (DIMIA, 2002b). Accordingly, women have found that Australia offers ‘protection’ from the dangers of war and persecution; as Medina said, ‘it is a place where we can live peacefully, somewhere we can restart our lives.’ Zolberg, Suhrke and Aguayo (1989) construct the ‘escape from violence’ as the central feature of the lives of refugees. They write that ‘[with] the immediate, intense suffering of the victims . . . relief is possible only by enabling them to move abroad – that is, by providing them with a refuge’ (ibid.: 33). In other words, refugees are primarily seen to require a place of safety.

Panel 6: In Australia there is safety and peace

The best thing about Australia is the freedom, safety, and the peace. Australia is a place where we can live peacefully, with freedom and lack of fear. We can change our lives from the way it was, the situation we had. We were just looking for somewhere safe. We always needed to go somewhere we could restart our life, live our life, because we were sure that we could not live in Somalia, that we could not get what we wanted peacefully. Here, you don’t have to hear guns and you don’t have to see dead bodies. Here, you know there is peace, and if you have even just a cup of water then you know you can live. But in Somalia there is no peace, whatever you have is stolen from you. So you have to run away to

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82 Composite of six women’s narratives.
wherever you think you can get peace. So that is why we came to Australia. The main thing for me was to have safety here.

As a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention, Australia is obliged not to expel or return refugees to a country where their life or freedom would be threatened on account of their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. However, the provision of a ‘safe place to live’ is not necessarily founded on an understanding of human rights and justice. Zarowsky (2000) argues that humanitarian aid is based on historically contingent models and practices of charity. She writes ‘pity – and not, say, a sense of justice – is a central dimension of the perception among Western audiences and donors of an obligation to help refugees’ (Zarowsky, 2000: 178). From this perspective, Australia’s Humanitarian program can be seen to be founded on a discursive formulation of refugees as vulnerable, traumatised, and in need of protection and assistance. In this sense, uneven geographies of power shape the directions and conditions in which displaced people move and resettle. Women’s accounts are a telling example of this uneven geography; they reflect the need to express gratitude that they have been allowed to cross a national border, and voice thanks that Australia has offered safety and peace. There is a sense that, as refugees, they must be grateful for protection. Their right to complain about situations is undermined by an expectation that they should remain grateful for the safety Australia has offered.

Panel 7: Australia welcomed us

Australia welcomed us with open hands. I can’t say anything other than that I am grateful. It is not that bad actually. We didn’t have any big problems after we left our country and arrived here. If you are a refugee and you have been on the run, then you appreciate whatever you can get. Here, we are part of Australia, part of a country, we have permanent residency here. What more can we ask?

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93 Composite of three women’s narratives.
While women have found safety from war, many have also found a chasm between their expectations of Australia and the actual circumstances of everyday life. Following resettlement, they are faced with a ‘country of asylum’ that is sometimes hostile and difficult to live in. Fadumo, aged 40, arrived in Melbourne in late 2000 with her eight children. Her partner remains in another country of asylum. It was not long before the beautiful life in Australia she imagined gave way to loneliness and hardship:

We thought the life would be gold. We thought that we would have a car for everywhere we went. We thought we wouldn’t have any problems. But now I can’t cope. I keep crying and crying. When we first arrived, sometimes I used to cry on the way and back from shopping, offices, schools. Just crying and crying and crying.

Fadumo recounts being taken to isolated on-arrival accommodation. There were no Somalis living nearby, and no-one to offer her support. She said:

I lived in Maribynong. Life was really difficult. The first three months were hell. I never slept, and I didn’t eat, I used to talk to myself. I spent my days crying and I was very unhappy. We had no family. The closest family that we knew was in Broadmeadows. That is how far it was. It was terrible when I came. When I got sick, no-one would get up to cook for me, when it was raining no-one could go outside. It was pretty bad. I used to ask other Africans for help, Sudanese and other Arabic speaking people, because there were no Somalis around, no-one to help.

LIVING IN EXILE

The Refugee Resettlement Advisory Council (RRAC) states that:

Settlement is the period of adjustment migrants and refugees experience before they can fully participate in Australia’s culturally diverse society. During the settlement period, migrants may need assistance to access basic services such as housing, employment, health and medical services . . . Early access to appropriate settlement services allows migrants and refugees to move towards active economic and social
participation in Australian society as self-reliant and valued members (RRAC, 2000: 8).

Settlement services offered to humanitarian entrants with visas, both state- and nation-wide, include 510 hours of free English language tuition, short term on-arrival accommodation, translating and interpreting services, information and orientation, accommodation support, torture and trauma counselling, and access to government and community services such as Migrant Resource Centres. Past research into the experiences and needs of refugees in Australia has explored recurrent and important issues relating to material and practical needs of housing, employment, clothing, and language skills (Batrouney, 1991; Markovic, 1999; Pittaway, 1991). Resettlement services provide a crucial network of support for many refugees and humanitarian entrants, yet they also provide an ideology of resettlement as a simple trajectory, mainly requiring pragmatic short-to-medium term assistance, in order to achieve self-reliance and active social participation.

The Somali are regarded as a particularly ‘high need’ community in terms of resettlement needs (MRC North East, 1999a: 12). In this research, several Somali women mentioned utilising services such as accommodation support, translating and interpreting services, and English language tuition. Many had turned to these services for help in their first months and years of settlement. Idil said:

Life in Australia is good because of the freedom and lack of fear. Sometimes you walk in the streets and you have some problems with people, but that is only a few. The government has assisted us in terms of housing. The kids can go to school. Those things are really good.

However, in talking about their experience of ‘resettlement’, women’s conversations did not centre upon the practicalities of accessing and using settlement services and the benefits (or

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84 The term ‘high need’ refers to a high demand for resettlement assistance, such as housing, information, referral, and material aid.

85 The Migrant Resource Centre North-East has a high number of Somali clients, and around 65 percent of Somali client-contacts in the year 2000-2001 were made by women.
other outcomes) of these services. Women focused on more personal and emotional themes of exile and alienation, and ways of making a home in Melbourne.

Naima’s house was a place where women often gathered to eat together or talk. One evening, Malyun and I dropped by to farewell a woman who was going overseas to visit her children in Kenya. Several women were present, talking and drinking tea. Naima’s daughter put on a video to watch a cheaply-made film shot in Mogadishu. The film’s plot was based on a scenario that I had often heard women laugh about: a man from the bush comes to Mogadishu and stays with his family. He is ignorant of city ways; he doesn’t know how to use a toilet or sit on a chair, has never seen himself in a mirror, he mistakes a plate of pasta for worms, and he can not eat with a fork and spoon. As the film continues, the man blunders his way through encounters with all kinds of street-wise city people and he gets in to various comical tangles. The women shake with laughter at the man’s ignorance. After the film, Fadumo recounts a memory from Somalia that is similar to the scenario of the ignorant bushman:

The funniest thing that I remember from Somalia is when we had a guest over. Some of the people from the bush didn’t know about the house and the food. That day we were eating spaghetti. And because it is a hot country, we would buy a big chunk of ice and put it in the middle of the drinks. So we had juice with a big chunk of ice. And you know how ice moves around in a drink? This man was from the country and he wasn’t familiar with any town food. He asked, ‘Is this ice alive? It is moving around like it is alive in my drink.’ He thought it was alive! And then he looked at the spaghetti and said, ‘Are these worms? I can’t eat this because I don’t eat worms.’ That was such a funny thing to see those people not knowing about the food at all because they are not used to eating those things . . .

These comic stories of blundering bushmen in Mogadishu are at the expense of the ignorance of the displaced, of people who do not understand the customs and ways of new places. Fadumo finishes her tale above with the comment:
Now the table has turned! I feel the same now that I am here and I don't know things. I look at the food and I think, 'I can't eat that.' Things are strange. We are looking around and we don't know what things are, we don't know how this place works.

The analogy that is drawn laughingly between bushmen and women's current situation in Melbourne resonated with the sadness and difficulties of displacement.

Women's accounts of resettlement are frequently constructed around the pragmatics of living 'in exile' and the difficulties of coming to terms with a new country. In the following section, I examine domains of daily experience that invoke a sense of living in exile. Many women perceive that hardship is characteristic of everyday life in Australia, their new homeland. Women communicated the vicissitudes of resettlement by reference to lack of English language skills, difficulties with raising children, experiences of racism, financial hardship, the bad weather, housing problems, cultural isolation, the poor quality of food, the vulnerability of living in a new world that is difficult to grasp, and the challenges of understanding new infra-structures. Many of these issues can be read as tropes of disassociation, reflecting difficulties that are imposed by the inherent qualities of Australia and the life it offers. The circumstances of resettlement create idioms of daily life that constantly evoke a sense that women live in exile.

'The language is very hard'

Many Somali women can not speak comfortably in English. The 1996 Census indicated that 85 percent of Somali-born people spoke Somali at home, 4 percent spoke Arabic, 7.8 percent spoke another language, and 3.2 percent spoke English (DIMA, 2000). However, English language is an important means of communicating with the wider Australian community, a prelude to employment, and a fundamental skill with which to negotiate life in Melbourne. Women feel trapped by their inability to speak English; this inability is narrated both as literal lack of English language skills and in terms of not having the opportunity to give voice to their needs and concerns.
Panel 8: Language difficulties\textsuperscript{86}

It is really difficult in Australia because the language is very hard. I can never get used to it. At first I thought Australia was a beautiful place, but then it became a place where I couldn't even say hello to people. People used to come and help me at home, but I could never understand what they were talking about. At one time I thought about going back because I couldn't communicate with people. So there is a real problem with not speaking the same language as others, it is one of the main barriers. I feel like I am not being heard. I don't want to go out. I am worried that even if I go out, I won't be able to understand. I have enough English to buy things from the shops. But I want to go to the immigration and say, 'this is my family, they have to come to Australia.' And I can't say that, because I don't have any English. I went to school but my mind started wandering so I didn't learn a lot. If my children were here, my mind wouldn't wander and I could learn better; if I were happy I could learn. But for now my mind wanders and I think about the kids and their situation. I can't remember very much, I think about the war and it is very hard to speak to the other people in Australia. It is hard to concentrate.

As already noted, humanitarian entrants are eligible for 510 hours of free language tuition, if they do not have functional English. DIMIA states that the language programs 'provide basic English as a second language to help migrants and refugees from non-English speaking backgrounds settle successfully in Australia' (DIMIA, 2002d). These classes must be undertaken within five years of arrival in Australia or granting of permanent residence. While many women have enrolled in English classes, there are barriers to their effective utilisation. Women with childcare responsibilities explained that it was often difficult to attend classes. They also felt that in the early period of resettlement, it was difficult to concentrate in lessons because everyday life was so hard and confusing.

\textsuperscript{86} Composite of six women's narratives.
A conversation held one afternoon with three elderly women – Luul, Roweda, and Isir - came around to discussion of language difficulties. They spoke of the frustration of not being able to speak to their neighbours, and not being able to ask for directions nor state their address if they were lost. As the conversation continued they started laughing at the hopelessness of their situation. Luul told me, ‘If you have language problems, there is a card you can show that says you don’t speak English.’ She pulled out a laminated card that states in bold letters ‘I NEED AN INTERPRETER’, and provides phone numbers for the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS).\(^{87}\) The women collapsed into laughter at the scenario of holding this card up to people as they babble at them in English. Roweda continued to explain the difficulty of communicating on the telephone. Acting out a telephone conversation she said:

And when the people phone you up to ask questions they say:

- Mrs Roweda Adan?
- Yeah?
- Yadda yadda yadda yadda yadda.
- Sorry, sorry, sorry. No speak English, me speaking Somali.
- OK, yadda yadda yadda yadda. Thank you.

For Luul, Isir, Roweda, and many others, lack of English means that they are incapable of resolving many problems by themselves. Many women require an interpreter even for a simple check-up at the doctor or an appointment at the Office of Housing. Further, they feel alienated from the Australian culture and people, as they are unable to make friends outside of the Somali community.

Women readily state that their lack of English is a decisive factor in limiting their employment options. The rhetoric of 510 hours of free English language tuition for humanitarian entrants as enabling active social participation that will foster a bright multi-

\(^{87}\) The Translating and Interpreting Service was established in 1973 by the Australian Government, to assist immigrant who are not proficient in English. TIS provides over-the-phone and on-site interpreting (Candlin and Plimer, 1996).
cultural community is not supported by women’s experiences. In Somalia, many women worked in family businesses, sold goods at markets, and were employed by government departments. Here, partly due to lack of English language skills, most women are unemployed. Child-care responsibilities, and the lack of networks, skill recognition, and equivalent work in Australia also hinder their employment opportunities. Unemployment is associated with low social status, stress, low self-esteem, poverty, poor health, and social isolation (Bartley, 1994; Ferrie et al., 1998; Macintyre and Dennerstein, 1995). Unsurprisingly, women identified that unemployment leads to social isolation, a bad financial situation, and lack of confidence. Waris said:

I don’t like to talk about Somalia. It makes me sad to remember. Life was so good there, and it doesn’t exist like that anywhere else. I’ve lost lots of things. Working, living a good life. When you compare life here and life there it is terrible. There we supported ourselves, here we don’t work.

Some women have found casual employment at places where language skills are not as necessary, such as waste recycling plants. But this kind of work can be humiliating, as women would not have accepted these jobs in Somalia. An information session with officers from the Commission for Equal Opportunity incited vigorous discussion about how hard it is to find work when you are expected to fill in application forms in English, the signs in the workplace are in English, and you can’t talk with the other workers. With the rapid increase in the Somali population, the expansion of service programs for Somalis has created a number of more rewarding employment opportunities in the welfare sector, and women disproportionately fill these. Even for these positions, English language skills are essential. Those women who have or acquire English language, have more opportunities available to them.

88 Iredale (1994) states that 1,200 hours of English language tuition are required for gaining language proficiency for employment.
89 Men also face employment problems. In addition to possibly poor English language, their skills are not recognised or are not needed. Many Somali men are forced to drive taxis. They ask ‘how can we show our qualifications when we left Somalia with nothing?’
‘My only worry is for the kids’

Women recalled that in Somalia they had extensive support from neighbours and family with raising and caring for their children. Women explained that as children they used to sleep at their neighbours’ homes and play in the streets, and as mothers they could leave their own children with neighbours if they went to the shops or left the house for a while. As Idil said:

Life in Somalia was good. The weather was nice, the food was fresh and nice, the social life was good, and you could talk to people that you knew all day. The kids would go out all day and you wouldn’t worry about where they had been, and you would know that they would come home safe. The social life with friends was good and so easy going. No problem at all.

In contrast, many women are apprehensive and anxious about raising their children in Australia. This is particularly the case for those who came to Australia without their partners, as they are hit hardest by the lack of support from extended family and community. Saynab, aged 35, came to Australia six years ago. She has not seen her husband since she fled Somalia with her children. She lives with her five children:

When I lived in Mogadishu I lived with my big sister, my elder sister. She was married young and she had lots of kids. In the morning I used to wake up and clean the house, collect the kids, put the kids’ clothes together, cook breakfast, and then go to school. And then when I came home from school I would do the other chores. But I was really happy with that . . . What I remember as a good part of the culture is that we girls weren’t married and if one of our family had a child, then my mother used to make us go and help them. So, you go to her house and then you work for her and look after her for forty days after she has the baby. So that part of the culture is really good. You rely on your family. You expect them to give you help. Even if you don’t ask for help, you will get it.

Saynab later talked of life in Australia, and a sense of isolation is clearly audible in her account:
It is difficult for me. I don’t have any relatives. The way we are now, things are not really good. We have enough food to eat, we have enough clothing. Life is not really difficult in that way. It is difficult that we don’t have any family, I don’t have anyone around me. That is the difficulty that I am facing. My only worry is for the kids and how they will cope living with both cultures.

For Saynab and many others, childcare responsibilities become overwhelming, as women lack networks of assistance. Women say that without family to assist with childcare, they are trapped in their homes, unable to leave their children unattended without someone to care for them.

Many women hold fears about the hazards of wider society and the perceived high crime rate in Australia:

    We used to have lots of kids and you saw them in the streets. The neighbours used to look after each other’s kids. There was no child abuse, and there was no fear of children being abducted. Here you never see the children. Here the kids are locked up inside the houses. That is something that goes with this culture. Sometimes here kids get lost. It never used to happen that children were molested or sexually abused. I used to think that when I came to Australia my life would be so secure. But life here has a lot of stress. (Fahia)

Information sessions where services – such as the Police Force or Child Protection Agency – provide information about rules, regulations and risks, can have a negative impact as they confirm the existence of crime prevalence in Australia. In particular, an incident of child sexual abuse by an Anglo-Australian became widely known and increased women’s fears about the dangers of Australian society.

On one occasion, in response to women’s concerns about their children, Malyun organised an information session on parenting and it was attended by fourteen women, all mothers. Women talked together of how they worry that they do not know how to raise children in Australia, or how to protect them from the dangers of an Australian lifestyle. Idil said:
For me, the good thing about coming here is that there is no war, it is a safe place to be. But personally, since coming here I couldn’t cope. I can’t cope with the weather, I can’t cope with the environment or lifestyle, and I worry about the kids. I don’t like the wider community attitudes towards each other or their culture. I worry about my three kids. .. In Somalia children had different attitude and opinions. Here, kids follow the culture and lifestyle they see. If the parents are harsh to their kids then the government tells them they can’t be. At the start I was so happy about coming to Australia. I thought that a lot of things were possible and my morale was really high. Now I am down, really down. I have seen a lot of things that I don’t really like. I am not too happy about it now.

Idil’s words highlight a sense of cultural isolation, and a feeling that the way of life in Australia is hazardous.

Further, several Somali mothers spoke of a sense that there are many restrictions placed on child-rearing in Australia, as there are different laws and expectations. Their remarks speak of a sense of disempowerment, in that their methods and approaches to parenting are controlled and observed by authorities in Australia. There is a danger that women will not be able to be ‘good Somali mothers’. In a conversation between two women, Maryam said:

I hate this place. You have to keep the kids inside and look after them, you can’t send them outside. It is too dangerous. We used to sleep with the doors open. But there is no freedom here. If I leave one kid at home and pick up the other one from school just around the corner, someone could call the police and I’ll get into trouble. There is no freedom.

Sahmso continued:

I feel like there are so many rules and regulations here and I don’t always know my rights. If I leave my children alone for two minutes while I run outside to get some milk, the neighbours could see me and phone the police and then Child Protection would come around. If they cry loudly, the neighbours might phone the police. The thing is that in Somalia people could just go about their business and ask their
neighbours to keep an eye on their kids for a few minutes, but here you can be reported. It is a big difference culturally.

Maryam and Shamso’s conversation conjures a sense of exile, as their lives in Australia have introduced them to a new social system replete with new rules for behaviour and parenting. Their accounts reflect a fear of authority in Australia, and an outstanding sense of vulnerability.

The tensions between cultures is often regarded as precipitating intergenerational conflict in immigrant families, especially where parents fear that their children will be influenced by the dominant culture (Manderson et al., In press; Woelz-Stirling et al., 2001). In their work on Filipina women growing up in Australia, Woelz-Stirling et al. (2001) suggest that intergenerational conflict between Filipino parents and daughters is provoked around issues of sexuality, career choices, racism, alcohol, family life responsibilities, and identity. They write that, ‘Filipinos share with other immigrants concern about their adopted environment (usually perceived as excessively liberal) and the personal risks that new freedoms may place on their daughter’s virtue and on family honour’ (Manderson et al., In press). Somali women also expressed anxieties that their children will be influenced by the ‘excessively liberal’ aspects of Australian culture, such as drug use, lack of religious faith, and inattention to education. Ironically, children learn English language quickly and are often able to find their way around Australian systems and structures before their parents. While many women worry about the influence of Australia culture on their children, they are also dependent on them for communication. Older youths have learnt they can get youth payments and rent allowance through Centrelink and are able to move out of home. As Nasra explained:

Back home, if the kids were a bit resistant we used to make them do things. If we got angry and they left to stay with their aunties or uncles, we would just ask them to send them back. They had no place to run. Here, the social workers would just give them a place, and payments and all that. And that is the end of your kids. We are not in control. Over there the aunties would bring them back a few days later after
everyone has cooled down. Here, the social workers take over. They give them a place to sleep, food, money. There is no education any more.

‘They treat us as refugees, as black’

The construction of Australia as a multicultural nation officially began in 1973, with the introduction of a ‘non-discriminatory’ immigration policy of multiculturalism (Castles et al., 1992). The ideology of multiculturalism calls for a celebration of cultural diversity as a continuing feature of Australian society (Castles et al., 1992: 5). A DIMA fact-sheet states:

‘Multicultural’ is a term which describes the cultural and ethnic diversity of contemporary Australia. It recognises that Australia is, and will remain, a culturally diverse country and seeks to ensure that the diversity is a positive force in our society. (DIMA, 1999)

The actual experiences of minorities, especially those who are visibly different, does not fit in with this comfortable policy vision (Castles et al., 1992: 2). Castles argues that affirmative multicultural celebrations of being colourfully different mask a deep-seated racism, the continuing exclusion of Aborigines from Australian society, and ignorance of the hardships of immigration (ibid.: 13). Pittaway’s (1991) study of refugee women in Australia found that 48 percent of respondents reported having been the target of racist behaviour, and 30 percent said it was the worst aspect of daily life.

Many Somali women state that racism is a prominent experience of everyday life; they spoke of feeling mistrusted and being subject to verbal and physical abuse. Maryam explained:

I cried for a whole month when I arrived here, July to August I cried. When I arrived I had difficulties at the shops, I asked the person in broken English ‘how much is this, and how much is that’ and they would say, ‘what’s it to you, go back to where you came from.’ Because you don’t speak English you sound like you don’t know anything. At school there was one time when the teacher said that the Somalis were
cannibals and they used to eat people. It is demoralising, especially the first few months, you just feel like you don’t belong here.

Women feel that discrimination and racism affects their ability to obtain housing through the private rental market, as realtors believe they are poor and therefore financially unreliable, have too many children, and will damage their properties. Women describe being met with direct hostility from wider Australian society; neighbours complain that they have too many and overly noisy children, children stare at and tease women because they are wearing veils, people swear at them if they take too long finding change for a bus ticket for example, and their children are bullied at school.

**Panel 9: Australian gaze and racism**

We don’t have that sense of safety here, because we suffer from the attack of racism. Sometimes the neighbours are racist and treat us badly. Back in Somalia you would have nice neighbours. Here, they are mean to the kids, especially the young ones. They start stealing the flowers and plants because they are racist. Just today, people in the street said to me ‘fucking black, why are you wearing that scarf?’ Because of our clothing, our religion, our skin, there is nothing you can do. Some people look at you and they are just racist. When I am driving, the steering wheel is really heavy to turn so I am a bit slow. People just yell at me and say, ‘go back to your country’ and they try and push in and I can hear them yelling at me, ‘fucking black woman.’ They treat us like that, as refugees, as black, and it makes you feel like that.

Further, women are aware that many Australians brand them with the refugee label. Women talk of the critical and discriminatory views that predominate:

People see us as refugees. I see us as having a biological mother and an adoptive mother. As far as I am concerned, my biological mother is Somalia and I have an adoptive mother, which is Australia. But sometimes people point the finger and they say ‘you are black, you are this, you are that, you are from a foreign place, how dare

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90 Composite of five women’s narratives.
you do this and that.’ People do that to you. The kids usually call me black. But as far as I am concerned, this is my home and it is like my adopted mother. (Aman)

Similarly, Idil stated:

We left because our homes were burning and because there was a war, and people here really think that we were nothing before. They don’t really know. They assume that we were always like that: refugees. We don’t feel like refugees, but we are told we are refugees, and that can make us feel like we are refugees.

A quote from Minh-Ha (1994: 12) aptly describes the widespread sentiment towards refugees in Australia. She writes that refugees are intensely connected with the history and the politics that have erupted to displace them. They are unwanted people whose story is an embarrassment for everyone as it:

exposes power politics in its most primitive form . . . the ruthlessness of major powers, the brutality of nation states, the avarice and prejudice of people . . . Those who succeed in resettling are blamed for usurping the work from someone else, and those who fail to secure happiness in their adopted lands are accused of being ungrateful, worsening thereby a situation in which exclusionary policies have been advocated on the ground that the rich host nations will soon be put in ‘the poorhouse’ by the flood of refugees – because ‘they multiply’ (Minh-ha, 1994: 12).

Given such a view of ‘the refugee’, it is no wonder that the very people who bear the burden of refugee experiences often refuse the label of refugee. 91 Many Somali women explicitly stated their rejection of the refugee label, following resettlement in Australia:

The children hate the term ‘refugee’. We came as refugees, but we’re not refugees.

A refugee is someone who lives in a camp. I am not a refugee, I am Australian. The

91 Similarly, the Afghans who have lived in camps in Pakistan since 1982 define themselves as muhajirin – ‘those who leave their homes in the cause of Allah’ – rather than as refugees. This label has admirable moral connotations; exodus becomes an act of profound religious and political significance. While refugees are primarily seen as exiled, the muhajirin are a people who have left but will return to triumph over the enemy who had temporarily displaced them from their rightful home (Sharani, 1995).
children say they are Australian. They speak Somali. I am Australian, I am also Somali. (*Ismahan*)

Women explained that in Australia they have citizenship, homes, and security. They do not define themselves as having an ongoing refugee identity, as their circumstances in Melbourne are so vastly different to those of the refugee camps and first countries of asylum from which they have come:

When I first left Somalia I felt like a refugee. I wasn’t living in a camp, but I had been forced to go. But I am not a refugee here. In Australia I have my family, I have a house, I have my life. That isn’t a refugee. Somalis feel like they are citizens of this country. The people who live in refugee camps call themselves *gaxotii*. They feel like refugees because they are not in their home country, but they are not in another country where they feel safe and comfortable. But the Somali don’t call themselves *gaxotii* while they are living here. They feel Australian as long as they have permanent visa, and if they have equal rights as the other Australians. If you have equal opportunity then you feel like you are an Australian. (*Amina*)

Women regard the imposition of the refugee label as restrictive and negative, and they are keen to shed the identity of refugee. However, they do make some pragmatic gains by taking on this identity. Matthews writes that ‘situational strategies are employed for self-definition and enable individuals to maximize the possibility that diaspora identity can be used as cultural capital’ (Matthews, 2002: 76). In a similar vein, ‘refugeeness’ can be used as a strategy for gaining resources. Thus, public housing applications are submitted with support letters describing people as Somali refugees who have left behind the trauma of war and require secure and appropriate housing as soon as possible. The generic letter routinely written to the Office of Housing by social workers would read something like this:

*Mrs Mohammed recently contacted our service to seek settlement assistance and support. Mrs Mohammed is a refugee from Somalia. She has spoken to me openly about her experiences of persecution, fleeing from Somalia, the traumatic experience of losing family and friends due to the civil war, and the hardships of living in refugee camps. It is*
imperative that Mrs Mohammed secure safe and appropriate housing as soon as possible in order that she can resettle in Australia and find some stability.

Such a strategy takes license to create an image of helpless and vulnerable refugees. Women are posited as recipients in a discourse of need, and their identity is coloured with characteristics of neediness and dependency. They are required to remain attractive enough to be helped, yet needy enough to justify provision of resources and their status. Whereas in other narratives of identity women were strongly averse to the label of ‘refugee’, in service domains women are willing to affirm their ‘refugee’ status. They adopt the refugee identity in order to gain services and resources, pragmatically deploying the label to mobilise identity categories in order to attenuate and manage the difficulties they face. In this sense, their refugee identity is negotiated between themselves and the people with whom they interact.92

‘I don’t feel safe here’

Chavez (1994) writes that immigrants feel out of place and vulnerable when they do not or can not form ties with wider host community. In relation to illegal immigrants in the United States, he writes:

Less likely to desire to stay permanently in the United States are those who do not perceive themselves as part of a community, be it because of inadequate time, attachment to family and community back home, or perception of isolation, experiences of discrimination, an internalisation of the larger society’s image of the temporary ‘illegal alien’ who does not really belong in the United States, or some combination of these and other factors. (Chavez, 1994: 68)

A number of women spoke of their mistrust of the wider community, due to experiences of discrimination. Aweys described a distressing incident that exacerbated her sense of

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92 Adams (1996), in Tigers of the Snow and Other Virtual Sherpas, suggests that identity is constructed through a process of mimesis; the imitation of what is taken to be one’s natural self as defined by the Other. In Adams’ book, the Other refers to tourists who visit Nepal, bringing with them an image of the Sherpa as romantic and spiritual people who have a primitive and special engagement with their landscape. Through the process of mimesis, the identity of Sherpas is made visible.
vulnerability: one afternoon, she was waiting in line at the post office and another woman lined up behind her. Aweys said:

A drunk woman came pushing into the queue. She started yelling at me when the teller asked me to come up to the counter, and tried to poke her fingers in my eyes. I put out my hand to stop her and she was so drunk she fell over and pretended that I had pushed her. The teller phoned the police and I was in trouble for pushing her. I asked the teller why he didn’t explain what had happened, but he wouldn’t say. Now I know I should never even be seen to look like I could be hitting someone.

Aweys explained that she did not know that she couldn’t respond if someone was physically abusing her. She felt that the police didn’t trust her, that nobody was willing to stand up for her, and she was upset that even the teller did not want to be involved.

Farah recounted a similar sentiment of distress at being mistrusted by the wider Australian community:

In our culture we have certain ways of explaining to our kids about what we expect. Even if we are shouting at them, we love them dearly, that is no problem. But if my daughter goes to school and says, ‘my mother shouts at me’, then the school teachers might say, ‘the way your mother is bringing you up is no good.’ And then the police and the Child Support would come. My daughter and I live under one roof, but there are people that can come in between to tell us how it should be. I don’t have any control over the situation.

The mistrust that some members of the wider Australian community hold towards Somali people was often spoken of with humour. Many women recounted the time that a father had his children taken from him because the Child Protection Agency suspected that he beat them. When the father asked for an explanation, the Child Protection workers told him that his neighbours had reported that they often saw him running down the road chasing his screaming children with a stick. Women laughed as they explained that in Somalia people clean their teeth by chewing a fibrous stick. When the man’s children left for school without
cleaning their teeth, he would run after his children with their toothbrushes. While this incident was often recounted humorously, highlighting the ignorance of Anglo-Australians, it also speaks of the mistrust and discrimination that many Somalis perceive they are subject to.

'\textit{It is very hard to make ends meet}'

In Somalia, financial and material hardship was widely attenuated through sharing and mutual support. Khadija described how people in Somalia could rely on each other. Those with an income would help others in need; ‘they would give out some money, lend it, give it to people to borrow so they can actually stand on their own feet. People used to rely on each other, no matter what.’ Similarly, Saynab said:

The best memory of Somalia is how people used to be happy even when they didn’t have a cent in their pockets. In the evenings everyone, all the neighbours, would come home and gather together on the corners and chat and talk with the moon shining . . . I loved the way we used to talk to the neighbours and the people five house down even and say ‘what are you cooking today?’ and they’d say ‘I’m cooking bread, I’m cooking meat.’ And then that person would bring some of the food that they are cooking and you would give them some of the food that you are cooking and then in the end you would have mixture of foods from different houses. It would taste really good, that kind of relationship. We were always exchanging things. Everyone was sharing. Neighbours always shared things . . . Then, if someone were poor they would say ‘can I please have something to eat?’ and all the neighbours would gather together and see if they can get together something for them to eat.

Women talked a great deal about the financial hardships of living in Australia. Following migration, financial difficulties descend swiftly on women as they discover the high costs of living in Australia. Rather than finding boxes of money and taps running with milk, most
women make do with Centrelink social security payments. And there are bills, rent payments, interest on debts, deadlines for repayments, and women must cover costs that they would not have incurred in Somalia (such as childcare). This brings a level of anxiety that many women did not have in Somalia. As Farah says:

Life is really difficult for me. It is hard for somebody on social welfare benefits to be expected to pay gas, electricity, water. In Somalia you pay that, but it is not constant like here. We work there and don't feel the hardship. But being on benefit here is really hard. I didn't have enough of a chance to get the language sorted out because I had to look after the kids, I can't get a job.

One afternoon, Malyun and I dropped by Maryam's house to see if she had time to talk with us. She was at home with her children and her neighbour, Aman. Maryam, aged 25, has three children, and while their father lives in Melbourne, he is rarely home and offers no financial support. Maryam explained that, 'he chews and is never really here. We fight a lot. He doesn't help much. He hasn't worked for years and he just stays with his friends.' Aman is in her fifties and lives close by with her husband. The two women talked together about the struggle of coping with financial demands without the support of extended family, and without the more relaxed financial arrangements to which they were accustomed in Somalia. Maryam said:

One of the worries that I have is the financial hardship . . . We have to pay gas, electricity, rent, childcare, car payments, all with a limited income. The childcare, the car payments. It is so difficult. I pay $100 a week for childcare. Sometimes if you can't pay the rent they send you to court. Also, the house doesn't have a TV antenna so the kids didn't have anything to keep them busy inside, so I had to pay for cable TV that comes with its own antenna and that costs about $50 a month. In

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93 The main Centrelink payments received by Somali women are Newstart Allowance which is for unemployed people who are looking for work, Family Tax Benefit which helps with the costs of raising children, and Parenting Payment which is financial help for people who are primary carers of children.

94 The comment 'he chews . . . ' refers to khat, a mild stimulant that is chewed by Somali men.
the summertime the kids were vomiting and had diarrhoea because the room got so hot from the sun coming in. But I couldn’t afford air-conditioning.

Financial pressures can engender feelings of dejection and hopelessness. There is a sense that repayments and debts are never-ending, and women feel insecure that they might not be able to afford daily living costs. Maryam continued the conversation about financial difficulties, saying:

Each week I have to pay money for bills, money for the cable TV, money to pay for the curtains and furniture, petrol and car payments, food, childcare, rent, money for my family overseas. I get about $900 a fortnight and send about $200 of that to my family – my brother, parents, grandparents. It is very hard to make ends meet, to look after the kids. All of these costs make me anxious. I worry and get sad because I don’t have any support to look after the kids. The kids get sad too. And all these bills. You worry that someone will kick you out of the house and force you to live on the streets. All these worries make you sad.

On another occasion Sahra came into the MRC with several unpaid bills. The red print on these reminder bills glaring with the threat of imminent disconnection of telephone, gas, water, and electricity. Sahra explained that her six children had been sick because the Office of Housing property was cold, damp and draughty and they had not had closed shoes when winter started. She had bought shoes to keep their feet warm, electric heaters to keep the house warm, and paid for cough medicines and an aspirator to manage their respiratory problems. Her water bill was large, the costs accumulating with the showers and loads of clothes-washing of a nine-person household. I explained to Sahra that she could apply for a one-off governmental rebate in which her bills (excluding the telephone bill) would be covered. She was relieved to have this option, yet found the subsequent process humiliating. We went to a community information centre to fill out the forms. She was interviewed about her weekly costs: ‘Why had she bought so many pairs of shoes, how could they use so much water, why can’t she manage money better, could she be sure that she could pay the bills next time?’ Sahra quietly and reticently explained, via an interpreter, that she has
uncontrollable teenagers who use the telephone a lot, she had been phoning Somalia to try and locate her husband, her children had been sick, and there had been too many financial pressures to manage at one time. The rebates were approved and Sahra was relieved.

The difficulties of living with limited financial resources are not confined to refugees, as the consequences of financial hardship are shared by those in similar economic circumstances. There are, however, some aspects of financial difficulties that are specific to the situation of refugees. Sahra, for example, drew a direct link between her financial difficulties and the conditions of displacement. She said that had she been in Somalia then none of these costs would have arisen: the children would not have been cold and sick, she would not have been making expensive international calls, and family networks could have offered financial help. She would not have been forced to beg for money.

Further, Centrelink payments are stretched thinly as women not only support themselves and their children, but also send remittances to sustain family remaining in other countries of asylum and Somalia:

    The depression here won’t go. People call you, they ask for help. But you can’t help them. It is hopeless. And there are people to support back home. Six of my brothers rang me the other night and they all expect me to send them money back home.

    Around 2000 dollars! (Hayatt)

Even women who find it hard to adequately feed and clothe their families in Australia are obliged to send back money to relatives.\textsuperscript{95} For Hakimo, financial obligation is coupled with the anxiety of not knowing whether her daughter is safe and the guilt of having left her behind:

    I have to send $300 to Ethiopia every month for my little girl. Her father rings me constantly and says I have a lot of money and I have to pay him. He blackmails me. I have to pay rent, I have to pay back my airfare. But he doesn’t believe me about all

\textsuperscript{95} It has been documented that many migrants send remittances to families in their home countries. For example, Filipina women in Australia have been documented as sending remittances to their families in the Philippines (Woeltz-Stulge et al., 2000).
that. Yesterday, I ran out of money for here because I had to send it to my girl. I was so stressed yesterday. He threatens that he will take her away from Ethiopia and I won’t be able to find her any more. I don’t know where he will take her, whether it will be a safe area.

Women who were relatively economically well-off in Somalia particularly feel financial pressures. Markovic describes a similar sentiment as expressed by refugees from the former Yugoslavia: ‘the loss of self-esteem is particularly an issue . . . among those who had a relatively favourable socio-economic position in their country of origin’ (Markovic, 1999: 106). Women who had been affluent in Somalia say that they feel depressed and anxious when they face the economic hardships of everyday life in Australia.

‘Now my problem is this house’
The majority of Somalis live in public housing properties. Many choose this option because they can not find properties through the private rental market that are large enough to house their large families, or they can not afford the higher costs of private rental. Moreover, there is an understanding amongst many Somali women that it is futile to apply for housing through private real estate agencies as the agents are racist and will not offer houses to Somali families because they believe they will damage the property.

In order to apply for housing through the Office of Housing, a person must have low income, few assets, and be a permanent resident of Australia. Public housing tenants usually pay around 20-25 percent of their household income on rent. The waiting period for public housing is anywhere between two to ten years, depending on the number of rooms and the residential area requested on the application. However, most Somalis apply for priority public housing, which has a much shorter waiting period. To be eligible for priority housing, the applicant must demonstrate that their current housing is insecure or inappropriate, or they have urgent medical needs that are not met due to their housing situation, or there is a threat of violence at their current residence. The applicant must accept the first priority
housing property that is offered by the Office of Housing, the philosophy being that the need for housing should be so great that anything will be acceptable, regardless of its location or condition.

Women have a broad base of knowledge about Office of Housing requirements: how to lodge priority housing applications, how to request transfers, and how to avoid being offered high-rise housing. This knowledge is acquired through on-arrival workers, service providers, and through informal social networks. A large proportion of my work at the MRC involved assisting Somali clients with Office of Housing applications, appeals, and transfers. However, there is widespread dissatisfaction with the poor condition of Office of Housing houses, and the fact that houses are spread across suburbs promotes a sense of isolation.

A sense of ‘home’ is tied to the notion of a physical dwelling (Olwig, 2002: 132). Women’s housing difficulties undermines their capacity to feel ‘at home’ in Melbourne. For many women, housing difficulties are a major source of distress. One afternoon, Amina was talking about the war; she described how she was at home when she heard on the radio that the militia were coming, and then the fighting and gunfire erupted around her and she and her children had to flee their home and country. Then her expression changed, and she laughed and said:

I don’t have a problem now with the war, I forget the war. I don’t have a problem. Now my problem is this house. Now we are living in emergency housing. Now there are seven of us living in emergency housing. Two of the bedrooms are so small, they are only supposed to sleep one person and now we have to fit in two people. When you open the door you bang the beds. And the toilet is very very old and the little ones struggle getting off it. The kitchen is very old as well.

The feelings of displacement and isolation that Amina evoked to characterise her life in Melbourne were heightened by the fact that she had no permanent housing. Each day she waited for her Office of Housing application to be approved, and in the meantime she could
not feel at home. Here, as in the section ‘They treat us as refugees, as black’ above, women suggest that the rationale behind their location in poor quality housing can be traced to their imposed status of ‘refugee’.

‘I wasn’t confident, I didn’t know anything’
Women learn about services and facilities through on-arrival support workers, Migrant Resource Centres, social workers at community health centres, English language teachers, family members, community organisations, and informal social networks. They are particularly likely to use services that employ Somali workers.

Since late 2001 the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Services (IHSS) program has operated within Victoria and other states. Through this program, humanitarian entrants are offered a range of services, including settlement support. Settlement services are funded by DIMIA and have been tendered out to community services, including Migrant Resource Centres. Refugees who are under the patronage of the Australian Government are met at airports by employees working for the IHSS program. These workers then assist with the organisation of English language courses, welfare benefits, banking, housing and provide information sessions. They are also provided with a ‘household formation package’ that includes basic furniture, such as beds and chairs, and kitchen utensils and appliances.

Despite these settlement support services, many women still feel vulnerable, particularly during the first months or years of resettlement. Infrastructures and systems are often different from those in Somalia and can be hard to understand, particularly when coupled with women’s lack of proficiency in English. ‘When I came here, I had depression and sadness’, Sahra said. ‘I felt lonely, I felt like I wasn’t confident, I didn’t know anything – things like the hospital, the schooling system, the education system, the streets. Simple things like going to do the shopping. All that was so complicated and was so different and made me really sad, especially with my lack of English. So that is why I am so sad here.’ Through the contrasts between past and present that women so frequently map out, they set
out the distinction between the familiarity of daily activities in Somalia and the difficulties of navigating daily life in Australia.

For Sahra and many others, the lack of familiarity with infrastructure creates a sense of vulnerability. Many spoke of how in the first few months they did not know how to use public transport, did not understand how to take money out from the automatic teller machine (ATM), and felt lost in unfamiliar streets:

Finding a place is difficult. Here you go by address. But where I come from it is different. So finding an address is difficult. When I was pregnant and having a baby, I needed to go and find places by address. The bus would take me, but then again the problem is you don’t know where to get off and where to go and all that.

The sense of being vulnerable and out-of-place is particularly the case for elderly women, who are less likely to learn English and are less mobile. Aman, for example, explained that she is scared to leave her house because she does not know how to use public transport. She sometimes arranges for male relatives who drive taxis to take her places. But she is not confident to learn about and access services in Australia.

With time, however, women come to make sense of a new environment and learn about and make good use of the services that are available. During interviews, many women asked if they could make an appointment to see us at the MRC for assistance with public housing, resolving problems with Centrelink payments, or proposing their family for refugee visas. These requests were not ‘cries for help’ so much as a pragmatic utilisation of assistance and services, based on an understanding of the hoops they need to jump through in order to acquire, say, the house they need.
HOME AS HABITUS

To be away from your natural environment is to be deprived of ever again functioning completely and fitting in instinctively. No other surroundings can replace the shared and unquestioned and thereby indigenous feeling of belonging made up of smells, sounds, gestures, and natural mimicry... Then comes exile, the break, the destitution, the initiation, the maiming... Henceforth, you are at home nowhere, and by that token everywhere.

(Breytenbach, 1993: 70)

When women speak of Somalia – their homeland – they conjure a sense of a being situated within a general community of belonging. As the cluster of themes discussed above illustrate, women’s accounts of life in Melbourne speak of displacement and exile, and this stands in startling contrast to memory of Somalia. Women talked of everyday life as filled with the vicissitudes of living in a new country; a place where things are different, and where you never quite belong. The accounts presented above reveal how women feel they have been thrown into a world of unknowns – new food, cold weather, different forms of authority, an unknown wider community, financial burdens, language difficulties, cultural isolation, and racism. These recurrent tropes of dissociation from Australia suggest that women do not feel at home in Melbourne. Indeed, narratives of exile and the difficulties of resettlement are so pervasive that it is tempting to think of them as the central feature of women’s experience, the symbolic core of their life-world (Gilroy, 1991b: 17).

Exiles are pushed from their homeland and can not return as long as the causes that drove them away persist (Grinberg and Grinberg, 1989). Many theorists argue that being exiled forever changes one’s thinking and perception (Glad, 1993; Spalek and Bell, 1982). Hewitt (1991) writes that the traumatic nature of being cast out of one’s country forces fundamental destabilisation of one’s emotional state. The participation and social membership of exiles in social relations is shaken. Breytenbach writes that following exile, ‘you are at home
nowhere'. Refugees in particular are regarded as homeless and displaced, clutching helplessly at a lost world and culture, but with no concrete attachment to new spaces and places (Daniel and Knudsen, 1995). The picture that is painted of refugees focuses on vulnerability, struggle, and problems adjusting to new situations. Daniel and Knudsen, for example, describe refugees as suffering 'a crisis in culture wherein past and present remain as rigid as they are disparate, connected only by a chasm of despair' (Daniel and Knudsen, 1995: 24). Allusions to liminality, a state of limbo, and of neither staying nor leaving, are widespread in descriptions of the interstitiality that results from exile and displacement (Amit-Talai, 1998: 52). Through this discursive form, refugees are constituted as being 'uprooted' and as having lost connection with their culture and identity, or as illogically trying to pull together two worlds. Rapport and Dawson (1998b: 9) write that 'exiles' and 'refugees' are expelled from the ranks of those felt deserving of combining house and home.

Nevertheless, Somali women are not merely uprooted refugees whose lives are shrouded in an overwhelming sense of exile. As Naficy writes, 'exile must not be thought of as a generalizable condition of alienation and difference' (Naficy, 1999: 4). Ethnographers of transnationalism have suggested that migrants can create socio-cultural contexts of great stability and sustenance within the disruptive process of displacement and migration (Olwig, 1997: 17-30). In the introduction to this chapter I wrote that, in a world of movement, a broader understanding of home is necessary (Rapport and Dawson, 1998b: 7). A 'home' can be built from practices, interactions, customs, histories, and memories that occupy, use, and make social sense of places and lives. Home can be any place: temporary and moveable, it can be built, rebuilt, and carried in memory and by acts of imagination (Naficy, 1999: 6).

Kaplan argues that exile can offer both cataclysmic loss and critical possibility (Kaplan, 1996: 17). Accordingly, women’s views of resettlement are structured by the sense of loss and displacement, but there is also the 'critical possibility' of feeling at home, and finding

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96 Even amongst nomadic populations, such as many in Somalia once were and many still are, the ‘home’ is regarded as being created through the control of space functionally, economically, aesthetically, and morally.
stability. As described above, a sense of being out-of-place is often threaded through women’s accounts, yet women also speak of how they create and maintain a home in Melbourne. While resettling in Melbourne, women face an immediate reality of new (and sometimes hostile) social and cultural environments, and the unfamiliar machinations of institutions and services. Nonetheless, a ‘home’ is carried and recreated through the workings of everyday life, and it comes to be found in the ways that space is constructed, daily practices, forms of social interaction, and modes of thinking about and understanding life-worlds.97

Some women find a feeling of home as they overcome the difficulties that previously induced a sense of exile and learn new skills and practices. Naima says:

My kids all speak English so that is good for them. I attend English classes and can understand a bit now. It isn’t as hard as when I arrived. I can communicate now. Before, I couldn’t go to the milk bar, but now I can go shopping and use the language. I can make appointments now. It is not that important for me to speak more English. I can do minor things, they can do the other things... This is our home. But I do feel like I am a Somali living in Australia.

But for many women, a home is made through the continuation of familiar forms of social interaction (explored in chapter 7), and through familiar practice such as cooking Somali food, wearing Somali clothes, and arranging and organising their houses in a typically Somali fashion. Fanon (1963) recognises the crucial importance, for subordinated people, of asserting their cultural traditions and retrieving their histories. But he is aware of the dangers of fixity and fetishism of identities, and warns that ‘roots’ should not be struck in the celebratory romance of the past or by homogenising history. Without wishing to romanticise Somali culture and history, here I bring forward two key domains through which women recreate a sense of home - Islam and food. Description of these domains

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97 Pries (2001) refers to this pluri-local expansion of social spaces (such as home) as transnational social spaces. Transnational social spaces – comprising the practices of everyday life, material culture and symbolic systems, and social institutions – do not correspond to specific geographic locales.
captures some sense of women’s relocation and recreation of home, and illustrates that to be displaced is not necessarily to be homeless.

**Islam as ‘Home’**

Islam is a powerful example of how a sense of home can be maintained in a foreign country. Although religion was not a primary focus of the research, it soon became clear that Islamic faith is an essential component of women’s lives and sense of belonging. Women think of themselves as Muslim in preference to a self-definition as a refugee, and this ‘pragmatics of identity’ tempers the exilic characteristics of being a refugee with the global community that is offered by Islam. Women draw upon Islamic practices and ideologies, and in turn Islam inscribes and shapes spaces, interactions, modes of thinking, and daily activities. In this way, Islam offers a sustaining thread in women’s lives and helps to overcome the threat of discontinuity that arises with displacement:

Everywhere is Allah’s place. Every country that you go, Allah is everywhere. It is not as if we have come to a place where we are disconnected from that. *(Fartun)*

Women recall life in Somalia as having a clear moral and social order that was defined by the framework of Islam. As Khadija says:

The Qur’an tells us how to live, and we have lived that way. It tells us how to do good deeds, and we lived that way. Most of the things that are good about our culture came from the religion. It prevents you from committing adultery, it prevents you from stealing other people’s property, it prevents you from doing all the bad things that you shouldn’t. People think that helping each other is part of the culture, but that also comes from the religion. You can not separate the Somali culture from the religion because we really live it.

Women talked of how daily life in Somalia encompassed prayer, religious lessons, and learning to read the Qur’an. Some women who had lived nomadically recalled how religious

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98 Identities are derived in part through people telling stories of themselves and their worldviews (rapport and Dawson, 1998a).
scholars came out to the bush to teach them Islam. Islam was central to coping with hardship and illness. As Nasra explained, ‘our religion is very important. It is good. We love it. It has a very important role. It protects us from a lot of things. If you have a problem or you are in trouble then we turn to God and ask for help. You go back to the religion and that is the way that you solve your problems.’

Following resettlement, Somali women are not uprooted from all that is familiar, and confined to a harsh life in exile. Islam is carried throughout the processes of displacement and resettlement; it offers an enduring meaningful form in women’s everyday lives. In his influential text *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Geertz states that the importance of religion consists in:

its capacity to serve, for an individual or for a group, as a source of general, yet distinctive, conceptions of the world, the self, and the relations between them. . . Religious concepts spread beyond their specifically metaphysical contexts to provide a framework of general ideas in terms of which a wide range of experience – intellectual, emotional, moral – can be given meaningful form. (Geertz, 1973a: 123)

Through Islam, Somali women make themselves at ‘home’, and Islam is a central aspect of their everyday lives and identities in Melbourne. The centrality of Islam was apparent as conversations were peppered with reference to Allah and religious faith, and daily life was suffused and punctuated with Islamic practices. Some months after Medina arrived in Australia, we were sitting together drinking tea in her home and talking about her experiences of displacement and resettlement. Our conversation was interrupted as her eight children, aged between 1 and 11, tore through the room. In an attempt to quiet them, she sat them on a mattress and placed the Qur’an in their hands. The walls of her public housing home were marked by the scribblings of the previous tenant’s children. These markings were partially covered with ornate Islamic texts etched onto brass plates and woven into fabric. Medina’s conversation was sprinkled with reference to Allah; her current circumstances were attributed to the will of Allah, and the things she hoped for were only
possible if they were Allah’s will. She talked of holding on to her faith when she was lonely and when she couldn’t cope. As dusk set in and the light began to fade, she said that she couldn’t talk any longer as it was time to pray.

To my non-Muslim eyes, the clearest signifiers of Islam amongst Somali women initially lay in clues of material practice and use of space; women attend mosques, buy their meat at halal butchers, wear veils, fast and feast during Ramadan; children are sent to Islamic weekend schools to learn the Qur’an; and sheikhs are called to recite the Qur’anic texts for good fortune and at times of crisis. People’s homes, the bland low-rise apartments and houses provided by the Department of Human Services, are transformed into ‘Muslim spaces’. Mats woven with images of Mecca were unrolled and women prayed together, veils were hurriedly readjusted if men entered the room, the Qur’an weighted with its beautiful and sacred text lay on tables, shoes were removed at the door, and women’s homes were filled with tapestries, plates and ornaments decorated with Qur’anic text and pictures of Mecca. In this way, material and symbolic resources of Islam are transplanted from homeland to site of settlement, and in so doing new spaces are appropriated, recreated, and transformed into home.

The world that is brought into being through Islam creates familiar discursive and physical practices. One afternoon, we arrived at a local park, a coach-load of twenty Somali women and sixteen of their young children. The trip, organised by Malyun and I as part of our work at the MRC and funded through a local council grant, aimed to give women a chance to see different parts of Melbourne and to alleviate the sense of loneliness and isolation that many women had voiced in interviews. The women spread out rugs and sat on the grass in the sun and talked while their children ran around the gardens. The women’s veils ranged from dark cloth covering everything but their eyes, to brightly-patterned cloth draped over their hair and bodies. Soon after midday they began to go in small groups to the public toilets to wash, and then gathered on the rugs to pray, facing towards Mecca in rows. After prayer time, lunch arrived; halal lamb stuffed with rice, sultanas, peas, and almonds, Turkish dips and
breads, and juices. The halal food was bought from the restaurants and shops of longer-standing Turkish and Iraqi Islamic communities. During these few hours, Islam was made visible through the material practices of women’s clothing, prayer, practice, and choice of food. The visible signs of Islam are not only religious practices but ways of inscribing Islam on new physical spaces and social landscapes following displacement and resettlement. These practices affirm an intense affiliation with cultural and traditional identities. Through the inscription of Islamic faith and practice on spaces and lives, women make themselves at ‘home’ in Berger’s sense of the word (Berger, 1984).

Islam is integral to the ways that women manage displacement. It brings together memory and longing, the ideational, the affective, and the physical. It is an aspect of life and at the same time a way of forming, reflecting on, and inter-relating life-worlds. When Somali women come to Australia, it is not simply as uprooted people, refugees who have lost all ties to their past, their identity, and their culture. As Malkki writes, ‘home is where one feels most safe and at ease, instead of some essentialized point on the map’ (Malkki, 1995b: 509). (In other words, ‘home is where the heart is’.) Islam, in its diverse forms, is a way in which Somali women find and maintain resilience and continuity and make themselves at ‘home’. Islam provides continuity, a shared yet negotiated identity, and a ‘home’ built from practices that occupy, use, and make social sense of places and lives.

While Islam allows women to feel safe and at ease, and is a way in which Somali make themselves at home in a new country, for the wider Australian community, Islam can operate like the concept of ‘race’ in that it builds an image of a different, essentialised and homogenous social group (Abu-Lughod, 1990: 9). This can create political and social boundaries that provide a forum for racism centring around alien-ness and difference (Malkki, 1995a: 14). Many women, for example, talked of a sense that people regard them as passive adherents to an oppressive religion, and of staring eyes seeing their veils as the regulation of all women. But it is Islam that bears the burden of making sense out of dislocation and change. It arbitrates tensions and the disruptions to women’s lives, alleviates
the stress created by displacement, offers symbolic solutions to real problems, and provides rituals for repairing ruptures in the fabric of everyday and social lives. Islam is both a personal resource that women draw upon and a site for mutuality and collectivity between people.

**Home tastes good**

In her chapter ‘Home: Smell, Taste, Posture, Gleam’, Morse (1999) writes that feeling at home is, in essence, a personal and culturally specific link to a sensory world – a fleeting smell, spidery touch, a motion, a bitter taste. She suggests that sometimes, sensory domains taken into exile become a powerful synecdoche for the lost house, the unreachable home, feeding the memories of the past and the narratives of exile. I have previously described how food and sharing meals is an important domain of social interaction. In this section, I argue that the continuation of familiar sensory worlds can become a powerful form through which women maintain a home. A sense of home is created through food and food preparation. The tastes, smells, and practices surrounding Somali food directly sutures everyday life in Melbourne to women’s recollections of home in Somalia.

In accounts of life in Somalia, cooking, exchanging, buying, and sharing food is passionately recalled as a central part of daily life. Many women described at length how to make traditional foods:

To make the traditional Somali bread you take a big clay pot, dig a hole in the ground and put the pot in it. Then you put coals and fire in the pot so that it gets really hot and all the coals are glowing red. You take the maize and make round and flat corn-breads by slapping them between your palms, and you stick several inside the edges of the pot. When they are ready, you get a knife and take them out. It is so beautiful. In the place I lived, Kismayo, one of the main dishes that people used to eat was cooked wheat in a spring lamb. You cook it until the lamb gets very tender and soft and you put sesame oil on it. It is one of the best dishes. (*Haweye*)

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Women spoke frequently of how they visited their neighbours in Somalia to borrow ingredients, they exchanged dishes - such as hot flat-breads for meat stews - so that households could eat well, and people gathered together to eat meals. By contrast, women consider the food in Australia to be of poor quality; many stated that there was a big difference between the taste, smell and variety of fruits, vegetables, meat and milk in Somalia and Australia.\textsuperscript{99}

**Panel 10: Food and cooking in Somalia and in Australia\textsuperscript{100}**

The worst thing is that here, if you eat anything, you put a lot of weight on. In Somalia, even if you eat everything you didn’t put a lot of weight on. The food was fresh, and you walked a lot. We did a lot of activity. There were different kinds of meat. Everything was fresh, you went to the market everyday. There was no defrosting, you bought everything on the day. The food over there is organic. Here the food is not organic. There are lots of preservatives. Over there it takes years to grow. Here, they get the meat and sell it and if you don’t use it that day it won’t even keep till the next day. The first few months when I arrived in Australia I didn’t eat meat. I couldn’t taste it, it didn’t have any taste.

One afternoon at Fatuma’s house, we watched videos sent from Somalia of the engagement party for a young woman in Somalia who was to marry her son. As the videos played several women dropped by to visit. Images of tables laden with tropical fruit, plates of cooked fish and whole roasted goat, beans and rice, pasta, and stews panned across the television screen. The women called out the names of the dishes and pointed out the juiciness and colour of the fruit, the amount of food, and the beautiful dishes. By the end of the video everyone was holding their stomachs and bemoaning the poor quality of food here; fruits and vegetables sprayed with chemicals, tropical fruits with no taste, meat that is

\textsuperscript{99} In *Under the Sun of Foreign Sky*, Markovic’s (1999) study of resettlement of people from the former-Yugoslav republic, she also describes how people are disappointed in the quality of food in Australia and reminisce about the food in their homeland.

\textsuperscript{100} Composite of four women’s narratives.
too fatty.\textsuperscript{101} One woman called out 'now we want to go home, now we wish we weren't here.'

At first glance, women's recollections of Somalia and their lamentations about being displaced from a homeland where the food tastes good point to a feeling of homelessness. However, even as women lament the quality of food here and long for the foods and dishes of Somalia, food and food preparation are still important ways to establish a sense of home in Melbourne. This points specifically to the formation of a community of needs and interactions which is made tangible in the food itself and palpable in the social relations of its cultural production and consumption. After the video ended, for example, Fatuma's daughters brought in plates of stew, pasta, salad, and flat-breads. The women carried out their prayers, and then began to eat together, sitting on the floor with rugs spread beneath them and bowls of water to wash their fingers after they finished. The experience of deterritorialisation is counterbalanced by efforts at an implicit mapping of 'localised cultures' onto definite places. This idea of 'place making' draws attention to the social practices in which community, locality, and region are formed and lived (Kempny, 2002).

Expressed through food and food-related behaviour is the social value of foods, the role of food in celebration, and sharing and maintenance of social relationships (Manderson and Akatsu, 1993). Cooking and sharing food remain important aspects of social life for Somali women in Melbourne. Food holds strong social and symbolic meaning and 'is a means by which people communicate with each other' (Manderson, 1986). Women continue to cook traditional dishes, buy meat from halal butchers, and adapt their diets around the available ingredients. Many women invest hours every day cooking food for their families, and women often eat together at each other's houses. Food remains a central part of celebrations and social events, with large quantities of traditional breads, stews, and rice dishes prepared for guests. As Judith Butler suggests, 'the stylised repetition of acts' cultivates a sense of

\textsuperscript{101} Naficy (1999) writes that modalities of placement and displacement are mediated by one or another of the media, from the epistolary technologies of letters, telephones, fax and e-mail to the audio-visual media of photos, cassettes, films, and videos, to print, electronic and cyberspace journalism.
belonging (Butler, 1990: 140). Perhaps the tastes and choices are different, but women find a home within the familiarity of cooking and eating. Somali food and food preparation is a subtle and significant register of dislocation and loss faced by women following resettlement, but it is also a domain through which cultural identity and a 'home' are maintained and deployed.

An authentically migrant perspective . . . might begin by regarding movement, not as an awkward interval between fixed points of departure and arrival, but as a mode of being in the world. The question would be then, not how to arrive, but how to move, how to identify convergent and divergent movements; and the challenge would be how to notate such events, how to give them historical and social value.

(Carter, 1992: 101)

The sense of exile and home are convergent forms within women’s experience of migration. As Malkki writes, ‘understanding displacement as a human tragedy and looking no further can mean that one gains no insight at all into the lived meanings that displacement and exile can have for specific people’ (Malkki, 1995a: 16). Somali women articulate experiences of exile through their accounts of displacement, vulnerability and isolation. Far from losing their homes, histories, and culture, however, women create familiarity and homeliness within their very displacement. That is to say, their experience of resettlement includes the contrapuntal conditions of being out-of-place and grounded emplacement.

Women have some sense of exile and disorientation. They speak of their lack of English language skills, difficulties with raising children, experiences of racism, financial hardship, the bad weather, housing problems, cultural isolation, and the vulnerability of living in a new world. However, processes of displacement do not tear women from all that is familiar.
While women have left their homeland, this does not preclude the possibility of being at home in a new land. Parallel to the conditions of exile run many ways in which women recreate and maintain their lives and a sense of home. Islam and food are sustaining threads within women’s lives that help to overcome the threat of discontinuity that arises with displacement. These are colourful examples of how maintenance of traditions enables women to feel at home: they reveal that for people who are physically displaced, habitus, ongoing concerns, practices, and modes of thinking are methods for becoming emplaced. Islam, food and food preparation, ways of dressing, language, and social networks act to ground women and create a home in a new country.

The introduction to this chapter outlined four key perspectives on migrant experiences of home and exile.\textsuperscript{102} However, none of these perspectives can adequately account for Somali women’s experiences of resettlement in Melbourne. Their accounts of resettlement involved parallel or ‘dualistic’ accounts of home and exile. In this sense, their accounts had the closest affiliation with the third perspective: ‘the exile is unstable or unbalanced, and their dualistic understandings of their lives are illogical.’ However, this argument gives an unsatisfactory account of women’s experience of displacement. Their dualistic experiences of exile and home are not illogical, nor could women be characterised as unstable or unbalanced because they maintain these parallel experiences. The sense of exile may be tangible in some domains of everyday life – such as racism, housing difficulties, negotiating welfare services, and incomprehension of English language. At the same time, women feel at home in Islamic practice, ritual celebration, and continued social traditions. These experiences of exile and home in different domains of everyday life may alter with the passing of time and changing circumstances.

\textsuperscript{102} 1) The exile identifies with the old community and hopes to return; 2) the exile identifies with the country and wants to stay; 3) the exile is unstable or unbalanced, and his or her dualistic understandings of life is illogical; and 4) the exile swings like a pendulum, vacillating between identification with ‘old’ and ‘new’ countries (DeSantis, 2001).
Somali women narrate many aspects of their lives as imbued with the conditions of exile, and they also create and maintain ways of being ‘at home’. The experiences of home and exile throw into relief an interstitial intimacy that questions the way in which spheres of social experience are often spatially opposed. The spaces of home and exile can extend over more than one geographic area, and exist in the same area. In this sense, both home and exile are vivid, actual, and occurring together contrapuntally. As bell hooks writes:

Home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference. One confronts and accepts dispersal and fragmentation as part of the constructions of a new world order that reveals more fully where we are, who we can become (hooks, 1990: 149).

As a final point, it is worth noting that the social deprivation and inequality suffered by refugees (and that promote a sense of exile) tend to be understood in simplistic, culture-related terms. Culturalisation – a culture-related disguise of social inequality and discrimination – occupies a prominent place in discourses of resettlement and associated hardships. Alund (1999: 148) writes that the increasingly common political and popular arguments focus on whether various groups of refugee and immigrants are ‘suited’ or ‘unsuited’, more or less ‘adaptable’ or ‘foreign’. There is a risk that the difficulties recounted in women’s narratives of exile could be seen to arise from the unsuitability or inflexibility of their culture rather than internal constraints, such as discrimination in the labour market, segregation in housing, political marginalisation and racism in everyday life. Through this discursive culturalisation of differences, a blanket of obscurity is all too easily cast over the social problems suffered by refugees. However, women’s experiences of hardship and sense of exile are primarily a product of broader contexts of displacement and resettlement, not the inadequacies of their own culture. Ironically, cultural practice and tradition can better account for the ways in which women make themselves at home in Melbourne than it can for the reasons for which women feel out-of-place. Exile and home
are parallel conditions that emerge from political, economic, and social contexts, as well as the resources, histories, memories, and capabilities of Somali women and their community.
COMMUNITY:
THE IMPACT OF WAR AND DISPLACEMENT

Isir grew up in rural Somalia. She lived with her parents and siblings and remembers that:

the community spirit was really high. People used to help each other. My family had
a lot of animals and we were considered to be in a really good position. We used to
have two families as neighbours, and they used to move with us and rely on us for
food and milk. Most of the bush people had lots of animals, and would give the poor
people about five or six animals so they could milk them. People returned the
animals when they ran out of milk, and then you gave them another animal that had
just had babies and had a lot of milk. Somali people always helped each other.
Neighbours assisted each other, even if they didn’t know each other well or they
were not related. If I compare Somali culture to other cultures, they have the best
culture in the world.

When the civil war erupted, ten members of Isir’s family were murdered. She recalls that the
war brought hatred and mistrust between Somali people. Isir fled to Ethiopia with her
children, and three years later they were approved for Australian refugee and humanitarian
visas. Isir is learning to speak English, she and her family live in one of the newer Office of
Housing properties, and she is glad that her children are receiving a good education.
However, Isir feels isolated and disappointed by the lack of community in Melbourne.
Family separation plays a large part in this; as Isir explained, ‘my mother is still in Somalia.
And I had a daughter that I adopted, and I had looked after her since I was nine years old. I
made a terrible mistake by not adding her to the visa application. That creates a lot of
problems. I would like to bring her here as my daughter, because she was my daughter. But
they [DIMIA] didn’t accept it. They rejected her application three times. Also, my brother
died, and I want to help his children and bring them here, but I can’t. So that makes me
really sad.’ Further, Isir describes how there is not a strong sense of social cohesion in
Melbourne. She said, ‘the way we are now, we all come from the same situation and there is
no point in us disagreeing because we all came here in exile. We should all get along. I would prefer to have one community. But that is not happening now.’ Isir explains that there is mistrust between people, and financial and social hardship attenuates the possibility of sharing, assistance, and building a sense of community.

As Isir’s account suggests, community in Somalia was a significant source of support and solidarity. In contrast, community relations in Melbourne are spoken of with disappointment and a picture of social dissolution is presented. In this chapter, I expand on women’s idyllic narrative construction of community in Somalia. I then explore the understandings, construction, experience, and contestations of community in Melbourne, and at the same time offer a cautionary tale against assumptions that displacement and resettlement necessarily or easily lead to new forms of social cohesion.

While the focus on only one gender appears as a limitation of any real understanding of ‘community’, researchers have found that immigrant women are often at the centre of initiating and maintaining social networks (Brettell, 2000: 108). O’Connor (1990), for example, describes female-centred informal networks, based on the Mexican tradition of confianza (trust), amongst Mexican women working in California. Similarly, the social connections amongst Somali women are a network of relations that are bound by their gender. Many of their social activities are attended solely (or at least predominantly) by women, such as engagement celebrations for young women, home visits when someone is sick, and shared prayer or religious events in women’s homes. Accordingly, this chapter explores the ways in which women talk about and enact community and social relationships.

Before turning to this ‘ethnography of community’, it is salient to discuss theoretical notions of community (particularly in relation to migration) and define the way in which I use this widely contested term. Since the turn of the 20th century, the concept of community has been central to anthropology and other social sciences. From the work of Durkheim (1984 [1893]) and Weber (1978 [1947]) in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, to the urban
studies of the Chicago School in the first half of the 20th century (Park, 1925; Wirth, 1938) and the more contemporary work of Anthony Cohen (1982, 1985), Benedict Anderson (1983), Arjun Appadurai (1996), Vered Amit (2002), and Andrew Dawson (2002), social researchers have employed the idea of community as a domain for exploring the relationships between social transformation and social cohesion. There are now so many competing definitions and conceptualisations of community that its analytic utility is often questioned.103 Amit argues that 'it is difficult to discern much in the way of coherence among the multitude of definitions, descriptions and claims of community which occur in quotidian conversation as well as within a variety of scholarly work' (Amit, 2002: 1). Despite the vast and often contradictory literature concerned with the notion of 'community', the proliferation of its invocation is testament to its continuing saliency (Amit, 2002: 1). There are, however, important distinctions in the way that community has been interpreted; some view community as an actualised social form based on interpersonal interaction, others regard it as an ideation or quality of sociality, and others regard the notion of community as an altogether artificial concept.

The view that community is articulated through the creation and continuation of social networks has a long history (Amit, 2002: 4). Many studies have stressed relations of intimacy – kinships ties, religious participation, informal systems of support – in local, face-to-face interactions. According to Durkheim (1984 [1893]), social solidarity emerged from the division of labour and the mutual interdependence of individuals who relied on each other's skills and abilities. The classic ethnographies of Malinowski (1922), Evans-Pritchard (1940) and others were concerned with issues of social solidarity, village life, and tribal membership. Through his interest in the lives of peasants in a class-stratified society, Redfield introduced the notion of little communities characterised by their, 'distinctiveness, smallness, homogeneity, and all-providing self-sufficiency' (Redfield, 1956). More recently, this exploration of close interaction was taken up in Anthony Cohen's work on community,

103 See Chavez (1994) for a discussion of the emergence of notions of community in social theory, and Baumann (1996) for discussion of the futility of the plethora of taxonomic approaches to community.
belonging and boundary in Whalsay, a rural community in the Shetland islands off the coast of Britain (Cohen, 1985). His research explored the structures of interpersonal relations and ways of belonging, and conceived of community as fundamentally relational, the convergence between culture, place, intricate social relations and collective identity.

A large body of research explores the material practices and everyday interactions that serve to create a sense of community amongst migrant populations. For example, Rodriguez (1987) found that kinship networks amongst Central Americans in Houston provide social and economic resources that assist resettlement and stability. Werbner suggests that social networks amongst Pakistani entrepreneurs in Manchester, England are used in processes of distribution and credit, and form the foundation for gift exchange that binds the community together. She writes, ‘through gifting, migrants transform persons who are strangers into lifelong friends. Through such exchanges, not only men but whole households and extended families are linked, and exchanges initiated on the shop floor extend into the domestic and inter-domestic domain’ (Werbner, 1990: 332). Work such as this suggests that community, and the activities involved in the performance of community, promote resettlement, solidarity, and connectedness.

Many theorists, however, view community as less a product of social practice and interaction than as a symbolic framework for thinking about identity. In his influential book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson (1983) drew upon the idea of community to explain the loyalties invested in nationalism. Anderson argued that the rise of print capitalism in the 16th century provided the means for a sense of collective identification among large dispersed populations. Accordingly, ‘imagined’ communities could be conceived by interconnected people, who may never meet personally, yet who nonetheless imagined a sense of shared membership to a social group. To Anderson, the internalisation of the image and sense of connectedness is as important as the actual physical presence of community (Anderson, 1983). Anderson’s work decoupled the notion of community from the lived foundations of face-to-face interaction.
The concept of imagined community has been extremely influential, particularly within the field of migration studies.\textsuperscript{104} For example, Chavez examined the lives of undocumented immigrants from Mexico and Central America now living in the United States. He suggests that imagining oneself as part of a local community has a powerful influence on settlement, because it is central to the development of a sense of belonging and connectedness (Chavez, 1994: 53). Chavez writes that migrants are often viewed as outsiders, strangers, aliens, and even a threat to the well-being of the community and larger society, and he argues that many undocumented immigrants could not imagine themselves to be part of the North American community because of their immigration status. By contrast, other immigrants spoke of adapting to and taking an interest in North America, and these people imagined themselves to be connected to the wider community. Chavez suggests that, ‘perhaps even in defiance of such images of them as temporary residents and as outsiders, many undocumented immigrants perceive themselves as part of the community and intend to become long-term or even permanent settlers’ (Chavez, 1994: 68). In this way, they imagine a place for themselves in their ‘new’ communities.

Drawing on Anderson’s work, Gupta and Ferguson (1992) write that since it is imagined, a sense of community is not limited to a specific geographic place. In a world in which the movement of people and ‘transnational communities’ are commonplace, it is not surprising that the concept of imagined community has been so compelling. ‘Transnationalism’ is defined as a social process whereby migrants operate in social fields that transgress geographic, political, and cultural borders (Brettell, 2000: 104; Clifford, 1994). Transnational communities are defined as social fields - consisting of people, money, good, and information - that are constructed and maintained over time, across space, and through

\textsuperscript{104} The idea of \textit{imagined community} was developed during the interpretive turn in anthropology (Geertz, 1973a), in which emphasis was placed less on social institutions and practice than on the reading of these by particular actors. Ethnography became a textual exercise in search of meaning, rather than description of interaction and culture. The idea of \textit{imagined community} resonated with the interpretive turn as it was concerned with interpretations and ideologies of solidarity rather than contentious social description of social relations (Amrit, 2002).
circuits that repeatedly cross borders. Theories of transnationalism reflect and are closely linked with broader concerns emerging from postmodernist and feminist thinking that conceive of space and place in new ways (Brettell, 2000: 104; Lima, 2001: 78). Glick Schiller (1995: 49) argues that an awareness of transnationalism in anthropology is 'part of an effort to reconfigure anthropological thinking so that it will reflect current transformations in the way in which time and space are experienced and represented.' While transnational communities can involve the flow of material resources and interpersonal communication, they are imagined in the sense that people maintain ties to their countries of origin and create communities that transgress space and face-to-face interactions, making 'home and host society a single arena of social action' (Brettell, 2000: 104).\(^{105}\)

The competing notions of community as grounded in social interaction and community as ideation or imagined bring their own insights, yet there is a risk of setting up an artificial division between these opposing views. Michael Herzfeld (1997) proposes the concept of 'cultural intimacy' to underscore the interplay between everyday social interactions and official and social discourses of imagined communities. This interplay connects abstract notions of nationhood and community with intimate expressions of felt solidarities. Herzfeld suggests that through daily performance and interaction, expressions of scepticism, and the use of irony, humour and self-deprecation, people engage with and subvert discourses of nation and citizenship. Like Herzfeld, Olwig (1997, 2002) emphasises the ongoing and interpersonal social relations through which people interpret generalised categories of community and identity. In her chapter, 'The ethnographic field revisited: Towards a study of common and not so common fields of belonging', Olwig (2002) traces the social networks of people born in the West Indian islands of Jamaica, Dominica and Nevis who migrated to Britain. She suggests that there is interplay between the actualisation of concrete and intimate relations and the more generalised categorisation of cultural and diasporic identity and community. As Amit writes:

\(^{105}\) For example, Ho (1993) explores sharing and reciprocity within kinship networks where members have crossed national boundaries to create transnational families.
what is imagined can only be truly felt and claimed by its potential members if they are able to realize it socially, in their relations and familiarity with some, if not every other constituent . . . Community arises out of an interaction between the imagination of solidarity and its realization through social relations and is invested both with powerful affect as well as contingency (Amit, 2002: 8-18).

In other words, the imagination of community is always oriented towards the creation and maintenance of social interactions.

The idea of community has continuing saliency within social research, yet recent theoretical configurations have expressed dissatisfaction with conceptualisations of community that are essentialist, bounded and localised, and this has resulted in new ways of theorising community. Many theorists now emphasise that social relations within communities are never wholly commensurable and are often in tension with one another. Layne writes that peoples’ sense of community involves constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others (Layne, 1994: 25). For example, in his study of community in a Northern England former coal-mining town, Dawson writes that community must be conceptualised as a multi-vocal symbol (Dawson, 1998: 208). Dawson’s study reveals that when people were co-opted into conflict over resources (in this case consultative positions in a local heritage museum), their idiosyncratic understandings of community became more loudly articulated, and the sense of community that people had assumed they shared began to fragment. And Mehta and Chatterji, in their description of the demolition of the Babri mosque in 1992, and its impact on a local slum in Bombay, suggest that the riots created ‘not a coherent moral and local world but a multiplicity of fractured communities, each charting, through rehabilitation work, its strategies of survival and coexistence’ (Mehta and Chatterji, 2001: 202). In these works, what is at issue is the way that numerous versions of community are constructed (or deconstructed) as people apprehend and locate themselves within social worlds.
This chapter explores the sense of community and fields of belonging amongst Somali women in Melbourne. Drawing on the theoretical insights discussed above, I take community to be located in the interplay between imagined entities of identification and grounded social interaction. In the following account of women’s social activities, relationships and narratives of community, I discuss both face-to-face interactions and the imagination of community. In so doing, community is shown to be embedded in a social as well as an ideational context. However, I do not reify social networks as monolithic structures to which women can turn in times of need, but emphasise the multifaceted character of social ties. The many meanings and experiences of the Somali community in Melbourne can be best understood as a process involving contestation and negotiation about the nature and quality of community relations (DeSantis, 2001).

The chapters in the edited volume *Remaking a World: Violence, social suffering and recovery* (Das et al., 2001) highlight ‘how communities “cope” with – read, endure, work through, break apart under, transcend – both traumatic violence and other, more insidious forms of social suffering’ (Das et al., 2001: 3). This chapter teases out some of the ways in which war, displacement, and resettlement impact on women’s sense of community, and how their ‘community’ copes with the social suffering that goes hand in hand with displacement. I explore numerous overlapping themes below: memory of community in Somalia; the erosion of community through displacement; family separation, mistrust, gossip and the conditions of resettlement; and (conversely) the maintenance and building of community networks. An undercurrent throughout this chapter is how women’s lives and community are situated in the experience of movement and displacement. The transnational nature of social relations are highlighted as women articulate social relations in Melbourne in contrast to traditional community life in Somalia, position themselves in relation to the wider Australian society, and describe continuing ties to people, politics, and places in their homeland.
LOOKING BACK:
TRUST AND SUPPORT IN SOMALIA

Gupta and Ferguson have argued that immigrants ‘use memory of place to construct imaginatively their new lived world’ (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997: 11). Memory of Somalia involves nostalgic recollection of a partly lost and idealised community-life. When women discuss the Somali community, they often dramatically juxtapose contemporary social life in Australia with the strong social networks and solidarity in Somalia. I discussed in chapter 4 the ways in which accounts of life in Somalia involve a longing for their past; women reminisce about their homeland where food was always fresh, where the sun always shone, the weather was warm and daily life was beautiful. In accounts of social life, the homeland is configured as a place where shared values provided an environment of trust and social support that suffused everyday life and social relations. Recollections of an ideal social setting free from worry and struggle pose a striking comparison to accounts of contemporary community life amongst Somali people in Melbourne:

The best thing that I remember is how everybody comes home at lunchtime. After lunch they have a nap, and when people wake up, the traditional way is to have a cup of tea in the afternoon. When people woke up I used to go outside to see everybody. You know how here you have a front-yard? In Somalia, most of the houses had a small seat at the front of the house and all the neighbours would sit outside in groups and have a cup of tea and chat. When that chatting finishes at about sunset, we would put on nice clothes and go outside without worrying that someone might hurt you. There was a sense of freedom, a sense of community, a sense of togetherness, and chatting, and knowing all the neighbours. We would all know about each other’s business. That was the best thing. But here we feel a bit restricted about what we can share and what we can give each other. For example, if you rented a house back in Somalia and your husband didn’t earn enough money one time, or there was a bit of a shortage, you would talk to the person that owns the house and explain that your husband is in this situation and they would give you some lee-way. They wouldn’t
send you to court. You wouldn’t have to go to the Tenant’s Union. But here it is constant, the courts and here and there. In Somalia, even if your husband was not working or he had an accident, the neighbours and your family would keep you going. It is a big difference. (Maryam)

Rothenberg (1999) writes that migrants’ new social worlds bring the strength of community relations in their homeland into vivid focus. Women remember meeting to talk outside houses, caring for each other’s children, and sharing food, and they designate these types of social activity as central to daily life in Somalia. However, DeSantis (2001) criticises analyses of exile writings that offer a one-dimensional view of exiles as either hating or loving their country of origin. Grinberg and Grinberg, for example, state, ‘Exiles reject everything the new country has to offer . . . idealizing their original country with never-ending nostalgia’ (Grinberg and Grinberg, 1989: 158). DeSantis emphasises that people living in exile often simultaneously hold divergent interpretations of their home-country. As discussed in previous chapters, some women hinted that their nostalgia for the past glosses over the cleavages and inequalities in Somali society, such as differences in wealth and power, political factionalism, and the oppression of minority clans (Besteman, 1999; Cassanelli, 1993; Hassig, 1997; Hyndman, 1999). However, they did not dwell on the tensions between the good and bad aspects of their homeland, but rather focused on the idyllic qualities of community life in Somalia:

In Somalia there weren’t any closed door. Every door in every house was open in the mornings and if one of us didn’t open the door, then everyone else would say ‘what happened to Amina this morning, she didn’t come out?’ and all the neighbours would come to your door and find out whether you are sick or not. The best thing is when we were cooking tea, everyone would ask each other:

- What did you cook?
- Spaghetti. What did you cook?
- Rice. Did you cook meat?
- No. I need semolina from this person and I need sauce from you.
All that exchange, all the exchanging of food during the day was beautiful. And during afternoon tea we sat together. You never missed anything, time just flew past. One of the good things is that if you needed to go away, you could ask someone to look after your children. There were no forms, you didn’t have to pay for family day-care, your children would be looked after, and you wouldn’t have to worry. They wouldn’t even have to be related. It could be someone that you spend a lot of time with, who knows about your children, their eating habits, their sleeping habits, somebody that the kids are happy to stay with. Those things about the community, we miss that. (Isir)

Peteet (1995: 180) suggests that essentialising the past through a selectively reconstituted memory narrows the distance between people, providing a narrative basis for establishing a restored inward-looking trust. The central components of the nostalgically recalled Somali community are solidarity, sharing, and supporting each other. Characteristics of hospitality and generosity were animated by reference to the underlying nomadic culture and the ideology of Islam. Tales were told of how nomads would wander for days and could trust that the people they came across would provide food and shelter. Women related how everyone followed Allah’s words, which dictate that people must care for each other. Others spoke of how an ethic of support was maintained, as those who had resources supported individuals and families who were more needy.

Women’s descriptions of community in Somalia identify face-to-face interactions and exchanges that take place within the localised spaces of neighbourhoods, rural settlements and nomadic camps. The community is described as the primary environment within which people act and inter-relate. Rouse suggests that such visions of community imply a certain commonality and coherence in which parts fit together neatly to form an integrated whole and a shared way of life that is based on a ‘single and internally consistent set of rules, values, or beliefs’ (Rouse, 1991: 10). This normative picture of community life in Somalia is central to women’s aspirations for a similar social world in Australia. Indeed, it is difficult
to separate accounts of community and social life in Somalia from those of Australia, as comparison is implicit in so much of women’s talk of their social lives here.

Having reiterated women’s nostalgia for social worlds in Somalia, I now turn to configurations of the contemporary reality of social life as women resettle in Australia. It will become clear that historical narratives of community in Somalia (outlined in chapter 4 and highlighted above) represent a discursive practice that configures and morally weighs everyday life in Melbourne, and gives form to the social imagination of exile (Malkki, 1995a: 105).

LOOKING INWARD:
COMMUNITY DURING RESETTLEMENT

Here, there is less support from people. People occasionally visit each other, but everyone has got their own problems. People might help you in the first two or three days, or when you have a baby, or when you are sick, or when there is death in the family they come and give some support. But other than that you are on your own. People are all settling in and there isn’t much support. Everyone is just struggling on their own. Sometimes it is lonely. Many Somali people are sad; they miss their families. (Samira)

Samira’s words convey disappointment at the lack of social support in Melbourne. This sentiment was widely held amongst the women I talked with. In this section, I explore social capital and ethnic solidarity amongst Somali women in Melbourne through the following questions: To what degree do Somali women feel they support and are assisted by one another? What reasons do women give for the erosion of social support networks in Melbourne? How do women behave towards one another, regardless of what they say about social relationships? Do women feel that they are part of a wider Australian community?
Because migration is a movement between places, it has commonly been treated as a movement between social relationships and community settings. As Rouse writes:

migration has always had the potential to challenge established spatial images. It highlights the social nature of space as something created and reproduced through collective human agency and, in so doing, reminds us that, within the limits imposed by power, existing spatial arrangements are always susceptible to change (Rouse, 1991: 11).

A body of sociological work has sought to understand community amongst immigrants in terms of social capital. Social capital describes the web of connections, loyalties, investments, and mutual obligations that develop among people as part of their regular interaction. It refers to the sense of commitment that induces people to extend favours, expect preferential treatment, and look out for one another’s interests (Gold, 1995: 282). Coleman explains that the benefits of social capital are gained from relations of trust and collaboration within groups of people (Coleman, 1988; Menjivar, 2000: 148). According to social capital theory, networks of participation, cohesion and trust facilitate good health (Veenstra, 2002).

Social networks have long been seen as central in migratory movement, and the importance of immigrant solidarity and cultural continuity is widely emphasised (Menjivar, 2000: 28). Social capital amongst immigrant groups is associated with the notion of ethnic solidarity. Numerous studies of resettlement argue that migration heightens immigrants’ reliance on each other (Brettell, 2000; Werbner, 1990). For example, Portes and Zhou (1992) argue that immigrants create and find their own niches and sheltered spheres of activity and experience, which they label ‘bounded solidarity’. They describe how, when faced with a hostile reception in Miami, USA, Cubans retreat into the familiar by consuming home products and associating and working with ‘co-ethnics’. This evolves into ‘ethnic enclaves’, as community businesses thrive and ethnic identities are formed. Many studies pay lip-service to theories of cultural continuity and resistance amongst migrant populations. However, this literature often slides over the intra-group jealousies and tensions and posits a
view of community that is palatable to informants and readers. Menjivar writes that ‘in general, immigration scholarship is still concentrated on depicting a one-dimensional view of immigrant informal networks that focuses almost exclusively on their positive aspects’ (Menjivar, 2000: 33).

By contrast, in her study of Central and South American migrants in Long Island, USA, Mahler (1995) questions the notion of ‘ethnic solidarity’. She found that themes of competition, jealousy, and egotism were consistent amongst her ‘informants’ testimonies’. She writes, ‘when interviewing immigrants regarding their relations with compatriot immigrants, for instance, I was deluged with unsavory characterizations’ (Mahler, 1995: 3). Mahler attributes the lack of ethnic solidarity to peoples’ alienation and marginalisation from mainstream America and its institutions, which leads them to focus their resentment on each other. Mahler’s work reveals that social capital is not generated automatically as members of a group interact. It depends on the resources that are available to the individual in the group, and is conditioned by physical and social location.

Other recent research informed by feminist scholarship has criticised notions of immigrant communities and households as democratic, altruistic, and compliant, ignoring tensions and conflicting interests. Kibria (1993) observes that idealised representations of immigrant lives obscure gender and generation as distinctive experiences in immigration and ignore internal fissures. Hondagneu-Stotelo (1994a, 1994b) argues that, upon closer examination, the notion of collective objectives and strategies amongst immigrant populations that permeates so much literature is difficult to sustain. She observes differences in access to resources among Mexican immigrants, and finds that the networks that emerge to cope with the challenges of immigrant work can be abusive. Menjivar (2000) suggests that the social networks of Salvadorans in the US are conditioned by structures of opportunity, and reflects that social ties are often tainted by disappointment. These studies provide important insights into the theorisation and understanding of social networks in immigrant communities. As Menjivar writes, ‘macro-structural forces enable and constrain the actions of individuals, but
internal differentiation such as gender, generation, and social class places an equally powerful delimitation on individual action’ (Menjivar, 2000: 30).

In exploring community relationships amongst Somali women, themes emerged in women’s accounts that pointed to a lack of social capital and ethnic solidarity. Women voiced disappointment that the norms of reciprocity and sharing of their homeland have been eroded since resettlement in Australia, and they lament the loss of social and moral ideals. Women frequently said, ‘there is less support here’, and made explicit the short-comings of community relations in Melbourne. They recounted specific events when the Somali community failed them or did not provide support. These expressions of lost social ideals and relations were frequently the framework within which women placed their experiences of loneliness, sadness and depression, an issue that I discuss in greater detail in chapter 8.

One day, Amina and I were talking about some of the difficulties that cause her to feel depressed and anxious. She described an incident when she needed help from her Somali neighbours, but they did not offer support. Her story is a poignant example of the disappointment of social ties in Melbourne:

When we had the fight with our neighbour, there were a lot of neighbours around us who were Somali. The guy is white, he is drinking, every night drinking and drinking and throwing things at us. The Somali people saw that, and they told us ‘he did this and he did this, he threw this at you, he chased your children!’ Then we fought with him, and the Somali people saw the fight, but they didn’t do anything to help us. They just ran away. The fight got to the police, and the Somalis still didn’t help us. We went to court for that fight, and the court told us that we had to prove that he did these things. But the Somalis said they wouldn’t come to court. Before they told us a lot of things, and we said if you have that truth to tell then you have to come to court. But no Somali would come to say what they had seen. They said no. The court later decided we weren’t guilty, that he was just crazy. But we had already had to leave the house. The Somali people didn’t do anything. We didn’t want them
to fight, we wanted them only to say what they saw, to tell the other people [i.e. police, court judges, public housing officials]. But they didn’t. Now, we all live in emergency housing. Now I am lonely, I don’t have anything to do. I see the people here and they don’t communicate well.

Amina’s account illustrates the perceived erosion of moral order, trust, and community responsibility. She does not consider that perhaps fear and anxiety underlay others’ lack of willingness to go to court and become involved in an institutional process. Amina’s concern is that social support has not only diminished following migration to Australia, but that a fundamental social and moral order has been eroded. Many women feel there is social disregard and loss of generosity between Somalis in Australia. Amina locates the source of the difficulties she is now facing, including her loneliness and current housing difficulties, to the unmet social responsibilities of other Somalis. Other women recounted similar tales of disillusionment and disappointment with social ties in Melbourne, and these stood in stark contrast to the co-operation women recalled as characteristic of social life in Somalia.

Accounts of eroded social relations capture a significant sense of social and moral loss that permeates personal and community life following resettlement, yet women do not have a shared understanding as to how or why social relationships have changed. Rather, their understanding of the causes of this erosion of community was notable in its diversity. Many women spoke of the war as undermining social relations. They said the community was literally torn apart through family separation, loss of trust, and continuing conflict between clans. The difficulties of displacement and resettling in a new country are also seen to unravel any sense of community and support; everyone is dependent on the same welfare payments, homes are spread across suburbs and this restricts the opportunity to socialise, women feel trapped in their homes without transport or reason to leave, gossip is generated by the insularity of a small community, and parenting troubles emerge as children are drawn into a new cultural worlds of wider Australia. In the following section, I present different
women’s accounts of community in Melbourne, and describe the reasons they offered for the erosion of social ties and networks.

‘Everyone lost their father, their mother’

At the end of 1998 we came here to Australia. Now we are here, we miss everything in our country actually. We aren’t getting what we are used to having. Everyone lost their father, their mother. And now it is really strange when you come to another country and you don’t know anybody anymore. We are nobody now. When I was in Somalia, I actually remember that my brother used to take care of me, and it used to be that I could get everything I wanted. But now, since I lost him, I have to start everything again, I have to do everything on my own now. When I had somebody it was possible to be happy myself. I have never felt the way that I am feeling now. I didn’t think that one day it was going to happen like this. I have to do things on my own. (Medina)

The families of Somalis living in Melbourne are dispersed across international borders. Children, parents, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, and cousins live in different geographic locations. This situation is largely a product of the war and exile, which forced people to flee their homeland to countries of asylum, and later to second countries and regions of asylum, such as Australia, Canada, and Scandinavia, through refugee and humanitarian programs. Separation from family is a pervasive aspect of everyday life. Women talk of the sadness, anxiety and loneliness of being separated from family. Family separation and the subsequent loss of involvement in family interaction are vividly expressed in women’s narratives; families can not eat together, women are no longer sure what loved ones look like, there is no-one to talk to, no-one to help with child-minding, and no-one to offer support.

During the civil war, Naima escaped from Somalia with her nine children, leaving behind her parents, brothers and sisters, and one child. In 1992 she reached Kenya and waited for
three years for their visas to be approved, only to be told that the children who were over 18 years were not dependent and could not be included on her visa application. She recalls that the Australian High Commission Officers in Nairobi, Kenya, told her to go ahead to Australia and that her sons could apply for visas and then follow her. In 1995, she came to Australia with her three daughters. Her five eldest children remained overseas. Naima has no extended family in Australia and no links to people and families that she knew in Somalia. She has been prescribed anti-depressants, but still she has trouble sleeping and worries about her children who remain overseas. The following transcript details Naima’s experience of family separation:

The things that are important and difficult to me now are not having all my children and family here. I have four children left in Somalia, and I am not sure whether another has survived or not. If my children came here today, I wouldn’t go back to Somalia even if it became the best country in the whole wide world. This is my home. But if I learn that there is no hope for my kids to reunite with me, then there is no point for me to be here.

- You’re still waiting for a decision on their visa applications?
Yes. I put in the application, but I am leaving it in Allah’s hands. I don’t know whether it will be approved or not. The fact that they are separated from me is causing me a lot of problems. I am not sleeping, especially after speaking to them. My older son there has high blood pressure, the other is missing. That is causing me a lot of problems. I have lack of sleep, lack of eating. I think a lot and feel really sad. I feel hopeless.

- And how are your children in Kenya?
They say to me ‘Mum, what’s wrong. Why aren’t you helping us? It has been two and a half years, you don’t want to help us. We’re having problems here.’ They explain their situation to me. Their life is very hard. They ask me to come back. They ask ‘if you can’t help us then why don’t I come back?’ It is making me sad.

- So do you feel sadder in Australia than you did in Somalia and Kenya?
I had different kinds of worries in Somalia. There I was worried about whether there was anything to eat, or whether we would get killed. Here, we are well-fed and all that, but I worry about my kids in Kenya and whether they are fed. And it is the distance between us, the distance is making it worse. They are still in limbo, they are still being chased by soldiers every day, they get really depressed. So in Somalia, if there was a problem we were together, that seemed to be a lot easier. We could reach each other, reach the problems. But now there is a distance in between and that makes it really difficult. Whenever I start to cook I always start to think about whether my kids have eaten that day. So I am torn into two, I am in two worlds at the one time. When we are eating I always think, ‘Will all my kids and I ever eat together again?’ They are in my memory all the time.

On other occasions when Malyun and I talked with her, Naima reiterated the metaphor of being ‘torn into two’ through separation from family. She waited for months to hear from the Australian High Commission in Kenya about the status of her sons’ visa applications. Finally, a letter arrived stating that their applications had been rejected and Naima lost any hope of being reunited with them in Australia. She has since taken her daughters to live with family in America, and she has travelled to Kenya to stay with her sons.

Aisha gave a similar account of how loss and separation from family left her bereft and without networks of support. She is 23 and arrived in Melbourne in 2000 with her young child. Her partner was killed in the war. One evening, we sat in the living room in the dim light and she explained that she could not sleep at night; she showed photos to illustrate that she had lost 20 kilograms since arriving in Australia. For Aisha, the loss of family and community support has made her situation unbearable. When she is depressed she feels there is no-one to talk to, she feels lost without the assistance from her family, and she has no sense of being supported by a community. I asked her ‘What were the people like in Somalia, the social life?’ She replied:
The people in Somalia love each other. Here you are not supported because the person you are asking for support needs support themselves. So, over there you have ten children, you can go and do whatever you want because there will always be people to help you out. But here, with only one child I am going crazy because there is no-one to leave her with. In Somalia you do your daily things and have some time to sleep even during the day. People in Somalia have a sleep after lunch, they have the time to relax during the day. Here, I wake up, do the chores, go to sleep, wake up, do the chores again. No-one is here to help me. You might have a sick child, and no-one is here to help you. It is endless. I can’t avoid being depressed by the separation from people, from my family and my husband.

As already noted, many women from the Horn of Africa are accepted as immigrants under the ‘Women at Risk’ program. This visa operates in response to the vulnerability of women in their home country and/or in refugee camps, where women have lost fathers, brothers or husbands. The provision of this visa assumes that the vulnerability and risk from the lack of protection of a responsible male will dissolve at the time of migration, yet this is true neither physically nor emotionally. Young mothers who have no family assistance or support often talked of the strain of fulfilling parenting responsibilities. They feel they have to be both a father and a mother to their children and are often overwhelmed by the pressure of these roles. As Ismahan explained:

When we were escaping Somalia, my husband and I were separated. I went to Egypt, but he was lost. My sister was in Australia and she sponsored us to come to Australia. I came with six children in 1996. My mother was already in Australia, but she died eight months after I got here. I was here alone with my children. I had to be both a mother and a father to the children; that was a big responsibility and I felt anxious.

Women emphasised the difficulties of raising children alone. Some of their concerns included a lack of familiarity with the Australian culture, inability to assist with their
children's schoolwork, and fears that social workers will assist their children to get social security payments and to leave home. Most importantly though, being a single mother without support networks is lonely. For Medina, being a single mother in a new country is a struggle:

When I got to Australia, I was actually feeling strange. I can’t say that it was perfect coming to Australia, I was feeling strange. I had no-one to support me and I felt lost. I lost my family. I have only a brother left and the children of my brother. I would have been happier if my mum, my dad, everyone was here. But I don’t feel happy. I’m trying to survive, trying to accept the real world. Actually, family means a lot to me. When I came to Australia I was strained, I had no friends, no family. My family had just been killed. My sister-in-law is here. But she can not help me with everything, she can not fill the position of my family. When I came here I found that I was pregnant. That was the worst thing. The father is not here with me, he is in Africa. So I had to struggle with all that. My son is one now. Here, if you have a child, if your mother is around, and if the father is here, you still get some support. I miss that, and for me that is the hardest thing. I can’t stop that, I can’t stop waiting for him the way I do. But that is for another life-time. Now, I get home, and wonder what he looks like.

‘The trust has fallen’

Trust, while basic to social life, is a multi-layered sentiment and relationship . . . [and] is continuously established and reestablished in a process of negotiation in the course of social activity. . . Thus, while trust is present at many levels, it must be sustained and nurtured rather than simply taken for granted . . . Trust is a fragile and situational concept, easily broken but difficult to restore.

(Peteet, 1995: 169)

As shown in the section ‘Looking Back’, trust is recalled as central to the configuration of community and daily life in Somalia; trust in the solidarity of community, the support of
social networks, the unity of Islamic ideology, and the hospitality that is essential to a nomadic way of life. Women speak of sharing food, leaving doors open to welcome visitors, minding each other’s children, and caring about each other. Layoun writes that the memory of trust is crucial to the assertion of that trust and its subsequent betrayal (Layoun, 1995: 80). In accordance with Layoun, women’s memory of trusting social life in Somalia is juxtaposed to the violation and rupture of trust in their social worlds during the civil war and in Melbourne. An illustrative instance of the juxtaposition between memory of trust and present mistrust and lack of support is found in the following extract from an interview with Idil:

In Somalia, you talk with the neighbours while the things are on the stove for lunch. While you are cooking you go outside and talk to each other over the fence. You’ve got company around the clock. You never felt tired, you never felt cold, you never felt hot, you never used to be without company. You feel fine and alive. Since the civil war, some of the attitudes and some of the trust has fallen. Some people still hold on to what has happened, but some have forgotten. When we see other people and are dealing with other people we are very close, but when we look among ourselves there is a bit of difference, a bit of mistrust. The civil war forced people not to trust each other.

Many women suggested that the breach of faith between people and clans during the war left a legacy of mistrust. The war did not only physically tear families and communities apart; it also put trust on trial (Daniel and Knudsen, 1995). The Somali civil war was fought along clan lines and the repercussions are evident in the mistrust that continues amongst people following resettlement in Melbourne. A person’s clan or family may have been subject to persecution, violence, and murder at the hands of another clan, and consequently strong sentiments of mistrust and betrayal separate them from the perpetrator’s clan:

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106 Interestingly, some ethnographies and other literature suggest that Somali culture has always had issues of conflict and mistrust (Aman, 1994).
We don’t hate each other, but the civil war makes it like that. People go far away from each other. It is just because of the war, they are not all bad people. I don’t want to say the name of the clan that killed my brother. . . . But after the war, for the first time the people lost trust in each other. Now there is tribalism. Everyone has to go to his own tribe. They don’t even know each other, they haven’t ever seen each other, but if they know that they came from Somalia then they are going to start to relate to each other without trust. Before, it didn’t used to be like that. Everyone used to be friends. People used to communicate with each other, to be nice to each other. But now they will not be. It is just that everyone is feeling that inside . . . I mean the clan that killed my brother, I don’t like them. They killed my brother, and I don’t feel that nice about them. As a human, if I saw them I would say hi. But in my heart I don’t feel like having a friend from that tribe. I don’t like them. It is not good actually what I feel inside, but that is what I feel. Things are still like that in Australia. We actually know what tribe we come from. (Medina)

The relations between people, clans, and families in Melbourne were sometimes characterised by tension, which on occasion erupted into conflict. The potential for such conflict has intensified with the ongoing conferences and pushes to form a government and ruling parties in Somalia. Reflecting the Somali national situation of clan-based politics, Somali people in Melbourne become involved in political tension. For example, during the course of the research, the women of a dominant clan were angered when minority clan members opposed the formation of a government in Somalia that was composed of dominant clan families. This led to physical violence between women at a public gathering.

The lack of long-standing familial and social bonds in Melbourne also precludes the maintenance of trusting relations. In Somalia, social support was sought and extended by clans, families and neighbours. People lived in kin and clan groups and maintained traditions of sharing food and family life, and offering social support. Women recounted how men would pay the fares of any family travelling on the same bus, women who went to
markets would buy food for their neighbours and family in the knowledge that the favour would be returned, and children from the city were sent to stay with family in the bush during holidays. These networks of trust and support were maintained within family and clan relations. The perception that community support and trust is a natural part of social life in Somalia is challenged by the conditions of migration. People who come from different clans, families, and regions of Somalia are thrown together to form a ‘Somali community’ in Melbourne. To ask support of people just because they are Somali is to ask people to act in ways that are inconsistent with their usual patterns. As Samira says:

You wouldn’t trust anyone here because you don’t know them. The neighbours in Somalia were there since you were young, your whole life. But here you don’t know them, no-one knows each other.

Somalis have settled in Melbourne, as much as possible, along family and clan lines. Dominant clan groups have settled in different regions of Melbourne. Family groups strive to live in the same regions and suburbs, often appealing to the Office of Housing for a property in specific areas on the grounds of their need for social support from family and friends. While this has enabled some re-creation of familiar social worlds, the reality in Somalia of long-established neighbourhoods and extended families living in close proximity can not be rebuilt. The community is too small to allow social relations to be based solely on kin and clan, and people are too dispersed spatially to support the creation of close-knit neighbourhoods.

Resettlement in Australia has created a ‘community’ of people who were previously strangers. They have diverse backgrounds in terms of wealth, clan, region, social status. Some women lived as nomads, others worked in the cities as business women or government employees; some came from dominant powerful clans and others from persecuted minority clans; some were educated and others illiterate. Women emphasised that the Somali community is largely composed of people you don’t know, and you don’t know if you can trust:
All the people that came here are from different areas. People come from country areas, people come from city areas, people come from farming areas. People come from different areas. They don't know each other. In my opinion it is better to have a community, to talk with Somalis. In Africa we have a big community. Somali people here are in the North and in the East or in different areas, we don't have a big community to know. Here we feel lonely, it would be better to have a big community and talk with each other. In Somalia I didn't get lonely, I was busy. Now I don't have anything to do. Now I feel lonely. (Deego)

Many women say that they keep their business to themselves, they keep their doors locked, and those who have no family here are reluctant to ask other Somalis for support:

All the Somali here are different and they come from different areas and they don't know each other. Everyone comes from another area and they don't come as a group or live together in the city, so they don't speak to each other. It would be better if they talked to each other and saw each other, but everyone just talks to their clans so it is very hard to communicate. Everyone comes from a different area, and every group just talks to each other and if you go to another area they just throw you out so it is very hard to go. (Amina)

Similarly, Khadija said:

There are different people here. There are different classes here. Before, in Somalia, people had different classes and they used to stay with their class, here everyone is mixed up. You can end up being hit because you don't understand each other. You look around and you see who is suitable to go out with, similar classes.

'I can't do anything about the gossip' 

Somali women suggested that gossipping is necessarily the product of displacement. The term 'gossip' refers to informal talk conducted within small groups of acquaintances to elicit and share information or knowledge (Ayim, 1994; Tebutt, 1995), however the term often has a negative connotation. Gossip amongst Somali women provides an important social
function through which people find out and disseminate information, and judgments, norms, and values are expressed and clarified. People without prior social ties and people from different clans have been thrown together to form a ‘Somali community’, and gossip provides a way to establish who people are and what their background is. It allows women to place each other within a social framework:

If you ask someone about someone else, that person will tell you. People gossip. They don’t trust each other. It started in the war. Before the war everyone was happy. But here Somali people don’t know each other and they gossip; ‘who is she, what is she doing here?’ In Australia, there are a lot of clans all together, and if you go to a wedding or some event, you can see that everyone is gossiping and asking, ‘who is she, who is he?’ You can see it and hear it, but you can’t do anything about it. I had never even heard of the other clans until I got to Australia. I can’t do anything about the gossip so I just leave it. I don’t care. I don’t care if they gossip about me. (Fartun)

However, women also commented that they feel statements about their lives and sentiments are easily misconstrued and rumours easily started. Menjivar also reports concerns amongst Salvadoran immigrants in the US that other Salvadorans might spread rumours about them or betray them (Menjivar, 2000: 145). Fears of betrayal and gossip can prevent Somali women from seeking support from each other. Gilmiyo prefers to be alone than share her sadness with people who might not keep her troubles to themselves, and in the solitude of her one bedroom flat, she cries herself to sleep. She told me, ‘you can’t trust anybody not to tell all the things that you want, so you have to keep it in your mind.’ Amina explains that she turns to religion and finds consolation in reciting the Qur’an and praying instead of talking or visiting.

Many women suggested that gossiping is a product of boredom. Fahia explained that women have nothing better to do in Melbourne and there is not enough interest in their own
life so they talk about each other’s lives. The small size of the community means that everyone hears of everyone else’s business:

Sometimes, someone talks to me and she says ‘keep this in confidentiality, don’t tell anyone.’ Then I might go around to the next house, and another person would tell me the same story and say ‘keep it to yourself.’ It has already been circulated and I don’t say, ‘look I’ve heard this before.’ I keep listening like I haven’t heard. I’ve seen this amongst all these women so many times. If I say, ‘Hawa’s hair is yellow, don’t tell anyone’, it would go everywhere – whoooosh. But if I say ‘look, Hawa’s hair is yellow and everyone knows that’, then they wouldn’t bother to tell anyone.

A lot of ladies don’t have anything to do here. They just stay at home, they have nothing else to do. So they are just on the phone all the time, or visiting all the groups, and all they talk about is other ladies. ‘This one she said this, this one she wears that.’ They talk about it. In Australia that is what happens. Here, all Somalis know each other. If you say the name ‘Hakimo’, for example, everyone would say ‘yeah I know her, I know here she lives.’ They gossip because they have nothing else to talk about. It is just the loneliness, and women are bored. That is why. If they go out and study and work then they wouldn’t find the time to gossip, but now that is what happens. People talk in every culture. But for Somali women, there is no excitement in their lives. People have to duplicate and repeat what they saw. It is just their nature because there is nothing else to talk about, and too bad if that means that people talk about each other’s personal lives.

Gossip can incite mistrust and conflict amongst women within the community. This can lead to the real possibility of reprisal if gossip turns to malicious stories that are spread within the community. Fartun arrived in Australia in 2000. She was nominated for a visa by her husband, and they now live together in an Office of Housing property. Fartun has no other family in Melbourne, and she senses that the Somali community is untrustworthy:

I hear the gossip about me as well, but I can’t do anything. I hear the gossip. Not all Somali are like this, but say two people are talking to each other and one tells all her
secrets to the other then the other person might go and give the secrets to another person. The person who told their secrets is very angry, so that is why they then fight. Somali people have good and bad though, not all are like that.

Women recall the sharing of stories and details about each other’s life in Somalia as an example of closeness and trust. Here, women view gossip with wariness and regard it as the product of mistrust and boredom.

Gossip and rumours can also play a significant role in polarising Somali and Anglo-Australian identities. In their paper on immigrant’s ‘story-telling’ about medical and health care services, Manderson and Allotey (In Press) write that stories of contradiction, conflict and poor outcome take on an emblematic value within communities, fuelling people’s suspicions about the medical services of the host countries. Similarly, Somali women referred to stories about the loose sexual morals of Australian women, the efforts of doctors to inhibit them from bearing children, and the attempts of the Child Protection workers to take their children from them.

‘Life is entirely different here’

Studies of refugees and refugee communities often focus on experiences of war and exile, the lasting impact of trauma and persecution, and the subsequent erosion of trust. However, refugee lives are also affected by the conditions of displacement and the receiving context within which they find themselves. Many Somali women attribute the erosion of community not to the repercussions of war but to the difficult conditions in Melbourne. They suggest that the maintenance of social networks is hindered by the limitations they encounter in Melbourne.

The idea that broader forces shape the internal dynamics of social networks is common within social research. Belle (1982) argues that poverty imposes a considerable burden on potential sources of social support and describes ‘negative networks’ that can be stressful to impoverished families. Conversely, Lomnitz’s (1985) study of a Mexican shantytown
suggests that social networks provide important financial, material, and emotional assistance to those who are living in the midst of poverty. Menjivar (2000) writes that key institutions directly influence the viability of social networks. For example, the state implements policies around immigration and security of residence and controls rights to the labour markets and social programs, and the local economy limits stable employment opportunities. Social networks do not work independently of these structural forces, but are shaped by the possibilities and limitations of their broader context. She writes, ‘our attention should shift from reifying notions that immigrants achieve benefits through informal exchanges with relatives and friends toward examining the structure of opportunities that determines if immigrants will have the means (and what kind) to help one another in the first place’ (Menjivar, 2000: 156).

As discussed in chapter 6, women had imagined they were migrating to a country where there would be opportunities to build a good life, they would have access to housing, and there would be financial stability or even abundance. Many women have found that this imagined country is far-removed from the reality that they confront following migration to Australia. Luul spoke with great frustration about the constraints of trying to maintain and create social networks with other Somalis, saying:

Here, it is different. Life is entirely different here. If there is somebody living by themselves, the culture is ‘don’t knock on my door and I won’t knock on your door.’ The Centrelink gives you a little benefit, you live off that and if you can’t really support yourself then tough luck because that is the way it is. Your next door neighbour is not Somali and they won’t look out for you. If I lived near Somali neighbours and I ran out of spaghetti, they would give it to me. Or if I ran out of salt or onion, then they would give it to me. If I didn’t feel like cooking that night I could go to my neighbours. Now, that sense of community and exchange has been lost. Everybody gets the benefit and no-one is below the other person. Over there, sharing was really good because some families had less than others. Here, that has been lost.
because of the Centrelink benefits. But if we had Somali neighbours then that could continue. It is a bit sad, it got lost.

Luul’s account of social networks in Melbourne touches on the impact of financial hardship, of not having Somali neighbours, and the loneliness of daily life in Melbourne.

Physical presence, as well as social presence, enabled ‘close’ relations in Somalia. Physical proximity created the possibility of an ethic of neighbourliness and reciprocity. As Fadumo explains:

In Somalia, we were a large family. Life was really busy. The whole suburb was related, we were one big family. There were lots of activities always going on. There were eight kids in my household, lots of brothers and sisters. All the relatives outside of Mogadishu, the people from Baidoa and the country, they used to come and stay at our house in the city. The house was always so busy and full. It is a cultural thing. People stay with their extended relatives from the same tribe. You see, some of them can’t really afford to stay in a hotel or anything. The people from the bush came to the city to seek medication or sell the wheat and sesame oil, and they stayed at our house. That was really common.

By contrast, there is less social interaction in Melbourne, as Somalis are dispersed through different suburbs, often in Office of Housing properties in the suburbs of Preston, Heidelberg, Broadmeadows, Essendon, Brunswick and Maribyrnong. The following accounts illustrate an experience widely shared by women in Melbourne:

The distance between houses makes it different and that is part of the reason why it is harder to maintain the old tradition of helping each other. The distance. Whereas before all your neighbours – to the side, the one in front and the one behind – were all Somali. Here, there is a bit of a distance. What would make me happy is just to have my family around and to have Somali neighbours. For example, a couple of weeks ago my son hurt his leg and he was sitting outside and crying while the ambulance was coming. None of the neighbours opened the door and bothered to see what was happening. I couldn’t leave the other kids and take my son to the hospital.
If I was in Somalia I could have easily just left the kids with the neighbours. My dream is to have my family and to have Somali neighbours. *(Idil)*

Fatma is in her early fifties, and lives on her own in an Office of Housing flat. She has no family in Melbourne and feels very isolated. Her account speaks of a feeling of vulnerability:

Life here is OK. But there is a big loneliness, especially in the beginning the loneliness . . . In Somalia if you stand out the front people would walk past, neighbours would shout out to you. Here it is so quiet and lonely. What is frightening about living here is that if something happens to you, or there was a fire, the police don’t come straight away, and you have no neighbours to call out to who understand your language. So that is really frightening. You are completely alone. In Somalia if the fire broke out you could yell out and people used to turn up. Here they wouldn’t even know what I am calling for and the police don’t come. Over there, people would just turn up on your doorstep. But here there is no-one to talk to. If you had a fight or a dispute with somebody in Somalia, your neighbours would stand by your side and defend you, if you don’t have a family around. But here . . .

Elderly women particularly spoke of isolation.\(^{107}\) They are not involved in activities that bring them into contact with wider community, and social activities that used to incorporate elderly people in Somali are not in place. Aman, aged 66, said:

I think that people here are happy, but they don’t tend to rely on each other very much. People have gone their separate ways and they seek assistance from the government and they don’t really need each other so much . . . The neighbours in Somalia were people that you used to talk to. But it can be lonely here. In Somalia all the neighbours used to talk to each other over the fence, people would chat, you could go outside and people would walk past. You’d have lots of people to talk to and to occupy your time. But look at our surroundings now. You don’t even know

\(^{107}\) The term ‘elderly’ is used by Somalis to refer to people above the age of approximately 60. By this age, most Somali people would have children, grandchildren and possibly even great-grandchildren.
who lives next door. And you can be inside all day and not go out unless you go in
the car, so it can be really quite lonely... For the elderly community here, it is quite
frustrating being in Australia. The younger you are the better off you are here,
because you can pick up the language and the culture and all that. For us, we came
here as elderly. We feel lonely. Our neighbours and the people that we are used to
are not here. And with the language it is very difficult. You can't speak English. And
even if you want to go out and beat the loneliness, you don't have anyone that you
can communicate with in your own language. There is nothing you can do. You are
at home, indoors. There is no-one to talk to. No-one you know.

Social isolation is not just a reflection of loss of physical proximity between Somali people
in Melbourne, but is also derived from a sense of being out of place and alienated from the
wider community. Non-Somali neighbours can appear unwelcoming and difficult to
communicate with; they don't believe in Islam, they don't help, and they don't share.108
Medina described how she felt invisible to the wider Australian community, saying 'it is
really strange when you come to another country and you don't know anybody anymore.
We are nobody now.' Differences are hard to transcend, their religious beliefs and language
set them apart, and women sense that they are not always welcomed.109 Social isolation is
exacerbated when women with limited English language skills find they can not
communicate with their neighbours or create a sense of social cohesion with the wider
Australian community. This situation is distressing as it contravenes cultural and religious
expectations of offering interpersonal support:

> In our religion, the first question you get asked when you die is 'how were you with
> your neighbours, did you share your food, did you check whether they were sick or
> not?' The first question is not about your husband, not about your parents, it is about
> your neighbours and how you treated your neighbours. And that is not only your

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108 Silveira and Allebeck (2001) also note that Somali men in East London regret that they have decreased
opportunities to mix with the mainstream community.
109 Similar results are documented in Chavez' work on Mexican and Central American migrants living in the
US (Chavez, 1994).
next-door neighbours, but forty houses down as well, to the left and right and forwards and behind. You have to say hello to the houses for forty houses in all directions and say 'how are you, how do you feel, did you have anything to eat, is there any sickness?' God, I am going to go to hell now. It is really impossible. In our religion there will be questions if you didn’t do that. In Australia I see a neighbour and I can only call out 'Hi!’ (Isir)

Further, women are alienated through discrimination that takes form as racist remarks and actions and through the insidiousness of feeling marginalised and invisible:

The neighbours complain about me. I had a neighbour who lived in a next door block and she used to come over and stand around outside my house and then complain to the Office of Housing that we made too much noise. The Ministry told me that I have to respect my neighbours, but she didn’t even live in the same block as me. They said if they had to talk to me again then they would evict me, and also that this wasn’t my country and I couldn’t expect to do what we used to do in my country back home. (Aman)

Women perceive that they are subject to discrimination: that their racial identity and migration status is used to justify exclusion. In turn, they feel marginalised from the wider Australian community.

Financial constraints have also played a large part in undermining women’s ability to maintain social ties and a sense of community. The importance of reciprocity is emphasised in the work of many scholars. In 1950, George Simmel (1950) wrote that 'all contacts among men rest on the schema of giving and returning the equivalence'. Similarly, in his much cited work, The Gift, Marcel Mauss (1954) argues that gifts are always 'given and repaid under obligation', and these prestation serve to structure social forms and create alliances (Mauss, 1954: 1). However, families with fewer resources are less able to provide assistance due to the socio-economic conditions. Menjivar, for example, writes that the physical conditions of scarcity in which many migrants from El Salvador live in the US
assails sources of assistance and sets the conditions by which mutual obligations and exchanges are limited (Menjivar, 2000: 116):

When people, by virtue of their circumstances, lack enough resources to exchange with others, informal exchanges will be weakened, leading to a decrease in the potential of these ties to generate social capital. In impoverished conditions, when resources to share are unavailable, social capital may not be generated, in spite of strong ties (Menjivar, 2000: 149).

White and Riedmann (1992) and Hogan, Eggebeen and Clogg (1993) also observe that people are unable to participate actively in networks when they lack the resources to do so, even among groups that are assumed to have strong kinship networks. While this argument is not convincing when applied to all peoples who face economic hardship, it does shed some light on the erosion of networks amongst displaced people who are accustomed to an ethic of reciprocity and informal redistribution of resource. The economic hardship faced by many Somali women and families limits their ability to maintain relations of reciprocity and sharing.

Maryam, a woman in her early twenties with three children, is a case in point. In Somalia, she had a large and supportive family and social network. Since resettling in Melbourne, her partner has abandoned her and the children, and she has no family to turn to. She lives in public housing. She can not afford child-care and is unable to look for work, as it would require her to leave the children unattended. One afternoon I visited her at home. The television emitted a background babble of daytime programs. Maryam talked of her frustrations about her financial situation in Australia. She explained:

I don’t see any women help each other here. In Somalia, they can help each other because they all had some money. Here, all the families are the same and they only get the government money. They don’t work, they can’t work, the only way is the government money. People here, they don’t help each other. How can you help each other if you get the same money? In Somalia they work and if there is someone who
can’t work they give money to that person, they help each other. But here, with the
bills and everything, it is expensive.

As Maryam describes, people are constrained in the amount of financial support they can
offer, as they are predominantly living on welfare payments. However, it is not simply that
people face financial hardship, but that everyone is in the same financial position and this
reduces the need for redistribution of resources. Many women also send remittances
overseas to family and friends, and this hinders their capacity to help each other financially
in Melbourne. A further impact of financial hardship is the loss of exchange and support.
Activities that would have involved reciprocal exchanges in Somalia are constrained by
peoples’ financial hardships in Melbourne. Women are less likely to exchange things and
support each other as they are all ‘struggling the same.’ As Aweys put it, ‘Life over there –
if you had ten bucks you would share with a lot of people. But here everything has turned to
greed. I can’t afford even one dollar to give away.’

COMMUNITY AND COHESION: A COUNTERPOINT

Women’s accounts illustrate that the experiences of war and displacement are marked by
disintegration of social networks. Despite this, many women have found solace and support
amongst Somalis in Melbourne. During an interview with Fartun, I said, ‘some people I
have talked with say there is less trust and support now. What do you think?’ In reply, she
said:

When I had a baby here, even though it is difficult, all the women gathered in the
area and put in twenty dollars. They gave me a bed as a gift, the pram as a gift, the
clothing as a gift. I didn’t have to buy anything. Isn’t that a good culture? You rely
on them. In a way, there is a good side when you don’t have any family. You will be
looked after. Sometimes people say that they don’t trust the other Somalis, but then
again they still get help from each other. Sometimes living in a different country
brings people together. I think that it can sometimes be a good experience. (Fartun)
In Mehta and Chatterji’s discussion of social healing following rioting amongst the Hindu and Muslim communities in Bombay’s slums, healing is described as the ability to allow everyday commerce between people to resume after violence has cut ties and broken relationships (Mehta and Chatterji, 2001). They write that community cohesion is seen to begin with sufficient co-operation to allow for the resumption of everyday activities. Das (1990c), in a paper on the survivors of the Delhi riots that occurred after the assassination of Indira Ghandi in 1984, shows that the recovery of everyday interactions is achieved by coming to terms with the fragility of the ‘normal’. In the introduction to this chapter, I questioned the taken-for-granted solidarity of migrant communities, and the section above has detailed accounts of eroded community relations. It would, however, be misleading to depict community solidarities amongst Somalis as all but lost. A sense of community is maintained by forming new relationships and interactions in the often fragile conditions of resettlement. Through informal conversation and spending time with women, I came to hear about and see social interactions, supportive networks, and co-operation.

One afternoon we went to Idil’s house. Her husband was sick and the house was filled with a constant stream of women visiting to offer support. As women arrived, Idil’s daughter brought out trays with mugs of sweet tea and milk. A video of a celebration in Somalia played on the television, and the sounds of Somali music incited Sahra to begin dancing. The women laughed and clapped as she continued to dance in time with the music. Soon after, a rug was spread on the floor and a bowl of water passed around so the women could wash their hands before eating. Idil served a lamb and vegetable stew, salad, maize flat-breads and tea, and we sat together eating and talking. Visiting each other’s houses and sharing food promotes the continuance of Somali culture, community life, and hospitality. At the same time, it preserves social identity and supports the continuance of shared spaces and community life.
Occasions such as the afternoon at Idil’s house were not rare. I watched women come and go at each other’s houses. During these gatherings, women often prayed together: rugs were spread on the floor and women formed a line facing Mecca while they uttered Qur’anic text together. Some women gathered regularly at each other’s houses to form prayer groups to discuss the messages of the Qur’an and the Hadith. Interviews were often punctuated by people dropping by, telephone calls from family and friends, preparation of tea and meals for visitors, or women picking up their children from other women’s homes. There is a constant stream of marriages, engagement parties, women’s gatherings, and religious events:

If I stay home and I feel lonely, and I might worry about how my family are in Somalia. I think about that while I am alone. But if I go out then I feel like happy, and I feel comfortable, and I get dressed nicely and I feel like there is support. You dance with anyone, talk to anyone, feel relaxed. If I am invited to a Somali party and I don’t have anywhere to leave the kids then I wish I could be there, I wish I could see it. They are having a good time and you are sitting at home lonely. That is when I mostly think about back home in Somalia. (Ismahan)

Despite the frequency with which women’s accounts referred to mistrust and isolation, social events, religious gatherings, and celebrations are common. They play an important role in women’s lives, promoting interaction, shared time, and a sense of social well-being.

I have discussed previously how women spoke of the dangers of gossip, describing how they were reluctant to share their problems with people who might then spread rumours about their lives. Nonetheless, ‘gossip’ can offer a valuable mode of sharing information about jobs, health care issues, daily life, housing, changes to immigration policy, and community programs. As Lloyd and Margaret Fallers (1976) demonstrate, gossip can be a means of disseminating economic, political and social knowledge. In Elley’s (1985) study of Turkish immigrant women in urban Australia, for example, home gatherings and communal activities provide a forum for women to exchange information about housing, employment, and information about social security. Similarly, gossip becomes a vehicle for Somali
women to share knowledge about Australia: the availability of jobs, where to buy cheap food, information about services, and changes to immigration criteria. The speed with which information is exchanged between people was evident through my work at the Migrant Resource Centre. I assisted Zahra to apply for a government grant to cover the costs of electricity, water and gas bills. This one-off grant can be used by people who have received unusually large bills due to extenuating circumstances. Over the next few weeks a number of women came to the Migrant Resource Centre with their bills, saying they had heard about government grants and wanted to apply.

In addition to informal social networks and activities, a number of community associations and organisations have been established, some of which have arisen in response to the context of resettlement and others that are a continuation of traditional community structures. Through informal conversations I heard talk of ‘Somali banks’ that operate as rotating credit associations. Rotating credit associations have been documented amongst many immigrant populations (Mahler, 1995: 133). Somali banks comprise groups of around ten people, each of whom provides a specified sum of money. The participants’ money is pulled together into a sum and rotated among members, thereby allowing people to apply for bank loans on the basis of their ‘savings’. In one instance, for example, I heard women planning to organise a Somali bank to which twelve women would each contributed $1,000. Over a year, each woman was to hold the accumulated $12,000 in her bank account for one month. The original contributions were then to be redistributed to individuals at the end of the year. These credit associations enable people to secure bank loans so they can start businesses, buy cars, or pay for household items. They run entirely on trust, with no legal documentation to ensure against people absconding with the money. The groups are formed through word of mouth, and generally include people who are known to each other.

Financial co-operation also occurs in relation to the ‘Assurance of Support’ that is required in order to sponsor someone for a humanitarian visa. An Assurance of Support is a legal commitment to provide financial support for a person applying to migrate so they will not
rely on the government for an income. It also entails a commitment to repay the Commonwealth of Australia any social security payments made to those covered by the assurance. The Assurance of Support is required for the first two years after the date of arrival in Australia or granting of a relevant visa. It covers the principal applicant and the family members included in the application. The person giving the Assurance of Support must be a resident of Australia and financially able to support the sponsored person or persons. However, as the person giving the Assurance of Support does not have to be the same as the sponsor, those Somalis who are financially secure are often asked to provide an ‘assurance’ by people who wish to sponsor their family but do not have the financial resources.

For example, Hayatt wanted to sponsor her mother for migration to Australia. She has seven children, is dependent upon Centrelink payments, her housing situation is unstable, and she is unable to work because she can not afford child-care. Hayatt could not provide an Assurance of Support because she lacked the bank statements, income statements, tax payments, rental slips and other financial documentation to show that she is financially secure. She turned to Abdirahman, a distant relative, who has financial stability. He agreed to provide an Assurance of Support in order that Hayatt’s mother might have a chance to migrate to Australia.

The examples above illustrate informal interpersonal networks through which social ties and support are maintained. There are also more formalised community structures in place. ‘Somali courts’, composed of elders, are sometimes called upon to resolve disputes amongst members of the community. Physical or verbal conflicts are brought to the court, a decision is made as to who is culpable, and financial compensation and apologies are demanded. These courts are based on the moral framework and laws of Islam and the traditional customs of Somalia. People can turn to Somali courts to resolve their problems even while pursuing legal channels within the Australian system, such as intervention orders. Numerous community associations have also been formed that aim to represent the needs of Somalis.
and Horn of Africans and to offer support to people in the community.\textsuperscript{110} These groups provide on-arrival support to new arrivals, regular social gatherings, and forums through which to direct attention to the political situation in Somalia. Many of these associations are based on political or clan affiliation. Their proliferation could be taken to illustrate the fragmentation of Somali people into different factions, yet the many Somali associations in Victoria mirror the fragmentary political organisation of Somalia.

Outlined above are some of the social structures and interactions that are part of Somali women’s everyday lives in Melbourne. However, a sense of community is not necessarily grounded in material locality. It is inadequate to see displacement as a movement between distinct communities that are the loci of contained sets of social relationships (Rouse, 1991). Somali people have created a community that extends beyond the parameters of localised spaces, in which resources, thoughts, money, information and people transgress national boundaries. As the following account of a ‘Somali Women’s Peace Conference’ suggests, women are both affected by and demonstrate their continued interest in events in Somalia. This conference was held in July, 2000, and was one of the more visible demonstrations of a transnational social field. It was held around the time of the convening of the Fourteenth Djibouti Peace Conference, which aimed to set up a transitional government in Somalia. The event was organised by Somali workers in various Melbourne-based organisations, including health centres and Migrant Resource Centres. More than one hundred Somali women gathered in a local town hall to show their support for the transitional government elections, call for peace in Somalia, and acknowledge the suffering of people who remain in Somalia. Speeches were made, young girls performed traditional Somali dances, and women sang Somali songs and the national anthem. A television crew recorded the event for a

\textsuperscript{110} Some of these organisations include the Horn of Africa Communities Network, Horn of Africa Information Committee, Horn of Africa Seniors Program, Horn of Africa Women’s Group, Horn of Africa Young Mothers’ Group, Somali Community in Victoria, Somali Digil and Mirifle Association in Australia, Somali Fiki Walal Rescue Association of Australia Inc., Somali Jubiland Community in Australia, Somaliland Committee of Australia, Somali Friendship Association Inc., Somaliland Women’s Group, Somali National Organisation, Somali Relief Association Inc., Somali Rahweyn Relief Association of Australia, Somali Support Group Association, Somali United Society of Victoria, Somali Women’s Group, and the United Somali Organisation in Australia.
national news program. The day was filled with an air of anticipation and shared hopes that peace might be restored in their homeland. Women talked of how peace in Somalia would mean they would not have to worry about family that remained there, they could return to visit or live without fear of persecution, and their people and country would return to the happiness and beauty that had been lost. The event culminated in a Somali lunch for which women had brought piles of breads, fried pastries, rice dishes, meat stews and salads.

Chavez (1994) writes that a migrant is not limited to membership in one community; sentiments and connections for one community do not categorically restrict feelings of membership in another. Similarly, Rouse (1991), on the basis of ethnographic research among immigrants from the Mexico living in California, suggests that Mexican immigrants belong to a transnational community as they resettle in the United States and maintain ties to their families and communities in Mexico. He writes, ‘the various settlements have become so closely woven together that, in an important sense, they have come to constitute a single community spread across a variety of sites’ (Rouse, 1991: 14). Women see their current lives and future possibilities as involving simultaneous engagements with social and political spaces in both Somalia and Melbourne. As Basch et al. write:

Transmigrants take actions, make decisions, and develop subjectivities and identities embedded in networks of relationships that connect them simultaneously to two or more nation-states. (Basch et al., 1994: 7)

The transnational nature of social relations is, perhaps, best illustrated in the emergence of new ways of experiencing family ties. Family separation affects refugees possibly more profoundly than it does the mobile non-refugee, due to visa restrictions and social and economic factors that restrict movement and family reunion. Important family members and friends of many women, live overseas or interstate. Somali women suffer from the emotional impact of displacement and physical separation from family. However, this separation does not necessarily involve a severing of relations. While struggling to sustain themselves and their families financially in Melbourne, many people retain ongoing
responsibilities of providing financial support to family overseas. Money is sent frequently to people living overseas in refugee camps or in countries such as Kenya and Ethiopia, who are unable to work or have no resources or source of income. People regularly attend Migrant Resource Centres asking for assistance with submitting visa applications for family members from whom they have been separated. Videos of significant events are sent from overseas - weddings, engagements – and these are watched with both excitement and a sense of loss because the distance is so apparent as blurred images with unnatural colours flicker on television screens in Melbourne, weeks after the event. Displacement has brought the homeland and Australia into immediate juxtaposition. Nonetheless, many women have a sense of belonging to a transnational family and community that combines social worlds from different settings.

As Das and Kleinman write, ‘finding one’s voice in the making of one’s history, the remaking of a world . . . is also a matter of being able to recontextualize the narratives of devastation and generate new contexts through which everyday life may become possible’ (Das and Kleinman, 2001: 6). War, displacement and resettlement are often viewed by Somali women as causing the disintegration of social networks. However, they can also be a way to generate community on the basis of shared or collective experience. Interactions and support networks are built as people reminisce about Somalia, attend rallies for peace, support each other in sponsoring family and friends for visas, and share knowledge about processes and conditions in Melbourne. Further, their community is not situated in a singular locality; women maintain transnational ties and connections to people living in other localities. In chapter 6 - Home or Exile? - I discussed how Somali women create a ‘home’ through material practice and everyday life. In this section, community can also be seen to comprise a ‘home’ through the continuation and recreation of social networks and forms of social interaction.
Women’s ideas and experiences of community involve desire for the social ideals of homeland, disappointment with the realities of community in Melbourne, and hopes for the possibilities of community formation following displacement. Accounts of community in Melbourne are often threaded around the recalled ideals of social relations in Somalia. The imagination/recollection of community in Somalia informs images and experiences of community in Melbourne. Layne writes, ‘It is because the past has this living active existence in the present that it matters so much’ (Layne, 1994: 34). Somali women’s social history of community in Somalia is connected to the present through the part it plays in defining social ideals and providing a comparative framework. What is perhaps most striking is the way in which women long for a lost social past and feel betrayed and let down by the distorted social relationships of community life in Melbourne. The war has generated a level of mistrust and caused separation of families and dispersal of communities. The material and social conditions of resettlement in Australia also permeate their social relationships by determining the resources they can share, and the level of interaction that can take place.

In their accounts of social relations in Melbourne, women describe how they have been separated from family and have lost social networks of support that are so fondly remembered as central to daily life in Somalia. Women articulate the loss of trust that has emerged between clans and amongst people who have been thrown together in Melbourne, yet have no long-standing social bonds. They also recognise that the circumstances of life in Australia play a part in the erosion of social capital; people live too far apart to maintain a constant dynamic of sharing and reciprocity, they receive welfare payments and the ability to maintain an ethic of supporting those in need is lost as everyone is financially restricted, a culture of gossip has emerged which (while performing some positive roles) eats away at trusting relations, and women feel lonely because they are not involved in activities and social roles that offer social interaction. This image of community in Melbourne stands in contrast to recollections of community life in Somalia (see Table 4).
Table 4: Narrative representation of community: past and present

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PAST</th>
<th>PRESENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United families</td>
<td>Separated from family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Mistrust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical proximity of community members</td>
<td>Dispersal of community members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing/redistribution of material resources</td>
<td>All facing financial hardship, less sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing conversations</td>
<td>Gossip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-standing friendships</td>
<td>Social ties are recently built</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Busy/working</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supported by social networks</td>
<td>Alone</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Women’s accounts of the deterioration of community and social order suggest that ideas about immigrant solidarity and social cohesiveness need to be revised. Women give an emphatically positive valuation of community and life in Somalia and represent the present as a corrupted version of an idyllic past. These accounts of social losses may obscure the way in which stories of failed social responsibilities might always have been set against an idyllic past. Nonetheless, there is a real sadness that arises from family separation, dissolution of social networks following war and displacement, and the conditions of resettlement that undermine the possibility of community cohesion.

In this chapter, I have avoided assumptions of altruism and consensus amongst Somali women as an immigrant group, and emphasised the shifting, contingent, and sometimes fraught nature of social ties. I have explored the diverse ways that Somali women understand and participate in social networks, focusing particularly on the impact of the war and the impact of resettlement. Women’s accounts expressed a transformation from idyllic community life in Somalia to disillusionment with social ties in Australia. However, there
were many examples of solidarity and support: community activities, social support and celebrations, and structures such as banks and a court.

There is an overwhelming presence of contradictions and tensions as women tussle with imagination of community, the desires for the stability and familiarity of the old land, and the exigencies and possibilities of starting over in a new land. A sense of ‘community’ emerges that resonates with Bakhtin’s ideas about the ever-present contradictions in language and action. Women’s social networks in Melbourne are not fixed structures that can be equated with solidarity, but are constantly in flux. Somali women’s accounts of community engage with many dimensions of experience by reformulating questions of history and tradition, discursive formations of contemporary experience, social relations, and in the ways in which community is embodied in interactions. A sense of community further intersects with transnational flows of information, resources and communication. Social networks amongst Somali women can not simply be taken as a unified and constant body of social support. Women’s narratives and everyday lives convey the jagged processes of remembering, giving, withholding, receiving and lamenting the loss of social support. A fluid sense of community is found, at the level of both the imagined and the lived, amidst the diverse experiences of co-operation, tensions, disappointment and solidarity.
Without an opportunity to articulate their own experiences in their own terms and to identify their own priorities in terms of service provision, refugees may be the subject of institutional responses that are influenced by stereotypes and the homogenizing of refugees into a single pathologized identity.

- (Watters, 2001: 1710)

The pain in our shoulder comes
You say, from the damp; and this is also the reason
For the stain on the wall of our flat
So tell us:
Where does the damp come from?

- (Bertolt Brecht 1976: 292)

Somali women's emotional distress is entwined with migration, resettlement, and social marginality, as well as the socio-political context of war and persecution. Women's accounts of emotional distress and well-being lie partly within the language and experience of war and persecution, yet women also attribute their emotional distress to contemporary realities of family separation, loss of community cohesion, marginalisation, isolation, and the hardships of resettlement. These aspects of their emotional health can not be understood fully through a standardised discourse of persecution and associated trauma, nor by slotting their experience into diagnostic categories such as PTSD. Women's sadness, loneliness and depression are configured through personal experience, cultural representation, political and economic circumstances, and collective memory.
In this chapter, I discuss in particular how narratives of emotional suffering are constructed in terms of disordered social relationships. One of the most constant elements in over a century of sociological and anthropological inquiry has been consideration of the emotional impact of community (Amit, 2002: 17). I argue that women’s emotional well-being is indelibly caught up in their histories, ideas of community and lived experiences of interpersonal relations. In chapter 4 I discussed how community life in Somalia was characterised by close affective ties of kinship and friendship, and by expectations of support, hospitality, and sharing amongst neighbours and family. By contrast, women relate feelings of being unsupported, isolated, and lonely in Melbourne. Their accounts of emotional distress express the profoundly alienating experience of disrupted social relations. While the internal feelings and symptoms associated with clinical depression are likely to be audible to clinicians and other social service providers, it is narratives about disordered social relationships that appear as a far more potent sign of distress amongst Somali women.

This chapter pulls together the themes and domains of experience discussed in the preceding chapters 4 through 7. ‘Depression’ among Somali women in Melbourne is explored through a re-examination of women’s stories about idyllic histories, war, belonging and exile, and the cultural discourse of social relationships and loneliness. The chapter elucidates the inexorable linkage of pre- and post-migration experience, and illustrates the important impact of both upon women’s mental health. In so doing, it offers an anthropologically informed account of women’s understandings and experiences of emotional suffering.

Refugee research has tended to focus exclusively on suffering and the mental health consequences of war and trauma: little attention has been paid to factors that facilitate adjustment and resilience (Young, 2001). In response, this chapter also touches on some ways in which women have found resilience and strength to cope in the face of adversity. I tease out the moderating effects of social and personal resources on women’s emotional well-being, and explore some of the ways that women respond to episodes and experiences of depression. This includes discussion of the mental health services that are available to
and targeted at refugees, and women's use of health care services. Finally, I offer an account of women's hopes for their futures.

REFUGEES, RESEARCH AND MENTAL HEALTH

The policies of countries receiving asylum seekers, program guidelines of international agencies dealing with refugees, and much of the therapeutic literature on refugees share the premise that the problems of refugees result from the persecution, trauma, and violence that precede resettlement. The 1951 Geneva Convention (see chapter 4) supplies a language for approaching 'refugee issues', in which the key experience of the refugee is that of persecution, with the role of governmental signatories to offer protection to subjects who would otherwise have none. It comes as no surprise that much research and literature that focuses on mental health and refugees perpetuate a discourse of 'protection for the persecuted.' In this literature, the most audible discourse construes refugees as suffering from experiences of war, persecution, trauma, and flight (Watters, 2001). Accordingly, there is a vast body of literature that focuses on war-related post-traumatic stress syndrome, trauma, loss and grief, depression, and bereavement.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD),\textsuperscript{1} triggered by experiences of war, is widely applied to refugees, both in research and clinical diagnosis (Eisenbruch, 1991; Lee et al., 2001; Van Ommeran et al., 2001; Watters, 2001). PTSD was recognised as a distinct psychiatric category in 1980. According to the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (referred to as DSM-IV) (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), PTSD originates in 'an event outside the range of usual human experience that would be markedly distressing to almost everyone.' This wording is remarkable given that in the current state of the world, traumatic events are well within the range of usual human experience. PTSD is diagnosed amongst victims of war and persecution, regardless of their cultural background.

\textsuperscript{1} PTSD is also commonly referred to as post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSS).
or place of origin (Young, 1995). The DSM-IV guidebook states, 'however different people are before developing Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, there is a very characteristic human pattern of response to an extreme stressor that includes avoidance of stimuli that remind the person of the stressor, experiencing the stressor in a number of ways, and increased physiological arousal, particularly on exposure to memory-jogging triggers' (Frances et al., 1995: 258-259). Common symptoms of PTSD include persistent re-experiencing of the traumatic event (dreams, hallucinations, flashbacks), persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma (thoughts, feelings, activities, people), numbing of general responsiveness, and persistent increased arousal (irritability, startle response, sleeplessness). In order to receive a PTSD diagnosis, these symptoms must occur persistently for at least one month and cause significant distress in social, occupational, and other areas of functioning.

The expectation of post-traumatic stress disorder can be seen in three recent pieces of research taken from a vast body of literature on refugees, war, and trauma. Blair (2001) interviewed 124 Cambodian refugees in Utah about their mental health and found that 51 percent met the DSM-III-R criteria for major depression and 45 percent for a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder. Blair writes that in spite of these high rates of psychopathology, utilisation of health and mental health services was limited. Van Ommeren et al. (2001) studied the impact of torture on the distribution of psychiatric disorders among Bhutanese refugees living in camps in Nepal. Through structured diagnostic psychiatric interviews they found that tortured refugees, in comparison with non-tortured refugees, were more likely to report post-traumatic stress disorder, persistent somatoform pain disorder, dissociative disorders, and generalised anxiety disorder. Lee et al. (2001) interviewed 170 North Korean refugees in China in order to identify trauma experiences and symptoms of post-traumatic stress and depression. PTSD was suspected in 56 percent of respondents, anxiety in 90 percent, and depression in 81 percent. They

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112 The PTSD model has been more recently applied to other life-events, such as domestic violence, rape, and sexual abuse.

113 DSM-III-R is the previous edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual.
conclude that this ‘vulnerable segment of people’ have severe mental health problems and urgent psychiatric care needs. In each of these examples, refugee mental health is approached with pre-defined modes of suffering in mind, and suffering is construed as resulting from specific refugee experiences.\footnote{Other DSM-IV criteria applied to refugees include adjustment disorder, schizophrenia, depression, anxiety disorder, personality disorder, and paranoia. These diagnostic categories have been applied to refugees from Eastern Europe, Iran, East Germany, and Southeast Asia (Winter and Young, 1998).} This makes it appear that refugee mental health has specific empirical and psychiatric features that are aspects of a generic refugee experience.

In Australia, mental health problems are anticipated amongst refugee and other humanitarian entrants because of the traumatic events that precede their arrival (Jirojwong and Manderson, 2001: 168). An outline of the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Services (IHSS) program launched in 2001 states that the Early Health Assessment and Intervention component, ‘provides information, health assessment and referral as well as torture and trauma counselling to entrants as soon as possible after their arrival in Australia to ensure that any physical or psychological health problems resulting from their pre-migration experiences do not become enduring barriers to settlement’ (RRAC, 2000: 22). In this quotation, war and pre-migration experiences are presented as the primary cause of physical and psychological refugee health problems. In the light of the traumatic experiences of refugees, this approach seems appropriately humane.

There is, however, a growing body of research and writing that criticises approaches to refugee mental health that pin psychiatric diagnoses onto experience, and fail to pay attention to refugees’ own interpretations of emotional distress (Summerfield, 1999). This work draws significantly from anthropological research into the cultural constructions of emotion and depression.\footnote{Studies of ethnopyschology, or the cultural knowledge and symbolic systems surrounding emotion, has a long tradition (Geertz, 1976; Hallowell, 1955; Mauss, 1938; Rosaldo, 1980; Valentine, 1980).} In her essay ‘Depression and the translation of emotional worlds’, Lutz deconstructs the conceptualisation of emotion within Euro-American culture (Lutz, 1985). She argues that emotion is understood in popular accounts, clinical
understandings, and social scientific theories, as a psycho-physiological event that resides in the internal feelings experienced by an individual. She suggests further that Western views of depression are premised on an insistence that the normal state is one of happiness or at least positive affect. What is particularly deviant is a depressed person’s failure to engage in the ‘pursuit of happiness’ or in the love of self. Lutz writes that this seemingly natural goal is based on culturally shaped definitions of normalcy. This vision encourages a narrow understanding of emotion that essentialises it as an interior state, relegating its social effects, historical roots, and moral overtones to epiphenomena. O’Neill (1996) also draws attention to the cultural construction of depression in her book on the Flathead Indians in the US, *Disciplined Hearts*. Here, depression is far more than a psychiatric problem affecting individuals; for the Flathead Indians it is an integral part of a larger discourse on identity, loss and betrayal of culture, and the production of historical memory. The narratives of depression told by the Flathead Indians are shown to weave together historical and personal loss, and these narratives assert that depression is the natural condition of ‘real Indians’. Studies such as these underscore the cultural diversity of depression and emotion, and reveal the shortcomings of psychiatric formulations of depression that can not appreciate the impact of cultural processes on phenomenologies of self, emotion and disorder.

Accordingly, recent studies of refugee mental health have moved beyond the medicalisation of refugee persecution and suffering, and have tried to capture the diverse nature of emotional distress amongst different refugee populations. Eisenbruch, for example, writes that Southeast Asian refugees suffer from a subjective and cultural experience, which he labels cultural bereavement. He describes how they continue to live in the past, are visited by supernatural forces, suffer guilt over leaving their homeland, feel pained by fading memories of the past, but also find constant images of the past (particularly traumatic images) intruding into daily life, and feel stricken by morbid thoughts, anxieties, and anger that limits their capacity to continue everyday life (Eisenbruch, 1991). Other researchers have explored the collective and social impact of trauma. For example, Martín-Baró, a Salvadoran psychologist, explored the psycho-social context of Salvadoran conflict. He
proposed that the emotional responses of Salvadorans to state terror be examined as a form of psycho-social trauma that includes collective experiences of anxiety, terror, and denial (Martin-Baró, 1990). The impact of trauma and persecution can also manifest itself in embodied conditions rather than psychological conditions. Jenkins and Valiente (1994) present an ethnographic analysis of the bodily experience of *el calor* amongst Salvadoran women refugees in North America. *El calor* refers to an intense heat that suddenly pervades one’s whole body. Salvadoran refugees have escaped from a situation of political violence and fear, and *el calor* is a way of expressing emotions of fear and terror through the physical domain (ibid.: 164). Jenkins and Valiente argue that Salvadoran refugees have been situated in a landscape of violence, and their experience of history manifests itself in the body in the form of *el calor*.

As the authors above describe, depressive experience and trauma may be expressed and lived in ways that differ from those presented in psychiatric categories. The emotional distress of refugees is understood as a cultural idiom, in which embodied and emotional experience is expressive of wider contexts of political violence. In this way, emotional distress is conceived as a form of personal and cultural engagement with social and political realities rather than a biomedical category. Criticisms of the medicalisation of experience are not limited to the field of refugee studies. In her ethnography of political violence in India, Das (1990b) shows how the desperately poor have meaning imposed upon them by legal, medical, welfare, security, and religious institutions, whose purpose too often serves the interests of the state rather than local, let alone personal, concerns. Kleinman (1997: 319) argues that meaning-making needs to be critically evaluated as a political tool that reworks experience so that it conforms to the demands of power. Too often, refugee health is confined to the realm of the 'refugee experience' and psychiatric nosologies.

The work of researchers such as Eisenbruch (1991), Martin-Baró (1990) and Jenkins and Valiente (1994) moves beyond psychiatric and biomedical constructs to explore local and cultural understandings and experiences of trauma. However, the impact of war and
violence on refugees remains the primary focus of their accounts. Kleinman (1995) regards this focus on the impact of war on refugees as ‘yet another type of violation.’ He writes that ‘when refugees escape to countries of asylum, their memories of violation, their trauma stories, become the currency with which they enter exchanges for physical resources and achieve the new status of political refugee’ (Kleinman, 1995: 176). While persecution and violence are real events that many refugees experience, to reduce refugee lives to these core images of oppression and victimisation is to rewrite social experience. The refugee is first of all a victim, ‘a quintessential image of innocence and passivity who can not represent himself or herself’, and then becomes a patient with post-traumatic stress disorder or war-related depressive episodes (Kleinman, 1995: 176). This is precisely what happens with Somali women (and other) refugees in Australia, through official mechanisms and policies, state procedures, and popular imagery.

When the health of refugees is reduced to the level of war and trauma, refugees lose their voices to the categories and interests of medical practitioners, aid agencies, service providers, and researchers. Medical categories do not speak of histories and the workings of international politics. Further, a discursive focus on war and trauma obscures people’s backgrounds, journeys and experiences of displacement. Thus, refugees (as with other ‘patients’) have meanings imposed upon them that transform local idioms and social experience into professional languages of ‘complaint and restitution’ (Kleinman et al., 1997). The focus on persecution and the trauma and horror of war disguises the domestic hardships that many people face following resettlement. While there is a significant body of literature exploring resettlement issues, studies of refugee mental health tend not to explore the circumstances of ‘host’ countries, post-migration experiences, and their impact on mental health (Watters, 2001). A few researchers suggest, however, that studies into refugee mental health should most certainly include exploration of resettlement issues. Allotey (1992) writes that the process of resettlement can be stressful because of new environments, loss of extended family and supportive community, differences in culture and language, and
lowering of social status: these take their toll on people’s health.\textsuperscript{116} As both Farias (1991) and Watters (2001) stress, when asked what would most help their situation, most refugees talk of social and economic needs rather than psychological help.

FARTUN’S STORY

Somali women’s sadness and depression are entwined with historical memory of belonging and idyllic social interaction, and experiences of war, displacement, and resettlement. Their emotional distress can not be understood through individual psychopathology alone. Women’s accounts of sadness and depression are shown to have a historically informed valence with important social and moral meanings. The ‘texture’ of their suffering is perhaps best felt in the gritty details of biography (Farmer, 1997: 263). I introduce this chapter with Fartun’s account of her life in Melbourne. Malyun and I went to Fartun’s house late one wintry afternoon. She lives with her three children and partner in a shabby Office of Housing property in one of Melbourne’s northern suburbs. Fartun opened the door and showed us into the sitting room. Fading afternoon light seeped dimly through the curtains that were pulled closed across the windows. The gas heater was turned on, but a chill remained in the air. Fartun’s eldest daughter brought in a Thermos-flask and we sat in the living-room and drank tea.

When we first began talking, Fartun was contained and softly-spoken, but as the conversation turned to life in Somalia, her face and hands became animated and she laughed about how ‘life was good then’. Like many women, Fartun remembers Somalia as a place where her family was always around her, the neighbours were supportive and community-minded, and the food and weather were beautiful. In 1992, soon after the beginning of the civil war, she left Somalia. For seven years, Fartun lived in Kenya then Ethiopia before being accepted to Australia through the Refugee and Humanitarian program. She arrived in

\textsuperscript{116} See also Markovic (1999) for discussion of the emotional impact of resettlement in Australia on women from the Former Yugoslav republics.
Australia in 1999 with her three children, but without her husband who ‘went missing’ during the war.

A few hours into our conversation, I asked Fartun how she had felt since arriving in Australia. She talked of homesickness, loneliness because her extended family is not with her, sadness that she lost her sister during the war, the lack of social support in Australia, the strains of English language and financial difficulties, and anxiety – as well as some hopes – about the future:

My sister who is 25 is missing in the war. No-one knows where she is. I last saw her eight years ago. I don't know whether she is alive or not. We separated during the war. She went to the Yemen Embassy with my aunts, but I refused. I said I was going to stay in Somalia because it was my home. From then, no-one knows where she is. I have searched but I can’t find her. When I am alone I talk to myself. Sometimes in the daytime I dream, and when I sleep I have nightmares that she has been hit by a gun, and died when she was pregnant. Sometimes, they are very real, those dreams are very real, and I can see them. It happens when I am alone. Everyone else, we know where they are, but my sister is missing. She is in my thoughts all the time. I am worried about her. I go back to Allah, and I give thanks that the rest have been saved, and I pray and I ask ‘is she is alive?’ and pray to one day meet with her.

What has your life been like in Australia?

When I first came here life was pretty difficult and I couldn't cope. One of the difficulties is not having any family or relatives or friends. Outside of my own family in this house, no-one is here. I have no support other than family day-care to look after my kids. I have no family of my own. It is much harder here. In Somalia, you have got neighbours and relatives. The people used to treat each other like brothers and sisters even if they weren't related. But here, everybody is in the same situation. People occasionally visit each other, but everyone has got their own problems, and everyone is struggling on their own. It is very hard for people to offer
assistance. Those things make it very difficult to cope in a country where all the situations are new.

The language is another one of the main barriers. I didn’t want to go out, I was just worried that even if I went out I wouldn’t be able to understand. It is all difficult, trying to cope with this country. The worst time for me here was when I had the last child, my son. I had a caesarean. I felt lonely. With my previous children, when I had them in Somalia, I had my family around and I felt supported. They looked after me for forty days while I recovered from the birth of my child. In Somalia, when a woman has a baby, even if she didn’t have any difficulties with the pregnancy or labour, she would have forty days off from everything. The family comes over and takes over everything, and the elderly women who have experience will come and help you to mind the child. All you have to do is eat and sleep as much as you can and look after yourself. That is all you have to do. They will cook for you, they will clean for you, they will look after the baby for you, they will give you extra food, you will have a different menu from the rest of the house. And at the end of the forty days, you will be a brand new person, and most of the women, they have different skin because they have so much sleep, and their skin glows. And at the end of the forty days, all the women gather and they have a party.

This time, it was even worse than usual. I had a caesarean and I had to look after the other children. Fifteen days after I had the baby, I started to wash the floors with my bare hands. I had to get the food, look after the kids. I had to do everything. When you are pregnant, doing all that, with the other kids depending on you, it is a bit difficult. That is when I felt the most lonely. There is no forty days help here. You go crazy here. There is no party. In Somalia, during the forty days, all the women come and bring clothing, food, baby clothes, perfumes, gifts after gifts, and the house gets full. All you have to do is sleep, talk to people that visit you, you don’t do anything...

I wish we had a peaceful Somalia. I would love to live there. I heard there might be a government there, but I don’t know if that will happen. We are praying
for it. In Somalia, there was nothing to worry about. We had plenty to eat. All you can think of is what you are going to do with your life, and how you can develop, and what you are going to do. But you wouldn’t worry about it at all. Here, you worry about whether your kids will be good Muslims, whether they will learn the culture and religion, where you are going to live, when you are going to settle, how will you take the kids back to teach them to learn about their roots. Things like that you worry about here.

- *How do you imagine your future?*

God willing, I would like to teach my kids my culture and my religion. They can’t speak Somali. It would be good if I could take them back so they could learn the culture and speak Somali. Our country is beautiful. I wish we were living there. Also, I would like my kids to be good at education, I would like to study myself. I want to develop a better life. If they can bring my parents, if I can find my sister, then life here would be a lot better for me.

Fartun’s account illustrates the diverse domains of experience that crystallise into the sharp surfaces of individual suffering. Her story echoes many of the themes and issues raised in previous chapters. Fartun speaks of war, the memory and the unavailability of idyllic life in Somalia, family separation, the losses of being displaced from her homeland, the absence of life-affirming social rituals in Australia, and the difficulties of daily life which undermine the possibility of situated and embodied well-being. Fartun has now been in Australia for three years, and she explains that she is learning to cope and to accept everyday life, even though she still feels sad and lonely. She maintains hope for her and her children’s future. Fartun’s account of sadness and depression is emblematic of wider experiences of Somali women. It brings into relief some forces and domains of experience that constrain not only her capacity for emotional well-being, but those of many of the women with whom I spoke.
SPEAKING ABOUT DEPRESSION

Before proceeding, I provide an overview of the terminology and semantic networks that women use when speaking about ‘depression’. Shweder cautions that ‘the process of understanding the consciousness of others can deceptively appear to be far easier than it really is’ (Shweder, 1993: 428). Euro-American terms are frequently used as approximations for the emotion terms of other cultures (O’Neill, 1996: 184). However, in *Culture and Depression* (Kleinman and Good, 1985a), alternative idioms for depressive-like experience and culture-specific concepts of depressive disorder are investigated. In their introduction, Kleinman and Good argue that there are ‘cultural variants in depressive mood, symptoms, and illness’ (Kleinman and Good, 1985b: 3), and they call for anthropologically informed research into emotion and depression.

Some researchers have begun attending to the ways in which language can provide insights into the networks of meaning around emotional experience (Obeyeskere, 1990). For example, the expression of emotional states amongst exiled writers is often most eloquent through use of metaphors, many of which place the individual as torn between home country and countries of resettlement, unable to find solace in a stable position (DeSantis, 2001). For Naficy, an Iranian exile living in Los Angeles, emotional distress finds expression through the metaphor of time. Naficy describes a recurring dream in which he is lost and disoriented, asks faceless men the time, and each gives a different answer. Naficy’s explanation for this dream is that in exile, the synchronicity of life dissolves, and time becomes fragmented. Naficy is forced to live in between time with both old and new worlds (Naficy, 1993). In Naficy’s writing, the expression of emotion and depression is situated within networks of cultural meaning.

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117 The work of Paul Ekman and colleagues (Ekman et al., 1969; Ekman et al., 1972) posits, for example, that there are certain basic or primary emotions, such as anger, sadness, and happiness that can be universally found within all cultures.

118 White (1992) argues that narratives of identity in Solomon Island society encompass reciprocal associations between emotion, history, and identity. And in her analysis of Bedouin sentiments, Lila Abu-Lughod grounds
Depression amongst Somali women must be understood in terms other than as a cultural variant on Euro-American depression. Women described three main stages of emotional distress: murugo, islahadal, and walasho. Murugo loosely translates as sad. The term murugodaada - or a state of being sad - is used as an equivalent to the English term 'depression'. Islahadal literally translates as 'talking to oneself'. Walasho refers to craziness, and women regard walasho as the most acute stage of emotional distress:

You feel murugodaada (depressed) if you are lonely, distressed or anxious. You get murugo (sad) when you don’t have anything to do, and you start thinking about something and you stress. It is confusion, it comes when you have a lot of problems and you can’t solve them and you are sad. That is murugo (sadness). Islahadal is when a person starts to talk to themselves. You can’t do anything, you lose weight, you lose your appetite, and you start to talk to yourself. It is the start of mental illness, but you haven’t gone crazy yet. It can be lonely. And walasho comes after being lonely, after being in a bad situation that you can’t get out of. If the person doesn’t get treated and solve their worries then it can become mental illness. (Ayan)

Women’s accounts of emotional distress encompass moral discourses involving their histories, war and flight, belonging and displacement, and home and exile. Within their narratives, islahadal is the term most frequently used to express emotional suffering. Islahadal encompasses physiological and emotional sensations of talking to yourself, sleeplessness, loss of appetite, loss of motivation, anxiety, social isolation, and tearfulness. It can occur across a broad spectrum of distress, from everyday concerns to devastating events that take a person to the verge of craziness. These are also symptoms in Western

the meaning of emotion in men and women’s poetic productions in public and private spaces (Abu-Lughod, 1986).

119 Due to the realities of working with an interpreter during interviews, my ability to explore semantic networks around emotional terms is limited. However, this discussion offers a rough account of the terminology and cultural construction of mental health and emotional suffering.

120 For example, the ‘Talking Health’ tapes by Women’s Health West (2001) refer to depression as murugodaada.
measures of depression. However, the meanings of emotional distress are derived from cultural discourses about the self and social relationships.

The most recurrent semantic networks tie the experience of *islahadai* to loss of community and isolation from community networks. *Islahadai* is embedded within a sense of being unable or unwilling to talk with other people. Interpersonal relationships are often described as central to Somali women’s happiness, and *islahadai* seems a fitting description of sadness in a state of disrupted social worlds and exile. The image of women talking to themselves about problems and anxieties conjures a sense of isolation and distance from supportive networks. Women described how they lay awake at night talking to themselves while worrying about family that remain in Kenya and Somalia, or how they walked in the streets talking to themselves about whether their children would be approved for visas:

> I have been separated from the rest of my family. That is the problem. Some of my children are still over there, and my sisters. It is just that I am missing my kids and my family. That makes me sad. I don’t talk to other people. I talk to myself. I think about it a lot. *(Fahia)*

Somali women’s experiences of depressive affect can not be reduced to Western notions of psycho-physiology and interior conditions. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) emphasises the internal feeling states of disturbed individuals, and recovery is seen to lie within improvement to individual psychological states. Somali women’s accounts of emotional disturbance, however, are largely concerned with aspects of social interaction. Kleinman writes that ‘moral-somatic interconnections indicate ... that the flow of experience is thoroughly dialectical. In that flow, cultural representation, transpersonal relations, and embodied subjectivity interact so as to transform experience’ (Kleinman, 1997: 326). Somali women’s accounts of emotional suffering are structured around loss of community, family separation, isolation, lack of support, and this is juxtaposed with idyllic memory of community life in Somalia.
SOMALI WOMEN AND EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

Women's accounts of the devastating effect of war resonate with the vast body of literature focusing on refugee mental health in the context of war. However, in describing their emotional distress, women spoke not only of war, but also of family separation, loss of community cohesion, and the hardships of daily life in Australia. Simultaneous consideration of these various 'axes' is essential in efforts to understand suffering. I do not wish to detract from the devastating effect of war; the point is to offer an analysis of women's experiences that begin with war and lead to flight and resettlement. In what follows, I focus on the particularities of women's suffering, and explore the interplay among memory, war, social relationships, and experiences of exile (see diagram 2).

Diagram 2: Sources of depression for Somali women.

- Nostalgic memory of community life, landscape, family networks, social unity
- Social disruption, traumatic experience, disordered life-worlds, flight from homeland
- Memory of Homeland
- War
- Social erosion
- Sense of Exile
- Family separation, conflict and mistrust between Somalis, discrimination and isolation from wider community
- Being 'out-of-place', difficulties of displacement (i.e. language, finances, housing)
Taken alone, diagram 2 gives a false impression of uniformity and order in the accounts of emotional distress given by Somali women. The following discussion reveals the complexity of women’s experiences of depression. The diagram is a useful heuristic device, however, as it depicts key sources of suffering that women referred to in interviews. But it is structural violence that is the underlying cause of women’s suffering, and the structural or macro forces that create suffering and lead to depression are conspicuously absent in women’s accounts.

Farmer writes that ‘the capacity to suffer is, clearly, part of being human. But not all suffering is equal, in spite of pernicious and often self-serving identity-politics that suggest otherwise’ (Farmer, 1997: 279). The structural violence in the world causes suffering of vastly different severity. For Somali refugees, as with others, suffering is a product of structural violence: the twisted outcomes of colonial borders and practices; fighting over resources in a resource-poor country; constraints put on the movement of the ‘other’ by rich Western countries. As Kleinman writes, ‘social suffering results from what political, economic, and institutional power does to people and, reciprocally, from how these forms of power themselves influence responses to social problems’ (Kleinman et al., 1997: ix). Social suffering refers to the relationship between people’s life experience and the political and historical currents that determine their shape and direction. Refugees are primary victims of structural violence, and their suffering is aptly understood as ‘social suffering’.

While certain kinds of suffering are readily narrated and observed, structural violence all too often defeats those who would describe and interpret it. Life experiences, such as those of Fartun, must be embedded in ethnography, narrative, and local understanding in order to be representative. However, broader social and economic forces dictate much of the circumstances and suffering amongst, for example, the many millions of the world’s

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121 Kleinman and Kleinman (1991) suggest that the disorder of one of their Chinese patients exposes the personal hurt of the Cultural Revolution, representing the individual effects of a society-wide delegitimation crisis, and a loss of engagement with the dominant moral order.
refugees. These broader forces leading to social suffering often evade specific description because of their immensity; their materiality is most available through local and individual experience. Thus, women speak not of the lasting impact of colonialism, the legacies of Cold War politics, Somalia’s introduction to international markets and capitalism (see chapter 3), nor the impact of Australian immigration policy, but of their individual distress over violence between Somali clans, separation from children and parents, and displacement. In reading the following accounts of emotional distress of Somali women, it is important to bear in mind the broader underlying causes of social suffering.

‘Lives have been shattered because of the war’

In chapter 4, I explored how many women’s accounts highlighted the trauma and horror of the war, perilous flight from Somalia, and poor conditions in refugee camps. The immediacy of the war was evoked as women talked of witnessing the murder of family, people dying of starvation, dead bodies outside homes, soldiers raping women, children going missing only to be found with their throats slit, the terror of militia groups, separation from family, and treacherous journeys to countries of exile. Others mentioned the war as if it were a transitory phase between the beautiful days of pre-war Somalia and the challenges and hardship of life in Australia. Many women acknowledged the widespread emotional distress during the course of these horrific events. As Fahia said:

During the war I talked to myself [islahadal] when I experienced a lot of difficulties. For me it was seeing my neighbours and people dying, seeing the snakes, being hot, the harsh weather, not having any relatives. That is when I started to lose control.

Gildmiyo talked more broadly of the reaction of people around her:

People were seeing their relatives being killed in front of them and there was a lot of depression. If a woman got depressed the person would go into a state of hysteria, not function well, they couldn’t sleep, wouldn’t wash their hair, they wouldn’t eat,

122 In The Praxis of Suffering, Rebecca Chopp (1986) notes that similar insights are central to liberation theology. Its key texts bring into relief not merely the suffering of the wretched of the earth, but also the forces that promote suffering.
they would eat very fast and nothing would fill them up. Then it would get to the
stage where they wouldn’t get up.

While women often related memories of feeling distressed and seeing suffering amongst
others during the civil war, only two women specifically spoke of the war and flight from
violence as the cause of current personal distress. Fatuma described witnessing the torture
and murder of the men in her town. She was threatened with rape. The emotional and
physiological impact of Fatuma’s experiences is still apparent:

From that day, I have never had my period back. I was 21, and that was the last
period I ever had. My body, after you have seen all those horrible things, you can’t
control your body. Sometimes I pray to God that I won’t go mad after the things I
have seen. It is so painful when I eat. I can’t sleep. Sometimes my head sounds like
there is an ultrasound, like when you are pregnant and you have an ultrasound. It
bangs in my ears, my body hurts. There are things that remind me of the war. The
coal for barbecues, sometimes when it is burning and it sends all those sparks, it
reminds me of the gunfire.

Some anthropological understandings of experience suggest that the moral, the religious, the
social, and the political are embodied in somatic processes such as habitus, physiology, and
in symptoms of pathology (Kleinman, 1997). Fatuma’s distress is largely described through
somatic symptoms: amenorrhoea, pain when she eats, insomnia, the sounds of banging in
her head, and hurt throughout her body. Her expression of physical complaints was clearly
tied to experiences of war, establishing a clear link between political trauma and physiology.
Lutz argues that the concept of psychosomatic illness, whereby mental deviance is
transferred to and experienced in the physical domain, represents a poorly integrated attempt
to bridge the gap in Euro-American thought between mind and body, or mental illness and
physical illness. As White and Marsella (1982) point out, people across cultures talk about
the interactions between the body and mind. It is only when a sharp distinction is set up
between physical and mental that a concept such as psychosomatic illness becomes
necessary. For Fatuma, political violence is an embodied experience.
Medina talked of how her brother was killed and she witnessed extensive violence in her home-town. The emotional impact is still strong:

We had a civil war, but I stayed in the place where I was born. I was getting scared of everything, I was seeing a lot of people dying, killing. When you are in a civil war you always think that you are going to get killed. It is something really terrible. It is not good to suffer like that . . . When I came to Australia I was strained. I had no friends, no family, my family just been killed. I have only a brother left and the children of my brother. I could have been happier if my mum, my dad, everyone could be here. But I don’t feel happy. I’m trying to survive, trying to accept the real world. I don’t think that I can forget all the things that I had in my past, but I can make it. I can live with it. I can’t take my mind from that, I can’t take what happened in my country, what I saw, from my mind. I am still having those dreams. I am trying to tell myself that I am in this country, where there are nice people. But still I am thinking about my country and what has happened. I am depressed. I don’t want to talk about it now.

For Medina, the trauma of war merges with the devitalisation and the loss of social networks. Her experiences of war spread from the individual body to the social body.\(^{123}\)

Medina and Fatuma explicitly stated that experience and memory of war and trauma remain a source of distress, and they expressed this in physiological, social and emotional terms. The majority of women, however, did not speak of their own sadness, anxiety or depression as related to their experiences of war and trauma. This silence should not be taken to suggest that the war has not had an ongoing impact on women’s emotional well-being. I argued in chapter 4 that silence can both mask and shape people’s experiences. Comments made by women such as, ‘It is so bad. I can never describe what happened’, hint at ongoing war-

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\(^{123}\) Among *hibakusha* women (literally atom-bombed women) of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, physical trauma also extended to the social realm: fear about inability to bear and raise children, fear that no-one would marry them, and social discrimination (Todeschini, 2001).
related emotional distress. Further, while avoiding description of personal experience, some women suggested that the war was a source of ongoing trauma for others:

Because of the war, the young generation used to hear about how their parents were killed by one tribe or another. People used to not like each other and not trust each other. The way I see it is that the current generation has got lots of problems because they saw people being killed, they saw blood, they saw their parents being killed by other tribes. All these things have been created and the kids don’t look normal to me because they have this burden when they are growing up, and their lives have been shattered because of the war.

Samira spoke of how the war has been a cause of ongoing depression for her husband, who has a physical disability:

The war affected my husband a lot because he was handicapped. We still have to look after him. It is really difficult for a man who was used to working and was a sole provider. He has been really affected by the war. It is really difficult and depressing. Since I came to Australia I have had to become a father and a mother to the children. My husband isn’t happy here because he can’t work. He is really depressed, very depressed.

Aman also suggested that the trauma of war has left many Somalis with poor mental health:

Some people have islahadal or bad mental health because it is triggered by the trauma or loss in their lives. The majority of mental illness in people in Somalia now is because of the gunfire. They have become traumatised and they have got mental illness. Fear, trauma caused by fears. The noise of the guns and uncertainty about when you are going to die. That has sent many men crazy. And many people here have had those experiences. Because they came here, it doesn’t mean that they are well. They can still develop illness from the war.

Accounts that detail the ongoing impact of war resonate with the vast body of literature that focuses on refugee mental health in the context of war. War is traumatic and devastating, and has had a lasting impact on some women’s physiological and psychological health.
While few women articulated a direct link between their own experiences of war and personal experiences of depression, this can not be taken as illustration that women have overcome the trauma of war. In her chapter, ‘Speech and Silence: Women’s testimony in the first five weeks of public hearings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission’, Ross (2001) notes that South African women gave scant account of their own brutal treatment – physical abuse in detention, rape, beatings, torture – because they found it difficult to talk of such violations for cultural and social reasons. The Commission and the media called women ‘secondary witnesses’ because they testified mainly about the experiences of men. However, Ross argues that hidden within the stories told to the Commission of the persecution of men are women’s own stories of violation and trauma. Similarly, I suggest that underlying women’s stories of the ongoing war-related suffering of others are layers of personal sentiment. Drawing on the philosophy of Wittgenstein, Veena Das asks whether it is possible to experience another’s pain in one’s own body (Das, 1996). She comments that this question opens the possibility that pain is amenable to expression and sharing, as opposed to demarcating the individual from the world. Perhaps it is through women’s accounts of how other people still suffer from the war that personal suffering is extended from individual to shared experience.

However, other domains of distress during displacement and resettlement should not be obscured or subordinated to a focus on the suffering provoked by war. It is crucial to take account also of post-migration experiences, and attend more closely to the local complexities and constraints that pattern women’s emotional distress.

‘You can’t avoid being depressed by separation from people’

The nature of refugee displacement is such that separation from family members is commonplace. Literature on refugees identifies family separation as a key difficulty of migration, compounding bereavement and post-traumatic reaction (Rousseau et al., 2001). Extended separation from family members is seen to serve as a continuing link to an unbearable past, and refugees’ distress about the fate of family members who they have left
behind is tied to traumatic experience (Beiser, 1988; Gilad, 1990; Williams, 1995). Little attention has been paid, however, to the effects of family separation as an emotional realm outside of diagnostic categories such as PTSD.

Ample research indicates that cohesive and supportive family networks promote good mental health and resilience (Farwell, 2001; Garmezy, 1985; Howard, 1996; Mahler, 1995; Manderson et al., 1998). To be human is to be connected to people through kinship, both biologically and emotionally. In his writing on social capital, Coleman (1988) suggests that social relationships can act as a form of social insurance, provide communication and information networks, and create norms and sanctions that facilitate social action. The extensive literature focusing on social capital argues that participation and membership in family groups, social networks, or other social structures has significant benefit to people's well-being (Whittaker and Banwell, 2002). Rousseau argues that the presence of family members during resettlement can aid in the rebuilding of a meaningful universe (Rousseau et al., 2001: 17). Silveira and Allebeck's (2001) study of ageing and mental health among Somali men in east London found that support from family was one of the main sources of life satisfaction, and that having family enabled men to cope with a 'foreign country'. Similarly, Somali women with family networks in Melbourne explained that their relations provide social and emotional support during resettlement; there is the possibility of recreating a social world reminiscent of the extended family neighbourhoods in Somalia. Depression and anxiety is prevented and assuaged through the support their families provide.

However, the families of many are dispersed across international borders, with children, parents, siblings, uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, and cousins living in different countries. Family separation has a devastating emotional impact, and these women speak of it as the most immediate and pervasive source of sadness, anxiety, loneliness and depression in their lives.
Panel 11: Family separation

The thing that is most difficult for me now is not having all my children and family here. All my family, my brothers and sisters, are either back in Somalia or spread around the world. People took different routes, different journeys of migration, and went to different countries. So that brings sadness. I think a lot about my family who I left behind in Somalia. They don’t have a place to live. My sister was recently killed in Saudi Arabia, and I send money to her children. I have four children left in Somalia, but I am not sure whether they have all survived or not. The fact that they are separate from me is causing me a lot of problems. I am not sleeping, especially after speaking to them. I have lack of sleep, lack of eating, I think a lot and feel really sad. I feel hopeless. They say to me, ‘mum, what’s wrong. Why aren’t you helping us? It has been two and a half years, you don’t want to help us. We’re having problems here.’ They explain to me their situation. Their life is very hard. They say, if I can’t help them then why don’t I come back? I did an application for them and it was rejected. This application is their third. I am just hoping that something might come out of this. But it is basically making me sad. It still feels lonely and I have difficulties coping. Now I am sad. Now I am so sad. Every night when I go to bed, I cry from loneliness. I am just by myself. You can’t avoid being depressed by separation from people.

The anguish of family separation is exacerbated by the constraints of humanitarian visa allocations that make family reunion an unlikely event. In the last few years, the family reunion program has ceased, and immediate family members — that is spouse and dependent children — can now be proposed to migrate to Australia through the humanitarian program only if they were listed as family on the original applicant’s visa. This policy of bringing immediate family members under the humanitarian program reduces the number of places available for others seeking visas through the humanitarian program. As family members

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124 Composite of four women’s narratives.
125 Alternatively, family members can be sponsored for migration through the Family Migration program. However, this program requires that the ‘proposer’ give an Assurance of Support; that is a commitment to provide financial support to the personal applying to migrate so that they will not have to rely on any government forms of support. The Assurance is in force for two years, during which time the family member can not receive welfare benefits or public housing (DIMIA).
who may not be in immediate danger take visa places, the fundamental principle behind
Australia’s Humanitarian Program – the protection of those in greatest need – is undermined.
Further, many people have strong bonds to people beyond the definition of ‘immediate
family’, either because of a culturally defined relationship or because most or all of the
immediate family members have been killed in conflict. However, under the current
arrangement, it is close to impossible for a refugee to be reunited with someone who is not
an immediate blood relative or with children who are no longer classifiable as
‘dependent’.126

Panel 11 indicated that family separation causes women considerable anguish. Naima
described how Australian Migration Officers in Nairobi told her to go ahead to Australia
with her dependent daughters, and that her elder children’s applications should be
resubmitted separately and after assessment they could join her shortly in Australia. Several
years and three visa applications later, her elder children remain overseas and Naima remains
depressed and wracked by guilt. Many women have also been separated from family through
the more brutal reality of death and murder, with children, partners and other relations killed
because of clan conflict in Somalia.

Women without partners and family networks say they feel particularly susceptible to
emotional distress and isolation (see also Manderson et al., 1998: 279). They describe
themselves as disoriented, lonely, anxious about family they have left behind, anguished and
devastated over those that have been killed, and find resettlement to be isolating and
difficult. Parenting becomes a source of many tensions and anxieties. Women have no
family support to help with childcare, they worry about the safety of their children, they fear
that adolescents will obtain welfare payments and leave home, and find that it is difficult to
be a good parent without the support of a husband.127

126 The Refugee Council of Australia stresses the importance of family reunion in the settlement process and
calls for a designated family reunion program (Refugee Council of Australia, 2000).
127 This is true not only of Somali women, but for many women in Australia who are single parents and without
adequate income. Further, the majority of the poor in Australia are single mothers.
'No-one came to visit, no-one came by, that was really difficult'

Chavez (1991) suggests that imagining oneself as part of a local community is central to the development of a sense of belonging, overcoming feelings of isolation, developing a network of friends in the local community, and acquiring local cultural. Few Somali women, however, consider themselves to be part of a wider Australian community. Living in Melbourne means living in a place where your neighbours do not speak the same language, people are racist, the culture is less communal than in Somalia, and you can not relate to the wider community. Many women perceive Australia as dangerous for their children, with a high crime rate and the lure of drugs. They speak of fears that the streets are not safe, and they can’t leave their children with neighbours for child-minding because the social networks are not in place:

Here, life is entirely different here. The culture is ‘don’t knock on my door and I won’t knock on your door.’ Centrelink gives you a little benefit: you live off that, and if you can’t support yourself then tough luck because that is the way it is. Your next-door neighbour is not Somali and they won’t look out for you. If I lived near Somali neighbours and I ran out of spaghetti, they would give it to me, or if I ran out of salt or onion they would give it to me. If I didn’t feel like cooking that night, I could go to my neighbours. Now, that sense of community and exchange has been lost. Everybody gets the benefit and no-one is below the other person. Over there, sharing was really good because some families had less than others. Here, that has been lost because of the Centrelink benefits. But if we had Somali neighbours then that could continue. It is a bit sad, it got lost. (Luul)

This loss of belonging and supportive social networks creates a strong sense of isolation and sadness.

Further, women are subject to direct marginalisation and discrimination in their everyday lives in Australia:
They see us as someone who had nothing. But the reality is that where we came from, some of us were rich, some of us were normal, and some of us lived day by day. But here, to the Australian people’s eyes, people think that we were nothing, that we were refugees. That we never owned anything, that we were uneducated. That is how they see us. But that is not the truth. (Aman)

As Paul Farmer (1997) notes, any distinguishing characteristic, whether social or biological, can serve as pretext for discrimination and thus as a cause of suffering. The idea of race, which is considered to be a biologically insignificant term, has enormous social currency. Racial classifications have been used to deprive people of basic rights, and have been a source of considerable suffering. Similarly, in Australia’s current political climate refugees and asylum seekers are viewed as threatening and untrustworthy, and thus when the refugee label is attached to people it serves to remove their individuality and humanity. Somali women articulate that being seen as ‘black’ and as ‘refugees’ can be a source of humiliation and distress.

It is not only relationships with the wider Australian community, however, that are difficult to build and maintain. In chapter 7 I described how women feel that community cohesion amongst Somalis has broken down through the conditions of displacement and resettlement. Many Somali women spoke of intra-group tensions and conflicts. They recounted specific occasions when Somali people failed them, and did not provide the support they needed:

When I first arrived, it was winter and it was so cold. We didn’t have a place to live. We didn’t have winter clothing. In Somalia, people used to come and visit all the time, in and out. When we arrived here it was as if we were locked in the house. No-one came to visit, no-one came by, that was really difficult. We couldn’t get used to it, how the life changed. The kids left the house to go to school then they came back. It was only me and the kids and we felt like we were living in a tiny house. (Fadumo)

Some women blame the war for undermining social relations, as families were torn apart and trust was lost between clans. More frequently, eroded community networks are
attributed to the circumstances of displacement and resettling in a new country. Everyone is dependent on welfare payments, people have too few resources to maintain an ethic of sharing and reciprocity, homes are spread across suburbs and their location restricts the opportunity to socialise, women feel trapped in their homes and are lonely, inter-generational conflict has emerged, and gossip is generated by the insularity of a small community.

‘I feel lonely, I’m not confident, there are a lot of difficulties here’

Women’s emotional well-being is entwined with the process of negotiating dislocation and resettlement. Immigration can be a stressful experience, as people have to live in new social, political, linguistic, economic and other realities (Liebkind and Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2000; Rotenberg et al., 2000). Rotenberg et al. (2000) report that Russian-speaking immigrants in Israel experience obsessiveness, hostility, interpersonal sensitivity, depression, anxiety, and paranoid ideation. They argue that the level of distress in the majority of new immigrants is still high, even after five years of immigration. This was particularly the case amongst Russian-speaking women who were unable to find a job and for people who did not have a sense of being integrated into their host country. Other studies of migrant populations have also explored the negative impact of discrimination, insufficient proficiency in the host country’s dominant language, breakdown of family relations, and confronting the competing norms of the host society (Berry, 1997; Gil et al., 1994; Liebkind and Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2000; Mirsky, 1997; Ying, 1996).

Sadness and hardship is spoken of as intrinsic to everyday life in Melbourne due to the conditions of displacement. Women underscored the extent and diversity of post-migration stressors, including lack of proficiency in English language, racism, financial problems, difficulties with parenting, housing, cultural isolation, bad weather, and coming to terms with new bureaucracies and systems. Women recount suffering in Somalia as foreshadowed by a belief that one’s situation could improve, whereas in Australia the certainty of a brighter future is less assured. Women’s accounts of everyday life in Australia suggest that
they do not feel at home in Melbourne: they point to a strong sense of living in exile and are the cause of anxiety, sadness, and distress.

Panel 12: Everyday hardships in Australia\(^{128}\)

When I was in Somalia, I never had depression, I never felt sad. It was my home, and I knew everything. When I came here, I had depression and sadness. For a whole year, all I could think of was how I could go back. I was so lonely. We found a home and then I started asking people to save some money for us so we could go back. The others said, ‘take it easy, it is just because you are new that you aren’t coping.’ The money that the government gives us was there in the bank for one and a half months because I didn’t know how to get it out. I didn’t know how to use the machines. I didn’t know whether I was paid weekly or fortnightly or monthly. I didn’t know anything – things like the hospital, the schooling system, the education, system, the streets. Simple things like going to the shops. All that is so complicated and so different and makes me really sad. And with the lack of English also I get so sad here. We coped. But still I feel lonely, I’m not confident. There a lot of difficulties, but things are starting to open up. I am starting to understand about the school and education and systems.

MANAGING DEPRESSION

Mental health has traditionally been seen by Somali people as a binary concept – a person is either well or unwell. People are reluctant to define themselves as mentally unwell, and Somali women in Australia do not seek help for depression or poor mental health until their needs are extreme (Buechler and Talaricio, 1999: 11). Women recount that it was rare for anyone to experience *murugo* or *islahadal* in Somalia except when in exceptionally difficult circumstances, such as death or loss of family members, or being forced to marry. In these instances, community and religious leaders and family played an important role in assisting

\(^{128}\) Composite of three women’s narratives.
and supporting people. Women described that following arrival in Australia, depression has become the most pressing problem in their everyday lives.

**Mental health services for refugees in Australia**

Since 1994, the Department of Health and Aged Care Services has funded the Program of Assistance for the Survivors of Torture and Trauma (PASTT). The objective of PASTT is to promote the physical health and psychosocial recovery of people who have experienced torture and trauma in their countries of origin or while fleeing those countries prior to their arrival in Australia. The services provided by PASTT include counselling, referral, advocacy, education and training and natural therapies. There are eight PASTT services: one in each Australian state and territory. In Victoria, PASTT is operated by the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (VFST).

The VFST is now the central service provider in Victoria for the Early Health Assessment and Intervention component of the government’s Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Service program (IHSS). The IHSS was established in 1997-98 to provide a national framework for settlement services for humanitarian entrants. DIMIA states that:

> Under its annual offshore Humanitarian Program, Australia welcomes thousands of humanitarian entrants, including refugees, who have faced serious violations of their human rights. Many are severely traumatised as a result of their experiences, including persecution and torture, which has caused them to leave their home countries. The Government recognises that rebuilding the lives of these people involves far more than securing permanent residence in Australia. They must be provided with extra support to enable them to become acquainted with the Australian environment and the services available so that they can fully participate in the Australian community (DIMIA, 2001).

The Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy comprises seven service types: Initial Information and Orientation Assistance (IIOA), Accommodation Support, Early Health Assessment and Intervention, Community Support for Refugees (CSR), Proposers' Support,
and Service Support. In their discussion of the invisibility of everyday social suffering, Kleinman, Das and Lock (1997) speak about the fragmenting effect of the bureaucracy of aid:

Because of the manner in which knowledge and institutions are organized in the contemporary world as pragmatically-oriented programs of welfare, health, social development, social justice, security and so on, the phenomenon of suffering as an experiential domain of everyday social life has been splintered into measurable attributes. These attributes are then managed by bureaucratic institutions and expert cultures that reify the fragmentation while casting a veil of misrecognition over the domain as a whole (Kleinman et al., 1997: xix).

The division within the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Scheme (IHSS) of the refugee resettlement process into seven service areas resonates with the quote above, warning of the dangers of splintering social life into different attributes. Health and mental health are set up as a contained component of resettlement, and health problems are attributed to pre-migration experience.

VFST runs a program called The Health Access Pathways for New Arrivals. This program is targeted to those who have recently arrived in Australia from situations of political and civil conflict. A VFST publication states that many people from a refugee background ‘are in poor physical and mental health, the result of deprivation and trauma experienced in their countries-of-origin and asylum’ (VFST, 2002). The service aims to provide intensive support and care in the early settlement period in order that problems with refugees’ health are identified and treated before they become enduring barriers to settlement. While VFST regards other resources, such as social support networks and assistance with employment, housing and education, as essential for resettlement and long term physical and mental health, their primary role is to contribute to ‘recovery from some of the psychological consequences of the refugee experience’ (VFST, 2002).
In addition to VFST, migrants and refugees in Australia are able to access services provided by general practitioners, hospitals, community health centres and counsellors for help with mental health issues. There are also numerous services, such as Migrant Resource Centres and Adult Migrant Education Programs, which are funded through the Government’s IHSS scheme to offer assistance with resettlement. These services have only a limited ability to respond to the psychosocial issues that accompany resettlement. They can provide infrastructural assistance and material aid, yet they have no direct responsibility to assist with the emotional impacts of resettlement.

**Coping with depression**

- *What do you think are the best ways to cope if someone is depressed?*

  The best thing for me is that when I got really sad I would get out of the house and go to the next-door neighbour and talk. It is good to talk. Everyone needs someone then can talk to, they can help you forget about what you are worried about and what you are sad about. And other times, I would pray and try to forget my worries and turn to Allah and accept my life and what was happening. Whatever happens, it is from Allah anyway. When that Somali girl moved into emergency housing nearby, that was the end of my worries. We used to stay in the one house. All of our families stayed in one house. She used to cook and she used to say ‘forget about this’ and ‘forget about that.’ She tried to get me to forget about the sadness that I have gone through. If it wasn’t for that girl, I wouldn’t have made it. She was the person who helped me.

- *What do you think of counselling, or doctors? Do you think they could help someone who was sad?*

  They wouldn’t help me. You know why? They wouldn’t have stayed with me 24 hours, they wouldn’t have helped me cook. A woman from Foundation House used to come.\(^{129}\) She used to help me, and that was really good. But that could never fill the role of a Somali friend. They used to make an appointment, and they thought that

\(^{129}\) Foundation House is an alternative name for Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (VFST).
I was fit in the head, and then the next time that they came I wouldn’t even remember what we had talked about. I was in a mess, and they thought I was OK. They wouldn’t understand me. They kept making appointments, I kept missing them. I was really a crazy person. They used to take us to the doctors and all that.

- *What did the doctors do?*

They took me to the doctors, but they couldn’t help. That didn’t help me. You need someone who knows how things work, someone who can tell you which way to go with things. My depression was related to not knowing things. You need someone to explain things. A doctor won’t help you, they won’t understand you, they won’t be there for you. You need someone who knows what you mean, like a family person to show you around. *(Fadumo)*

Some women have utilised biomedical services in response to experiences of emotional distress:

I went to the doctor and they gave me something to calm me down: anti-depressants and also sleeping tablets. It did affect my daily life. I used to wake up in the morning, and I lay in bed and felt like my head was falling apart. It felt like something was dragging my hair out, like they were cutting the whole back of my head out. When I woke up, I didn’t want to do the house chores. I couldn’t do the right things for the kids. And as it went on for a long time, I started to deteriorate, I started to feel dizzy and my health got worse. When I described all that to the doctors, they said that it has something to do with me thinking a lot or being depressed a lot. When the medications were prescribed I feel a lot better and performed a lot better. *(Hakimo)*

During the course of the research, I heard startling estimates that up to 80 percent of Somali women have been prescribed and have taken anti-depressants since resettlement in Melbourne. Some women said they had found that anti-depressants helped them cope with everyday life, yet few women felt that doctors could adequately understand or treat their
emotional distress. In a conversation with Fatuma I asked, 'how has your health been since you got to Australia?' and she replied:

My health is not good, I have a lot of headaches, lack of sleep, my neck hurts, my health is not very good, I am worried. I don't have family around me, the kids are still little and need lots of support, there are language difficulties. If I go to the doctors I can't even explain about my sickness. All these things happen, but I am still thanking Allah.

- Does going to the doctor help with your health?
Sometimes it helps, but the medication they give me doesn't really help because I keep taking it and I am getting used to it. Anti-depressants, the doctors were worried that I might get addicted so they stopped giving them to me. They didn't help me.

- Does religion help you to cope during difficult times?
I don't believe that the medication would fix it. My religion is one of the things that keeps me going. I feel pain. The sicknesses are one of the things that Allah has brought to me, and no-one else can help me with it. It is only Allah's choice to take it away. I feel that the medication replaces the religion, but the religion keeps me going. I read verses of the Qur'an and put the book over my body and that keeps me going.

Despite the apparently high rates of medication, women felt that conversation and talking with a friend was a better way to resolve sadness and depression:

Talking is good, when a person is sad it is good to talk to somebody. But then again it is good to talk to someone from your own background. Friends talk to each other. Usually, I could come to my friends and say 'look, these are the problems I am having.' And if somebody could help they would, but if they couldn't they would tell you. Overall people help each other. (Samira)

Given the perceived disintegration of social networks and trusting relationships, some women are not predisposed to sharing their problems with other Somalis. As Roweda said, 'in Somalia there was a community of women that came together. A community. We had
that in Somalia. We supported each other. Here, nobody helps each other.’ The disintegration of support networks following displacement has eroded customs for dealing with personal trauma:

It is not a matter of just finding a person to talk to in Australia, it is important that the person that you tell can keep it to themselves. I think the majority of people don’t really talk to people because they worry that if they do and later have an argument with that person, then the person might tell your intimate details and secret issues that you have talked with them about. So people can’t trust in confidentiality, it can be breached. In Somalia you can tell relatives, but here you can’t talk to anyone. 

(*Gilmiyo*)

Despite the view that talking can help people to resolve emotional distress, formal counselling is widely regarded as an inappropriate and ineffective way to manage emotional distress. Women explained that they didn’t have counsellors in Somalia, and would not be comfortable using them in Australia as they didn’t think they could really help resolve their problems. Deeqo said that while it is acceptable to try and resolve specific problems and concerns by talking with friends or family, few people would feel comfortable articulating a generalised sense of depression or sadness, particularly to a counsellor:

Back in Somalia we didn’t express ourselves about things like depression. We didn’t speak about that. If we got sad we dealt with it ourselves. You don’t talk about that stuff to someone else, you just keep it to yourself.

Women also have concerns about confidentiality, particularly if a Somali interpreter is necessary:

If Somali people were to go to a counsellor, and they told the counsellor something about their life and all their problems, then Somali people think that this person would tell another person. And then all the people know what you do, what happened to you. And how do counsellors speak Somali? You need an interpreter, and then the interpreter knows your problems. If the counsellor speaks Somali then
maybe that would be OK. But otherwise you need an interpreter and nobody wants
that. (*Amina*)

Women are aware of the availability of services, such as counsellors, general practitioners
and community health centres, yet their accounts indicate a view that these services are
ineffective as they are unable to resolve the basis of their problems. The majority of women
emphatically stated that it is Islam that sustains them during times of emotional distress and
through processes of resettlement. As Amina explained:

Since coming here, life has been very different. In the refugee camps there was
uncertainty and fear. But now, all these things are not present. But there are other
things that make life hard. There are many things that I miss. I have family, but there
is no support and you can’t bring those that aren’t here in to this country. It is hard to
manage with childcare because I don’t have the help of family. The housing is tiny,
and the kids drive me crazy. I have language problems. In Somalia if I couldn’t find
my way, my mother, my neighbours would have helped me, but here there is no
help. Emotionally, sometimes I feel very happy because I am here. But sometimes I
feel very sad because I don’t have any support or family members around me. When
I am sad, I pray to soothe my mind. I feel sad because of the war, I worried about
people killing each other, death, losing your life. Sometimes now I talk to myself. I
do talk to myself when I look at the children and there is no partner. I have so many
worries, that they don’t have a father, and there is no-one I can tell all this to except
for Allah.

The question of suffering is a central problem for the world’s major religions, although it is
handled in different ways (Bowker, 1970). As Clifford Geertz wrote, ‘as a religious
problem, the problem of suffering is, paradoxically, not how to avoid suffering, but how to
suffer’ (Geertz, 1973b: 103). Many women said explicitly that the rupturing impact of war
and displacement has led them to place increased importance on their religious faith. As
Fadumo said, ‘we always worship Allah and we always pray. And when you are here it is
really important to stick to that because Allah is your only saviour. So you hold on to that.’ During times of emotional distress, Islam is brought to the forefront of women’s lives. Prayer, talking to Allah, modes and moral guidelines for social relations, in words uttered, and in a way of making sense of one’s life-world: these are some of the ways in which Islam provides explanation, meaning, solace, emotional support, and acceptance of life situations. As Idil explained:

When you lose your appetite and you can’t sleep and you start to talk to yourself and you have got problems way over your head, what I do is sit down, pray, focus, look at Allah and realise and recognise that this is Allah’s will. If we are separated from our family, it is meant to be and it is Allah’s will. If you have lost family or you have a problem, then you look at it that it was something that was meant to happen to you and it is Allah’s will. And then when you recognise that it is Allah’s will, you calm down and pray and take time out and really realise that there is nothing that you can do for the situation, and worry can only make the situation worse, then you can leave it to Allah. Sometimes, people get relief when they go back to the sources of their belief system. It can give you temporary healing for about a week. Things might come back to your head later on, but that is the only way to survive.

The importance of Islam for coping with adversity and suffering was frequently iterated. One afternoon, we went to Saynab’s house and spent a few hours together. Her children were sleeping and her husband working, and we sat in the lounge room drinking tea and talking. Other Somali women regard Saynab as an example of piety and Islamic commitment. Her brown veils tightly pinned around her face, she spoke of how only Allah could see what is necessary for each person. She explained that Allah allowed some people to have their family around them in Australia and then watch to see if they were grateful, whereas other people’s family were left in Somalia or killed in the war and Allah watched to see if they were patient and accepting. Saynab explained that she fell into the second situation and that while she is lonely and misses her family, she knows that it is important not to question Allah’s will. She said:

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Allah is watching me to see whether I go out there and pull my hair and say to Allah ‘why not, why not?’ I am not going to say ‘why not.’ It is the way that has been chosen for me. I talk to Allah, and I look around and see that Allah has given other people their families but Allah hasn’t given them to me. So I look at what Allah has already given me, and I’m really grateful for what I’ve got now rather than what hasn’t been given to me yet. It would be really un-Islamic for me to cry out for things that I haven’t got rather than thanking Allah for the things I have got. So, that is the reality of my situation.

After this, she rolled a rug out on the floor and prayed for several minutes before returning to continue the conversation.

Fartun, introduced earlier in this chapter, also explained that when she feels sad or worried, she prays to Allah:

Sometimes I sit and worry, I sit by myself and I think, ‘What can I do? I’m here by myself, the kids are here, and I can’t find my husband and sister, and the people in Africa say that my family is in danger.’ Then I get worked up because I am worried and I start to feel ill. Then one of the things that I do is I start to wash myself and then pray, and then I read verses of the Qur’an and that calms me down, and then I end up sleeping. And then at the same time as praying I say, ‘I’m only a human being, I can’t fix these things. Allah, you’re the only one who can help this.’ So that takes the pressure off. I leave it to a higher being and then I can go to bed and sleep.

Similarly, Waris explained that only Allah and religious practice offers solace:

I’m a Muslim and I believe in prayer. I believe everything happens because it is meant to be. That is how I manage if I am sad. I pray. I go back to Allah. I pray to Allah. I try to forget about these things, these memories that are distracting me. I go back to Allah, and I give thanks that the rest [of my family] have been saved, and I pray and I ask if she [sister] is alive and pray to one day meet with her.
For women such as Saynab, Fartun and Waris, their faith in Islam and the routine of prayer provides solace, a framework for understanding their situation, allowing them to relinquish responsibility for circumstances. They voiced an understanding that all events and their own situations are the will of Allah, and that they must accept their situation with patience. Their faith not only provided a causal framework that helps make sense of their lives, but routine practices that assist and calm them when they experience emotional distress. In other words, Islam offers ideologies and practices that enable women to find resilience in the face of adversity.

Das and Kleinman (2001) warn that the realities of local worlds are too multi-sided and changing to be adequately categorised as healthy or broken-down, healing or pathological. They write, ‘we suspect that it is because the task of reformulating everyday life in the face of the radical doubts about its possibilities is fraught with unimagined dangers that we find survivors inhabiting all these contradictory positions’ (Das and Kleinman, 2001: 25). While women frequently speak of the erosion of community and a profound sense of exile, there is a contradictory capacity to draw about personal and social resources in order to cope with the conditions of displacement and resettlement.

In addition to Islam, other forms of resilience and strength have been illustrated in previous chapters: the formation of new social networks, utilising welfare and community services to best advantage, maintaining links and communication to family and friends in Somalia and other countries, continuing traditions of food and hospitality, and adapting to new spaces and situations. However, it is perhaps in women’s hopes for the future that their resilience is most audible. Some stated their dream to return to Somalia when peace is achieved, many imagined reunion with lost or separated family members, and others talked of establishing a home in Australia and making a better life for themselves here.

During the course of the research, there were many occasions when I sat with groups of women as they played ‘home-videos’ sent from Somalia, looking for glimpses of familiar
yet altered spaces, and searching for signs of safety and danger. Women also sought news of Somalia through telephone conversations with friends and family, listening to world radio services, media releases about political occurrences in Somalia, and the stories and accounts of people returned from visiting. This keen interest in Somalia served not only as a link to the homeland, but offered a means of monitoring the situation in Somalia to know when it might be safe to return.

Panel 13: Return to Somalia

This country is my second home. But I would like my first country to be better. The war is still on in my first home and I worry, I worry what has happened to my home, my family, my country. They have guns. I don’t like guns. Still there is war. I heard on the radio – the Somali radio – that there is still a lot of fighting. I heard there might be a government, but I don’t know if that will happen. I am praying for it. I would like Somalia to be better. I hope to go back to Somalia one day, me and my children. See my mum, my sisters. That is my hope. I would like to teach my kids my culture and my religion. They can’t speak Somali. It would be good if I could take them back so they could learn the culture and speak Somali. Our country is beautiful. Everyone would want to live in their own country. I wish we were living there, God willing. Life is not stable there, but I’d love to live there again, to live in my home. I don’t hate here but if I had the choice I would return. I suppose I have two countries. Somalia is my mother and this is my other home. But the fighting . . . I hope things are going to get better and when it does I am going to jump on the first boat.

Desired return to Somalia was more common amongst elderly women than younger women. Elderly women have not built the same connections to Australia, find it difficult to adapt to new situations, and frequently speak of a sense of isolation and homesickness:

I hope to go back home because I like the weather and the way things are over there. That doesn’t mean that I don’t like the way things are here, but I wish that I could return one day to Somalia. If there were no guns, I would wish that in the future I

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130 Composite of six women’s narratives.
could go to my home. This doesn’t mean that I don’t like Australia. I am old and I want to go back. Not only me, but all the elderly people that I know in the community. Elderly people can never get used to living in Australia. (Aman)

But how real are women’s dreams of return to Somalia? In 1941, Thomas Mann wrote in a letter to Herman Hesse, ‘I fear – if fear is the right word – that this process is going to go on and on, and that when the waters recede Europe will have changed beyond recognition, so that one will hardly be able to speak of going home, even if it is physically possible’ (Mann, 1995). Sixty years later, the question of return amongst Somali exiles raises the same fears that their homes and homeland have changed beyond recognition. In one social gathering, a man talked about returning to Somalia in 1998 to find his family. He said, ‘I didn’t recognise my town, the people in it, my house was gone, everything was changed.’ Other men and women in the room shook their heads, their homes no longer an anchoring reality but a nostalgic memory for a place that is indelibly altered through violence and social change.\textsuperscript{131} With the continuing violence in Somalia, the Somali nation remains unavailable, making coping even more difficult and nostalgic memory more obdurate.

Other women’s hopes for the future centred upon improving their situation in Melbourne. Women who are separated from family dreamt of being with them again; eating together, talking together, and seeing and supporting each other. In anticipating a future in which they are reunited with family, women imagined a future without sadness or loneliness.

\textbf{Panel 14: Hopes of reuniting with family}\textsuperscript{132}

When I remember about where I am, when I remember the cruelty of the embassy and the way that they handle the visas, I worry and I get sick. I worry that my family won’t come over. I had a daughter that I adopted and looked after since she was nine years old. I think we made a mistake by not adding her to the visa application, so that creates a lot of

\textsuperscript{131} DeSantis (2001) discusses ‘lost homes’ as having a strong thematic presence in the literature of exiled writers, including Thomas Mann, Herman Hesse, and Isaac Bashevis Singer.

\textsuperscript{132} Composite of seven women’s narratives.
problems. I would like to bring her here as my daughter, because she was my daughter. But they are not accepting it. They rejected her application three times. Also I want to help my dead brother’s children but I can’t. So that makes me sad. In the future, I would love to bring all my family here and be reunited. We’d all live together. All of us, here. If only I could just see them, just see the faces of my children. When I am cooking, and I put too much food in the pot, I imagine, ‘will it be possible for my kids to come and eat with me?’ I would feed them rice, chicken, meat, all sorts of sauces, and milk, until they vomit. If my family were here, I would be really happy.

Other women’s musings about the future focused on a better life in Australia. This was particularly the case amongst those women with stable economic situations, work opportunities, and family networks, as these women were more likely to have made firm decisions to remain in Australia. Their increasing security and more comfortable circumstances gave them confidence in a future rather than a past. These women often felt that Australia offered them opportunities they would not have if they returned to Somalia.\textsuperscript{133} They made sense of exile through aspiring to a good life and education for their children and by imagining social mobility that will allow them to buy a new house and good furniture. Women’s hopes for the future included concrete practicalities that would allow them to feel settled and at home: changes to the spatial reality of a new environment and development of skills and resources.

\textbf{Panel 15: Imagining life in Australia}\textsuperscript{134}

I always like to think of myself as having a good and beautiful life, and building my children’s future. I want a peaceful life, a beautiful life, with a beautiful family. That is all. God willing, I would like to study myself and improve my English, and try to get a job before I get old. I want to develop a better life, to be a good mother, and to raise my children

\textsuperscript{133} Research has often demonstrated that women are more reluctant to return to their country of origin than men because it will mean giving up some of the advantages they gained abroad (Brettell, 2000).

\textsuperscript{134} Composite of eight women’s narratives.
so they can have a good life. I would like my kids to do well, and be good at education. I hope that they will all be self-sufficient and build their lives. I only have one now, but as I am a Somali woman I am expecting to have more children. Say five, I would like five. And I am expecting to raise my children to have a good life, a beautiful and healthy life. I picture that my husband would come, and we would move into a permanent house in a new neighbourhood, and buy some furniture. That is what I am picturing. A larger house, my husband here, to buy new furniture, I would get a van to put all the kids in. That is all. I would change all that. Then I would feel like I belong here and I am part of this.

Islam provides a framework of faith and practice that sustains women during contemporary realities of sadness, loneliness, anxiety, and depression. Women’s imagined futures also tell something of their resilience, their continued belief that the future holds the possibility of emotional well-being. Women’s resilience is derived, in part, from sustaining dreams and hopes for the future.

In this chapter, I have argued that women’s claims of depression, sadness and loneliness are potent emotional expressions of their experiences within the world - war, displacement, disruptions to social relationships, and relocation in a new country. Women recount the war as distressing and permeated with suffering. Some women speak of the ongoing emotional and physiological impact of their experiences of war and trauma. Accounts of disordered relationships and the difficulties of resettlement also appear as powerful signs of emotional distress amongst Somali women. Idioms of distress are expressed through accounts of separation from family, the fracturing of community networks in Australia, and a sense of isolation and struggle in a country where everything is different and everyday life is difficult.
Somali women's emotional suffering is tied to much more than war and trauma. Their narratives of depression speak of social disintegration and loss of community networks. As refugees, however, Somali women are not vulnerable victims who are helpless in the face of adversity. This chapter has discussed how women find resilience by drawing upon their resources and frameworks of understanding, namely Islam, social interactions, and hopes for their futures.
CONCLUSION

This chapter is entitled 'Conclusion', but a neat conclusion is hard to write. In the introduction to this thesis I stated that I aimed to explore the ways in which Somali women experience and create meaning in the intersecting spaces of dislocation and resettlement, focusing particularly on their experiences of depression. I find, however, that women's narratives of depression are too broad to lend themselves to any neat tying-up, their accounts of war and flight too awful to confine to any summary, their experiences of displacement and hopes for the future too diverse to set within a single theoretical framework. Nonetheless, this is an important point on which to end: to emphasise that women's lives are diverse, and that the causes of emotional distress include and extend beyond torture and trauma issues to encompass dissolution of social worlds, the vicissitudes of displacement, and political and economic conditions. In my attempt to capture women's experience of emotional distress, the scope of this thesis has been broad, yet this has allowed an understanding that attends to the complex social processes of their emotional lives.

In this thesis, I have explored the ways in which emotional distress amongst Somali women in Melbourne is given meaning in a historical, political and social context, as well as through personal experience. In documenting nostalgic recollection of Somalia through to the devastation of war and flight to first countries of asylum, chapters 4 and 5 introduced a framework within which women situate their current emotional suffering. These chapters offered a detailed exploration of women's historical narratives of Somalia: an idyllic homeland torn apart by the eruption of war. Within these narratives, identity, morality, belonging and loss are discursively linked as women describe images of the transformations of Somalia and the Somali people from a state of harmony to disorder. Chapters 6 and 7 explored women's accounts of resettlement in Melbourne, focusing particularly on social and community relationships, and the interplay of home
and exile. Women’s accounts of depression and sadness are largely based and given meaning within the framework of these thematic domains of home, exile, and community. Emotional distress is tied to the guiding images of displacement from the home and the disintegration of social relationships and networks. In the introductory chapter, I posed the question ‘why is depression regarded as the most pressing health problem faced by Somali women in Melbourne?’ Chapter 8 re-explored women’s accounts of the causes of emotional distress and associated social and cultural meanings, in order to offer an understanding of depression amongst Somali women.

Somali women’s accounts of depression, sadness and loneliness are interpretive responses that give shape and meaning to their experiences of war, displacement, the disruption of social relationships, and relocation to a new country. Their narratives derive meaning from culturally constructed discourses about the self and interpersonal domains. Women’s sadness and depression-like symptoms are linked to a morally charged ideology of belonging that emphasises family ties, reciprocity and social responsibility. Women elucidate that their emotional suffering is largely caused by family separation, disintegration of community, and disruptions to meaningful social action. I argued in chapter 4 that recollections of Somalia include culture-specific ideals of the self and social relations. In that vision, sharing, support and trust is crucial to social relationships, and peoples’ social involvement marks true Somali spirit. The same moral discourse of belonging and social support that underlies the construction of women’s social histories in Somalia configures accounts of emotional distress in Australia. Women’s narratives of sadness and loneliness express their anguish at finding themselves outside of ideal social relationships of exchange, trust, and support.

Sadness and loss are further nested in the language of exile, which in turn is located within a discourse of belonging and home. Reference to home involves a prominent discourse that extols the ways of women’s everyday lives in Somalia. This nostalgia arises from the distress of displacement, and in turn it is used to give structure to
women's accounts of the hardships of resettlement. The discourse of home is paired with a sense of being in exile in Australia, as women's narratives tie sadness and suffering to memory and the conditions of displacement. As Fartun's account reveals in the introduction to chapter 8, loneliness and sadness in narratives of individual experience speak to shared issues of displacement, nostalgia for the homeland, and the hardships of resettlement.

Social suffering and responses to it are social and political phenomena (Adelson, 2001; Das et al., 2001). Why, then, the focus on war and trauma in studies of refugee mental health? The first and most obvious answer is that violence and persecution are devastating, and they are a source of enormous suffering for those who are subject to the horrors they entail. Women's accounts reveal, however, that the domains of experience impacting on mental health and emotional well-being are much broader than the war-related traumas of 'refugee experience'. Rousseau et al. (2001) suggest that the greater interest in trauma than in post-migration factors is perhaps reflective of a political discourse in which war is seen as the violence of others, whereas post-migration stressors can highlight Western administrative violence. Similarly, in their edited volume *Rethinking the Trauma of War*, Bracken and Petty (1998) argue that the focus on individual psychology in the discourse of war trauma and in the rhetoric of refugee mental health contributes to the invisibility of structural economic and political relations. However, the structures of social policy, international relations and political systems so often have devastating impact upon the well-being of refugees. Ongoing family separation, for example, is at least in part the result of Australian Federal Immigration Policy that limits eligibility for family visas to spouses and 'dependent' children under the age of 18. Furthermore, reunion is not assured, people are constrained by the financial demands of sponsorship, and the application process is lengthy. This administrative violence is now even more evident in the case of Australian Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) holders, who are denied all right to nominate their family for visas. In many ways, it is convenient to ascribe refugee mental health problems to war
and pre-migration experiences, as the medicalisation of political trauma obscures the social experience of post-migration suffering and the responsibilities of host countries.

Furthermore, in the current political climate, refugees are expected to affirm their authenticity by maintaining an identity of persecuted and traumatised peoples who are grateful for the safety offered by a host country such as Australia. Thus, the call to attend to local experience and post-migration stressors is a fine line to tread. In speaking of depression as related to experiences other than those of war, Somali women expressed concern about the judgements that might be passed by the wider community. Claims of distress due to the conditions of resettlement were often qualified with comments such as ‘of course, the Australian people are mostly good to me’ or ‘then again, I have to thank the Australian government.’ This suggests that women feel that as refugees, they should be grateful to be in Australia, and that to speak of depression as related to the conditions of resettlement could be interpreted as ingratitude. So long as the current political climate and the demands of refugee identity politics continues, post-migration suffering may not be the most audible within refugee narratives.

How, then, can services and resources be developed which respond to refugee’s own views as to their mental health and social care needs? Biomedical efforts to reduce suffering habitually focus on control and repair of individual bodies. The social origins of suffering and distress, including poverty and discrimination, even if fleetingly recognised, are set aside, while effort is expended in controlling disease and averting death through biomedical manipulations (Lock, 1997: 210). A recent WHO manual on the mental health of refugees recommends and describes breathing exercises and relaxation techniques for managing the stress faced by refugees. Despite reference to the material and political risks in which people live, healing is limited to activities that aim to improve the emotional state of the individual (World Health Organization, 1996). Further, DSM-IV criteria are widely used to characterise depression amongst refugee
populations. Medical pigeon-holing of emotional suffering enables clinical labelling of emotional distress, and the construction of a treatment plan.

Zarowsky argues that, 'to reduce the suffering of refugees or other displaced populations to a question of mental health, seen as fundamentally individual or private, does injury . . . to the individuals and the social networks in which they are inextricably embedded' (Zarowsky, 2000: 199). Trauma counselling and services that respond to the impact of war are offered in Australia to assist refugees to cope with personal or family torture and trauma issues. At the individual level, these services provide an important and necessary service. However, in order to alleviate the profound suffering that many refugees experience following resettlement, it is imperative to provide more than a medical approach to suffering that focuses on helping individual refugees deal with pre-migration experiences. Whereas medicine and psychiatry are grounded in the primacy of the individual and treating the patient, it is essential to look to the environments that constrain refugees during resettlement (Muecke, 1992: 520). Enabling women to successfully resettle in Australia in the long-term is a crucial way to improve their mental health. Effort must be made to facilitate family reunion, foster social networks and a secure and stable environment, and to encourage resilience, self-esteem, confidence, and the ability to cope with change and adaptation. By putting the social, political and economic bases of health into the foreground, social suffering can not be relegated to the level of the individual and the medicalisation of social distress. This thesis underscores the importance of social action - directed at social, political, and economic conditions - as a strategy for improving the mental health of refugees.
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# APPENDIX 1

## 2001 Global Population Statistics

### PERSONS OF CONCERN TO UNHCR (by region)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Total of Concern 1(^{st}) January 2001</th>
<th>Total of Concern 1(^{st}) January 2002</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>8,449,900</td>
<td>8,820,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>6,060,100</td>
<td>4,173,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>5,592,400</td>
<td>4,855,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern America</td>
<td>1,051,700</td>
<td>1,086,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin American &amp; Caribbean</td>
<td>575,500</td>
<td>765,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oceania</td>
<td>84,500</td>
<td>81,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>21,814,200</strong></td>
<td><strong>19,783,100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### PERSONS OF CONCERN TO UNHCR (as 1\(^{st}\) January 2002, by category)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Refugees</th>
<th>Asylum Seekers</th>
<th>Returned Refugees</th>
<th>IDPs &amp; others of Concern*</th>
<th>TOTAL 1(^{st}) Jan, 2002</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>5,770,300</td>
<td>33,100</td>
<td>49,200</td>
<td>2,968,000</td>
<td>8,820,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>3,305,100</td>
<td>107,200</td>
<td>266,800</td>
<td>494,500</td>
<td>4,173,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>2,227,900</td>
<td>335,200</td>
<td>146,500</td>
<td>2,145,600</td>
<td>4,855,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. America</td>
<td>645,100</td>
<td>441,700</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>1,086,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lat. Am &amp; Caribbean</td>
<td>37,400</td>
<td>7,900</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>720,000</td>
<td>765,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oceania</td>
<td>65,400</td>
<td>15,600</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>81,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>12,051,100</strong></td>
<td><strong>940,800</strong></td>
<td><strong>462,700</strong></td>
<td><strong>6,328,400</strong></td>
<td><strong>19,783,100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Internally displaced persons, stateless and war-affected populations

Source: UNHCR, www.unhcr.ch/statistics

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APPENDIX 2
Interview Guide

1. SOMALIA
Life in Somalia
- the country
- everyday life (a typical day)
- community life
- role/work

What did you like best/least about life in Somalia?
What is your best memory of Somalia?

Can you tell me about the history of Somalia?

Why do you think the war started?
- experiences of war
- social relationships after the war started

Flight from Somalia.
- when, where, who with, what was it like
- what was life in exile like/life in refugee camps

2. RESETTLING IN AUSTRALIA

Can you describe your journey from Somalia to Australia?

What was it like arriving in Australia?
Did it meet your expectations?

What is your best memory a time in Australia? What is the worst?
What are the good things about being here? And the difficult things?

Can you talk about your social life, community networks, family life?

Are you satisfied with your life here? What would you like to change?

What do you hope for when you think of the future?

3. EMOTIONAL DISTRESS AND WELL-BEING
Have you had any health problems in Australia?

Can you talk a bit about how you feel emotionally since arriving in Australia?
  (do past experiences of exile/resettlement impact upon associative networks surrounding
  experiences of depression and loneliness?)
  (What is the impact of life in Australia on emotional distress and well-being?)

What do you do when you feel unhappy/depressed/lonely? Does this help?

Have you ever been to a doctor/medical practitioner for concerns about your mental
health?
What did they do? (anti-depressants)

What would make your life better in Australia?

Explore:
- What are the Somali terms that are used to describe the emotions that Somali women
  feel in Australia?
- What do these terms mean i.e. semantic networks?

What kinds of things made Somali women distressed in Somalia?
- Was depression recognised in Somalia?
How did people manage hardship, depression in Somalia?
- ie community networks, family, treatment, religious healers

Why do Somali women get depressed or sad in Australia?
Is it normal for Somali women to feel sad here?

How do people manage emotional distress here?
- What do people do here when they feel emotionally distressed

Do you offer emotional support to other Somali people here?

How do emotional problems (depression, anxiety, loneliness) affect your life?
- work, social life, family life etc.
What makes you feel positive about your life?
What makes other Somali women feel positive about life?

4. SOMALI IDENTITY
Who are the Somali people?
What does it mean to be Somali in Melbourne?
Have Somali community relations changed since people came to Australia?
- cohesion
- social life

How would you describe the Somali community to someone in Australia?

Explore clan (How did clans come about? Was there clan between conflicts in the past?
How did some clans become more powerful? Do women belong to clans? Do you think
of yourselves as belonging to a clan in Somalia/here? How can you tell which clan
someone is from? Was the war related to clan? Is social life here related to clan?)

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How do other people in Australia see Somali people?
- Islam?
- Refugee?

Refugee Identity:
- Do you think of yourself as a refugee: why or why not?
- What does it mean to you to be called a “refugee”?
- What do you think the term “refugee” means to other people in Australia?
APPENDIX 3

Participant Consent Form
Somali Women in Melbourne

I, ____________________________

consent to participate in the above project.

- I have received and read, or been read, a copy of the Information Sheet about the project.
- I understand that the project will explore Somali women’s resettlement experiences, and their sense of well-being.
- I agree to participating in an interview, and understand that it will be taped or, if I prefer, notes will be taken.
- I understand that participation is voluntary and I have the right to withdraw from the study, and that I can withdraw any data supplied.
- I am satisfied that the confidentiality of information provided and participant identity will be maintained.
- I understand that I can choose a different name to be used in place of my real name.
- I understand that the project is for the purposes of research.
- I acknowledge that the project findings may be used by community services to help improve Somali people’s resettlement experiences.
- I acknowledge that the Principal Investigator can refer me to services, such as counselling services, if I indicate a need for that.

Signature ____________________________

Date ____________________________

Contact Details of Principal Investigator:
Celia McMichael (Principal Investigator)
Key Centre for Women’s Health
The University of Melbourne
720 Swanston St
Carlton
VIC 3053
Tel: 8344 4333
Fax: 9347 9824
E-mail: c.mcmichael@pgrad.unimelb.edu.au
Participant Consent Form (Group discussions)
Project Title: Resettlement Experiences of Somali Women in Melbourne

I, ____________________________

consent to participate in the above project.

- I have received and read, or been read, a copy of the Information Sheet about the project.
- I understand that the project will explore Somali women’s resettlement experiences, and their sense of well-being.
- I agree to participating in a group discussion, and understand that they will be taped or, if I prefer, notes will be taken.
- I understand that participation is voluntary and I have the right to withdraw from the study, and that I can withdraw any data supplied.
- I am satisfied that the confidentiality of information provided and participant identity will be maintained, subject to legal requirements. I understand that following transcription onto computer disks, notes and recordings from discussions will be destroyed, and that the disks will be stored in a locked cabinet and destroyed after five years.
- I understand that I can choose a different name to be used in place of my real name.
- I understand that the project is for the purposes of research.
- I acknowledge that the project findings will be used by community services to help improve Somali people’s resettlement experiences.
- I acknowledge that the Principal Investigator can refer me to services, such as counselling services, if I indicate a need for that.

Signature ____________________________________________

Date ____________________

Contact Details of Principal Investigator:
Celia McMichael (Principal Investigator)
Key Centre for Women’s Health
The University of Melbourne
720 Swanston St
Carlton
VIC 3053
Tel: 8344 4333
Fax: 9347 9824
E-mail: c.mcmichael@grad.unimelb.edu.au
Information Sheet on the Project: Resettlement Experiences of Somali Women in Melbourne

My research is concerned with Somali women. I would like to talk with you about displacement from Somalia, what it means to you to be living in Melbourne, and your sense of emotional well-being. Although I would like to talk about your experiences of resettlement and emotional well-being, it is up to you what you choose to talk about within this general topic. Discussions will be tape recorded so that I can keep a copy of conversations. But if you prefer we can talk without a tape recorder and I will take notes. The length of the conversation will depend on you and what you would like to say.

All information is for the research project. It is your choice whether you agree to talk about your experiences. You are free to change your mind at any point about whether you want to participate in the study. If you choose to share information but then change your mind, the information will be withdrawn from the project. You will not be penalised in any way if you choose not to participate.

The identity of people who participate in the project will be confidential. No-one will be able to find out what you, as an individual, have said. Reports and writing developed from the data will use pseudonyms that you choose. Participants will be acknowledged in publications although your names will not be used. I have gained ethical clearance from the University of Melbourne for this research.

The research is part of a Ph.D research degree for The University of Melbourne. The data will be the basis of my Ph.D thesis. The findings will also be useful for community organisations such as the Migrant Resource Centre North East in Preston. You will receive a summary of the study at the end of the project.

If you have any concerns about this project, please contact the Executive Officer of the Human Research Ethics Committee, Melbourne Research and Innovation Office on 9344 7507. If, at any point, you have questions or issues you want to raise about the research, you can speak to me. My contact details are provided below.

I thank you in advance for your time and help.

Contact Details:
Celia McMichael (Principal Investigator)
Key Centre for Women’s Health
The University of Melbourne
720 Swanston St
Carlton
VIC 3053
Tel: 8344 4333
Fax: 9347 9824
E-mail: c.mcmichael@pgrad.unimelb.edu.au
Argiga ka qabgalka ee haweenka soomaaliyeed

Anigoo magacaygu yahay,

Waxaan cadeynayaa in aan ka raali ahay ka qayb qaadashada barnaamiykan ku saabsan sidii loo horumarin lahaa beela ha durnarka ee degen fiktooriya.

- Anigoo aqray warbixinta ka qayb qaadashada barnaamiykan
- Waxaan ogahay in ay barnaamiykan lagu soo qaadi doono haweenka soomaaliyeed iyo degenaashahooda iyo caafimaadkooda
- Waxaan ogalaaday in aan ka qayb qaato wareysigaan iyadoo ama la duubayo ama la qoraayo habda sida an doonayo
- Waxaan fahamsanahay in uu yahay wareysigani mid istiqaari ah oo aan diidi karo hadii aan doono
- Waxaan ku kalsoonahay in la xafisi doono wareysigaan lana ogeyn qofka la wareysanaayo magaciisa
- Waxaan ogohay ama ii banaan in aan isku bixin karo magic kale markii aan ka qayb qaadanayo barnaamiykaan si aan loo ogaan magacayga
- Waxaan ogahay in borojetadaani ay ku salaysan tahay sidii loo ogaan lahaa daryeelka haweenka soomaaliyeed ee ustareeliya
- Waxaan ogahya in warbixinta ka soo baxda barnaamiykaan lagu wax loogu qadan doono ama lagu horumarin doono degenaashaha dadweynaha soomaaliyeed ee degen fiktooriya
- Waxaan ogsoonahay in hadii aan u baahanahay la ii gudbin doono meelo aan ka heli karo caawinaada aan u baahanahay

Saxiixa qofka

Taariikhda

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Warbixin ku saabsan barnaamijkan

Khibad degenaashaha Durmarka soomaaliyeed ee deggen magaalada meelboon

Takhasuskani ama baaritaankani wuxuu ku saabsan yahay Durmarka soomaaliyeed, waxaan jecelahay in aan ka hadlo sidii ay u dayacmeen markii ay ka soo guureen Soomaaliya, waxaay idinla tahay ku noolashaha magaalada meelboon iyo sidii aad dareemaysid.

Masdama aan jecelahay in aan ka hadlo waaya aragnimadaada iyo waxyalihii aad kala kulantay kadib markii ad ka soo salkaciday dalkaagi waxaan jecelaha y in aan ogaado sidii aad dareemaysid guud ahaan. Waxaas xor u tahay in aad dooratid qodabadda aad jecehashay hadii ahaan lahaayeen wax guud ama wax gaar ah. Wadahadaladaan waa la duubi doonaa do aan u ahaysto kobi ah wadahadaladeen, laakin hadii aad jecesahy in aad lagaga qaad koraqo inta aad doonaysid ama waqtiga adiga ayay kugu xiran tahay.

Rawarka la aruuiyo waxaa loo aruurin doonaa nbarnaamijkan baaritanka. Adiga ayaey kugu xiran tahay waxii aad ka hadli lahayd, waad iska deyn kartaa haddii aad u baahantahay in adaan ka qayb qaadam barnaamijkan, haddii ad ka qayb qadatid barnaamijkan kadiibna aad ka noqotid waad yeeli kartaa.

Waxaa loo sheegayaa ka qaybgalyaasha in la zafidi doono warbixinanta oo ay tahay qarsoodi uuna ogan Karin qof kale waxii aad ku hadashay waxaa loo mahadniqi doonaa dadweynasha ka qayb galay mashruucan markii la dhameyyo lagana qoro warbixin iyadoo aan la magacaabi doonin magicyadoodo gooni ahaan. Waxaan waydiistay ogolaasho si aan u fuliyo barnaamijkan jaamacadda meelboon.

Go’aanada soo saarayo barnaamijkan ama warbixinanta laga soo saaro waxay fa’iido u noqon doontaa xarumaha kala ah xarunta maaygantiga ee bareeston waxaa la siin doona ka qaybgalyaasha go’aanadii ka soo baxay.

Haddii ay jiraan wax aad ka qabtid barnaamijkan fadlan la soo xiriir maamulaha qayba baaritaanka ee jaamacadda meelboon taloofoonkiisuna yahay 9344 7507 hadii aad doonaysidna fadlan ila soo hadal.

Mahadsanidiin

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APPENDIX 4

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'Everywhere is Allah's Place': Islam and the Everyday Life of Somali Women in Melbourne, Australia

CEILIA MCMICHAEL

Key Centre for Women's Health in Society, University of Melbourne, Australia

This article explores the role of Islam in the lives of Somali women in Melbourne, Australia. It is derived from ethnographic research carried out between April 2000 and August 2001 that focused on displacement, resettlement, and the emotional well-being of Somali refugee women. As refugees, these women are dislocated from familiar life-worlds in Somalia. Yet Islam provides an enduring 'home' that is carried throughout displacement and resettlement. Islam is articulated through women's use and construction of space, daily practices, forms of interaction, and modes of thinking about their lives. Further, Islam offers a meaningful framework of practice and ideology that sustains women during the hardships of exile, displacement and resettlement and in times of emotional distress.

Introduction

Some months after Medina arrived in Australia, we were sitting together drinking tea in her home and talking about her experiences of displacement and resettlement. Our conversation was interrupted as her eight children, aged between one and 11, tore through the room. In an attempt to quiet them, she sat them on a mattress and placed the Qur'an in their hands. The scribbles of the previous tenant's children marked the walls of her public housing home. These markings were partially covered with ornate Islamic texts etched onto brass plates and woven into fabric. Medina's conversation was sprinkled with references to Allah. Everyday circumstances were attributed to the will of Allah and hopes for the future were only possible if they were Allah's will. She talked of holding on to her faith when she was lonely and when she could not cope. As dusk set in and the light began to fade, she said that she could not talk any longer, as it was time to pray.

Religion has been widely conceptualized as providing a framework for apprehending and living in the world. In his influential text The Interpretation of Cultures, Geertz states that the importance of religion consists in:
Its capacity to serve, for an individual or for a group, as a source of general, yet distinctive, conceptions of the world, the self, and the relations between them. Religious concepts spread beyond their specifically metaphysical contexts to provide a framework of general ideas in terms of which a wide range of experience—intelectual, emotional, moral—can be given meaningful form (1973: 123).

Firth (1976: 40-47, 197) writes that religious practice supplies people with patterns for conduct in daily life and in times of crisis. However, the role of religion in the lives of refugees during displacement, forced migration, and resettlement is an area that has been studied very little.

This article offers an ethnographic account of Islam in the lives of Somali refugee women in Melbourne, Australia. It focuses on the ways in which Islam provides a ‘home’ as women resettle in a new country. ‘Home’ here does not refer to a stable physical place where domestic life is realized (see Douglas 1991). Instead, it is conceptualized as a mobile anchor that provides stability in the often unstable world of forced migrants and refugees. John Berger (1984) writes that in a quintessentially migrant age, the idea of ‘home’ undergoes dramatic change. A broader and more mobile conception of home is necessary, as something ‘plurilocal’ (Rouse 1991; 8), something to be taken along as individuals move through space and time. For migrants and exiles, home comes to be found in a routine set of practices, a repetition of habitual interactions, in styles of dress and address, in memories and myths, in stories carried around in one’s head (Berger 1984).

Forced out of their homeland and resettled in Australia, many Somali refugee women have a vivid sense of displacement, both physical and cultural. However, women are not uprooted from all that is familiar, nor confined to a life in exile. Women draw upon the practices and ideologies of Islam, and in turn Islam shapes spaces, interactions, modes of thinking, and daily activities. In this way, Islam offers a sustaining thread in refugee women’s lives and helps them to overcome the threat of discontinuity that arises with displacement. Islamic practice and ideology provides a plurilocal home that can be carried through space and time. Further, Islam comes to the forefront of women’s lives during times of emotional distress. Many women experience loneliness, sadness, anxiety and depression due to the rupturing impact of war and exile and the exigencies of family separation and resettlement. Islam provides an important source of solace and emotional support.

An underlying concern in this discussion is to question universal representations of Muslim people. Appadurai (1988: 36-37) notes that anthropology tends to develop ‘theoretical metonyms’ that come to stand as the quintessential aspect of a given region. Where Islam is the predominant religion, there is a tendency for it to become a defining feature of the ‘culture’ through which the lives and experiences of people are theorized and represented (Abu-Lughod 1988). The terms ‘Muslim’ and ‘Islam’ frequently appear within the public imagination of non-Muslim peoples as rigid,
stereotypical images, often with full prejudice as evidenced in the public
discourse following the so-called ‘Islamic terrorist’ attacks against America on
11 September 2001. There is a view of Islam as anti-Western, anti-modern,
anti-democratic, and prone to ‘mob-like public outpourings’ (Vertovec and
Peach 1997: 8). Muslim women are represented as repressed, marginalized,
excluded from public religion and Islamic rituals, and subject to the
conservative forces of sexual ideology within Islamic patriarchy (Afshar
1982; Mernissi 1975). These perspectives reduce people’s lives by subsuming
them under the broad rubric of the Islamic world and defining them as different
or ‘Other’. More recent ethnographic and historical studies have entailed
a critical discussion of what is meant by Islam. Numerous authors argue that
there is no essential Islam, and that Islamic people have different and even
contradictory understandings and practices of Islam (Abu-Lughod 1988; Asad
1986; Bhatti 1997; Eickelman 1989; El-Zein and Hamid 1977; Said 1985).
Fischer and Abedi (1990) describe the experience of Islamic exiles from Iran
living in the United States, and their discussion reveals the diversity of opinion,
style, custom and politics that runs beneath Iranian Muslim identity. As Abu-
Lughod (1988) suggests, the ‘Other’—such as the Islamic Other—might
actually consist of many others who are not so other after all.

As previously indicated, this paper first explores the many ways in which
Islam offers a ‘home’ for Somali refugee women during resettlement in
Melbourne. Second, it discusses the ways in which Islam is an important source
of emotional support during the continued trauma of resettlement. It highlights
the diversity of Islamic ideologies and practices amongst Somali women by
providing a wide range of women’s own accounts of their religion. However,
before discussing in depth the role of Islam in Somali refugee women’s lives, it
provides a brief sketch of Somalia’s recent political history and the events
leading up to the civil war that began in 1991, in order to enhance our
understanding of the historical and social dimensions of Somali women’s
forced migration and their subsequent resettlement in Melbourne. Description
of the fieldwork site and discussion of research methods follow.

Exodus and Resettlement

Somalia is situated in the northeast of Africa. It borders Kenya, Ethiopia, and
Djibouti, and is one of a group of countries in the region referred to as the
Horn of Africa. Somalia has a population of approximately eight to 10 million.
However, the Somali people are not contained within the national borders that
were drawn by the politics and ink, first of the Ottoman Empire, and later of
Britain, France, Italy, and Ethiopia. Almost one-third of the Somali
population now lives in adjacent Djibouti, the plateau region of Eastern
Ethiopia known as Ogaden, and the Northern Frontier District (NFD) of
Kenya. Many people have also resettled in countries such as Holland, Britain,
Denmark, the USA, Canada, and Australia.
The forced migration of Somali people has primarily been the result of violent conflict during the civil war. Since the late 1970s, Somalia and other areas of the Horn of Africa have been in an almost perpetual state of violence and political conflict. In 1977, Somalia's leader Siad Barre launched a war to reclaim the Ogaden region in Ethiopia. Somalia was defeated, fissures within the Somali government became visible, economic and political problems emerged, and the regime became unpopular amongst the Somali people. Domestic political structures began to disintegrate in the face of 'blame and recriminations as to who lost the Ogaden' (Cassanelli 1993). Dissatisfied clan-based military groups launched numerous conflicts and attacks against the government. By 1986, Barre's government had lost all popular support, as increasingly brutal methods of political control emerged.

Between December 1990 and January 1991, battle between government forces and clan-backed rebel groups resulted in the collapse of Siad Barre's 21-year rule. Conflict flared up between clan-based military organizations and warlords in many areas, and civil war emerged in place of Barre's regime (Hashem 1997). Somalia has now been in a state of war for over ten years. The civil war, politically-induced famine and drought have forced many people to flee their country. Hundreds of thousands of Somali refugees remain in exile, either in refugee camps or in other locations in Africa. Many must choose between the dangers of repatriation or remaining without citizenship in countries of first asylum. Less than one per cent of Somali refugees have been accepted for resettlement in countries such as Australia (Hyndman 1999).

The Somali-speaking community is one of the fastest growing ethnic communities in Melbourne, increasing from 1,391 in 1996 to 3,226 in 2002. Melbourne has approximately 65 per cent of Australia's Somali population, the majority of whom arrived in Australia after the eruption of the civil war. 92 per cent through the Refugee and Humanitarian programmes. A high proportion of women have entered through the 'Women at Risk' refugee and humanitarian visa subclass, a category designated for women who are 'without the protection of a male relative; and in danger of victimization, harassment or serious abuse because [they] are female' (DIMA 2001; see also Manderson et al. 1998). The overwhelming majority of Somali people are Muslim (Metz 1993). In Australia, however, Muslims are a minority comprising only 1.43 per cent of the Australian population and 2 per cent of Melbourne's population (MRC North East 1999).

Research Methods

This article is based on qualitative research that explored displacement, resettlement, and the emotional well-being of Somali women in Melbourne. Oakley (1992: 17) suggests that qualitative methods allow exploration of the quality of experience through the study of meanings and processes. The key research methods included interviews and group discussions. In addition, I gained a richer understanding of women's lives through participant
observation that included spending time with refugee women in their homes and in other social settings, and through my experiences as a resettlement caseworker. Each method informed the others to create an iterative process that could produce an ethnographic understanding of women’s lives.

In April 2000, I started to work as a volunteer at the Migrant Resource Centre Northeast (MRC), which provides direct services to a large number of Somali clients. MRC is located on a busy main street in a northeastern suburb of Melbourne. It sits at the beginning of a long stretch of community service offices and shops: a local office of the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA), a Centrelink office where people seek welfare and social security payments, government funded emergency housing services, halal butchers, Iraqi and Turkish kebab shops, second-hand clothes and furniture stores, and the local markets. The daily thoroughfare at MRC is busy with newly arrived migrants attending the drop-in services and appointments for assistance with resettlement issues. Most of these people have emigrated in the past six years from the Former Yugoslavia, China, Iraq, and Somalia. Every week around 20 to 25 Somali people, approximately two thirds of whom are women, seek assistance with housing, health care, welfare benefits, and immigration advice.

Omidian writes that ‘much fieldwork is accomplished just by being in one place over time’ (Omidian 1994: 155). I began working with Malyun Ahmed, the Horn of Africa worker, and focused on resettlement issues and community development amongst Somali people. Over the first few months, Malyun taught me the basics of settlement support casework: how to assist with Office of Housing applications, refer people for material aid such as second-hand furniture, secure a No-Interest-Loan for electrical white-goods, apply for government rebates for utility service bills, nominate family for refugee visas, and use the Telephone and Interpreting Service. Soon I gained enough confidence to help people through the complex maze of social services. Through my work at MRC, I developed some understanding of Somali women’s histories, learnt of the hardships and trauma that many women have suffered, and could appreciate women’s resilience as well as recognize the ongoing problems that they face relating to resettlement in Australia.

Between August 2000 and July 2001, I carried out in-depth interviews with 42 Somali women, all of whom had entered Australia under the refugee and humanitarian programme. I spoke with several women on more than one occasion. The interviews elicited narratives of war, displacement, resettlement, and emotional health. They were carried out in women’s homes and followed a loose thematic framework, but women directed the course and flow of conversations.

Group discussions occasionally developed as friends and family arrived: the composition of groups changing as people came and left the house, went to the kitchen to prepare food, or unrolled mats on the floor and began prayers. Writers on research methods suggest that the purpose of focus group discussions is to obtain general information about beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour.
(Dawson et al. 1993; Huddleston 1994; Patton 1990) and to inform and confirm other data (Bernard 1994). The group discussions in this research did not have such explicit methodological aims, as they were informal conversations rather than tightly controlled and ‘focused’ conversations. Nonetheless, they provided an opportunity for differing views to emerge as women teased out divergences in their experiences.

Malyun assisted with many aspects of the interview process and her input was crucial. My rudimentary knowledge of Somali and the limited English language of many Somali women meant that I relied on Malyun to interpret for 33 of the interviews. Literature on interpreting includes various suggestions to minimize technical problems, such as assessment of interpreter skills, ensuring the interpreter understands their role is passive, and maintaining eye-contact with the interviewee in order to prevent a ‘psycho-social coalition’ forming between the interpreter and the interviewee (see Edwards 1998: 200-201). The aim of such approaches is to control the interpreter and render her or him invisible.

In this research, however, Malyun did not act merely as an interpreter or ‘neutral mouthpiece’ (see Edwards 1998). She was able to pursue sensitively issues that I might have left alone. We discussed research themes, and we talked about issues that I felt I hadn’t grasped. I did not use an interpreter, but worked with an interpreter, key informant, and co-researcher. This approach enhanced the interview process, as Malyun and I were able to work together and bring different skills and perspectives to the research project.

The selection of women to participate in the study centered around Malyun’s extensive network of friendships and acquaintances, the relationships I had formed with women through my work at MRC, and the willingness of people to participate in the research. To preserve confidentiality, women’s names and identifying details have been changed. Despite the common refugee label, women’s backgrounds were diverse; some had lived as nomads, others grew up in various cities in Somalia, and their levels of education were varied. Malyun was mindful of involving women who had different life-circumstances in Melbourne. For example, she included women who had no relatives in Melbourne and those who had migrated with family members, elderly and young women, and women who had been diagnosed with clinical depression as well as those who appeared resilient. However, all the women who participated in the study were Muslim.

The collection of narratives was not a tool that I used to produce an account of the truth of women’s experience (see Schepers-Hughes 1992; Wikan 1996; Kirkman and Rosenthal 1999: 19-20). Rather, the interviews were a chance to explore how women ascribe meaning and order to their lives. Women’s narratives involved selecting, omitting and ordering elements of experience. Images emerged of nostalgic memory for homeland, the civil war, fleeing Somalia, living in refugee camps and other countries of asylum, their expectations and the realities of life in Australia, and imagined futures. Women could have told their stories differently, or focused on different events.
or meanings. The important thing is that their stories were meaningful at the
time of telling. There were also silences around specific experiences. Some
women, for example, chose not to speak of the war, swiftly moving from
narratives of pre-war Somalia to arrival in Australia, while others described the
war as a series of events and processes entailing generalized and abstract details
without emotional edge. I accepted silences within narratives out of respect for
women’s integrity. I also understood silence as a form of communication, in
that it enabled women to construct their narratives in meaningful and
acceptable ways.

Conventional anthropology has dictated that participating in a community
is integral to understanding the meanings and experiences that constitute a
cultural world. Abu-Lughod (1988: 22) argues that living in the social world
that one is studying allows the researcher to grasp more immediately how the
social world works and how members understand it. Participation in
community and social activities brought richness to my understanding of
women’s lives. I spent many hours in rooms full of women: drinking cups of
sweet milky tea and watching aspects of women’s lives take place around me. I
attended wedding and engagement celebrations, social gatherings, political
events, picnics, and went to information sessions for Somali women organized
by various service providers.

Working in social settings of displacement and resettlement, however, invites
questioning of anthropological concepts of participant observation. A
significant barrier to participant observation is that, as refugees, Somali
women’s life-worlds extend to spaces and experiences beyond the reach of
ethnographic observation or participation. I could never share the traumas and
hardships of civil war, displacement, and resettlement, be subject to racism, or
live in the knowledge that I could not return to my country and life as it was
before war. My participant observation was limited by the reality that refugees
are displaced, and that a researcher from a non-refugee background can never
share many aspects of their lives.

Throughout the research process, the centrality of Islam in everyday life was
apparent. Conversations were peppered with reference to Allah and religious
faith, and daily life was suffused and punctuated with Islamic practices. Islam
shaped the course of the research on a daily level. Interviews were frequently
halted so that women could pray. Prayer, five times each day, is one of the five
pillars of Islam (the others being declaration of faith, giving alms, fasting, and
pilgrimage to Mecca). The prayers consist of prescribed verses recited in Arabic
at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and nightfall (MRC North East 1999).
During the month of Ramadan we spent less time talking with women as they
focused on religious practice and fasted between dusk and dawn.

Islam as ‘Home’

For Minh-ha, ‘our present age is one of exile’ (Minh-ha 1994: 13-14). Many
aspects of women’s narratives reflect a sense of being homeless and exiled from
all that is familiar in their worlds. Recollections of Somalia were shaped by a compelling drive to present and hold onto a beautiful era. Women told stories of the good life they had, the fresh food, the beautiful weather, and the strong social networks; this was a time when everyone was happy. Representations of Somali identity and community life in Australia are strikingly different. Women lament the loss of family support and trusted social networks. They often referred to fissures and conflicts amongst Somali people in Melbourne, such as problems with gossiping and lack of trust. For many, there is an understanding that the idea of a ‘Somali community’ in Melbourne is a myth, and that there are strong cleavages along lines of clan membership and status. Further, women feel out of place in Melbourne, as they face an immediate reality of new environments and social networks, and the unfamiliar workings of institutions and services.

The narrative contrast between Somalia as home and Melbourne as a site of exile and disorientation is striking. This resonates with the general picture painted of refugees that focuses on vulnerability, struggle, and problems adjusting to new situations. Daniel and Knudsen, for example, describe refugees as suffering ‘a crisis in culture wherein past and present remain as rigid as they are disparate, connected only by a chasm of despair’ (Daniel and Knudsen 1995: 24). The metaphors employed to describe the movement of refugees refer to fluidity, as opposed to the anchoring metaphors of roots, soil, and homeland that convey settlement and stability (Malkki 1995: 16). Through this discursive form, refugees are constituted as being ‘uprooted’, as having lost connection with their culture and identity. Rapport and Dawson (1998: 9) write that ‘exiles’ and ‘refugees’ are expelled from the ranks of those felt deserving of combining house and home.

In this article, however, I suggest that processes of displacement and resettlement do not tear women from all that is familiar. Within the experience of exile, Islam is a way in which women recreate lives, homes, and community. Islam is a sustaining thread throughout women’s lives and this helps to overcome the threat of discontinuity that arises with exile and displacement. In women’s historical narratives, Islam was often central to accounts of personal and community life. As Amina said:

A story in the Qur’an explains that if you are cooking soup then you should put in extra water so that you can share it with everybody else. As a Muslim woman, if I am cooking I don’t just cook enough for my family to eat. In Somalia I used to cook a big pot of food and sometimes my kids would run out and they would miss the first lot of food, and I would have to cook for them again because the neighbours and the people that came visiting would be fed. In Ramadan we had samioosas to break the fast, and I would cook that many. Some people couldn’t afford the meat and the flour. I cooked plenty for the neighbours and all the people that were fasting.

Women talked of life in pre-war Somalia as having a clear moral and social order that was defined by the framework of Islam.
The way it was in Somalia before the war was a good way, but now it is changed. We had a clan, but people were in the same culture, same religion, same language, we were all Somali. Life was pretty simple. The things that were good about Somalia were the religion, everyone had the same religion, and the culture we all shared, there was communality. The food was great. There were no differences between us. The people, the weather. It was all good.

These narratives of homeland articulate nostalgic recollection of the Somali people as a community with clear religious identification. Reference to religion featured as a unifying part of their identity and society. When women's narratives turn to life in Australia, Islam is still affirmed as a central aspect of their contemporary lives and identities. Naima described how her faith has given her the strength to cope in Melbourne. She said:

If you have faith and you feel homesick or sad, you just remember that you are a human being. You remember that there is a God and that Allah has chosen that way for us. For me, when I feel homesick, I pray and I read verses of the Qur'an. I hear people who can't take life and they commit suicide. They jump over the bridges, things like that. I think those people don't have faith, they don't have faith in Allah and the things that Allah can do, and the things that Allah must do. My faith allows me to cope with my situation now. I go back to Allah and state my case and say 'Allah, help me'.

Women articulate that the Somali people have 'one religion', and many emphasize that Islam and Somali culture are inseparable as their way of life is permeated by Islamic morality and practice. In this way, Islam and Muslim identification remain constant throughout historical and contemporary life narratives.

While women themselves are resettuated in Melbourne, Islam offers an anchoring home. As discussed in the introduction, the term 'home' does not refer to a traditional conceptualization of a bounded and framed physical place, or a location from which to depart and return. Rather, a home is created in the articulation of practices, routines, and ideologies. Bourdieu (1990) suggests that people come to live by the principles of an ideology through their bodies—their use of space, their practices. For Somali women, a 'home' is carried and recreated through the everyday workings of Islam; it comes to be found in the ways that space is constructed, daily practices, forms of social interaction, and modes of thinking about and understanding life-worlds.

Q: Are there any things that you would say have been good about coming to Australia?
A: Everywhere is Allah's place anyway. Every country that you go, Allah is everywhere. It is not as if we have come to a place where we are disconnected from that.

To my non-Muslim eyes, the clearest signifiers of Islam amongst Somali women initially lay in clues of practice and use of space. Bhatt (1997: 43) writes that there is an inextricable link between the production of identity, the presentation of bodies, and the transformation of the physical and social
spaces of the life-world. The expression of Islam was immediately apparent through material practices: women attend mosques, buy their meat at halal butchers, wear veils, and fast and feast during Ramadan; children are sent to Islamic weekend schools to learn the Qur'an; and sheikhs are called upon to recite the Qur'anic texts for good fortune and during times of crisis.

One afternoon, we arrived at a local park, a coach-load of 20 Somali women and 16 of their young children. The trip, organized by Malyun and myself at the MRC and funded through a local government council grant, aimed to give women a chance to see different parts of Melbourne and to alleviate the sense of loneliness and isolation that many women had voiced in interviews. The women spread out rugs and sat on the grass in the sun and talked while the children ran around the gardens. The women's veils ranged from dark cloth covering everything but their eyes, to brightly patterned cloth draped over their hair and bodies. Soon after midday they began to go in small groups to the public toilets to wash, and then gathered on the rugs to pray, facing towards Mecca in rows. After prayer time, lunch arrived; halal lamb stuffed with rice, sultanas, peas, and almonds, Turkish dips and breads, and juices. The halal food was bought from the restaurants and shops of longer-standing Turkish and Iraqi Islamic communities. During these few hours, Islam was made visibly apparent through the material practices of women's clothing, practice, and choice of food.

People's homes, the bland low-rise apartments and houses provided by the Department of Human Services, were transformed into Muslim spaces. Mats woven with images of Mecca were unrolled and women prayed together. Veils were hurriedly readjusted if men without allianal ties entered the room; the Qur'an weighted with beautiful text lay on tables, shoes were removed at the door, and women's homes were filled with tapestries, plates and ornaments decorated with Qur'anic text and pictures of Mecca. These are some of the visible signs of Islam that are thread into the everyday lives of many Somali women. They are not only religious practices, but ways of inscribing Islam on new physical spaces and social landscapes following displacement. Through the inscription of Islamic faith and practice on spaces and lives, women make themselves at 'home' in Berger's sense of the word (1984).

Yet, this plethora of shared Islamic practices and the visual signifiers of 'being Muslim' can all too easily lead to a vision of a unified and authentic Islam. When depicted as a concrete and constant form, Islam operates like the concept of 'race' in that it builds an image of a different, essentialized and homogeneous social group (Abu-Lughod 1990: 9). This can create very real political and social boundaries that provide a forum for new racisms centring on immigration laws, alien-ness and policing of difference (Malik 1995: 14). Many women, for example, talked of a sense that people regard them as passive adherents to an oppressive religion, and of staring eyes seeing their veils as the regulation of all women. Since the events of September 11, 2001, women's experiences of discrimination have been even more explicit; Muslim schools have received bomb threats and the local mosque has been defaced by racist graffiti.
Despite the apparent unity of practice, of praying in rows and words uttered together, Islam does not consist in unmediated forms that emerge from a rigid religious framework. Somali women hold diverse ideas about Islam and the appropriate expression and practice of Islamic faith. An example of the ongoing diversity in expression of Islamic faith is to be found in practices of veiling. It is a salient example because in the Western imagination, the veil remains a tangible symbol of women’s oppression (Abu-Lughod 1988). Somali women might wear the full-length chador, or a veil covering their hair, forehead, shoulders and neck, or brightly coloured cloth tied around their hair, and some—particularly younger women—do not wear a veil at all. Waris, aged 38, talked about the ways in which this diversity of Islamic dress codes is disputed amongst Somali women. She said:

The Somali community here in Melbourne is fresh from the civil war, they are made to succumb to Islamic faith and religious values predominate at the moment ... now there is a wave of fundamentalism in Australia. Maybe it is about preservation of culture because we are a minority culture here. Our traditional values are more prescriptive than they have ever been. I never remember people wearing thick veils. All of this is new for me. I started wearing a veil because of the anger and judgment of the community. I realized I was judged because I did not wear a veil.

Waris talks of wearing a veil to appease ‘traditionalists’ within the community. For other women the diverse use (and non-use) of veils arises from the multiplicity of personal interpretations of religious faith within the Islamic tradition, cultural pride, modesty, and resistance to Western influences.

Further diversity was to be found in women’s daily Islamic practice and interpretation of the Qur’an. Some women followed the prescribed five daily prayers, while others prayed only when it was convenient. Many women chose to attend medical clinics and Western services when they were sick, yet others turned only to the Qur’an for assistance and guidance. As Amina describes:

I don’t believe that the medication would fix my sadness. My religion is the thing that keeps me going. I feel pain. The sicknesses are one of the things that Allah has brought to me, and no one else can help me with it. It is only Allah’s choice to take it away. For some people the medication replaces the religion, but the religion keeps me going. I read verses of the Qur’an and put the book over my body and that keeps me going.

Interpretations of the Qur’an were also diverse. Idil, aged 63, read the Qur’an literally and it became a template for daily life. She told me:

In the Qur’an, it says at the end of the time there will be forty years when the people must stand up before they get judged. The sun comes very close, and those of us who are not meant to go to heaven will not be able to take the heat of the sun. Everyone left standing will then be judged. The Qur’an says you can’t make bad comments about things. But for us, those kinds of things have become natural. We might say ‘Amina doesn’t really look good, she is short’. But you can’t say those things! It is a sin if you say that people are ugly. And we shouldn’t
complain, but here people just say that it is cold, the weather is nasty. We are not meant to say those things, we are not supposed to criticize the nature of Allah, because it is Allah's creation. In one of the verses the prophet Mohammed says, 'if you can't say anything good or worthwhile, then don't say anything at all'. For us, those of us who don't know the verses of the Qur'an and what it actually says, we are really in trouble. It is like someone who doesn't know the way.

Other women did not read the verses of the Qur'an literally, but used them as guidance for how to live and behave. As a final example, some women felt that the course of their lives is entirely the will of Allah, while others expressed the importance of setting their own paths while living within the moral guidelines of Islam.

Islam is negotiated and contested in the fluid and shared spaces between people and shaped by changing situations. In short, women make sense and make use of Islam by continually moving amongst an inventory of ideas, practices, and modes of expression. With the above-mentioned examples in mind, an understanding of Islam emerges that moves away from a vision of a bounded and unified religion, to an awareness of contested meanings, contradictions and multiple discourses. Islam, then, is not a religious framework with one authentic Muslim way of life. The expression and ideology of Islam alters with circumstances, individual interpretations, and contestation between people. For Somali women, Islam involves many versions that are created through the push and pull of ideas and practices; through self-reflection and imagination, women elide, negotiate, embrace, and reformulate the expectations and offerings of Islam.

Islam is nonetheless an enduring and overarching framework that shapes how women create and perceive themselves, their lives, their surroundings and their future. Islam can be carried and lived throughout processes of displacement, migration and resettlement. As Hawa described, 'In a sense, there are no boundaries in the world. Every place and every piece of earth belongs to Allah.' Islam provides a shared frame of reference, practice, and meaning and is a way of maintaining and recreating a 'home' in a new country.

Islam and Emotional Well-being

This section discusses the ways in which Somali women draw upon Islam to provide emotional support, manage transitions, and frame experiences of depression and loneliness. While Islam suffuses people's lives, it plays a particularly important role when women are faced with anxiety, sadness, loneliness, and depression. Time and time again, women stated that religious faith and practice was the most important way of coping with emotional distress in their lives.

Q: Does your religion help if you are ever worried or sad?
A: If I ever need anything, the first thing I do is pray. If I need a good friend, I turn to Allah and I say 'Allah, I need you as a good friend'. Allah is not going to
gossip about you; Allah is not going to hate you if you return over and over, asking and asking. If anything, if you ask for something, Allah would love you for it. If I am sick, if I need a special thing, if I need a simple thing, I just pray. Allah is the only one that I seek help from, the only one I can rely on.

Unni Wikan notes that 'attention to how people actually struggle, amidst multiple constraints, to cope with distressful events may offer an insight into the rationale and conceptions they use to frame their own acts and give meaning to experience' (Wikan 1988: 453). Numerous researchers have suggested that aspects of religious faith and spirituality have a beneficial effect upon the mental health of individuals and populations, particularly in regard to subjective assessments of well-being (Chatters 2000; Ellison 1995: 1561; Fry 2000; Kaplan, Cassel and Gore 1977; Koenig, Smiley and Gonzales 1988; Levin 1996; Pardini et al. 2000; Schumaker 1992). Ellison, for example, argues that religious practices promote social networks and support and provide a coherent framework, religious doctrines encourage altruistic behaviour, and devotional activities allow people to relinquish psychological control and responsibility for circumstances with minimal self-blame or guilt (Ellison 1991, 1995). In the case of Somali women in Melbourne, the practice and ideology of Islam is a central framework that gives meaning to lives and helps them to cope with 'distressful events'.

Women speak of Islam as a source of social order, meaning and reassurance in daily practice and everyday life. As Haweye explained:

Our religion is very important. It is good, we love it, and it has a very important role. It protects us from a lot of things. If we have a problem we turn to Allah and ask for help. We believe that there is an afterlife and we will go to heaven. In our religion you only go to heaven if you work for it, and then you will have a good afterlife. That is what we believe in. If you have a problem or you are in trouble then you go back to the religion and that is the way that you solve your problems.

Many women said that in Somalia, Islam was central to coping with specific difficulties in life. One elderly woman talked at length about the use of the Qur'an in pre-war Somalia; she explained that verses were read to cure people of sadness and mental illness, to ask for the return of missing people, and to protect people from lions. She said 'the Qur'an is the treatment. The first priority is the Qur'an ... there is a strong knowledge that the Qur'an can guide you and save you'.

When women speak of the eruption of violence and the civil war and people's subsequent flight from Somalia, their narratives suggest that Islam and faith in Allah became an even more important source of strength. Women recall the war in terms of danger, fear, violence, chaos, loss of trust, and social breakdown. The immediacy and horror of the war was evoked through descriptions of people dying of starvation, dead bodies outside people's homes, witnessing murders, family separation, soldiers raping women, children going missing only to be found with their throats slit. A report by the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (VFST 1998) states that the
trauma of war and exile can shake people’s faith in religion and God. Yet, despite the horror of the war, women did not recall their experiences as unravelling their faith and belief in Allah. Islam offered its ideational foundation and practices to provide understanding and expression in response to the exigencies of the civil war and exile.

During the civil war, people were seeing their relatives being killed in front of them and there was a lot of depression. If a woman got depressed, the person would go into a state of hysteria, not function well, they couldn’t sleep, wouldn’t wash their hair, they wouldn’t eat, they would eat very fast and nothing would fill them up. Then it would get to the stage where they wouldn’t get up. What used to happen is the neighbours would acknowledge that problem, women would get together and talk to them, they would go the mosque and verses of the Qur’an would be read.

For many women, Islam offered a causal framework as a way of comprehending displacement and exile, where the adversities of exile and displacement are the will of Allah, yet simultaneously their faith gave them the strength to continue and survive.

Somali people have migrated to Australia under the refugee and humanitarian visa programme and have left behind the immediacy of war and refugee camps. In the newness of Melbourne, however, they must recreate social networks, find new resources for daily life, and come to terms with past losses and new situations. While Somali women’s resilience and ability to manage transition is striking, many women speak of times of sadness, grief, loneliness, anxiety, isolation and depression. This is a response to a situation and history that includes experiences of persecution and trauma of war and violence, separation from and loss of family, fraught identity politics of clan rivalry, and the hardships of displacement, resettlement, and loss of trusted social networks.

A number of women have sought help from doctors and been prescribed anti-depressants, a handful have gone to counsellors, and many turned to friends and family for social support. However, all women mentioned or talked at length of the ways that Islam permeates their days and sustains them during times of emotional distress and through the processes of resettlement. As Fatuma explained:

Since coming here, life has been very different. In the refugee camps there was uncertainty and fear. But now, all these things are not present. But there are other things that make life hard. There are many things that I miss. I have family, but there is no support and you can’t bring those that aren’t here in to this country. It is hard to manage with childcare because I don’t have the help of family. The housing is tiny, and the kids drive me crazy. I have language problems. In Somalia if I couldn’t find my way, my mother, my neighbours would have helped me, but here there is no help. Emotionally, sometimes, I feel very happy because I am here. But sometimes, I feel very sad because I don’t have any support or family members around me. When I am sad, I pray to soothe my mind. I feel sad because of the war. I worried about people killing each other, death, losing your life. Sometimes now I talk to myself. I do talk to myself when I look at the children and there is
no partner. I have so many worries, that they don’t have a father, and there is no one I can tell all this to except for Allah.

For many women, Islam has become even more important since the war and resettlement in Australia. Some voiced an explicit awareness that the rupturing impact of war and exile has led them to place increased importance on their religious faith. During times of emotional distress, Islam is brought to the forefront of lives. Prayer, talking to Allah, modes and moral guidelines for social relations, words uttered, and ways of apprehending life: these are some of the ways in which Islam provides explanation, meaning, solace, emotional support, and acceptance of life situations. The following examples illustrate the ways in which Islam has provided emotional support in two women’s lives.

One afternoon we visited Fartun to talk with her about her experiences of displacement and resettling in Melbourne. Fartun came to Australia in 1999 with her three children and husband. She suffers from depression and has been prescribed anti-depressants. When we arrived at her home she ushered us to the front room and we began to talk. She was very quiet at first, often readjusting her veil and partially covering her face with her hands. After half an hour or so she began to talk of her depression, her sense of isolation because her extended family remain in Somalia and Kenya, and her anxiety about her sister who has been missing since the war. Fartun explained that when she feels sad she prays to Allah.

Q: When did you last see your sister?
A: Eight years ago. I don’t know whether she is alive or not. We separated during the war. She went to the Yemen Embassy with my aunts, but I refused. I said I was going to stay in Somalia because it was my home. From then, no one knows where she is. I have searched but I can’t find them. When I am alone I talk to myself. Sometimes in the daytime I dream, and when I sleep I have nightmares that a gun has hit her and she died when she was pregnant. Sometimes, they are very real, those dreams are very real and I can see them. It happens when I am alone. Everyone else, we know where they are, but my sister is missing. She is on my thoughts all the time. I am worried about her.

Q: What do you do when you think about these things, and you feel lonely or sad or unsupported?
A: I’m a Muslim and I believe in prayer. I believe everything happens because it is meant to be. That is how I manage if I am sad. I pray and I go back to Allah. I pray to Allah. I try to forget about these things, these memories that are distracting me. I go back to Allah, and I give thanks that the rest have been saved, and I pray and I ask if she is alive and pray to one-day meet with her.

A month later we went to Saynab’s house and spent a few hours together. Her children were sleeping and her husband working, and we sat in the lounge room drinking tea and talking. Other Somali women regard Saynab as an example of piety and Islamic commitment. Her brown veils tightly pinned around her face, she spoke of how only Allah could see what is necessary for each person. She explained that Allah allowed some people to have their family around them in Australia and then watched to see if they were grateful,
whereas other people's family were left in Somalia or killed in the war and Allah watched to see if they were patient and accepting. Saynab herself fell under the second category, and while she is lonely and misses her family, she knows that it is important not to question Allah's will. She said:

Allah is watching me to see whether I go out there and pull my hair and say to Allah 'why not, why not'. I am not going to say 'why not'. It is the way that has been chosen for me. I talk to Allah, and I look around and see that Allah has given other people their families but Allah hasn't given them to me. So I look at what Allah has already given me, and I'm really grateful for what I've got now rather than what Allah hasn't given me yet. It would be really un-Islamic for me to cry out for things that I haven't got rather than thanking Allah for the things I have got. So, that is the reality of my situation.

After this, she rolled a rug out on the floor and prayed for several minutes before returning to continue the conversation.

For women such as Saynab and Fartun, their faith in Islam and the routine of prayer provides solace, a framework for understanding their situation, and it allows them to relinquish responsibility for circumstances. They voiced an understanding that all events and their own lived situations are the will of Allah, and that they must accept Allah's will with patience. Their Islamic faith not only provided a causal framework that helps make sense of their lives, but routine practices that assist and calm them when they experience emotional distress.

Conclusion

This article has been animated by the challenge of describing the role of Islam in the everyday lives of Somali women in Melbourne. Eickelman argues that religions remain vital and meaningful through the actions of those who subscribe to them, and maintain and shape them over historical periods and in diverse contexts (Eickelman 1989: 255). My concern has been to explore the ways in which women draw upon the ideology and practice of Islam to provide a framework of emotional and social support. 'Exiles' and 'refugees' are often regarded as homeless and displaced, clutching helplessly at a lost world and culture, with no concrete attachment to new spaces and places (Daniel and Knudsen 1993). Allusions to liminality, homelessness and a state of limbo are widespread in descriptions of the dislocation that results from exile and displacement (Amit-Talal 1998: 52). More recently, ethnographers of transnationalism, such as Olwig (1997: 35), have suggested that migrants can in fact create socio-cultural contexts of great stability and sustenance within the disruptive process of displacement and migration.

In this article I have argued that in the context of displacement and resettlement of Somali women in Melbourne, Islam is a vital source of sustenance. Islam provides continuity, a shared yet negotiated identity, and it is a 'home' built from practices that occupy, use, and make social sense of places and lives. Islam is also integral to the ways that women manage transitions and
their emotional well-being. During times of sadness, depression, loneliness, and anxiety, women draw upon ideological frameworks of Islam to help them make sense of their lives, and they find solace in their faith and in prayer. Indeed, the meaning of suffering, depression, and loneliness is entwined with the language, ideology and practice of Islam.

Islam brings together memory and longing, the ideational, the affective, and the physical. It involves many versions that are created through circumstance, individual interpretation, and contestation between people, yet it provides an overarching and shared framework of expression and ideology. It is an aspect of life and at the same time, a way of forming, reflecting on, and interrelating life-worlds. When Somali women come to Australia, it is not simply as uprooted refugees who have lost all ties to their past, their identity, and their culture. Islam, in its diverse forms, is a way in which women find and maintain resilience and continuity in their lives.

1 To preserve anonymity names of interviewees have been changed.


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