

Dumarka Soomaaliyeed Voices Unveiled: Undoing the *hijab* narrative through a participatory photography exhibition

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ABSTRACT

The photographs and narratives collaboratively created by the women of *Dumarka Soomaaliyeed² Voices Unveiled* (DSVU) offer multiple *hijab* narratives. This article explores how these narratives initiate a process of undoing certainties such as the stereotypes and singular representations of Muslim women and thus serve to agitate public space. Drawing on Rogoff (2000), this article describes DSVU, presents photographs and stories from the exhibition in an effort to undo the singular *hijab* narrative, and theorizes this work and project as an agitation of public space.

Introduction



Here in Columbus, we are at a crossroads. People still don't know what to make of us. They've gotten used to the fact that Somalis live here, but there is still a misunderstanding that inhibits any kind of progress as far as getting to know who Somalis are and what we're all about. (Qorsho)

Dumarka Soomaaliyeed Voices Unveiled (DSVU) is an exhibit of photographs and written narratives created through participatory photography, using a participatory action

Fig. 1 Muna (2013). Used with permission of the participants.

research (PAR) method, with five young Somali women in Columbus, Ohio (DSVU, 2013). Through the presentation of the photographs and narratives created collaboratively by the women of DSVU, this article offers multiple *hijab* narratives to initiate a process of undoing certainties such as the stereotypes and singular representations of Muslim women. *Hijab* is the Muslim custom of modesty commonly practiced by wearing a headscarf. The ways Qorsho, Nasra, Hoda, Muna, and S. talk about and visually represent themselves regarding *hijab* offer a rich site to explore the relationship between place, representation, identity, and belonging. Community art education initiatives addressing identity and representation, such as DSVU, can thus serve to agitate public space by undoing certainties through the presentation of multiple stories (Rogoff, 2000) and emphasize the fluid nature of culture and identity. What follows is a description of the DSVU project, a presentation of photographs (Figures 1-12) and stories from the exhibition in an effort to undo the singular *hijab* narrative, and a theorization of this work and project as agitating public space.

Somalis in Columbus

Columbus has the second largest Somali population in the United States. It is a diverse community, yet for the general American population the Somali community is seen as homogenous, typified by language (Somali), dress ("traditional"), and religion (Sunni Muslim). Women wearing the veil are a common and visible sign of these generalizations and among Americans are often perceived as oppressed. However, this homogenized cultural framework obviates the various migration histories; economic, educational, and religious experiences; and ethnic affiliations informing the decision to wear (or not) *hijab*. The prevalence of these singular representations of Somali culture affirm Roble and Rutledge's (2008) assertion that the Somali community in Columbus is still preparing to participate³ and negotiate its place in central Ohio.

³ Participation is a concept describing Somali resettlement experience. Participation occurs when Somalis are able to take part in aspects of American culture

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² *Dumarka Soomaaliyeed* translates to Somali Women.

A Participatory Photography Project

Participatory action research (PAR) is a methodology which seeks to work with participants to define and carry out research that is not only about understanding the world but working to change it (Hunter et al., 2013; Stringer, 2007). *DSVU* began with one Somali woman, Qorsho, and the goal of challenging stereotypes about Somali women.

PAR forefronts relationships and it was through personal recommendations that Qorsho, a young woman with whom I had previously worked at a local Somali social service agency, introduced me to a friend (Nasra) and family (Hoda), and suggested student organizations to contact at The Ohio State University. Through these conversations, a form of snowball sampling (Stringer, 2007), five women between the ages of 18 and 31 agreed to participate in the project. Each woman was connected to The Ohio State University either as a current undergraduate (Muna, English and International Studies) or graduate student (Nasra, Masters of Social Work, and S., doctoral candidate in Education Teaching and Learning), recent alumna (Qorsho, International Studies), or employed in the medical center research lab (Hoda).

As a PAR project with the goal of generating a “community response to a community issue” (Kreig & Roberts, 2007), collaboration with participants was vital. All participants worked together to develop the project, each offering their input regarding the process, their level of participation, and content. We chose to use participatory photography, a process that engages community members in photography and storytelling about issues relevant to their daily lives. Derived from Wang’s (1999) photovoice method, participatory photography aims to promote critical dialogue and knowledge, and enacts social change. We decided that I would take the photographs, although each woman was offered the opportunity to do so herself. Together, we decided on the focus of our investigation and subsequently explored questions of

which suit their definition of self but not those that violate their dedication to family or religion (Roble & Rutledge, 2008, p. 14). Participation assumes visibility, agency, and some degree of power and freedom.

dress, traditions, family, religion, and the participants’ role in the community through photographs and individual interviews. We jointly edited the resulting transcripts into narrative accounts and chose the photographs that presented a myriad of perspectives of Somali women in Columbus, Ohio. Finally, we created an exhibit of photographs and written narratives in order to educate non-Somalis about Somali culture and challenge stereotypes about Somali women. The project continues as the exhibition travels to libraries in central Ohio and new initiatives begin⁴.

Positionality and the Single Story

Rogoff (2000) explores the disruption of singular narratives through positionality and the agitation of public space through the undoing of its certainties in order to repopulate previously unknown images. *DSVU* functions as an agitation of public space, proffering a series of stories that first claim singular narratives in order to retell them in detailed complexity to construct a language of lived experience, how it is received, perceived, and often misunderstood. Collaborative projects such as *DSVU* that put first the concerns of the participants present “possibilities of greater plurality of coexistent fragmented voices and identities” (p. 151) within their respective geographic region – in this case the Somali diasporic community in Columbus. However, there is a danger to overlook the very real possibility that, despite efforts to reclaim complex identities and encourage collaboration, these images and stories may nonetheless “masquerade as the sole legitimate representation” (p. 151) of Somali women. For example, the women whose stories are presented here have similar migration histories, socioeconomic statuses, education levels, clan affiliations, and religious identification as a result of being recruited through a single source. Asserting this project as inherently representative of the “plurality of coexistent fragmented voices” would be a deception.

Stressing the ongoing nature of the project, and indeed the impossibility of its closure, is vital to working towards its goals to challenge,

⁴ All project initiatives are housed on the project website: dumarkasoomaaliyeedvoicesunveile.weebly.com

agitate, and undo. The project continues to collect images and stories, with explicit efforts to include those from other geographical and cultural places by facilitating projects with women in other locations in Columbus and in other cities across the Somali diaspora. Presenting stories from women in many locations helps emphasize the connection between place, identity, and positionality; works to dispel stereotypes; produces a space where there is multiplicity in representation; and resists a politics of closure, finality, and simplification. The *hijab* narrative presents one such site of undoing and agitation, where the female body is viewed as the site of geographical ambivalence (Rogoff, 2000), inhabiting many spaces rather than a single story.

Hijab Narratives: Undoing the Single Story

Somali women are subject to misrepresentation and stereotypes concerning Islam and Somali culture. In the dominant cultural narrative in the United States, veiled Muslim women have been depicted as oppressed and without agency or voice (Lombardo, 2013). As a result, Berns-McGown (1999) found many Somali women were denied jobs, stared at, or reacted to in fear or dislike simply for covering. Though *hijab* is often equated with a headscarf, it is a practice of modesty subject to cultural, temporal, and geographic variation. For example, what many Americans consider “traditional” Somali dress – long dark dress and a flowing headscarf – is actually a recent fashion⁵. The *hijab* narrative becomes one about a religion of the “Other” and a culture from which women need to be liberated (Abdurraqib, 2006). However, for Somali women there is much to say about wearing *hijab*, and the *hijab* itself has an extensive language. As Roble and Rutledge (2008) write, simply by looking at a woman’s *hijab* you can tell

who is married, who is single, who is more religious, who is less, who is rich, who is poor, who is celebrating a special occasion, and who is simply getting through her day. If mainstream Americans cannot understand a woman who wears a *hijab*, it is

5 For more about the recent history of the veil see Ahmed (2011). For more about traditional, religious, and western clothing worn by Somalis in the United States see Akou (2004).

because they have not learned to speak her language, and this will not change when the woman simply removes a piece of cloth from her face. (p. 99)

There is no single story when it comes to *hijab*; each woman comes to the practice differently and from a different positionality.

Undoing the Single Hijab Story

Veiling for the women of *DSVU* is not simply a matter of culture or religion. For many of the participants, there is a blurring between religion and culture. They are not opposed, but rather go, as one participant put it, “hand in hand” (personal communication, October 28, 2013). Qorsho elaborates this point:

I personally don't like mixing culture and religion, but I realize I'm a product of it because the Somali culture is heavily based in Islam. What I disagree with is when there is a blur between religion and culture and how Somalis have created a code that Islam and Somali are synonymous. And they're not, they're really not. Culture and religion are two different things. They blend well together sometimes, but sometimes they disagree completely. And when they do, I would go towards the route of Islam rather than our culture because I know that the first thing I am is Muslim, and then I am Somali. (*DSVU*, 2013)

Hijab is an expression of overlapping identities of Somali, Muslim, and U.S. American. It is personal, political, religious, and cultural (Akou, 2004). It is a matter of choosing one’s identity and subsequent representation, and as Berns-McGown (1999) describes, “it is simultaneously a departure from and a reinforcement of tradition, so the decision of whether to don the *hijab* is not straightforward” (p. 78). In these stories, women who wear a *hijab* according to Abdurraqib (2006) can never construct a comfortable and singular narrative within U.S. culture, and those that do not cover challenge the constructs within Somali American culture so that as a result all “must create a new genre” (p. 56). Between the deference of a fixed identity and the conscious choosing of which elements of U.S., Muslim, and Somali cultures to participate in and which to do differently, the women’s

stories interrupt and undo the single *hijab* narrative.

The photographs included below (Figures 2-12) do not serve as illustrations of the text. When installed, the exhibition deliberately does not align a particular image with a particular story; instead, the images and stories are intermixed, offering different forms of narrative exploring the same topic. Instead of offering individual stories of *hijab*, the intentional juxtaposition of multiple stories and images of *hijab*; its role in the Somali community; and what it means in the lives of Hoda, Muna, Nasra, Qorsho, and S. serves to interrupt single stories of *hijab*, undo certainties regarding Somali women, and ultimately agitate public spaces. The following section closely approximates the exhibition as it would be viewed in person, unadorned with captions (DSVU, 2013).

Dumarka Soomaaliyeed Voices Unveiled

There was a time when I had to go downtown to one of the government buildings to do something with my taxes.



Fig. 2 Muna (2013).
Used with permission of
the participants

When I went through security, they asked me to take off the zippered sweatshirt I was wearing. It was part of my uniform for work. It would not have been appropriate to take off my sweatshirt in such a public setting, so I tried to explain the situation and said I could not do this in the lobby. The security guard said I was not dressed like a Muslim, simply because I was not wearing *jilbab*

– a big scarf – so obviously I was not Muslim. Because of this she would not give me “special

treatment” and allow me to use a private room. I wear my *hijab* every day, but because I was wearing my work uniform, khakis, and a sweatshirt, I was told I was not Muslim by someone who



Fig. 3 Muna (2013). Used with
permission of the participants

had a very narrow concept of my religion. You cannot generalize the entire community, especially based on appearance. I am not more or less Muslim because of my dress. (Nasra)

I was age 11 when I began to wear *hijab*. I started wearing it because I wanted to imitate my mom. I saw her wearing it, and I decided to wear it for a while. (Hoda)

I don't dress the part. I feel that I will wear *hijab* when I'm ready, when it comes

from the heart and not just because I'm supposed to do it. There was a point in my life where I thought I was ready and wore it for a year straight. I still wore jeans and stuff, but I tried to cover my hair. One of my really



Fig. 4 Hoda (2013). Used with
permission of the participants

good friends, she started wearing it. I respected her a lot for putting it on.

She uplifted me a little, and I thought, “It’s time to grow up.” So I put it on. I saw that friend switching back to her old ways and for me to see that she was even becoming worse. I thought maybe I just did it in the heat of the moment. I’ve realized since then that I wasn’t ready and just jumped into it. In the Islamic religion, we call that having



Fig. 4 Muna (2013). Used with permission of participants.

low *iman*, which is faith. That’s just what I went through at that period of time, and I took it off and said, “You know I’m just going to restart. I’m still not ready to wear it. Hopefully one day soon.” (Muna)

I stopped wearing *hijab* for a year, around 9/11. My mom didn’t feel safe with us wearing it. She had an incident at work, and she didn’t want us to be discriminated against.

She never really told me the full story,

but from what I gathered, she was intimidated by someone at the grocery store bakery where she worked. I don’t know if the person was wielding a knife, but they blamed her for what happened. That really scared her. She ended up quitting, and it spurred her to make us look less Muslim. Then my grandmother came to stay with us for a while, and her coming really changed my opinion on Islam. I learned more about it. I always had questions about it – why do I have to do this, or do that? I didn’t always feel I got the best answers from my mom, so I asked my grandmother. She gave me answers that I was really happy with. I started praying and wearing *hijab*. Not just *hijab* but also the skirt. Since then, I haven’t stopped wearing it. (Hoda)



Fig. 6 Hoda (2013). Used with permission of the participants

One of the things that almost set us back is the way we dress because people assume that we don’t speak English and that

we don’t know how to interact with males. A

lot of negative assumptions are made when we’re looked at and to me it’s completely the opposite. To us, our dress means so much more. It’s not about covering us up and hiding our jewels. It’s more about our devotion to God. Initially, I perceive Somali women who do not cover negatively because it seems like they are Westernizing our values and our customs. It’s weird because I



Fig. 7 Nasra (2013). Used with permission of the participants

consider myself a Western individual because I was raised here, but in some

ways it seems that they are changing the perception of Somali women as if they were oppressed and now they're liberated because they don't wear the same clothes. Now I realize it's more of a personal choice – it's really up to the individual how they want to dress, and how they want to express themselves. And if those women choose to not wear the *hijab* it's really between them and God. I realize I shouldn't be so judgmental. It's easy to be judgmental; I know that. I still don't agree to it – I believe that what makes us Somali is our commitment to our faith and we go against the norm in many ways and it's a marker of strength because we're able to do so much in such a strong way; it's almost that we're showing American society that we're not going to change. We'll do some things - we'll learn English, we'll adhere by the laws of America, but we are going to choose to wear what we wear because it's important to us. (Qorsho)



Fig. 8 S. (2013). Used with permission of the participants

I started wearing *hijab* when I was twenty. By the time I started wearing *hijab*, I understood that it was for modesty and a commandment from God. Now many years later, I feel that *hijab* is like a second skin. It's part of who I am. (S.)

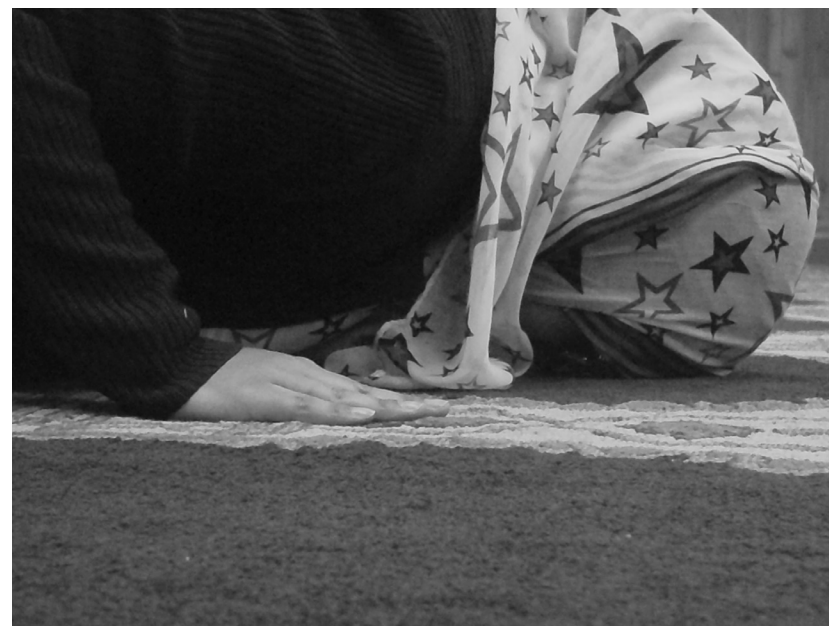


Fig. 9 Hoda (2013). Used with permission of the participants

I talk to women who don't cover and they definitely understand why I wear it. They agree with me that we have become a visual



Fig. 10 Qorsho (2013). Used with permission of the participants

society and in many unfortunate ways the image of women has been degraded, especially with popular media. For non-Muslim women, they find it refreshing that somebody would not ascribe to those beauty ideals. There is a lot of pressure for everybody to have the perfect body, to have the perfect face and features. A lot of my friends are not Muslim, and they might not be wearing headscarves but they understand the whole issue of modesty. It is not just a matter of dress, but also of character and how you

carry yourself. I also have friends who are Muslim and don't cover. We have conversations about *hijab*. For some Muslim



Fig. 11 Muna (2013). Used with permission of the participants

women they have lots of pressure. "Should I do it, should I not? Am I going to be pressured by the community to cover?" And I just tell them, "Your time will come. Don't rush it." I was somebody who didn't rush it. I wore the headscarf late, and for me it was doing my own research and coming to the decision on my own. So I tell them my story and remind them that there are other ways to display modesty. That's what I advise them to do. (S.)

Agitating Public Space

The stories and images of *DSVU* work to agitate the public space of central Ohio, which many veiled and unveiled Somali women inhabit. While the exhibit's explicit goals are to interrupt the misperceptions of the Somali community held by non-Somalis, there are also implicit goals to represent Somali culture and identity as fluid by exploring multiple perspectives across different segments of the community. Agitating public space entails challenging the single stereotypes through claiming and retelling stories of lived experiences. The *DSVU* exhibition does this



Fig. 12 S. (2013). Used with permission of the participants

by acknowledging the presence of a single story and re-presenting multiple stories and images of *hijab*.

The stories and the photographs of *hijab* offer a different representation of feminine identity in the diaspora – one that is shifting with time and place, relationship to others within the Somali community and with non-Somalis, and the positionality of each of the women portrayed. The presentation of multiple stories serves to challenge the certainties of identity in public space. Moreover, the *DSVU* exhibition initiates dialogue about the representation and conceptualization of what it means to be a Somali woman among Somalis and non-Somalis alike. For example, after viewing the exhibit, one young Somali woman approached me about initiating a *DSVU* project among her peers and as a result, nine women gathered to write about, photograph, and discuss a variety of issues surrounding the role of women in the Somali community and as U.S. American Somalis. For non-Somalis, the images can challenge certainties regarding belonging. One woman asked library staff upon viewing the photographs, "Where are all the American kids?" (personal communication, November 13, 2013). The images in particular challenged this viewer's preconceptions of who is American, and contributes to the public dialogue of what constitutes "American." Moreover, the variety of *hijab* stories in particular challenge the stereotypical *hijab* narrative prevalent in U.S. culture. The visibility of women who are differently gendered and differently embodied (and as a result have different access to power) can facilitate viewers in questioning the ways they inhabit, make, and remake their own culture; the exhibit subsequently agitates public space.

The title of the project - *Dumarka Soomaaliyeed Voices Unveiled* - offers another site of agitation. Since the project's intent was to reveal different perspectives and complexities in identity, and generally interrupt preconceptions about the Somali community through sharing stories, "voices unveiled" seemed an appropriate metaphor. However, "unveiling" has significant connotations for the women of the project. Like many other Muslim women, for several of the women of *DSVU* wearing a headscarf meant that they were representing the entire

Muslim community, as *de facto* ambassadors for their culture and their religion. While each woman was aware that she was in a position to represent the Somali community by participating in this project, “unveiling” their voices in some regards is taking off that responsibility and individualizing the representations of community, ultimately interrupting any single definitions of what it means to be a young Somali woman in Columbus through the juxtapositions of experiences, perspectives, and understandings portrayed in the stories. These definitions come from within the community in the form of expectations, as well as from non-Somalis through stereotypes and singular representations. While practicing *hijab* is certainly a norm within the Somali community, the reasons for wearing it, what it means, and the decision to actually wear a *hijab* vary among individuals.

While the women of the project approved of the title, non-Somalis challenged the use of “voices unveiled.” In one experience, a library staff member was concerned that the women involved in the project might find the use of “unveil” offensive as if I were trying to remove the *hijab* and free them from their oppression. As I explained at the time, the five participants were involved continuously in the decision making for the project, including the title. Moreover, as one participant commented, “It fits” (personal communication, December 2, 2012). However, the significance of being informed by a fellow “outsider” about what “unveiled” would mean for these women was not lost: two non-Somali women were in conversation about what “unveiled” would or would not mean for the Somali women involved. If asked, the Somali women claim “unveiled” as an assertion to differentiate their work and their voices from the dominant narratives of what it means to be a Somali, Muslim woman.

Collaborative efforts like *DSVU* that utilize participatory photography offer art educators a way to explore and re-present positionality. Working with participants to define questions of importance; choose methods of practice; and create art together as a form of research, public education, and advocacy presents an opportunity to make a difference. Moreover, this collaborative process works to agitate

public space through its ongoing nature, the presentation of multiple perspectives, and attention to the fluid nature of identity and culture. Attending to the relationship between space, place, and identity enables art educators to work to undo certainties through community arts initiatives rather than reinforce them.

Reconsidering static understandings of culture and the way that women embody markers of culture are important efforts toward eradicating stereotypes and cultural misunderstandings. Viewers of *DSVU* are offered entry into particular aspects of culture and the opportunity to reflect on the role of individual agency through the creation and exhibition of personal narratives. Working with participants to create visual and written narratives about their experiences with culture, identity, place, and belonging and engaging those participating in comparing their stories to those around them presents a legible body of experiences emphasizing the fluidity of stories and calling attention to the idea of culture as dynamic and the relation between individuals, place, time, and culture as something in flux. Art educators can harness participatory artmaking, storytelling, and exhibition to explore lived experiences of culture, place, and identity and work to undo the certainties of single stories.

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