

## Strangers in Our Midst

Herein lies their radical difference, the demonstration that they have never been, and never will be, a part of us.

—Achille Mbembe, “Provincializing France?”

While the city representatives quoted in chapter 4 are eager to champion a positive image of Lewiston’s management of difference that can be exported to other cities, a very loud background conversation circulated in local newspapers and private conversations asserting that Somali refugees were deepening Lewiston’s economic insecurity and weakening the city’s cultural integrity.<sup>1</sup> In a blistering editorial, the managing editor of the city newspaper challenged the 2010 Advice for America conference representation of multicultural success, suggesting that “the social workers and educators” in attendance were deaf to the broader and much more pervasive antagonistic feelings about refugees in Lewiston:

I have a little news for advice-givers who attended last week’s Advice for America conference hosted by the Center for Preventing Hate. They may believe the Somali integration post-2006 here has been a success worthy of national model, but that view is not wholly shared in the Twin Cities

[Lewiston and Auburn]. . . I hear negative comments every day. Every Day. . . I saw with great clarity a gap in how this group perceives the climate of acceptance in Lewiston and what that climate actually is in multiple corners of this city. . . Any advice coming out of Lewiston should be viewed as through a kaleidoscope of distorted views.<sup>2</sup>

A set of powerful myths (by which I mean shared beliefs) about the refugees that capture “what the climate actually is” reveals the ways in which unhappy Lewistonians felt that their city was under economic and cultural siege. The myths rest on the assertion that, in contrast to the Somali refugees, the earlier French Canadian immigrants were a model of determined economic self-sufficiency and integration, the two pillars of the refugee resettlement model. Commentary on this point became especially heated in response to articles in *Mother Jones* (2004) and *Newsweek* (2009) suggesting that the refugees were rescuing Lewiston, a view that contradicted the perception held by many that the city of hardworking residents was draining its coffers to provide for economically dependent refugees, as the mayor’s 2002 letter had suggested.<sup>3</sup> The *Newsweek* article alone generated over 150 pages of mostly vituperative blog comments railing against the article’s suggestion that refugees saved Lewiston by bringing economic and cultural revitalization to a dying mill town. A few typical examples, with original spelling, set the tone:

Revived my ass! They have done nothing good for our city! We have lost jobs. People who actually need state assistance can’t get it because them and their ten kids have used up what little there was to begin with. Areas that used to be decent to live in are now infested with them. Seriously, find twenty people in Lewiston who are glad they are here. I know I can’t.—domnemasmama, January 30, 2009

Am I disgruntled that federal and state dollars are being used to supply immigrants with housing food clothes and vehicles? YOUR DAMN STRAIGHT.—Dee In Maine, January 30, 2009

They [Somali refugees] are human leaches brought her to suck off the liberal maine system. . . When did maine become the welfare state to house and feed the worlds misfits.—Megalito, January 30, 2009

The Somalis over-populated Lewiston, drained it’s money and resources, and cried discrimination constantly. . . They are at DHHS [Department of Health and Human Services] requesting welfare daily. The majority of Somalis are unemployed. Our schools are overcrowded with children who don’t speak English. Lewiston . . . is down the tubes.—cojr, January 26, 2009<sup>4</sup>

During my research in Lewiston I constantly encountered these myths, which circulated despite news articles and op-eds challenging their veracity, as well as the dialogues sponsored by CPHV early in the decade and ongoing community meetings and panel presentations throughout the decade offered by refugees at myriad events and institutions to teach people about their background.<sup>5</sup> Although these events offered opportunities for Lewiston's residents to confront stereotypes about their new Somali neighbors, the myths' stubborn persistence from 2006 to 2011 indicates they speak to deeply held suspicions about charity for illegitimate recipients, fears of cultural difference, and the danger of the resident foreigner for American civic life.

This chapter draws on conversations, interviews, editorials, and letters to the editor in the daily *Lewiston Sun Journal* and the conservative-leaning local weekly *Twin City Times*, and, most obnoxiously and extremely, the online comments that accompanied every news story about the refugees (until the *Sun Journal* closed off the ability to make anonymous comments), to explore the most widespread myths and analyze their peculiar potency.<sup>6</sup> The discussion of each myth also offers contrary empirical evidence from research I conducted with Ismail Ahmed and Rilwan Osman, as well as ethnographic observations about the quotidian experience of these myths for Somalis and Somali Bantus in Lewiston. Because most of the myths are not particular to Lewiston but echo nationwide allegations about how immigrants introduce financial and cultural insecurity into American communities, I conclude with a reflective analysis of the insecurities contained in American mythologies of immigrant foreigners, situating the material presented here within broader American nativist and racist discourses against immigrants.<sup>7</sup>

### **Free Cars and Apartments! Chickens in the Cupboards!**

On June 24, 2010, Rilwan Osman e-mailed me a copy of a letter to the editor from a local resident that appeared in the *Twin City Times*. The letter read:

The Somalis received more money than they deserved upon setting foot here, and most never pay a cent into the system. It makes me sick that we are supporting them and seeing them living a better life than most of us. Some lie to receive money when they go for help. . . . Most of them claim that they don't speak English, but they can all say "City pays." . . . Besides food stamps, why do they receive vouchers for car repairs and other things? . . . Why is it so easy for them to start up in a business while on welfare? . . . Do they pay taxes on the money they make, or is that another thing being kept secret? And most of their stores refuse to serve white people (not that I'd ever go there). . . . I think it's time someone puts them

in their place. I would put them on a ship back to their uncivilized country because I don't trust them as far as I can throw them.

Fed up with the constant repetition of such allegations, Rilwan wanted us to draft a response. Together with Somali activist Ismail Ahmed, we generated a list of the claims we heard most often, and then gathered evidence to attempt to debunk them. Our response, "The Top Ten Myths about Somalis and Why They Are Wrong," appeared in the local newspaper and was circulated in government and social services offices and posted online by Catholic Charities. Ismail and I also collaborated on a publicly circulated financial study about the economic impact on Lewiston of the Somali presence, demonstrating that the influx of Somalis brought economic advantages rather than distress.<sup>8</sup>

Here are the top ten myths.

#### 1. SOMALIS GOT A FREE RIDE TO COME TO AMERICA.

The basis of this complaint is that Somali refugees have not earned the right to live in America, an assertion that is sometimes accompanied by a reminder about the young soldier from the Lewiston area who was killed in Mogadishu during the Black Hawk Down debacle.<sup>9</sup> Obviously this myth refers most generally to concerns about giving foreigners the right to cross America's borders—suspicion about the wisdom of the exception noted in chapter 4—but it also reveals a belief that Somalis (the very people who killed Maine soldiers ostensibly sent to help them) received easy access to America, unlike the ancestors of Lewiston's residents whose immigrant struggles are memorialized in family stories and the exhibitions of the local Museum LA. The difference between the two waves of immigrants to Lewiston rests on the claim that whereas French Canadians came to work, Somalis came for security, which makes the latter's presence in the community less legitimate because it is not based on a commitment to economic productivity.

In 2009, the Museum LA, whose mission is to tell "the story of work and community in Lewiston-Auburn," agreed to mount a collaborative exhibit on the history of immigration to Lewiston, using as its core the exhibition *The Somali Bantu Experience: From East Africa to Maine*, created by Somali Bantu community members, my students, and myself for the Colby College Museum of Art. The exhibition for the Museum LA, called *Rivers of Immigration: From the Jubba to the Androscoggin*, included immigrant stories from other newcomers as well as Somalis and an immigration timeline that charted the history of foreign arrivals in Lewiston over the past two centuries. For museum staff, the goal was visibly to place the Somali arrivals within a single timeline of immigration to Lewiston that included the earlier wave of French

Canadians, a risky move for the museum because some Lewiston residents found it offensive to place the Somali immigrant experience alongside the experiences of their hardworking parents and grandparents. As Mayor Macdonald explained in one of his editorials, “equating safety-seeking Somalis with job-seeking French Canadians . . . so outraged Lewiston’s established community that even today this statement is held against the Somali population.”<sup>10</sup>

When the exhibition was announced, staff members received complaints from the museum’s regular visitors that their museum was showcasing the Somali arrivals. (One of the staff members mimicked a common response: “Too much Somalis! Everything’s about the Somalis!”) At the close of the year-long show, the museum director reflected that the exhibit successfully challenged the myth that Somalis, as refugees, had an easy and direct trip to the United States, where everything was arranged for their care. After acknowledging that although she continues to hear “the same shpiel, that they’re taking all the welfare meant for our people” from her Franco-American neighbors and family, she said,

Those who have gone through the exhibit have learned from it. I gave a tour to a group who said, “Wow, we didn’t realize they’d been through so much.” They don’t know. No one’s ever explained it to them. . . . [Our museum visitors] didn’t have any idea they spent time in refugee camps and how horrible it was. They didn’t know about the war, about the loss, the horror. . . . Viewers never realized how hard they had it in their country and why they had to leave. Genocide was never on their radar. Rape was never on their radar.

Her staff assistant interjected, “All the stories about walking for hundreds of miles. They thought they just got on a plane and came straight here! Having to stay in refugee camps for years, people didn’t know that. That was a big learning curve. People don’t know. They don’t know that story. The news doesn’t tell them. The news just says, 2,000 Somalis arrived. They didn’t know they went somewhere else first and didn’t just come here directly.”<sup>11</sup> And almost no one realized that Somali refugees must repay the full cost of their airfare (with mandatory travel on American carriers). Many thus arrive in the United States already thousands of dollars in debt, paying off their travel loan for years and years after resettlement.

Criticizing the border crossing into America of Somalis in search of security raises a fundamental question about the basis of humanitarianism. Under debate here is the question of who has the right to mobility and who has the right to residence in the United States. It is difficult not to interpret these debates within a broader racialized, imperialist frame that positions Somalia as a

chaotic African country of uncivilized, irresponsible people, as implied in the quote that opened this section, who destroyed their own country and killed the Americans sent to rescue them. The racialized imperialist lens thus sees Somalis as illegitimate invaders whose mobility is not motivated by the values of hard work and personal sacrifice that Lewiston's citizens believe defined the earlier generation of French Canadian immigrants. The obvious result is myths 2–5, which insist that Somalis are accessing resources to which they should not be entitled.

## 2. SOMALIS ARE DRAINING THE WELFARE COFFERS.

In the words of “Liam,” in his online post in response to a January 30, 2010, *Sun Journal* article about Lewiston's experience with refugees, “My family came here without a dime in their pocket. There was no welfare system to leech off. They had to make it work and they did. They made Lewiston/Auburn what it is today. They didn't do it so refugees could rape our system till it's dry.” Liam's comment is so commonly expressed by Lewiston's residents that local newspapers have published several articles investigating the use of welfare by Somalis, the most recent of which included a link to the economic impact study I did with Ismail Ahmed in which we used Freedom of Information Act requests to estimate how much money Somalis in Lewiston were actually receiving in welfare payments (including GA, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families or TANF, and food stamps) in comparison with the rest of the population.<sup>12</sup>

Allegations about Somali use of welfare condenses two common arguments: that Somalis are moving to Maine because it has more generous welfare benefits (a sentiment endorsed by Governor LePage and Mayor Macdonald) and that Somalis are taking welfare resources away “from our people, the ones who really need it.” Since everyone but Somalis seems to find it incredible that Africans would choose to move to Maine, a cunning effort to access welfare benefits offers a more likely sounding reason and places Lewiston's newest immigrants in contrast to the previous wave of Franco-Americans, who moved to the city to work rather than to receive welfare. Sadiq has become increasingly annoyed by the question he most consistently receives: “Why did you come to Maine?” “No matter what you say,” he tells me, “there is only one right answer.” In one conversation I overheard with a hostile administrator of a doctor's office with whom he was negotiating for Somali Bantu translators, Sadiq showed his frustration to the standard question by asking the administrator, testily, “Why are you asking me this question when you have already decided the answer?” Next to myth no. 1, this claim was the most frequent criticism I heard about Somalis during my years of research, many of whom

cited the bloggers who post online comments to newspaper articles when I asked for verification of their claims.

The data (obtained through Freedom of Information Act requests and records maintained by the city of Lewiston) reveal that after heavy use of GA funds in the early years of their migration to Lewiston, by 2010 Somalis drew welfare at lower rates than the rest of the population. During 2001, the first year of refugee arrivals in Lewiston, refugees accounted for half the GA budget (which, as noted earlier, had been cut in half that year from the previous year), then 40 percent of the next year's budget, and 35 percent of the following year's budget before dropping over the rest of the decade to 16 percent in 2009. City officials state that no one who qualified for assistance from the city was ever turned away, or, in other words, that Somalis are not taking all the available resources for emergency support. In 2009, noncitizens (who are mostly adult refugees) received 6.8 percent of TANF expenditures in Lewiston-Auburn, and 5.4 percent of TANF expenditures in Androscoggin County, as well as 3 percent of the food stamp budget in Lewiston-Auburn and 2.1 percent of the food stamp budget for Androscoggin County. Recognizing that children of Somali refugees are citizens and thus not counted as noncitizens, these statistics suggest that Somali families draw assistance more or less in proportion to their demographic representation.<sup>13</sup> While Somalis do acknowledge that immediate access to assistance through the GA office enabled their resettlement in Lewiston, the facts indicate that claims about their long-term dependence on welfare are wildly exaggerated.

To confront the persistent distortion of the facts by private citizens as well as public figures, Maine's DHHS prepared a document, "The Real Facts," that reported the following in 2010:

- Maine's maximum TANF benefit is \$485 a month, which is the lowest in New England. When combined with food stamps, recipients reach only 65 percent of the federal poverty level.
- Over 70 percent of Mainers who receive TANF do so for less than a year, and 85 percent receive TANF for less than two years. Only 4 percent of recipients have received TANF for over five years, most of whom are permanently disabled.
- Over a five-year period, five times more recipients left Maine each month than the number who arrived and received benefits.<sup>14</sup>

The DHHS point person for refugee benefits in Lewiston is clear that everyone receives benefits according to their eligibility: "I know what the guidelines are and I know the verification process and I know people are not coming in here getting benefits they are not entitled to. Only those who are eligible

are getting assistance.” When non-Somali clients whose TANF benefits are reduced or denied because of household changes blame Somalis for their loss of benefits, he patiently explains that “everyone is getting exactly what they’re eligible for and Somalis don’t get any more than anyone else.” He is frustrated by the accusations that somehow Somali eligibility impacts the eligibility of other Mainers, and when I suggest it may reflect a perception of a zero-sum game—the more they get, the less there is for me—he replies, “It’s not about the division of resources. It’s about prejudice.” The anger derives not only from a belief that Somalis are using up welfare benefits not meant for them, but also about the fact that Somali immigrants have the right to be eligible for benefits in the first place.

Whether or not they draw welfare, many of my Somali friends are embarrassed by the perception that they are dependent on welfare and that their use of welfare is somehow illegitimate. In a 2010 conversation with Somali Bantu teenagers about what they most enjoyed and most disliked in Lewiston, many participants mentioned their shame about the perception of Somalis as welfare cheats. Some students had even demanded that their parents stop using food stamps because they were being attacked at school as welfare users with taunts like, “My dad bought you those shoes!” In 2012, a Somali Bantu college student recounted his humiliation in a high school government class when the teacher staged a debate about welfare. Students lined up to denounce welfare as an unfair entitlement program for lazy people. My friend, the eldest of five boys raised by a single, illiterate, non-English-speaking refugee mother who fed her family with food stamps and lived in subsidized housing, was shocked and mortified at their hostility. When the teacher asked if anyone in class was willing to mount a defense of welfare, my normally gregarious and confident young friend stared at the floor in mute shame. “How can they not understand what it’s like for people with no income? What are they supposed to do if there are no jobs?” he asked me. We discussed the sentiment that people who work and pay taxes are angry that their tax money supports others who don’t work. “So, if they cut welfare will people pay less taxes?” he asks, and I admit that a reduction in welfare would probably only translate into a minuscule tax decrease, if any. He was incredulous that anyone would want to “just cut off a struggling family with no job and say, ‘Too bad!’”

The myth about Somali welfare dependence is coupled with persistent claims that people see Somalis leaving stores with carts full of food they have been given for free. Even the superintendent of schools mentioned to me that Somalis “overbuying” in the supermarket was one of the common complaints he heard from local parents. Somali families often pool money to buy groceries in bulk, leaving local residents to speculate that people (presumably) on



welfare who can afford carts full of food must be receiving enormous welfare payments. Police officer Bill Rousseau, a member of Lewiston's downtown Community Resource Unit, laughed as he recounted police efforts to track down this rumor:

It's just like those stereotypes about the police. You know the story of the guy pulled up at the red light, and a police car drives up alongside him and puts on his lights, drives through the intersection, and turns into Dunkin' Donuts? When different groups come in there's a newness, an unknown, and the rumors start. You heard about that lady with the cart filled with food in the store? She said the government was giving her the food for free and they let her leave the store with all the food. Everyone saw it! Everyone was in the store that day! Everyone you talk to saw that happen! There must have been a huge line at the store that day! We looked into this story. It never happened! It's a bunch of crap! It's an urban legend. I arm myself with the facts. Less than 15 percent of the Somali population is on welfare. If you look at old Mainers, more of *them* are on welfare! We're seeing second- and even third-generation Mainers who are on welfare!

Like myths 4 and 5 below, the claims that Somalis live on welfare and somehow get more of it than local people encapsulate several sentiments about growing economic insecurity: that local people who worked hard their entire lives are being abandoned by their government as the local economy contracts and that instead of honoring its commitments to hardworking citizens the government is funding foreign nonproductive interlopers who should not have the right to receive assistance because they are not members of the community.

### 3. SOMALIS REFUSE TO WORK AND ARE NOT SEEKING JOBS.

A 2008 Maine Department of Labor (DOL) report estimated that the unemployment rate for Somalis in Maine was around 50 percent, setting off a firestorm of accusations that Lewiston's high poverty level resulted from Somalis unwilling to look for jobs because of their happy dependence on welfare.<sup>15</sup> Since employment is seen as the path to economic self-sufficiency, city officials have been particularly concerned about how to employ Somalis with limited English and literacy skills, a concern that became acute in middecade when state officials inexplicably missed a deadline for providing information to the federal government that would have allowed the city to apply for special federal funds for refugee-targeted job skills training programs.<sup>16</sup>

Lewiston's challenging economic environment means that concerns about jobs resonate powerfully. As Mary LaFontaine, the director of Lewiston's

CareerCenter, suggested to me, an unemployment rate of 50 percent is probably accurate for the downtown population more generally, not just the Somalis, due to a regional lack of low-skilled jobs: “We do not have [enough] low-skilled or unskilled labor jobs here. All our jobs are computer-based and high-tech jobs. Even Walmart uses computers in the warehouse to manage the goods. . . . We don’t have a meat manufacturer. There is no garment sewing industry. We don’t have jobs that can be easily shown with visual cues. This is putting our population at risk.”<sup>17</sup> The DOL report also acknowledged that employed Somalis receive lower wages than other workers, contributing to the perception that the Somali presence accentuates unemployment levels by ensuring more competition for the lowest-skilled jobs.

Complaints about Somalis in the job market even extend into school classrooms. During a visit to *The Somali Bantu Experience* museum exhibit at Colby College Museum of Art by Lewiston’s junior high school, I overheard a teacher say, sotto voce in a roomful of Somali students looking at a photograph of a smiling Somali Bantu parent at his post in L.L.Bean’s order fulfillment center, “He took a job away from our people.” The child of a Somali friend reported to her mom that her fifth grade teacher says she should not have been allowed to come to America because her parents are taking jobs and resources away from “real Americans.” While the child is confused about what it means to be a real American, the adults in the room have all heard this complaint many times. In a no-win assessment that echoes American complaints about immigrants more generally, residents decry Somali use of welfare because of a supposed aversion to work while simultaneously accusing Somalis of taking away jobs from local citizens.

Evidence from Somali enrollment in job training programs, use of the city’s CareerCenter, the rush to seasonal work, the large number of new Somali-owned businesses, and the constant requests at Aliyow’s, the store I frequent, for help with job applications indicate that refugee community members are eager to find jobs. One of the most common complaints from the ELL adult education teachers is the inconsistency in attendance of their students because their classes empty as students flock to short-term seasonal jobs at L.L.Bean, a wreath-making company, coastal hotels, and to the Cultivating Community nonprofit farming project.<sup>18</sup> While seasonal jobs cut into the ability of Somalis to attend ELL classes consistently, refugees with limited English also tend to get the most demanding, physically grueling jobs, which often leave them too exhausted to attend English classes. A vicious cycle ensues, as limited English translates into limited job opportunities, ensuring that refugees with limited English will only be able to get short-term, arduous work.<sup>19</sup>



FIGURE 5.1 Nur Libah at his post in L.L.Bean, 2008. Photograph by Catherine Besteman.

Abdiya is typical of many women: she attends adult ed ELL classes to improve her English, applies for every seasonal job available even when a successful application means suspending her English classes, joined an intensive job skills training program in computer literacy and workplace expectations, visits the CareerCenter to learn about new job possibilities, and yet, despite her obvious intelligence and work ethic, cannot even find a permanent job as a housekeeper. After being told by a potential employer that her lack of a GED and advanced computer skills makes her unqualified for a housekeeper job, she asked me, “Why do I need a high school degree and advanced computer skills to clean hotel rooms?” At Somali Bantu community meetings, the desperate need to find jobs dominated most of the discussions I attended in 2006–8, when people regularly asked me to tell people in Lewiston that since they used to be farmers they are hard workers who can do any kind of physical labor. At a 2007 meeting with a school administrator, a parent begged the school to offer Somali parents simple jobs like grass cutting, but the administrator responded that the school requires literacy even for gardening. The parent explained that, like many others, he had applied for many jobs, but no one would hire him because of his lack of English and prior work experience in America. “How will I ever get a job without prior work experience and

with only one hour of ELL class a day?” he asked, which the Somali translator augmented, for clarity, “He’s in a catch-22!” Gesturing at the huge vacant mill across the river from his store, the Somali Bantu owner of Aliyow’s store told me, “I thought President Obama promised to reopen the workplace if he got elected. Well, I’ve been waiting for that factory to reopen. It’s been a year since Obama said that and it hasn’t happened. Everyone here would work there” (a sentiment my friend undoubtedly shares with many non-Somali residents).

Addressing the high unemployment rate in the face of evidence that Somalis are avidly seeking jobs, the DOL report and subsequent research by an anthropology class at Bates College attempted to define the barriers to employment specifically faced by Somalis in Lewiston, offering explanations that resonate with accounts from career training and job development professionals as well as Somali job seekers like Abdiya.<sup>20</sup> As one would expect, employers say they fear language, cultural, and religious differences, expressing concern about the potential for miscommunication and that daily prayers and a different conception of time and work expectations will interrupt work schedules. CareerCenter director Mary LaFontaine argues that she can train any employer to work with limited English speakers and accommodate things like praying, but few employers seem willing to try. Although L.L.Bean regularly hires Somalis as seasonal workers, outfitting them with audio devices that provide work instructions in Somali, Walmart and other large employers have resisted such technologies.<sup>21</sup> When in 2009 the city of Lewiston funded a special job skills training program for refugees, 180 Somalis (including Abdiya) completed 144 hours of training before transitioning to the Work Ready program for another seven weeks, after which they were supposed to be able to get jobs.<sup>22</sup> But the trainer, Ismail, says, “Even after all this training they still weren’t able to get jobs! Not even entry-level jobs that they are perfectly capable of doing, like laundry, housekeeping, warehousing.” He tried to negotiate with Walmart for warehouse jobs, but the store insisted that Somalis had to start as cart pushers, cleaning up and organizing the shopping carts, and that they would only hire a few but not a group. After years of working in Lewiston to help Somalis find employment, he eventually abandoned the city in frustration. Noting other cities where Somalis have been able to move quickly into entry-level jobs, Ismail says, “My biggest frustration [in Lewiston] is with employers. They set a bar, and I train the workers to meet that bar. At first, they said Somalis had to have working English to qualify to apply for jobs. Okay. I train them to have working English. Then employers say they need a GED, or an algebra test. They create competencies for us to follow, and we follow it, and then they change their expectations. Then they blame Somalis for not wanting to work!” Reflecting Ismail’s experience, numerous Somali friends, like Ab-

diya, believe that GED requirements for housekeeping and custodial jobs are a disguised way of rejecting Somali applicants.

After years of training Somalis and Somali Bantus in work-ready programs, Ismail summarized his frustration with local businesses: “They don’t want us here. They don’t want to hire us. The idea is to frustrate us. It is the open secret of hiring here in Lewiston. They advertise a job, you go and apply, and the job disappears, or has new requirements, or they are too busy to deal with you, or they aren’t taking applications at that time. The employers are resentful that Somalis are trying to get jobs, and they just want them to go away.” After working with refugee resettlement in Lewiston, Cheryl Hamilton took a job with RefugeeWorks, a nonprofit dedicated to employment training and initiatives for resettled refugees.<sup>23</sup> She too expresses frustration that the ORR-mandated path to rapid economic self-sufficiency overlooks racism and discrimination and offers local communities and resettled refugees no assistance to confront these barriers. She insists that the relevant question should be “How does discrimination affect employment?” rather than “How should refugees get more jobs?”

The Bates College study offered suggestions for how local employers could be more proactive about hiring Somalis, including hiring translators, offering better training programs, scheduling work breaks in conjunction with prayer times, offering greater flexibility for family needs, and more. Predictably, their report was lambasted in a hostile editorial in the *Twin City Times* titled “Employers Should Relax Standards to Hire Somalis,” which mocked the Bates study for suggesting “that employers should ignore requirements for speaking English, pay for mediators and translators; relax their application process; and abandon standard workweek hours to make it easier to hire Somalis.”<sup>24</sup> A flurry of op-eds, editorials, and conversations that pilloried the Bates study as pandering to ungrateful refugees dominated the newspapers and private talk for months.

In her coverage of the Advice for America conference, the Lewiston *Sun Journal’s* managing editor expressed similar disgust at the suggestion by conference participants that the problem with Somali employment resulted from employer discrimination rather than refugee resistance to work:

There was a real focus that businesses must share a greater responsibility for integrating the new Mainers into the workforce by providing child-care, transportation and other amenities to ease the step from welfare to work. . . . There was, at the end of the day, a platform of recommendations developed that put the responsibility of peaceful integration at the feet of existing communities, not that of newcomers. That, instead of immigrants

stepping into this land of opportunity and making their own way as pioneers, that there is a great need to develop more networks to cocoon and protect immigrants when they arrive and for years afterward.<sup>25</sup>

While the view that employers should find ways to accommodate Somali employees largely failed to gain traction in Lewiston, Somalis found multiple ways to earn a living in addition to unskilled wage labor jobs, especially by creating new businesses and finding cultural broker, translator, and caseworker jobs. Dozens of Somalis started businesses as store and café owners, butchers, truck drivers, and importers, or, informally, as accountants, child care providers, caterers, and healers. Those who work as cultural brokers, caseworkers, and translators for the local schools, hospitals, and mental health care and social services agencies often find their opportunities for upward mobility constrained, leaving job trainers like Ismail frustrated that with the grant funding that came into Lewiston over the 2001–10 decade in part to support outreach to Somali refugees, so little of it was used for capacity building for the refugees themselves, who remained caseworkers and translators on an hourly wage: “There is no progress in the workplace for Somalis [here]. No upward mobility,” he complained.<sup>26</sup>

I watched as the careers of several Somali Bantu friends employed as caseworkers suffered from a combination of no training and what Ismail calls “microsupervision.” One bright, ambitious friend was hired as an outreach coordinator to do “social marketing” to the refugee community for a community assistance agency’s programs, but received no training or mentoring in agency expectations. With no clear instructions, he interpreted his job to mean community caseworking, so he spent his days in an exhausting whirlwind, helping refugee families with everything from rent negotiations with landlords to parent-teacher meetings about discipline problems at school. An older white woman at the agency shook her head as she told me that because the agency provided no guidance or training, my friend looked incompetent because he was always running around trying to solve daily problems rather than building programs of social outreach.

Another quiet, hardworking friend landed his dream job as a caseworker at a medical office while he studied nursing at the local college, but became increasingly unsettled as his colleagues constantly questioned and challenged his interpersonal style. The only male, Muslim, and person of color in his unit, he found it difficult to adjust to a work environment where his female colleagues went out drinking together after work, talked about their boyfriends and what they did with them on the weekends, and “kicked each other in the ass” (a phrase he learned from his coworkers). Because he doesn’t participate

in these activities (explaining to them that he is a quiet, religious person who doesn't drink, is uncomfortable sharing private stories about his wife, and will never be able to kick his supervisor in her ass) his colleagues repeatedly filed complaints against him for "refusing to be a team player" and for "poor workplace social skills." The office eventually fired him for his "inability to integrate into office culture." Other friends tell me about how their supervisors stand over them while they type e-mails to ensure they are not attending to personal business or gaming. Ismail jokes in frustration, "We're trying to learn to type, not to play FreeCell! We are not the ones they should be watching!"

Idris's family provides a snapshot of typical employment. In 2010, Isha worked as a farmer during the growing months in addition to her informal activities as a child care provider and healer. Idris worked as a translator in the hospital, a parent liaison-translator in local schools, and a translator-caseworker for a mental health agency while taking classes toward a social work degree at the local college. Only the caseworker position was salaried; the others were based on an hourly wage and offered no opportunity for further training or career development. Idris's wife Fatuma volunteered at the Somali Bantu Youth Association as a mentor. Idris's younger brother Iman worked evenings at Tambrands and seasonally at L.L.Bean in hourly wage jobs while attending school and volunteering in the Somali Bantu community office; another brother, Bashir, worked as a community volunteer for the Somali Bantu community office, and cousins Garad and Mohamed held hourly wage jobs, respectively, as a cart pusher at Walmart and a food services worker at Bowdoin College. The wives of Bashir, Garad, and Mohamed cared for their preschool-aged children at home.

The DOL report failed adequately to capture the work of women who care for small children, some forms of seasonal employment, out-of-town employment, newly arrived Somalis still completing their ELL courses, and Somalis in job training programs, high school, and college. It also made no attempt to acknowledge the thousands of hours of free and volunteer work like translating, casework, chauffeuring, child care, or wedding and festival catering that Somalis do all the time for each other. It did not include the grant-funded projects run by community members through community-based organizations, nor does it recognize the volunteer time Somali community members spend running youth sports programs; holding citizenship, tutoring, and adult literacy classes; and staffing the Somali and Somali Bantu community offices for troubleshooting and assistance (discussed in chapter 7). The DOL report also did not include the time Somalis donate to the city, through participating in the numerous focus groups of researchers and other organizations, giving (uncompensated) presentations to local organizations and schools, and volunteering in support of other city projects.

Aware of the negative stereotype that the refugee community are welfare dependents, Somali Bantu leaders have begun placing ads and articles in the local newspapers to showcase their grant-funded and volunteer programs, attempting to counter the insistence that wage labor is the only labor worth counting as work and to demonstrate the wide variety of ways in which they are working, “giving back,” and participating in civic initiatives. Nevertheless, when Robert Macdonald announced in 2011 that he was running for mayor, he told the local newspaper that he intended to be aggressive about jobs and welfare in his campaign: “Lewiston taxpayers can no longer afford to support people who are unable or refuse to support themselves. If you come to Lewiston, come with a job or a sponsor—not with your hand out.”<sup>27</sup> Everyone knew whom he was talking about.

#### 4. SOMALIS GET FREE APARTMENTS FROM THE GOVERNMENT.

Fears about housing, along the lines of the often-heard claim that “Somalis are taking all the apartments and there won’t be anything left for our people,” reflect concerns similar to fears about welfare: that Somalis are illegitimate claimants who will use up a scarce resource (either low-rent public housing, low-income housing vouchers, or Section 8 assistance) that should be reserved for local people. And, like welfare, some people claim that generous Section 8 housing subsidies lure more Somalis to Lewiston, as mayoral candidate Robert Macdonald asserted during a 2011 debate: “Many are unemployable, as they are unskilled, illiterate and speak little or no English. And what is the response from our city leaders? Avoid confrontational issues and encourage more of these layabouts to settle here by providing new and more spacious Section 8 housing.”<sup>28</sup> Four weeks later Macdonald was elected mayor.<sup>29</sup>

Many Somali refugees do receive housing subsidies, paying rent at the same scale as everyone else. Housing assistance is available in the form of housing units that come with a subsidy as well as vouchers that provide rent support but allow families to choose where to live. The latter are in great demand and the program has maintained a waiting list since before the Somalis arrived. The director of Lewiston Housing Authority, Jim Dowling, estimated that in 2010 Somalis held perhaps a fifth of the available vouchers, noting that the pressure in this program is real but primarily due to unpredictable fluctuations in federal funding from year to year. The biggest change in the low-income housing scene in Lewiston is in subsidized housing, which never had full occupancy until Somalis began moving to town. About the positive benefits of full occupancy, Dowling observed, “A vacant unit collects no subsidy. When a family moves in, the subsidy starts to flow, and those funds enter the community and circulate.”<sup>30</sup>



The director of Trinity Jubilee, Kim Wettlaufer, whose work ensures a detailed knowledge of downtown demographics, offered an additional suggestion in a conversation about why the shift to nearly full occupancy might anger local people. Low vacancy rates have hindered the formerly popular practice of apartment hopping, whereby some tenants in downtown apartments avoid paying rent by falling behind on rent payments while staying in an apartment until they receive an eviction notice, then hopping to another apartment to do the same thing. Because there was so much available housing, it was an easy rent-aversion strategy. So, in a way, the Somali influx has made it more difficult for other Lewiston residents to shirk on paying rent.

#### 5. SOMALIS GET FREE CARS FROM THE GOVERNMENT.

When I asked Mary LaFontaine, the director of Lewiston's CareerCenter, about rumors she hears most often about Somalis, she immediately responded, "The car thing! All the time!" She recounts that she was at a car dealer recently and even the dealer was complaining about the Somalis getting free cars. She says she told him, "Knock it off! They don't get free cars! How can you think that?" LaFontaine's observation is echoed by GA director Sue Charron, who similarly expressed her exasperation with the persistence of this rumor. In response to the questions she regularly receives about new cars given to the refugees, Sue Charron sometimes says, "Oh, we give the new models to the Americans and the used models from last year to the refugees." People stop and look at her for a minute before realizing the joke. "Ask me a stupid question and I'll give you a stupid response," she says, with an innocent smile.

Even though the myth of free cars seems ridiculous, rumors are rampant that the government gives Somalis free cars as well as vouchers for cars, car repairs, and gas, and the blogs are filled with comments asking why Somalis have cars if they are refugees and receive welfare. Reports in the paper of car accidents involving Somalis always provoke a slew of comments that they should not be allowed to drive at all.

Along with their use of cell phones, the visible fact of Somalis driving cars inspires enormous ire in people whose comments suggest they believe that refugees either do not have the right to drive cars or should not have the money to buy a car. Driving is envisioned as a right of citizenship that should not be available to refugees. Cars imply ownership and property, and if Somalis are recipients of charity, as the myths insist they are, perhaps they are visibly to appear disenfranchised (by walking rather than driving). Since Lewiston has a poor public transportation system, car ownership dramatically enhances freedom of movement and independence. Cars imply mobility, which is a form of freedom, but also invisibility, which is frightening in an age of terrorism panics.

Since American culture is car culture, I wonder if Somali car ownership implies that Somalis smuggled themselves into American culture without passing through the appropriate stages: citizenship, English capability, pulling themselves up through poverty to property ownership. Does their car ownership make visible their illicit entry through the back door as refugees by an inappropriate appropriation of American culture? Is car ownership a material signification, a visible indication, of the appropriation of American culture by the illegitimate, who are first expected to exhibit gratitude and patriotism?

In 2010, the *Sun Journal* ran a front-page article, with color photos, about the hearing of a Somali Bantu woman who had accidentally hit and badly injured a student in the high school parking lot. Buried inside the paper was an article about an arraignment of a local man caught running a meth lab in his house. “Since when does a car accident outrank a meth lab in the middle of town?” asked Kim Wettlaufer, answering his own question, “When it’s a Somali driver!”

#### 6. SOMALIS ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR A RISE IN CRIME.

Early in the decade, concerns about Somali criminality rested on claims that since Somalis had destroyed their own country, they would do the same to America. By the end of the decade, the significance of their foreignness as a route to criminality seemed to give way to popular associations of blackness and crime. A front-page headline in the December 17, 2009, issue of the *Sun Journal* screamed, in huge letters, “Police Investigate Somali Attacks.” The article reported a number of assaults on people downtown by Somali boys, introducing the word “gang” to describe “the Somali attacks.” Within hours, Somali Bantu friends in Lewiston e-mailed and phoned me, upset about the allegations in the article, which was followed the next day with an editorial that said, “We are angered and disappointed by revelations Wednesday that roving bands of Somali youngsters are mugging vulnerable white people in the area around Kennedy Park.” The online comments were, predictably, vicious, calling for deportation and insisting that Somalis were terrorists and a threat to national security. When I wrote to the paper’s managing editor to complain that no Somalis were interviewed for the article, that the article made no mention of the violence against Somalis (there had been numerous cases of assaults and dog attacks on Somalis),<sup>31</sup> and that the article was sensationalistic, she responded that people in the city had a right to know “that the trend of these Somali youth gangs was real. . . . If there were gangs in your neighborhood, wouldn’t you want to know?”<sup>32</sup>

The language about Somali gangs continued to simmer over the next year, resurging in a memo written by an investigator at one of the public housing

projects with a high percentage of Somali residents warning that Somali “GANG” activity was on the rise and listing the individual GANG names (GANG always appeared in caps in the memo). The memo, which was circulated in the school system, suggested that the police should be prepared for “some type of GANG war” in the upcoming months and that schoolteachers should be vigilant to report anything suspicious, setting off a wave of panic among some of the schoolteachers who did not regularly interact with Somali students and who, according to their ELL teacher colleagues, were afraid of Somali children.

When Janet Saliba, the woman who ran the after-school tutoring program for Trinity Jubilee, saw the memo, she realized that the “GANGS” listed in the memo were the names her charges used among themselves, one of which had even been adopted for the Somali girls’ soccer team. In a meeting of the community collaborative mentioned in chapter 4 that included social services staff and police officers, Janet challenged the use of the word “GANG” to describe Somali kids who were, she admitted, engaging in bad behavior. “I know these kids, their struggles, what they’ve been through, what their parents have been through, how hard they are trying. Most of them don’t have dads. They are vulnerable kids trying to be tough, and making some bad choices.” She described the derivation of the local “GANG” names, explaining that it was kids’ play that became something else entirely when the police and the public adopted the culturally symbolic term, stigmatizing the kids by connecting them to violent images of gangs in popular culture. Acknowledging that some of the kids behaved as bullies and commanded younger kids to do their bidding, she cautioned against using the term “GANG” but did not reveal that the kids who belonged to the so-called gangs were the very kids tutored by several of the police officers who volunteered in her after-school tutoring program.

One day in 2010 as Janet and I sat chatting in my car outside Trinity while kids were arriving for the after-school program, a Somali Bantu boy wearing a hoodie over an oversized T-shirt came up and pounded on the window, yelling, “Hey! Whatcha doin’? Open up!” Janet opened the door and told him she’d be in soon, to which he responded, “You better! I gonna beat you up!” Janet laughed and told him to tell Kim she’d be inside in a minute. The boy returned a few minutes later, pounding on the window again while yelling, “Kim gonna kill you if you don’t get in here!” Chuckling at the idea of Kim killing anyone, Janet recognized that the boy was eager to connect with her after his long day in school. Making sure she was watching him, the boy picked up a rock and threw it at a passing school bus, hitting the back bumper. As Janet opened the door to tell him to knock it off, he ran into the street to retrieve the rock. Janet turned to me and said, “Being the tough kid, throwing a

little rock, and then picking it up.” We had just witnessed exactly what she was expressing in her cautionary lecture against the use of the word “GANG” to describe the kids’ antics. She suspects the average white Lewistonian watching that kid would not see how hard he was working to look tough on the outside, would not see the sweet kid he actually was, would not take note that he threw the rock gently and picked it up after it bounced off the bus, but rather would likely only see a black youth in a hoodie throwing a rock at the school bus. In the community collaborative meeting, Janet was demanding that the police officers see through the performative swagger and faux violence to connect with kids rather than stereotype them.

The community resource police officers, in fact, were extremely receptive to Janet’s argument about the symbolic weight of the term “GANG” and attempted to dampen the semihysterical tone of the warning memo as well as injecting common sense into the tendency by some community leaders to see Somali youths as inherently dangerous. One officer told me that a top school official even asked for a daily police patrol to supervise the sidewalks and parking lot of the downtown elementary school when school let out for the day: “He talks about the school like it’s a war zone . . . but it’s just a couple of car keying incidents and the fights that break out on the way home. It’s only because they walk home in groups and sometimes a few start shoving at each other. The school is mostly Somali, so when fighting breaks out it’s mostly Somali kids who are fighting, but the reaction is: Oh! The Somali kids are fighting! Like it’s something different from other kids who fight.” Another officer agreed. “Kids have always fought, but now when Somali kids do it, it’s a catastrophe!”

Although the police attempted to dispel rumors about Somali crime and violence, rumors about Somali gangs, terrorism, and crime remained powerful even though actual crime statistics tell a totally different story. Overall crime rates were falling during the first decade of Somali immigration to Lewiston, and my scrutiny of county grand jury indictments gave no indication that Somalis were buoying the crime that did occur. While things began to change in 2011–12 with the entry of some juveniles into the system, during the first decade fears of Somali criminality were, like claims about their welfare dependence, wildly exaggerated.

#### 7. SOMALIS KEEP LIVE CHICKENS IN THEIR KITCHEN CUPBOARDS.

People who claim to know people who have seen kitchen cupboards turned into chicken coops keep this myth alive. Even though I initially thought this myth was too silly to include in our study, Rilwan insisted it was important because he heard it so often. This myth resonates with other accusations that Somalis are uncivilized, unprepared for life in America, that they sacrifice and

butcher animals in their backyards, and that their eating habits are filthy. For example, many families were mystified when a public health nurse who visited their homes berated them for eating with their hands from a communal bowl while sitting on the floor, which is the normal way for Somali families to eat together. One concerned father e-mailed me to ask if it is true that, in America, sharing food while sitting on the floor will hurt their children.

#### 8. SOMALIS REFUSE TO LEARN ENGLISH.

This rumor persists despite the fact that over 1,000 Somali-speaking children attend Lewiston schools and that hundreds of them flock to after-school homework help programs at Trinity Jubilee, the public library, a public housing community center, and in the schools. In their early years in Lewiston, Somali parents ran academic summer camps so their kids could continue to study English during the summer break. Because of the high demand for ELL classes at Lewiston Adult Education, the program is full and has a waiting list, and Somali adults are enrolling in ELL programs in neighboring cities. In a 2010 survey conducted by the community collaborative mentioned in chapter 4, 100 percent of Somali respondents said learning English was their top priority.

I found this myth particularly intriguing as it was often accompanied, in my conversations with Lewiston residents, by stories about Franco-American parents and grandparents who struggled with or never learned English, even as their children were learning English in school. The director of the Museum LA reminisced about how Lisbon Street used to be French-speaking because all the major stores ensured they had a French-speaking staff for their non-English-speaking customers. Many older residents, including Maine's first Franco-American governor, recall attending elementary Catholic schools where the only language spoken was French. Governor LePage even successfully fought to be allowed to take his entrance exam to a Maine college in French rather than English.

#### 9. SOMALIS REFUSE TO BECOME CITIZENS.

Refugees can apply for citizenship only after residing in the United States for five years, and when they hit the five-year mark many Somalis began pursuing the process although no local organizations offered assistance with citizenship applications until late in the decade.<sup>33</sup> The Somali Bantu Youth Association began offering classes in 2008, which were soon flooded with aspiring applicants. By 2010, hundreds of Somalis were enrolled in citizenship classes offered by three organizations at four different locations in the city. Citizenship tests must be taken in English, which means a massive amount of preparation for people whose English-language skills are poor. By the end of the decade I was always running into Somali Bantu friends shopping downtown while

listening through headphones to citizenship questions and answers, muttering to themselves things like, “Who is chief justice of the Supreme Court John Roberts” or “President die vice president die who rules speaker of the house.”<sup>34</sup>

Allegations about citizenship are, again, about questioning the legitimacy of border crossing as a form of humanitarianism, as well as the fear that Somalis are not invested in adopting American cultural practices and norms, discussed further in myth no. 10.

#### 10. SOMALIS REJECT AMERICAN CULTURE AND DO NOT WANT TO PARTICIPATE IN COMMUNITY LIFE.

Lewiston’s newly elected mayor, Robert Macdonald, got himself into hot water in one of his first major postelection interviews in 2012, when, referring to Somali immigrants, he told a BBC reporter, “You come and accept our culture, and you leave your culture at the door.” He went on to clarify: “Don’t try to insert your culture, which obviously isn’t working, into ours, which does.”<sup>35</sup> As with their response to the Letter a decade earlier, proimmigrant activist groups were quick to criticize the mayor’s remarks, although the mayor’s views captured a sentiment shared by many others in Lewiston. Complaints about the lack of Somali participation in American cultural and community life range across a wide landscape but seem to focus most acutely on aesthetics, assumptions about gender norms, and visible participation in civic life. This final myth encapsulates a variety of claims about Somali failures to assimilate, evincing what Ismail Ahmed calls “cultural insecurity” produced by fears about difference.

Public harassment of Somali women for their dress has declined over the decade, although distress about their continued practice of wearing hijab dominated the early years of Somali settlement in Lewiston when passersby regularly criticized women out in public. Women initially did not understand what people were yelling at them when they walked their kids to school and shopped downtown, but soon learned the meaning of phrases like “Go home!” and “Dress like an American!” Remembering her feelings of shock and humiliation after being targeted in public during her first few months after moving to the United States, Abdiya asked me, “Why did they bring us here if they don’t want us?” The teacher of one young Somali Bantu friend told her that she was being “a hater” by wearing a head scarf to school. Almost all the Somali Bantu women I know have been yelled at in public because of their dress.

Concerns about women’s dress signal broader unease about Somali gender norms, which many non-Somalis assume are patriarchal and sexist. Blog comments state that non-Somali women are afraid of dealing with male Somali customers in their workplace or engaging with Somali men if they enter Somali

stores. Several female teachers told me that they were warned by their white superiors to expect sexist behavior from male Somali youths, although none ever did. Mayor Macdonald stated in one of his news columns what many others discussed more privately: "Living in America, the Somalis must conform to our culture. Here men and women are equal. In many places of employment, women are the boss. Somali men will have to get over it and conform. There can only be one dominant central culture: American."<sup>36</sup> Assumptions about Somali patriarchy and female submission make the visible difference of Somali women's dress an affront to American sensibilities regarding gender.<sup>37</sup>

The anger about women's dress styles, seen as an explicit rejection of American culture and liberal values, gradually shifted to the aesthetics of Somali stores, most of which cover their windows with colorful fabrics (including women's clothing) and sell products labeled in languages other than English. Lisbon Street hosts as many Somali-owned stores as other businesses and offices, causing non-Somali residents to grumble that it has become "Little Somalia" in a not-quite-hostile takeover. The chamber of commerce is concerned about complaints from Lewiston's non-Somali residents that they are uncomfortable entering or passing the Somali stores because their windows are obscured by fabric and their entryways filled with idle men. People say things like, "I don't know what goes on inside those stores," and "I'm afraid if I go into one they'll harass me." A 2010 editorial in the *Twin City Times* decrying Lewiston's downtown as "an inner-city ghetto of low income, non-working residents" asked readers, "Do you stop to peek in one of the 'New Mainer' shops with their windows completely covered by fabric? No, you hop in your car and get the heck out of there!"<sup>38</sup> To address the situation, the chamber of commerce approached a number of Somali store owners to ask if they would be willing to make changes, such as removing the window coverings and posting photographs of items for sale in order to make their stores more legible to non-Somalis and to make Lisbon Street look more like an American shopping center. Thus, although store ownership is a robust form of participation in civic life, instead many of Lewiston's residents experienced Somali aesthetics as an unacceptable intrusion of Somali culture into Lewiston's downtown civic and commercial culture.

The small businessman in American political and economic iconography stands as the quintessential American, the hero of the American economic story. But if so many Somalis are small business owners, then are they the heroes of the American story? How are they succeeding when so many others have failed? The only explanation is that they must be doing something illicit in their stores. Concerns about Somali stores spill over into accusations that Somalis do not shop at American-owned stores (except for the claims

about their full grocery carts at Walmart). As one woman complained during a conversation about Somali involvement in civic life, “I don’t see them at our restaurants! Where are they eating?”

As with store ownership, there are many indications that Somalis are embracing an active civic role, although perhaps not in ways non-Somalis grasp or accept. While Lewiston’s residents complain that Somalis remain isolated in their ethnic enclaves and do not attend the signature annual balloon festival, the Dempsey Challenge bicycle race, or high school sporting events, Somali efforts to engage in other civic ventures have faced resistance. Even though Somalis are perhaps 15–20 percent of the city’s population, at the end of their first decade in Lewiston the city school board still refused to provide interpreters for their meetings; the local school district still refused to allow the creation of ELL teacher-parent support groups despite urgent requests from teachers and Somali parents for such groups; and the city council refused to allow the appointment of noncitizen Somalis to city task forces despite their desire to serve (and recall that the federally designated downtown urban poverty zone initially refused to fund any grant proposals by Somali community action groups even though Somalis made up the majority of residents in the targeted zone).<sup>39</sup> Somalis had valiantly weathered being yelled at on public streets, publicly chastised as overconsumers in grocery checkout lines, and chased by loose dogs in public parks. They had responded calmly when their two mosques faced assaults: one by a disturbed white man who flung a frozen pig head into one mosque, and another by a businessman who threatened Somali Bantus at their mosque because he was angry about their use of his parking lot. They had endured the incredibly nasty comments that always accompanied local newspaper articles about Somali residents in Lewiston (until the newspaper altered the rules for posting responses). Somalis accepted invitations to participate in panel discussions and focus groups for city or social services agencies, and, as noted above, many donated countless hours to volunteer initiatives run by Somali community organizations. While Somalis may not always participate in community life in ways desired by other Lewiston residents, by the beginning of their second decade in Lewiston they had finally begun to claim the right to a public political voice. In a striking display of civic engagement, and after staying out of the spotlight during the protests over the Letter a decade earlier, Somalis led the response against Mayor Macdonald’s condescending remarks in 2012 about failed Somali culture and the need to assimilate by writing letters of complaint in the local newspaper, giving interviews to denounce the mayor’s comments, and organizing a protest march down Lisbon Street. Activism is, of course, a mark of democratic civic engagement.



### On the Role of the Foreigner

In her book *Democracy and the Foreigner*, Bonnie Honig argues that the point of philosophical and popular democracy origin stories involving foreigners is to resolve or make sense of the tensions and contradictions of the role of the foreigner, where the foreigner both redeems the democracy and threatens it, replenishes the democracy while taking from it. Foreigners appear in American democratic theory literature as the founders and renewers of America, the backbone of American exceptionalism as a nation based on consent, individualism, and liberty. In this literature, Honig writes, America needs foreigner-immigrants, who fulfill important roles in the popular versions of America's origin myths, including the myth of capitalist success, in which the foreigner-immigrant outworks everyone else as a devoted entrepreneur, affirming the possibility of upward mobility for others; the communitarian myth, in which the foreigner models community solidarity for those alienated by the predations of capitalism; the patriarchal family myth, in which immigrants renew traditional family values and gender roles; and the myth of liberalism, confirmed by the desire of the foreigner-immigrant to live in America. The four myths each contain within them threats as well: that the capitalist immigrant is an instrumentalist taker, only out for himself; that the communitarian immigrant self-isolates in an ethnic enclave; that the patriarchal immigrant imports illiberal traditional backward values; and that "their" naturalization threatens to overwhelm "us."<sup>40</sup>

If Honig's insights are right, then perhaps the myths about Somalis make sense if they emerge, in part, from a fear that Somalis are the renewing force that will displace those rendered impotent, disempowered, and atomized by Lewiston's long years of economic decline and marginalization. The very things for which Somalis are chastised—opening stores, buying cars, creating community organizations, trying to serve on task forces and participate in community meetings, demanding and demonstrating for their civil rights—suggest their potential power as the force of renewal and backbone of a new community. The myths then become a way to denounce Somalis as potential renewers by insisting on their status as guests, and specifically as recipients of charity, burdened by the gift of humanitarianism.

The myths promote hostility about allegations that Somali refugees are ungrateful beneficiaries of charity who refuse to fulfill the proper role of charity recipients. The contradictions created by the hostile resentment against Somalis for receiving charity because they are refugees, the hostile suspicion that Somali refugees do not want to participate in community life in the ways in which they are expected, and the hostile response to Somali efforts to

participate in community life on their own terms only makes sense if Somalis are, in fact, behaving as ingrates while receiving substantial charity.<sup>41</sup> For the myths to resonate, Somalis must be seen as receiving charity rather than benefits to which they are legally and legitimately entitled as full community members. Situating Somalis as charity recipients enables a community-wide response of what Derrida has called “hostipitality,”<sup>42</sup> the hostility that is always contained within hospitality, where, as Michael Herzfeld has shown, hospitality is an act of othering that implies a moral indebtedness on the part of the recipient and the expectation of eventual reciprocity.<sup>43</sup> Positioning Somalis as foreign, disempowered refugees burdens them as unworthy recipients of hospitality because dispossessed refugees are presumed to be unable to reciprocate.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, in return for charity, humanitarianism demands silence, dependence, and the renunciation of civic and political rights, an expectation that extends from the refugee camps to the new homes of resettled refugees, where their welcome demands an apolitical life of silence, docility, conformity, and unending gratitude.<sup>45</sup>

This is more than just conjecture. Somali failures to conform to American standards of etiquette, civility, and gratitude are a steady topic of complaint. A common question from the audience at public presentations offered by Somalis to explain their history is, “Are you grateful to be here?” People have suggested to me that Somalis should publish thank-you letters in the local newspapers to let other Lewiston residents know how grateful they are. The repeated failure of Somalis to participate in the annual Dempsey Challenge bicycle race and the balloon festival is interpreted as ingratitude to the host community (although bloggers express outrage that Somalis hold their own independence day celebration, but on Somali and not American independence day). Constant expressions of appreciation, including the ubiquitous use of words like “please” and “thank you” are abnormal in Somali speech, which heightens the perception that Somalis do not express their appreciation properly or enthusiastically enough. In Somali, Somalis say, “Give me that,” a matter-of-fact command that relies on clarity rather than some formulation like “Could you please pass me that?,” which to many Somalis sounds oddly and unnecessarily obsequious. That Somalis in stores or service centers sound demanding rather than gracious feeds talk about Somali pushiness and aggression in making demands, most especially the women.<sup>46</sup> In one of his editorials, Mayor Macdonald asked, “How do submissive Somali women turn into obnoxious customers at the grocery store cash register?” (In an effort not to appear racist, however, he suggests that “extremist” white liberals are to blame, for telling “submissive” Somali women, “Stand up for your rights!”)<sup>47</sup>

Concerns about standards of etiquette extend to other public spaces as well, such as school events, where Somali participants are maligned for talking during ceremonies and failing to observe cues to be silent. During the opening of Museum LA's *Rivers of Immigration* exhibit, people in the audience yelled "Shut up!" at the Somali Bantu dance troupe when some troupe members were talking among themselves while another member attempted to explain to the audience the meaning of the dance.

As Honig notes, the figure of the foreigner as a central figure for the story of American democracy is simultaneously ambivalent and frightening. In Lewiston, positioning Somalis as foreigners, in addition to as charity recipients, partitions them off from the community in another important way. The hostile discourses in Lewiston about charity for refugees mirror broader accusations about welfare in general, but with a slight twist. In Lewiston, the complaint about refugee use of welfare is that there will not be enough left over for "our people." The debate in Lewiston is not about whether welfare is good or bad; it is about whether or not refugee immigrants should count as community members who legitimately qualify for help.<sup>48</sup> It is about determining who belongs to the community, and thus complaining about refugee use of state assistance is easier if refugees are denied other forms of community membership, such as on task forces or parent school committees. Defining refugees as charity recipients thus ensures that they remain outside the community defined by moral responsibility.

The exclusion of Somalis from the moral community, and thus the community of legitimate welfare recipients, is deepened by the ways in which Somali support structures are visible to non-Somalis in Lewiston who express resentment and longing for such networks of care and mutual support. A wistful discourse has emerged among some of Lewiston's poorer residents at the sight of Somali sociality, which is obvious in public arenas where men gather every day on the sidewalks outside Somali shops to talk, and where women always shop in groups, care for each other's children, and constantly gather in each other's apartments. Listening to Somalis talking in an Adult Education class about solving a community issue by asking the elders to step in, a local non-Somali woman turns to a classmate and says, "I wish we had elders." A teacher in the Adult Education ELL program remarks that each new Somali arrival in Lewiston is embraced by resident Somalis, who offer help with shopping, transport, child care, and the challenges of settling into a new city. Everyone else in the Adult Education classes can see that every new Somali arrival in Lewiston instantly "has people," a display of conviviality that does not include them. The teacher wonders if her Somali students might be able to extend their welcoming efforts to other, non-Somali newcomers as well.

Kim Wettlaufer, the director of Trinity day shelter and food pantry, similarly notes the gulf between his Somali and non-Somali clients in their access to social support networks. One day when I was visiting Trinity, a very young white woman appeared at Kim's door to ask for help. She explained she was struggling to take care of her two special needs children. Apologetic and embarrassed about asking for help, she explained that her husband was unemployed, repeating several times, "I have no one to help me. I have no one." Kim sees that the strong Somali community support structures offer a palpable sense of community that many of his non-Somali clients utterly lack. This may be why it is so challenging for people to grasp that the overflowing shopping carts of Somalis represent the careful pooling of resources by many families who buy together in bulk and divide the food when they get home or that Somali car ownership is often the result of several families combining resources to purchase a car they share.<sup>49</sup> Perhaps the apparent vitality of the Somali community suggests something uncomfortable about the non-Somali community, provoking a backlash about "their" ability to benefit from "our welfare." Fears of gangs of Somali children relate to fears of being outnumbered. Each of the myths I list above speaks to Honig's four myths of the foreigner-renewer of American democracy, by insisting that Somali entrepreneurialism must be dangerous and related to illegitimate access to public resources, that Somali community structures are exclusionary, that Somali cultural and aesthetic practices are unacceptably traditional or disgusting, and that they did not struggle to get here and do not want to naturalize.

The fact of Somali physical difference as black people in a white city offers another unmistakable marker of their foreignness, and racist views obviously pervade the myths, especially in a country where welfare dependence and criminality have long been associated with blackness. Racial difference is where the unifying story of America as a nation of immigrants falters and breaks. African immigration has remained comparatively tiny since the era of the slave trade until recent years, which in the racial calculus of the contemporary United States positions Somali refugee immigrants as African Americans and not Euro-Americans who will assimilate into mainstream whiteness. Their blackness in U.S. racial ideology combined with their identity as "refugees" labels them as charity recipients rather than workers, positioning them within broader American popular discourses about lazy and criminal black people dependent on welfare, refusing to join mainstream (white) American culture.

Honig argues that democracy, like the history of immigration, is all about claiming rights, claiming participation, and insisting on voice, and is crafted and learned by fighting for voice and rights rather than through things like citizenship classes for immigrants.<sup>50</sup> She wonders whether myths of the

immigrant's value to the nation can be, in effect, repurposed for the benefit of a more expansive democracy rather than to shore up the nation, sharing a hopeful vision of democratic cosmopolitanism in which immigrants stretch political practice into a form of border-crossing democratic practice. Somali refugees in Lewiston reject the imposition of a localized subjectivity as charity recipients who ought to express gratitude and docility for the right to live in Lewiston, insisting, instead, that they have the right as human beings to live a decent life and to keep their (transnational) families safe. They argue that they are not responsible for the war that destroyed Somalia and do not need to be especially grateful to be living in the United States, where they are suffering and working hard to support families in Lewiston, Kenya, and Somalia. Somalis view the right to be mobile as a human right, not a humanitarian gift, and contest the idea that resettlement, which they feel they have worked very hard for, is a form of charity.

In addition to rejecting the presumption of gratitude, they also fight back against the imposition of a narrowly defined understanding of blackness in America, as well as the neoliberal calculus that defines economic productivity as the sole measure of human worth and individual autonomy and consumption as laudable goals. Through demonstrating alternative modes of blackness, alternative models of reciprocity, sharing, and collectivity, and a persistent insistence on mobility as normal to human life, as part of the largest group of African refugees in America, Somali and Somali Bantu refugee immigrants may very well begin to stretch democratic practice in ways foreseen by Honig. We shall return to these points in part III.