

These Are Our Kids

We moved here to save our lives. We didn't choose to come to America. We are refugees. We came here to find safety, so we could save the lives of our children, so our children could be safe. But our children are not safe here. We are terribly worried about them.

—Somali Bantu father in Lewiston

After one meeting where some of the younger community members and I attempted, unsuccessfully, to mediate with the breakaway faction responsible for the letter accusing the association of corruption, the young adults emerged frustrated and angry. One announced that he wanted nothing more to do with internal community politics, saying that the elders were behaving badly, incapable of good leadership, wasting everyone's time, and tearing things apart. He was walking away for good. But Idris responded, "There are so many people who really need help! We can't just leave it like this. We have to try to make it better and find a solution."

While the community association waged its campaign for self-representation and traditional counseling to mediate marital disputes, the English speakers in Idris's generation who worked as translators in the local schools and at

Trinity had a front-row seat to the challenges faced by children arriving from Kakuma and entering public schools in Lewiston. They saw firsthand their trajectories of adjusting to life in America—fashioning new identities relevant to the American context and traversing the vast cultural territory between their home lives and their school lives. They saw that the community elders utterly lacked the capacity to help their children navigate this new world.

Realizing that they were in the best position to work with youth, Idris and his peers created a new EBCO, the Somali Bantu Youth Association of Maine (SBYAM), to focus on youth development. As the Somali Bantu community association did previously, they started with a soccer program for young teens as well as a homework help program for older students, trying to fill afternoons and weekends with activities for Somali-speaking kids shut out of other options. One of their earliest objectives was to encourage a commitment to education, especially for girls. Concerned that not a single Somali Bantu student had graduated from high school by 2008 and that girls were routinely dropping out of high school to get married, SBYAM began in 2008–9 with meetings to encourage youths to focus on their studies and develop a life plan. One of their earliest meetings brought two dozen Somali Bantu teenage girls together for a discussion about the importance of setting career goals, delaying marriage until after high school, and resisting the allure of social media for connecting with boys. The board members all spoke earnestly about their willingness to intervene with parents who might be pressuring the girls to marry before graduating from high school. The meeting was both serious and hilarious, as the young male SBYAM presenter humorously warned about the ways in which boys try to get girls' attention through Myspace, Facebook, and texting: "He'll say, 'I love you, you are my everything!' So much sweet talk! 'Oooh, my sweetheart' . . . He'll promise you everything!" The assembled girls dissolved into giggles while sharing their experiences with precisely that sort of teenage seduction. Turning serious, the presenter implored them to understand the dangers of social media and the longer-term consequences of ignoring schoolwork in favor of flirting on Myspace and Facebook. Everyone started laughing all over again when one of the young male board members interjected to say he knew the girls spent all their time on social media because that was how he contacted them to invite them to this meeting.

As the straddling generation of their community, acknowledging the wisdom of their elders while recognizing the challenges to their leadership in the new context of life in America, SBYAM board members were walking a very fine line between respecting their elders while subverting their authority by resisting early marriage, insisting that girls finish school, taking on public positions of leadership in the community, and refusing to be drawn into petty

skirmishes over identity politics. In 2009–10, as SBYAM members began brokering the yawning cultural gap between non-English-speaking parents and their school-age children, refugee parents asked them for help with their children's behavior; other youth-oriented organizations sought them out for collaboration; and Somali and Somali Bantu adults alike began turning to them for help with gaining competency in American society. This chapter traces the terrain of parenting challenges, children's identity struggles, encounters between children and the juvenile justice system, racism, and culture change that the young adults who formed SBYAM attempted to mediate from 2009 to 2014.

“These Are Our Kids”

One June day in 2009, a group of seven SBYAM board members drove up to my house to work on a grant proposal. We sat around my dining room table for hours to hammer out a proposal to fund their soccer program and start a dance program. Trying to maintain their popular soccer program even when they were denied access to playing fields in Lewiston (because the fields had to rest or were claimed by other city sports leagues who received priority), they had rented an indoor soccer space at a facility near Portland the previous weekend at a cost of \$300 per hour, which they paid for themselves. They hoped a grant might bring in funds to offset the personal contributions they were each making to keep their programs afloat. We discussed the budget at length, with some board members wanting to ask for the maximum while others insisted that as a young organization with no track record, they should ask for the minimum and then prove themselves. As we debated the appropriate language, the board members spoke with ease about leveraging their programs, maximizing their impact, developing cultural competency, and following standard protocols for accounting, assessment, and outcomes. Noticing the photograph on my dining room wall of several young children clad in raggedy shorts dashing through the center of Banta in 1988, Abdirisak interrupted our discussion to exclaim, “Look at Banta!” As we all studied the photograph, he asked, “Is one of those little children Idris?” Several of the young men and women at the table, including Idris, were small children in Banta when I lived there, and we interrupted our work to reflect on the trajectory that brought them to my dining room table to talk in bureaucratic language about assessment, accountability, and outcomes.

A month later they learned they did not get the grant, a decision that was reversed in response to protests that the Lewiston-based organization had not funded any grant proposals submitted by local refugee EBCOs. The grant augmented other small amounts they had received for the homework help program and an outreach program about H1N1. As we reviewed SBYAM's growing track

record with grants and program development later that year, I noticed Idris's obvious exhaustion and asked about his schedule. He was still working full time as a translator at a local public school, taking four courses toward his degree in social work at the local community college, doing the internship required by his degree program, directing SBYAM, and running the weekend SBYAM soccer and homework help programs, all while raising his three children and mentoring his two younger siblings. He was sleeping about five hours a night. Concerned about his deteriorating health, I suggested he take fewer courses or cut back his work hours, but learned that his job at the school was on an hourly wage, not a salary, which meant he was not paid for snow days, vacation days, or during the summer months. Supporting his siblings back in the refugee camp as well as his family in Lewiston and feeling the pressure to finish school quickly to get a full-time salaried job, he felt he had to be working every minute to keep his goals on track.

But he also felt growing anxiety about how to keep Somali Bantu kids on track in school and in life. As I watched SBYAM develop its programs from 2009 to 2014, I was repeatedly struck by the leaders' sense of having no time to lose. When the accusations about "GANGS" exploded, when suspension rates skyrocketed, when police began apprehending small children shoplifting in local stores, and, after 2012, when Somali Bantu kids ended up in the juvenile detention center, SBYAM leaders felt increasing pressure to develop more youth programs because, as Idris gravely explained, "These are our kids." They were simultaneously working against the demonization of Somali Bantu kids as troublemakers and facing the reality that some Somali Bantu kids were beginning to misbehave because of their repeated failure in school and their parents' confusion about how to parent in America.

Knowing that they were the best-qualified people in town to translate the norms of U.S. society to confounded refugee parents and act as role models for youth, SBYAM began organizing discussions and workshops in response to concerns about youth misbehavior. Parents and youths alike trusted them because of their work history as translators and caseworkers in schools and at Trinity. These jobs gave them the firmest footholds in American society of anyone in the Somali Bantu community and enabled them to arrange meetings where parents and children could talk with police officers, social workers, and juvenile justice authorities in a safe space organized by people they trusted.

Parenting in America

The refugee resettlement program resettled individual families, not communities, so when Somali Bantus from the Banta area relocated to live with each other again in Lewiston, they were trying to resuscitate the structures of mutual

support that had allowed them to survive a decade of war and displacement in refugee camps. But parents expecting peace and autonomy found they had few defenses against American values and norms that penetrated and destabilized their families. Those families who received welfare assistance, participated in home visit programs, or lived in public housing learned that they had to submit to the surveillance of caseworkers and housing inspectors who monitored household residents, changes in income, parenting practices, and cleanliness. Somali cultural brokers bemoaned the erosion of parental authority that accompanied such monitoring because parents are so afraid of making a mistake that might lead to deportation or losing their children to the state.

In addition to the perception that government (including school) authorities usurp the power of refugee parents by scrutinizing their behavior, many young adults also point to the novel dimensions of American popular culture that parents have never before encountered. To be sure, many American parents struggle with the impact of popular culture's glorification of sex and violence, youth autonomy and independence, and consumption, but Somali Bantu parents arrived with far fewer tools for confronting and deflecting these cultural influences. As their children quickly became proficient in new technology like TV and the Internet, non-English-speaking parents remained ignorant of what their kids were doing and watching. With no idea how to navigate the new technological and cultural terrain, parents did not know how to intervene, explain, contextualize, or denounce the grotesque aspects of popular culture being consumed by kids fascinated with violent or sexualized video games and music videos or how to help their children define themselves in relation to it, an especially fraught situation in a community recovering from a decade of violence and endemic rape.

One day I took Abdiya's seven-year-old daughter shopping to buy a toy promised in return for a short essay, an experience that revealed to me what mainstream American popular culture aimed at children might feel like to refugee parents. We arrived at Walmart and excitedly headed for the girls' toy aisle. I knew that she really wanted a Hannah Montana doll, but the only dolls on display were rock star models in skimpy clothing: one in a bikini, another sporting a midriff top, miniskirt, and go-go boots. Looking in disappointment over the options, we agreed that these dolls were not what she was looking for. Her eyes wandered to the play makeup—eye shadow, rouge, and lipstick in various colors—but I knew I could not take her home with makeup. Moving on to the jewelry aisle, she spotted huge silver hoop earrings that said “Hannah” in fancy script and pulled them off the rack hopefully, but, knowing her mother would be unhappy about their enormous size, I gently coaxed her keep looking. At last, an hour later, we chose a Hannah Montana watch and

small hoop earrings, and I left the store appalled at how difficult it was to find a toy of a young female teenage popular culture icon appropriate for a modest young girl.

Somali Bantu parents had little experience with navigating the American culture of consumption, where you are what you buy. Their children were subjected to a constant barrage of things to desire, reasons to desire those things, and assurances that they needed those things to be relevant, modern, and American. One school principal whose population is over half Somali Bantu emphasized to me that, more than anything, the Somali Bantu students desperately wanted to be just like everyone else. They quickly abandoned their plastic sandals from Kenya for high-tops and platform wedges and, for boys, the baggy pants and baseball caps of their American peers. Some children began lying to their parents to get consumer items, claiming that their teachers required them to have an iPod or Nike shoes. In their early years in Lewiston, mystified parents pooled and borrowed money to provide these supposed necessities until Somali caseworkers intervened to dispel the deceptions.

Thus, SBYAM is trying to teach parents how to differentiate among consumption demands, how to be relevant in their kids' lives when they do not understand American culture, how to interact with school authorities, how to adopt American approaches to parental discipline, and how to embrace positive aspects of American culture while rejecting the rest. It has been a hard job.

“We Have Freedom Here and You Don’t Have to Listen to Your Parents!”

Abdirisak recounted a conversation he overheard between two children at the elementary school when he was dropping off his child. A Somali Bantu boy was describing to a white classmate how much fun he had running around the neighborhood until late at night. The white boy responded that his parents would never let him do that because it was not safe and his parents wanted him home at night so they knew where he was. Abdirisak said the Somali Bantu child explained, “We are living in America! We have freedom here, and you don’t have to listen to your parents! That means we can do whatever we want and go wherever we want. Just tell your parents that!” The interchange made a big impression on Abdirisak, leaving him to wonder why Somali Bantu parents were failing to have the kind of control over their children that white parents seemed to have. “Is it because Somali Bantu parents don’t know about things like kids getting stolen and that it can be dangerous at night?” he wondered. He, like many other young adults with young children of their own, watched with alarm the waning authority over their children of older refugee parents, trying to piece together the factors that chipped away at

family integrity for many Somali Bantu families in Lewiston over their first decade.

Somali Bantu parents arriving in America heard over and over again that physical discipline would be punishable by arrest or deportation and that their children had the right to call 911 to report abuse. Even though parents seldom employed harsh forms of physical discipline in prewar Somalia, newly arrived parents quickly became terrified to exert any form of discipline at all over children who threatened to call 911 if their parents asserted authority against their wishes. Holding the threat of violence in the background even if it was rarely employed meant, in Somalia and Kenya, full parental control. Losing that right without having any suitable replacement, in a context where children gained linguistic and cultural skills much more rapidly than their parents, meant a lot of confused parents and a lot of freewheeling kids.

The stakes were different for girls and boys. When the relaxed approach to parenting young children translated to city life in Lewiston, boys gained greater freedom to run around unsupervised while girls came under increasing scrutiny to behave respectably as parents attempted to protect them from America's public sexual culture in the only way they knew how: early arranged marriage and lots of responsibilities for domestic tasks. During their first decade in Lewiston, as some boys headed toward criminal mischief and some girls chafed at parental control, both genders defined the lessons they learned in school about American freedom and individualism as freedom from parental authority. Living in a culture that celebrates youth and disparages age, where children are given constant lessons that "to be an individual is good," "to make choices for yourself is good," how can parents who utterly lack American linguistic and cultural competency possibly compete with these narratives for respect and parental authority?

Chores formerly assigned to boys—farm work, weeding, watching for birds, and harvesting—no longer exist in Lewiston, but girls are expected to contribute more to household chores than ever before. "Here the girls still do all the household chores, but the boys don't have any farm work so they are totally free to run around," Idris explained to a group of social workers who were interested in providing support to refugee parents. In a different conversation, Sadiq told me, in frustration, "Parents don't require their sons to do anything! They don't help at home, and the parents don't set rules for them." He described the common experience of visiting friends when a teenage son returns late at night, "and the mom just says, 'There's food in the kitchen if you're hungry.' The son doesn't talk to her and she doesn't ask where he's been or what he's been doing."

By 2010, as boys began getting in trouble in the streets at night and as parents unable to control their sons became increasingly alarmed by their misbehavior, SBYAM, the community association, parents, police, and social workers opened discussions about how to engage boys who have no after-school programs or home responsibilities. At a meeting organized by Idris with social workers and community resource police officers to ask for advice about parenting strategies for boys, a female Somali caseworker asked about the kinds of chores American boys do in Lewiston. When the assembled non-Somali social workers suggested cooking, babysitting, sweeping, vacuuming, or cleaning the bathroom, the Somali caseworker and Idris looked at each other dubiously before the woman responded, “Somali culture is so traditional and women and men have such different roles. Men do absolutely no housework or work with the kids. Never.” She acknowledged that she has noticed that Somali Bantu men do more household chores than Somali men, especially when the wife is sick or has a new baby, but also emphasized that women and girls are as intent on maintaining distinct gender roles as men: “Girls want to be seen as competent in the household. They want to prove they can do all the household chores. Nothing is expected of boys until they’re eighteen, when they’re supposed to get a job.” Managing all the housework is important to a girl’s self-identity and self-worth, and overwhelmed mothers rely heavily on their daughters to keep their households running. While Somali Bantu boys are released from household responsibilities and some begin to become unmoored, some girls begin to chafe at the roles assigned to them. The following two sections offer short vignettes to describe what is at issue for girls and boys adjusting to life with refugee parents in Lewiston.

Raising Girls

“THE WORST THING I HAVE SEEN IN MY WHOLE LIFE”

During a visit to the apartment of Garad and his wife, Halima, the conversation turns, as it often did during 2008–12, to parenting girls. With the ever-popular World Wrestling Entertainment channel on mute in the background and their kids leaping off the couch and wrestling with each other on the floor to imitate the wrestlers, Garad tells me, “If my daughter was in Somalia now at age fourteen, she would be married, but here she has to be eighteen. Here girls watch American girls and behave outside of their religion. In Somalia this would never happen. American girls have boyfriends. They are hugging and kissing in public. This would never happen in Somalia.” His wife, who has been playing with their youngest daughter while we talk, interjects, “Our culture is being challenged in America. The worst possible thing is when people see a girl walking with a boy who is not related to her, talking closely. It’s very

shameful. That's what made us [have early marriage] in Somalia because we couldn't watch our daughters being with boys. It's just so shameful! Here in the U.S., when people see girls on the street talking with boys, they will call the mother and tell on them, and it's awful. Here everyone is very, very worried about their daughters but they are also very scared to confront and control their daughters because the daughters can call the police." I ask, "So . . . how do you control your daughters?" She throws up her hands and says, "We don't!"

Her husband agrees. "That's the worst thing I have seen in my whole life. Parents can't control their kids." He tells me that he understands that his children will grow up in a different culture than his culture and will decide for themselves how they will live, but for the moment he and his wife, among the most loving couples and parents I know, worry about protecting their daughters while trying to guide them toward a life path in a radically different cultural environment.

"DO YOU THINK YOU'LL SEE A SOMALI BANTU GIRL
GOING TO COLLEGE?"

Roqiya and Sacadiya, both fourteen, were debating the merits of having a baby during a homework help session. Roqiya proclaimed her disinterest in babies because they require too much work and keep you up all night, to which Sacadiya responded with incredulity, "But you have to have a baby! How can you not have a baby?" A non-Somali tutor who overheard their conversation broke in to suggest that girls don't have to have babies, and in any event can wait until they finish high school to have babies, but Roqiya explained that her parents were insisting that she get married soon rather than attend high school. "My father is very old and he wants to see my babies before he dies, and my mother says I can't go to high school because I have to get married," she explained. She knew it would likely be only a few years before she was up all night with her first baby.

The pressure on young Somali Bantu girls to get married early was intense during their first decade in the United States. Iman, one of the first four Somali Bantus to graduate from high school, watched most of his female peers drop out to get married. "All the daughters hear is that their mothers married at their age and had babies a year later. That's what they know. Do you think you'll see a Somali Bantu girl going to college in the next eight years?" he asked me. "Sure," I responded, but he emphatically disagreed. "No! All they know is their moms were married at fourteen, their sisters married early, and they will be married early. It's not like the Somalis—most of those girls go to college. We don't." Iman considered dropping out of high school himself when a female friend left school for an arranged marriage, but Idris convinced him

to graduate and pursue college. Somali Bantu boys know that parents looking for good mates for their daughters do not choose students, so the pressure to marry girls early to young men with jobs also compels young men to leave school in search of work.

To be a good parent means ensuring that your daughter is married to someone you choose or approve of, fulfilling your responsibility to provide her with a spouse. The pressure from relatives in Somalia and in the Kenyan refugee camps to marry daughters early is powerful, and parents in Lewiston find themselves stuck between the insistence by distant relatives to arrange a daughter's marriage and the daughter's desire to stay in school. "They are trying to control the culture from Kenya!" one father tells me, about his attempts by his mother, still living in Somalia, to arrange the marriage for his fourteen-year-old daughter in Lewiston. His daughter now refuses to talk on the phone when his mother calls from Somalia because she is so upset about her grandmother's focus on planning her engagement. Phone calls zip back and forth between Lewiston, Kenya, Somalia, and other American cities as families negotiate potential partners, terms, and dates. For many parents, early marriage is the key to safety, stability, and security for their daughters, but it is also a public demonstration and confirmation of community life. Marriage sits at the intersection of two moral ideologies and support structures: family responsibility and the moral circulation of money through extended family networks that link people across time and space. When arranged marriages are negotiated between family networks that extend across the United States and into Kenya and Somalia, the monetary exchanges that accompany marriage make their way along these networks to implicate a broad range of people in the success of the match. And weddings themselves are community affairs; people routinely travel hundreds or thousands of miles to attend weddings, which last for days and are open to anyone who wishes to attend. When Idris got married in Portland, Oregon, his entire family from Lewiston, most of the SBYAM board members, and the SBYAM soccer team flew to Oregon to support him and join the festivities, which included a soccer tournament with teams from Portland and Seattle and multiple feasts. Weddings are so important to community life that some people, like Sadiq, have started to wonder if they are a problem because people drop everything—their homework, a good night of sleep for the next day's soccer game, jobs, volunteer responsibilities—to attend weddings. But many parents fear that if weddings become individualized affairs arranged between the young couple for guests only of their choice, a linchpin of community life will be lost.

"THE CELL PHONE IS THE RUMOR LINE!"

"Snitches!" say the group of Somali Bantu high school girls at an SBYAM meeting when I ask about the worst parts of life in Lewiston. All the girls talk at once, describing the barrage of phone calls that fly between parents reporting to each other on the perceived misdeeds of each other's daughters. "The cell phone is the rumor line!" Xawo complains. Fatuma tells a story about a man who phoned her mother to report that she had left a school event with a group of fellow students and did not go where she was supposed to. She got in terrible trouble with her mother when she returned home, and in a rage she went to the police station the next day to report the man for spying on her. The other girls all tell similar tales about people calling their parents with stories about their behavior and how completely watched and policed they feel. "We are a very snitching community!" Xawo concludes, sadly.

In addition to its importance for community cohesion and transnational connection, early marriage is also about sex. Marrying girls as soon as they can be sexually active ensures that pregnancy happens only in a sanctioned relationship. But as the value of education gains traction, parents are stuck between protecting their daughters from the possibility of out-of-wedlock births and the desire to allow their daughters to finish high school. Girls are trying to balance their new life possibilities in Lewiston and the pressures from diasporic networks and parental concerns about the possibility of sexual impropriety.

It is obvious that girls are under significant stress. Everyone is watching and monitoring and gossiping about their behavior, and Somali Bantu girls are chafing at the burden. "They are carrying the weight of their culture," an ELL teacher observes. When I talk with Somali Bantu high school girls about marriage, I hear the same thing over and over: "I want to be a good daughter." "I want to follow my parent's wishes." "I want to make my parents happy." Some girls are very worried about their overburdened mothers' precarious mental health and do not wish to cause them any more stress. But many of the same girls are also working maniacally in school to demonstrate to their parents the value of their education in order to offer a stronger case against leaving school to get married. Some girls came up with a strategy to promise themselves to a boy of their choosing, approved by their parents, if their parents would let them finish school. Thus their parents feel assured that a good match has been made and that they can monitor their daughter's behavior with the chosen boy until marriage after high school. They want the respect, family honor, and social status that comes with being a good daughter, but it is clear that they also want to have fun in high school without being constantly monitored, reported on, and yelled at by worried parents anxious to protect them.

"It's now well accepted that girls should marry after high school," Sadiq tells me, acknowledging that when girls marry in high school they are unlikely to continue their education because of the demands of family life. But then he acknowledges that nevertheless some parents still feel compelled to arrange marriages for daughters in high school because of fears of out-of-wedlock pregnancy, "the worst possible thing that can happen to a family." Families face social ostracism if a daughter becomes pregnant before marriage, even to the point where people would cross the street to avoid having to greet the father of a pregnant, unmarried girl. "It's not fair that there are no repercussions for the boy," Sadiq acknowledges, but unmarried pregnant girls usually refuse to name the father anyhow.

As if to fulfill their parents' greatest fears, young teenagers were indeed beginning to become sexually active, and by 2012 several girls were pregnant before getting married. A social worker who interacts daily with many young teens and carries a great deal of anger about the ways in which Somali Bantu youths were shut out of programs at school that might have helped them when they first arrived in Lewiston, reflected, "Teenage pregnancy is not about sex. It's about having no hope, no plan for the future." Some parents are even starting to talk about abortion, as news of unexpected pregnancies shoots through the community like lightning. No one knows what to do, and parents start having the same debates one hears in other American communities about providing birth control to unmarried teenagers: will accessible birth control effectively control pregnancy at the cost of encouraging even more teenagers to have sex before marriage? In confusion, some parents begin pulling away from well-meaning social workers who provide information about birth control to unmarried girls, while other parents promote the idea that making birth control available is the only reasonable thing to do.

Families try to work out the lines of responsibility for children born to unmarried girls: Should the couple be forced to marry? Should the father, if the girl reveals his name, be registered with DHHS to ensure child support payments? Should the parents of the boy pay some sort of compensation? Iman tells me, "In the U.S. you don't need a father to have a baby. In American culture, they don't care if the baby has a father. I see [non-Somali] girls all the time getting pregnant and there is no father, and no one cares. We think there *has* to be a father. A father has to pay money if you have a baby. In America they don't mind. They're on their own. But you have to have a father! You have to get help from the father. You can't do everything on your own." Just that morning, the newspaper had reported that over 40 percent of the babies born

in the United States in 2007 were born to single women. Iman's insistence thus carried the fear of what might happen if Somali Bantu girls started behaving like American girls, and fathers became dispensable.

"WE ARE REALLY FIGHTING ABOUT THIS IN THE COMMUNITY"

In addition to the desire to protect their daughters and ensure that pregnancy happens only within marriage, everyone recognizes that marriages are also about money exchanges. Marriages occasion donations from friends and neighbors and the transfer of wealth from the groom's family to the bride's. In a context of economic deprivation, the temptation to find a match for one's daughter before she can elope or become pregnant is great because the latter would likely mean forgoing the customary marriage payment. By ensuring the flow of money throughout the community, marriage provides an important economy of support, but when the urgency to marry a daughter runs up against her desire to finish high school, the result can be incredibly stressful for young women who are trying to be good daughters while also achieving academically.

Some girls try to escape altogether by hurriedly eloping with boys of their choice earlier than they would have had to get married, just to ensure they marry someone of their choice rather than someone chosen by their parents they may not like. Several girls have fled the state to avoid arranged marriages, seeking help from other family members or "boyfriends" in other cities. Some girls call 911 to threaten suicide in protest against their parents' plans for their arranged marriage. Parents talk constantly about what to do in cases like these and how to stay within the law while still pursuing arranged marriages as a form of protection for their daughters and economic exchange. Girls know that fleeing or calling 911 might mean an irreparable break from their family support structure. It is an option of desperation.

At a wedding feast in Lewiston in 2007 for one of Sheikh Axmed Nur's grandsons, as the assembled guests sat on mats and pillows eating from platters of roasted goat, corn cakes, cardamom rice, salad, and the bananas present at every meal, a teenage boy arrived home and dutifully circled the room greeting his elders and shaking hands before disappearing into a back bedroom. While many of the elder men wore sarongs and prayer caps, the teenager sported a huge sagging backpack, enormous baggy pants that exposed almost all of his underwear, an oversized sports jersey, gold chains, a sideways baseball cap, and earbuds snaking from his neck to his backpack. Greeting his elders with appropriate Somali phrases, he switched to English when he got to me, asking, "How's it going?" In response I asked how he was, which earned me a grin and the popular rejoinder, "Just chillin'." As I watched him

leave, thinking about the relationship between his home life and his school life, the conversation turned to concerns about the changes that were infiltrating family life and the new seductions available to the youths. Sheikh Axmed Nur's daughter mentioned that young Somali Bantu men in Syracuse were starting to drink alcohol: they would gather in someone's apartment and drink beer and wine and get very drunk. Lots of discussion ensued about how to handle living in a country where people routinely drink. Then someone turned the conversation toward the ubiquitous theme of marriage. A recent case provided the fodder: a young couple fell in love and went to a sheikh to be secretly engaged in the presence of a witness. The girl's parents had promised her to a different boy, from whom they had received money, and were furious about the deception. They relentlessly pressured her to rescind her promise and agree to marry the boy of their choice, which she eventually did. The wedding guests debated this sequence of events at length: Should the couple have secretly engaged? Should the witness have informed the mother? Should the sheikh have sanctioned the secret engagement? Should the mother have tried to intervene, since the engagement already happened in the presence of the sheikh? Should the girl be allowed to change her mind after promising to marry the boy of her choice? Everyone in the room had a different opinion about the conduct of all the parties, arguing about what tradition and Islam do and do not allow, about the extent to which girls should have the freedom to choose their marriage partners, and about the ongoing propriety of arranged marriages in America. Everyone is confused about the moral course of action for protecting daughters, following the rules of customary economic exchanges that cement marital ties, and recognizing the new cultural context of extended educational opportunities for girls.

Some Somali cultural brokers have adamant feelings about culture change. A Somali caseworker told me that she tells her friends who phone her to come celebrate a young daughter's wedding, "No! I cannot come celebrate this!" She cautions her friends about their daughters, "When you marry and have a baby you are set back five years," trying to convince her community that early marriage is destructive rather than protective of girls. "We are really fighting about this in the community," she tells me. Although SBYAM tries to disrupt the practice by encouraging girls to resist the pressures from their parents to marry before finishing high school, they realize that it can be very hard for a girl to go against parental wishes and that standing between girls and their parents might undermine the efforts they are making in other areas to strengthen waning parental authority. They are stuck between helping girls pursue education and convincing parents whose authority they are working to bolster to refrain from using that authority to arrange early marriages.¹

Reflecting on the new strategies girls are pursuing to avoid arranged marriages, Sadiq tells me, “We must stop doing this. We cannot make girls marry against their will, and they cannot keep marrying so young. The problem is that as soon as a parent sees their daughter talking to a boy they assume the worst and arrange the marriage. But talking to a boy doesn’t mean anything!” While SBYAM is working to offer support to girls to finish high school before marriage, Sadiq hopes the community association’s women’s empowerment program can finally open a space for women to address their concerns about their daughters in ways that allow for outcomes other than early marriage.

A Somali politician and activist known for her anti-Islam pronouncements, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, writes in her autobiography about the patriarchal abuses of Muslim Somali culture, posing the Somali confrontation with the West as dichotomous and Manichean.² But SBYAM advocates schooling for girls, cautions parents against early marriage, and helps girls to negotiate around unwanted arranged marriages. The young adults involved in SBYAM are trying to teach against an American orientation of instant gratification, immodesty, and children who order their parents around while demonstrating respect for some American values, like education for girls, alongside Somali and Muslim values, like respect for adults, modesty, and an orientation toward family. The efforts by SBYAM and other Somali and Somali Bantu leaders to promote girls’ education and stop early marriage show that Islam and Somali culture in Lewiston is not the Islam and Somali culture of Hirsi Ali’s memory. They are trying to show how Somali culture is adaptable to rather than replaceable by life in America.

Raising Boys

“THEY’RE FAILING EVERY MINUTE OF EVERY DAY”

The first thefts by Somali Bantu boys occurred in 2009, when young kids stole a few things from visitors at Trinity that Kim easily recovered. When the panic about “GANGS” hit the news, it was apparent to Idris and many others that kids becoming disarticulated from parental authority and emotionally battered at school were going to be in trouble. “We are sitting on a time bomb,” a worried social worker observed to me about the dual impact of waning parental authority and school alienation. Sadiq warned, “Some parents are raising their children here just like they did in Africa. They just run around, play freely, coming home to eat when they feel like it. But here there are so many dangers. The parents don’t really even grasp the dangers.”

But what are the dangers? In a conversation with a social worker friend one day, she predicted dire difficulties ahead for Somali Bantu boys who take to the streets because they are bored at home and ignored by parents who are busy with so many other children, work, classes, and appointments. In

response I played devil's advocate, telling her that I always ran around my neighborhood as a kid and my parents never knew where I was or what I was doing. It wasn't a problem, just an old-fashioned American childhood. Why was it a problem for these kids? She hesitated, then said, "I don't want this to come out wrong, but the issue is, they're black. They are black kids in America. They are perceived as a problem in public and they're labeled that way." I think about the panic precipitated by the GANG memo, how quick the newspaper was to promote the image of "Somali youths attacking vulnerable white people," the demand that the police target Somali kids walking home from school as troublemakers, the high suspension rates, and agree that she is right.³ The social worker believes that black children running around the downtown provoke fears and insecurities in authorities who treat those children like criminals, which the boys then internalize as part of their emerging Americanized identities.

A Somali activist explains another consequence: "Our kids have no defenses and our parents don't understand what's at stake, what their kids are being exposed to. We are seeing it and learning about it all at once, and our kids are so vulnerable to getting sucked in." She wants to be clear that there are many good things about American culture—she names technology, women's reproductive health, education—but that the bad things, such as consumerism, youthful disrespect and misogyny in popular culture, the valorization of exaggerated "ghetto" performance in music videos, explicit images of sex and violence on the Internet, are all new things for them with which parents have no experience.

Her point is affirmed by ELL teachers, who notice the power of popular culture's black urban ghetto aesthetic for Somali Bantu boys, although not for the girls, who seem more invested in their parents' culture. "I see it in the register," one teacher says. "Some want to be American so badly they adopt the register of black rap talk." She describes how she intervenes to require them to use "classroom language," because she believes some young people still learning English really do not understand the difference in registers and need her to tell them. Many teachers and social workers affirm that Somali boys do not really identify with African American culture as portrayed in the media, but Somali Bantu boys do. In contrast to Somali boys, Somali Bantu boys "*know* they're black," the social worker says. "They were the lower caste in Somalia and they are here in America too. They adopt the look, the attitude, the swagger, the swearing." It's a pose, like trying on an identity. Teachers and police concerned about escalating aggressive behavior of some of their Somali Bantu male students attribute it to the violence they absorb from video games, music videos, the Internet, and which surrounds them in downtown life. One frustrated teacher remarks that dealing with aggressive behavior through sus-

pensions and expulsions rather than positive school interventions solves no problems and only produces a self-perpetuating cycle.

Another worried teacher tells me, “Kids [from refugee families] are getting extremely frustrated with their rate of failure. They’re failing every minute of every day.” The girls can still find validation in their household skills, but the boys, most especially those who cannot participate in sports because they are still in ELL classes, have nothing. Sports make a huge difference for Somali Bantu boys, many teachers tell me, because it provides one arena in which they are not failing and where they are equal with their peers. An ELL teacher explains, “They know they’re not good in the classroom. They know they’re not equal, but they can be equal on the soccer field. They can excel on the soccer field.” That so many ELL students cannot join sports teams is one more experience of alienation.

“UNIVERSAL SHIT STORM”

By 2009, parents, and especially single mothers, were beginning to grasp the dangers and turned to Idris for advice about how to control their boys who were staying out all night. Parents tried to keep their sons safely at home by buying things like computers, TVs, DVD players, Xbox games, and cell phones, but some were still disappearing for hours or even days with their phones turned off. A sympathetic community resource police officer told me, “The parents are just breaking down. They don’t know what to do.”

Mothers overwhelmed by many children and not enough help who were losing touch with their children became a constant topic of discussion among social workers in the collaborative, who worried that the emotional and physical history of trauma carried by many refugee women interfered with their ability to feel connected to their children. As some of the mothers lost control of their sons, their expectations that life would be better here evaporated into the reality of living “a worrisome life,” as one Somali Bantu father put it. While maintaining confidentiality, mental health counselors in the collaborative who worked with refugee women reported that their overwhelming topic of concern was their children. A Somali Bantu caseworker told me, “Women do not want to talk about their rapes and the violence they experienced in the camps. Instead they want things to go well for their children. That is what will make them feel better.” A mental health counselor said her worried refugee clients were navigating a “universal shit storm” of life in America, assaulted by one thing after another: poverty, sickness, trauma, many kids, exhaustion, confusion, illiteracy, demands for home visits by social workers, and, of course, the weather. Having a child suspended or arrested pushes them right to the edge.⁴

In response to appeals from parents caught in the universal shit storm and afraid of losing their children, Idris began organizing confidential meetings between parents, community police resource officers, community worker Janet Saliba, and social workers from the collaborative to create a safe space where parents could ask questions, get help, and feel supported. Unlike the focus groups or school meetings where parents were supposed to respond to agendas set by the organizers, these meetings belonged to the parents. Idris, Janet, the officers, and the social workers offered simply to listen to the parents and brainstorm about ideas for helping them regain their authority as they figured out how to parent in America.

“OUR CHILDREN ARE NOT SAFE HERE”

The first meeting Idris organized (in 2010) included ten parents whose children were in the most trouble at school and with the law. Unsurprisingly, suspensions topped the list of concerns articulated by stressed parents. One after another, the parents asked, “Why are our kids the ones in trouble?” “When you see kids in trouble, it’s always Somali, Somali Bantu, Somali, Somali Bantu. Why is that?” “Why have we come here to have our children always in trouble? Does the school hate our children? Do they want us to leave?” One father asked, pointedly, “Is it because we’re black?” The parents shared example after example of suspensions and their failed efforts to communicate with the schools. As different parents broke down, crying and clearly in great distress, other parents comforted them as Idris and the others affirmed their stories and listened, quietly, to story after story. One woman started sobbing as she explained her confusion about why her sons were always suspended even though she could not understand why. “What is happening?” she asked. “Why is this happening to us?”

After social workers offered to go to the schools with the parents to ask about suspensions, several parents wanted to talk about the GANG allegations against their children. “Gangs are something new!” one parent explained. “We don’t know what they are. We don’t know if our children are involved.” One parent begged the police to talk to the parents of children who were involved because “no one knows anything about this.” The assembled parents nodded their agreement when one parent explained, in the passage quoted in this chapter’s epigraph: “We moved here to save our lives. We didn’t choose to come to America. We are refugees. We came here to find safety, so we could save the lives of our children, so our children could be safe. But our children are not safe here. We are terribly worried about them.”

The police calmed the parents by explaining that despite the newspaper reports, their children were not forming gangs. A few older kids had collared

a few younger kids to do their bidding—stealing small things, taunting other children, and so forth—but the police had identified the older instigators and were working with them, assuring the assembled parents that their children could be “redirected to more positive activities.” The officers, Janet, and social workers offered the parents lots of suggestions about precisely the amount of physical force a parent can wield with a misbehaving child and described strategies used by American parents to exert discipline by taking away privileges or offering small rewards for good behavior. The mood lightened a bit when one parent asked the police to make sure her son wasn’t kissing girls in the park, which elicited approval from the parents, laughter from the policeman, and a lengthy discussion about the limits of police authority and the worrisome turn to public romance by teenagers. For parents who have never witnessed young people kissing in public, it is hard to differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate displays of affection according to American standards. All public kissing is shocking.

In a later conversation, one of the resource officers reflected, “The parents have bought their kids all these American things that the kids demand: cell phones, Xboxes, electronics, and the parents don’t know they can take these things away. There’s a certain dynamic that the parents just don’t know about, that you have the right as a parent to take away stuff and privileges. That if your child takes off out of anger, it’s not a bad reflection on you, and you should call the police for help. We’re educating the parents to talk to each other and give each other support. The kids are irritated about it, but the parents are starting to regain control now. We’re seeing a difference. The kids are behaving better and now there’s more fear of getting in trouble and getting caught.”

A few weeks later, the first Somali Bantu children were arrested and sent to the juvenile detention facility on a charge of assault, and the news flew through the community like a shock wave. Then another child stole money from his parents that he distributed to his friends, many of whom promptly went shopping. Idris, Janet, and Kim tracked down the story, pulled all the implicated boys and their parents into a meeting with the police, and remained in the room together until the boys accounted for every penny. The items were gathered and returned and the money reimbursed. For many of the boys involved and their parents, this meeting was a turning point because the children saw their parents as competently allied with the police and other adults in monitoring their behavior and holding them accountable. Everyone agreed that the following summer was one of the quietest yet as the community resource officers, SBYAM members, and parents worked together to better supervise and monitor the children’s behavior. Through Idris’s meetings, parents learned they could ask the officers for help without being labeled bad parents, and the kids

learned they could not pull the wool over their parents' eyes any longer with threats of calling 911 or claims about their freedoms in America.

“The Youth Are in a Different Culture”

And yet intergenerational gaps grew wider. In 2010, Idris asked me to help organize a history project for Somali Bantu teenagers, who were asking him about why they were in America and why they were called Somali Bantus. I thought back to a conversation with Abdiya's nine-year-old son the previous year. Looking at photographs I had brought to the family's apartment of Abdiya as a young woman in Banta and of his late grandfather, the little boy asked, “Why did we come here?” I told him there was a war and his mother had to leave her village to keep her family safe. “Why was there a war?” he persisted. “Did white people come and attack us?” Idris was concerned that young people had no idea about their history and suggested that a project for youths to interview their parents and grandparents about their lives in Somalia before the war and about the war itself might be a wonderful opportunity to teach Somali Bantu teenagers about their history while fostering intergenerational communication. We secured a small grant to cover expenses and held meetings with interested teenagers to develop a basic set of questions. The teenagers set out to begin their interviews, but we quickly discovered that the young people could not understand their parents' stories recounted in Somali or Maay Maay. The language was too hard, the cadence unfamiliar, the vocabulary too complex. Surprised, we regrouped and decided that SBYAM board members would participate as translators in each interview, assisting the parents and their children to talk with each other. The extent of the intergenerational communication breakdown was a revelation.

By 2013, SBYAM leaders were trying different kinds of projects to help parents and children learn to talk to each other. At one meeting, Ahmed taught elementary school children to tell their parents about school when they got home before going out to play. “Tell your parents something about your school day every single day,” he suggested. “Show them your report card and what it means. Bring your parents to school and introduce them to your teacher. Try hard to communicate with your parents by telling them when you are leaving the house, where you are going, and who you will be with. Tell them, ‘I'm going to the park! I'm going to Abdi's house!’” He reminded them that because their parents didn't speak English, they had to put in the effort to keep communication open. “Make little private jokes with your mom so you can laugh and have fun together,” he advised.

While encouraging kids to be more conversant with their parents, SBYAM leaders were also teaching parents what questions to ask their kids. When

Ahmed suggested to one parent that she could ask her child about school when he got home, the mom responded in confusion, “But what is there to ask?” Having never been to school, she had no conception of what she might talk about. The sad result, noticed by SBYAM leaders and social workers alike, is that some Somali Bantu children think their parents do not care about them. They see their parents consumed by the demands of managing life in Lewiston with very large families, and when they get home from school, parents rarely have time to sit and talk. Girls arrive home from school to be put in charge of babysitting younger siblings or cooking dinner; boys drop off their backpacks and immediately dash back outside again. The communication gap widens as the children become increasingly fluent in English and abandon Somali. One mother tells me that her two youngest children only speak English, not Somali, and since she cannot speak English, they never communicate.

One young friend described overhearing how some white parents talk to their kids when they drop them off at school, saying loving things, hugging them, and telling them, “Have a nice day, honey.” He tells me that he wants his mom to talk to him like that too, but, instead, “She yells at me like I’m a two-year-old.” A white social worker who works closely with Somali Bantu children says, “These kids think they don’t need their parents. They take care of themselves. They don’t think their parents love them. I can’t tell you the number of kids who say their parents don’t care about them. The girls say their moms want them to get married so they don’t cause shame, not because they care about whether or not they are happy. Parents don’t talk to their kids, never pay attention to them, never ask them anything. They don’t know how.”

But SBYAM leaders know parents are trying to show their love. Arranging a safe marriage is a form of love; cooking and ensuring food is available whenever your child comes home is love; overcoming your fear to talk with police about how to parent in America is love; attending parent meetings to rage about suspension practices is love; buying electronics in an effort to keep your children playing at home rather than in the street is love. I think back to village life in prewar Somalia, when parents and kids worked together during the day and relaxed together in the evenings, telling stories and jokes. I don’t remember parents ever asking, “What did you do today?” or “How are you feeling today?” Kids played and helped in the fields and listened to parents’ stories and advice, but no one ever asked children to explain what they were doing or feeling. But here, in America, young people live in totally different worlds than their parents. “There is no family life,” a Somali caseworker laments. “There is no connection. In America everyone is busy on different time schedules. Parents and older siblings are working different hours. Everyone comes and goes independently. No one talks to each other.” One parent tells

me about the intergenerational breakdown in communication: “The youth are in a different culture.”

Drug Dealers in the Park

In 2013, a Somali Bantu friend whose office window overlooked the downtown park began to realize that drug dealers from other cities were coming to Lewiston, using the park as a distribution center, and roping in young children from the refugee community as runners. Shocked about this recent turn of events, my friend began calling parents to come get their children. But the drug dealers were so intimidating that the moms who came to collect their children ended up going home alone. My friend said, “The men are telling the women to control their children, and the women are yelling at the men, ‘What do you know? You just sit out there under a tree all day long and don’t know anything about the kids.’” I asked my friend, “Well, why aren’t the men taking responsibility for the kids and keeping them away from the drug dealers?” He looked at me like I was clueless and said, “What can the men do? Their kids don’t even know them. They try to call their kid over and the kid ignores them like they don’t even know them. The kids don’t have anything to do with their dads. The dads can’t stand up to the drug dealers, besides.” A social worker tells me that she thinks Lewiston will become the next major drug distribution center in the state because the drug dealers are beginning to figure out that they can control the children of refugee parents. This disturbing story resonates with many other stories I was hearing about the severed connection between fathers and their children, as older refugee men’s authority waned both with their children and their wives.

Men’s relationships with their children are one dimension of their overall loss of authority, as described in chapter 7. Attempting to maintain disciplinary control in an environment where children claim freedom and autonomy from parents has forced some men into inflexible and authoritarian expressions of parental authority that are increasingly simply ignored by their children. “The relationship is broken because the dads don’t know how to talk to their kids,” a Somali Bantu social worker tells me. He recounts an example of working with a father whose son was struggling with behavioral problems. The father was attempting to parent by issuing demands and orders, setting rigid boundaries for the child. My friend suggested that the father should try talking with his child rather than setting strict rules: “If there is something big to discuss, like moving apartments, taking a trip, or another family decision, talk it over with your child and involve him in your decision making.” The father was mystified about what it might mean to involve his child in his decision making, a totally foreign concept to him. Listening to this story, I thought of a recent

conversation with Sadiq, who told me in astonishment, “The other day I was discussing with my wife our plans for a vacation this summer, and my daughter came into the conversation telling us what we should and shouldn’t do for vacation!” His daughter had overheard friends at school talking about Hawaii, so she was insisting that the family should visit Hawaii for their vacation. “I’ve never even heard of Hawaii!” Sadiq says, laughing. He is proud of his daughter for developing into an assertive young woman, but nonetheless finds the attitude challenging, telling me, “In Somalia, the home was like a dictatorship, but here it’s a democracy.” Children who have been taught never to look an adult in the eye while talking to them learn at school always to look adults in the eye, disturbing parents who experience direct eye contact as disrespectful. Like direct eye contact, involving one’s children in one’s decision making is something completely new. While Somali Bantu community members struggle to replace their participatory and democratic political decision-making practices with a more exclusive, representative, and hierarchical American model, they are similarly challenged to replace their model of hierarchical family structure based on absolute parental authority with a more democratic approach to parenting that grants children far more power in the household than ever before. It is this style of American parenting, involving negotiation, dialogue, collaborative decision making, and the management of privileges that SBYAM is attempting to make available to parents.

Somali Bantu American Youth Identity

One day when Somali and Somali Bantu high school students were looking over my photographs from Somalia, a few began debating whether the photographs depicted Somali life or only Somali Bantu life. When one of the young Somali Bantu boys asked, “What’s the difference?” a Somali girl said, “You are different. You have bigger noses and different dances,” a statement that several other Somali Bantu students challenged as incorrect. Such questions and confusions prompted Idris’s desire to create the oral history project for young teenagers who were asking him, “Why are we called Somali Bantu?” In our first meeting with the teenagers, they spoke heatedly about the ways in which their Somali peers used the term “jareer” to distinguish and denigrate them. Fatuma complained that her Somali classmates used the term all the time, but only in a derogatory way, which so enraged her that she actually fought the girls who taunted her with it. She and the other girls described how Somali girls sometimes snatched off their headscarves in the school bathrooms to get a look at jareer hair, provoking physical fights. Everyone in the meeting agreed that whereas “jileec” is used to describe all kinds of soft things such as fabric and paper, “jareer” is only used to describe people and only in a bad way.

Some of the SBYAM board members at the meeting brought up a Bollywood film dubbed in Somali that they had watched together the previous weekend: “We were really enjoying it—it was such a nice love story. But then the bad guy was described as *jareer*! We couldn’t believe it! We rewound the sound to listen over and over and yes, it was true, the Somali translation used the word ‘*jareer*’ to describe the bad guy. The movie was ruined.” The teenagers all agreed that, as one girl put it, “Whenever you hear ‘*jareer*,’ it’s only in a bad way.” Fatuma shared her dismay that when she phones the Line of Seduction, a Somali social networking phone line that people can call to join any one of a number of simultaneous conversations about a wide variety of topics, someone always asks her whether she is *jareer* or *jileec*. She knows and resents the fact that identifying herself as *jareer* puts her in an inferior category. While their older siblings and the young adults in the community express pride in their identity as Somali Bantus, finding it personally meaningful and instrumentally useful, teenagers are much more interested in tossing out the Somali Bantu label altogether because they experience it in youth culture as uniformly pejorative.

Idris opened one of the history project meetings by asking the teenagers, “Why did we come to America?” No one knew. “People died so we could come here. Do you know about that?” he asked. Everyone shook their heads. One teenager responded with a question: “Why were we selected to come here, and why are we called minorities?” This prompted an outpouring of other questions: “Where did the word ‘Somali Bantu’ come from?” “Why do Somali Bantus speak three different languages?” “Why isn’t there a Somali Bantu language if there is a Somali Bantu group?” “What’s the relationship of Somali Bantus to Reer Shabelles? To Mushungulis? To Bantus?” “What’s the difference between *jareer* and *ooji*?” The questions expanded as Fatuma asked, “What’s the relationship between *qabil* [clan] and village?” Xawo added, “And what is *qabil* anyway? I am so confused!” It became apparent that while the teenagers were interested to learn about these parts of their history, they did not expect the names would be significant to them in America. And it was particularly clear that they had no interest in maintaining an identity as Somali Bantus.

Some of the English-speaking young adults worry about what will replace Somali Bantu identity, as they watch their younger siblings adopting the stereotypes of black identity presented in popular culture, which is the predominant experience Somali Bantu children have with African Americans. Young adults who remember life in Kakuma and who arrived in the United States with enough English to graduate from high school try to model values based in Somali culture and Muslim faith while seeking success through education, American style, by trying to replace exaggerated popular iconography of ghetto culture with alternative models of how to be black, Muslim Somali Americans.

One college student who graduated from Lewiston's high school, Abdi, says, "When we got to Kakuma, we saw that our people who were well educated got jobs. They were our teachers. They could buy bicycles. They worked hard and got jobs because of it. We knew about the limitations in Somalia because our parents talked about it, so we began to understand the importance of education." Their self-confidence and self-worth were forged, in part, by seeing people in the older generation, like Sadiq, achieve success as teachers and leaders. But they fear that because their younger siblings growing up in America do not have the experience they had in Kakuma, they are not as directed and are more susceptible to the derailing threats of consumerism, sex, drugs, crime, and negative representations of blackness in the media. Ahmed, the eldest of five brothers with a single mother, interjects, "We feel really responsible for our younger brothers. It is only me to help my brothers make good decisions. Here there are so many choices and you have to always make sure you are making good decisions." Abdi and Ahmed call their younger brothers and sisters "the in-between generation," not fully American but also not Somali. Like Garad and Halima, they are uncomfortable seeing younger teens kissing and holding hands in public, changing their dress styles to mimic ghetto aesthetics, and becoming detached from Muslim practice. Ahmed talks about the experience of living in a Muslim soundscape in the refugee camp, where days were punctuated by the call to prayer over loudspeakers and sheikhs in the street paused to give children advice or blessings. Alienated from parents and school, lacking an enveloping sensory Muslim environment, losing the Somali language, learning to kiss and hold hands in public, adopting an aesthetic of street toughs, being viewed as problems in school and on the streets: these are the things that really worry Ahmed, Abdi, Idris, and the other young SBYAM leaders as they try to provide alternative role models for how to be black and Muslim in America.

Assimilation?

Ideas about immigrant assimilation based on the experiences of European immigrants to the United States that predict that each generation will be more assimilated (to mainstream, white American society) than their parents ignore the very different terrain of incorporation and integration navigated by immigrants of color. Studies in the 1990s offered more nuanced models of integration that attended to factors like racism, discrimination, poverty, social capital, family support, class status, and spatial geography.⁵ These studies suggested that immigrants of color who experience poverty, racism and discrimination in schools and the job market, a breakdown in intergenerational communication, the loss of parental authority, and demographic ghettoization may experience downward mobility, "dissonant acculturation" in which

children and their parents are acculturating at different rates, or “segmented assimilation” in which the second generation assimilates to minority, “adversarial,” or “oppositional” American culture.⁶ “Children of immigrants experiencing the most difficult economic and social conditions are more prone to see themselves as part of undifferentiated American minorities,” write two scholars who conducted much of the early work on race and acculturation.⁷ In her 1994 review of the new research of these and other scholars on the significance of race for integration, sociologist Mary Waters summarized, “The second generation that casts their lot with America’s minority groups will most likely be at risk of downward social mobility.”⁸

A decade later, scholars again nuanced these models of downward mobility and assimilation to oppositional American culture. Sociologist Philip Kasinitz noted that those who believe assimilation is harmful to immigrants of color because assimilation will mean downward mobility “point to the destructive effects of racialization into ‘ghetto’ or ‘underclass’ culture. But the aspects of culture they point to—individualism, nihilism, materialism, the high rate of marital breakup, the low rate of saving, the low value it places on education, the high degree of penetration by mass media—are hardly unique to any real or imagined ‘culture of poverty.’ They are precisely the supposed aspects of ‘ghetto’ life that most closely approximate, albeit in extreme form, the ways of the broader society.”⁹

Kasinitz and other scholars warn against assuming that the adoption of any of these cultural practices is by definition an indication of downward mobility or oppositional acculturation: “ghetto” style may be sartorial and not substantive; “ghettoized” ethnic enclaves may provide a structure of social buffering that nurtures community networks, support structures, and entrepreneurial initiatives; the second generation may develop a much more fluid identity that embraces some aspects of American culture alongside values inherited from their parents; assimilation might mean embracing civil rights projects of social transformation rather than simply negatively expressed oppositional culture; and ongoing transnational and diasporic networks might counter racism and provide, instead, globalized networks of belonging and affirmation.¹⁰

The small but growing literature on Somali youth in the diaspora expresses concerns about the challenges Somali American youth face from racism and discrimination and the likelihood that they will experience dissonant acculturation because of poor intergenerational communication, loss of parental authority, family fragmentation, and identity crises, leading them to “adopt the mantle of [North American] blackness” and oppositional culture.¹¹ Acknowledging the newness of Somali immigration to the United States, Kapteijns and Arman suggest dissonant acculturation is already “rampant” in Somali

refugee communities but express hope that a strong sense of ethnic pride, enduring cultural values, and a coherent community identity (which together constitute “Soomaalinimo” or “Somaliness”) can provide a buffer for Somali American youth to maintain connections to their parents and Islam while also forming relationships with people in mainstream society.¹² Other scholars note the importance of participation in diasporic networks for Somali youth in the diaspora, maintained through phone calls, the Internet, the circulation of DVDs and videos, phone chat rooms, and so forth, through which youths simultaneously forge “three or more different kinds of identity” (transnational Somali, transnational Muslim, and localized).¹³ One study of Somali American youth in Boston suggests that youths are playing with American popular culture hip-hop swagger without losing their connection to Somali cultural identity and values, noting that, for the youths in the study, “acting like an American was not equated with becoming an American” because of Somali resistance to racism, strong Muslim identification, and an “internal moral compass as Somalis.”¹⁴

But Somali Bantu children are in a slightly different position than Somali children because they experience racism as black people in America but also from their Somali peers. The emerging response of Somali Bantu youths in Lewiston embraces their sense of “Somaliness” while rejecting the racism that accompanies the Somali Bantu moniker and adapts, perhaps with more enthusiasm than their Somali peers, aspects of American hip-hop sartorial culture. I am wary of arguing that this means Somali Bantu youths are “in between” cultures or culturally fragmented because fragmentation or in-betweenness implies another state that is “whole,” which is never the case. Somali Bantu American kids are used to having identities or subjectivities that emerge from their many social relations because of fluid family structures and extended kinship networks. Their subjective orientation to the world is not as distinct individuals passing through, negotiating different cultural realms, but as people constituted by their associations and relations in all these realms simultaneously.¹⁵ “Wholeness” is a presumption that Henrietta Moore calls a “pretheoretical commitment,” a state that is assumed as normal when in fact it is imagined, but which then becomes the norm in contrast to which some people are imagined as fragmented.¹⁶ But there is no whole Lewiston culture, no whole African American culture, and no whole Somali Bantu culture. The first encompasses the xenophobes and the helpers, racism and welcome, nasty and compelling values promoted in popular culture. The second includes mainstream role models like Barack Obama and gangsta rap stars. The third is constituted through debates about the historical legacy of difference, a full embrace of Somaliness, Islam, and changing cultural practices.

The Somali Bantu youths I know are drawing on attachments to teachers, parents, extended family members, sheikhs, popular culture icons, young adult role models, white and Somali peers, and those with whom they interact on international Muslim websites and phone chat rooms.¹⁷

While the experiences of Somali Bantu youths fashioning lives in Lewiston may be more extreme, many youths behave differently in school and in public than at home, and all kids creatively make youth culture with their peer group that draws on a selected popular culture styles, bodily and sartorial practices, technology, language, and more. Somali Bantu youths may have more disparate possibilities from which to choose, but they are constituting themselves across an array of possibilities and choices, which is different than saying they are fragmented and thus confused. Because they are in their first decade of playing with and making meaningful the values and performances that constitute their identity, they are not yet finished (and, of course, will never be). What matters is which associations and performances receive positive validation and which get them into trouble. The leaders of SBYAM are trying to make sure that they, as role models, are part of the conversation, inserting positive values of parental engagement, adherence to Islam, respect for authority, service to the community, prioritizing education, maintaining transnational family and cultural connections, and being proud of their identity as Africans. They offer soccer programs and African dance sessions, homework help and prayer as part of their open house events. Through videos, DVDs, and YouTube they follow and practice the latest dance moves from Kenya, and through Islamic Internet sites they address questions of romance, dating, love, interpersonal relationships, and making ethical Muslim choices in a Christian context. They bolster parental authority while also helping parents embrace new cultural outlooks and practices. They recognize that the real challenges for Somali Bantu American kids are poverty and racism, so they fight racist stereotypes about GANGS while also strengthening the community bonds that give Somali Bantu refugees resilience and offering points of contact with mainstream society to help youths craft successful life trajectories of their own design.

In this way, SBYAM is trying to ensure that Somali values of sharing, mutuality, faith, family, and parental authority remain strong, that personal identities constituted through the social rather than the material remain in place, and that destructive popular-culture caricatures of blackness do not gain hegemony, trying, instead, to construct blackness as rooted in a Somali and Muslim value system and a cultural diasporic consciousness. Idris explains that a central part of SBYAM's mission is to show kids how to live in the face of racism without letting it define them and provoke a constantly reactionary stance. "Words like the 'n' word and 'adoon' are words and they aren't going

away,” he says. Thus, SBYAM focuses its efforts on teaching young people to live as black Somali Bantus in a world where such words exist.

Like immigrants before them, Somali Bantu refugees face economic penury in a context of assumptions about the moral imperatives of self-help initiatives, xenophobia and racism, exclusion, and tolerance as the highest form of acceptance. Like immigrants before them, they rely on support from kin and ethnic enclaves. Like immigrants before them, their family structures and cultural practices morph under the protective and invasive intervention of legal authorities and social services providers. Like immigrants before them, they face intergenerational chasms, arguments about the morality of culture change, and language loss. Like immigrants before them, they are building their own civic institutions, demanding civil rights, and exerting their own forms of political engagement. Among the many things that are particular to their experience is their blackness in a country of dichotomous race, their religion in a country that fears Islam, their strong and technologically enhanced diasporic ties, their minority status within the broader Somali diaspora, and their cultural comfort with mobility. How these dimensions of their identities will unfold as they start their second decade in the United States is unclear. Will they be able to blur the race line and confound the categories? Will they be able to normalize Islam as another mainstream American religion? Will their diasporic belongings and mobilities shape youth culture in novel ways in the future?

Toward Advocacy

When a few Somali Bantu children started getting arrested after 2010, SBYAM added workshops on the juvenile justice system to their roster of activities, hoping to teach children and their parents about what happens when you break the law and have to go to court. For these workshops, SBYAM gathered a panel of authorities including police officers, a judge, a court-appointed advocate, and others who work with youths in the justice system to help kids and their parents understand the consequences of arrest. These meetings were fascinating moments of engagement between the white Lewiston establishment and Somali Bantu kids and parents, where everyone had to work to overcome language barriers and learn how to communicate effectively. A description of one of the juvenile justice panels shows why.

Each panelist was asked to speak for five minutes about his or her role in the juvenile justice system, after which parents and children in the audience could ask questions. It was immediately apparent which panelists were accustomed to speaking through translators and which were having a brand-new experience. The community resource police officer, who had worked with SBYAM in the parent meetings described above, knew just how long to talk

before pausing for the interpreter to translate, producing a seamless, balanced pattern of English, Somali translation, English, Somali translation. Those who had never spoken through translators failed to pause for translation, forcing the translator to interrupt when the flow of English stretched beyond the boundaries of adequate translation and then cutting back in to begin talking in English again before the translator finished speaking.

Once the panelists and their translators were finished, parents and children in the audience were invited to ask questions, and new communication difficulties became clear as the metaphors used by speakers sounded outrageous in translation. In response to the query of one child who asked, “How do you become a police officer?” the chief of police answered, “Stay in school [several kids chimed in, dutifully, ‘Yes, we know, stay in school!’] and keep your nose clean.” The kids all looked at the translator and grabbed their noses in confusion as he explained, after clarifying with the police chief the significance of a clean nose.

The discussion continued with questions from parents about the long-term implications of having a police record and how to force their children to obey the law, and from kids about what the FBI is for and what defines a misdemeanor. A shy boy raised his hand, timidly asking, “Judge, can you explain that thing hanging over our head?” Earlier in the program, the judge, straight-faced, somber, and intimidating, had explained that juveniles do not always go to jail for every crime, but for minor offenses like curfew infractions, tobacco use, and alcohol use they might be sentenced to parole without any jail time. “But you’ll still have this hanging over your head,” he had cautioned, sternly, “and if you screw up you might have to go to jail.” The shy boy asked his question holding his hand parallel to the crown of his head as other audience members nodded their agreement with the question. As the judge grasped the literal interpretation, he finally cracked a smile before explaining what it means to have something hanging over your head.

These sorts of meetings were carefully coordinated moments of engagement, where SBYAM board members distributed themselves throughout the audience to maintain order while ensuring all those who had questions had the opportunity to ask them. As their success with such meetings grew, they continued to expand their programming by adding citizenship classes for adults and, eventually, literacy classes as well. Having established themselves as knowledgeable, trustworthy, capable, and fluent in American society, many Somali speakers who avoided such classes run by white people finally felt able to take on these new challenges of life in America. The SBYAM citizenship classes boasted a 100 percent passing rate. Board members taught all the classes with



FIGURE 8.1 Celebrating after a U.S. citizenship ceremony, Portland, Maine, 2012.
Photograph by Jorge Acero.

curricula they designed themselves, and relied on volunteers from the refugee community and Bates College for additional help.

By 2010 their roster was consistently packed with activities. At one SBYAM board meeting I attended in March of that year, the six members present organized their plans for the upcoming weekend: Jama was participating in weekly young police officer training on Thursday; all board members were obligated to participate in training on race and violence with CPHV on Friday; over the weekend four Somali Bantu high school students and one board member chaperone were supposed to attend a youth leadership conference in Washington, DC, which Abdirisak agreed to chaperone since Jama had chaperoned a youth trip to Boston the previous weekend; Ahmed was supposed to join the Washington trip but could not because he was also invited to a democracy workshop for young leaders in Maine the same weekend; Jama and Khadija agreed to attend leadership training led by a local organization scheduled for all day Saturday and Sunday in Portland; Nur would be working with a group of high school students all day Saturday and Sunday on an SBYAM-supported video project; and Idris, Rahima, and another board member were being interviewed on Saturday by a possible donor. That left the citizenship classes on Saturday and Sunday unstaffed. Ibrahim volunteered to take over the citizenship program for the weekend, and Idris would join him as soon

as the interview concluded. Then they began looking ahead to the following weekend, which included a conference presentation at Harvard, among other commitments.

In its first five years, SBYAM had managed to free itself of intracommunity tensions and build strong links to city institutions that engage with refugees. During those years, SBYAM established itself as a capable organization in the eyes of funders and as offering a safe place for community members to ask questions about living in America in meetings between white authorities and Somali Bantu community members, where Somali Bantu community members rather than white authorities set the agenda. Their workshops were helping parents regain disciplinary control over their kids, and fewer girls were dropping out of high school to get married. Several Somali Bantu high school graduates were attending college; many board members had completed community college degrees; a few were enrolled in BA and MA programs; and, in an exciting first, Jama joined the Lewiston school board in 2014.

But the effort it took to achieve so much cannot be underestimated: board members devoted countless hours over many years to planning, volunteering, and working incredibly hard to turn small grants into meaningful programs that would make a difference for their community. Their newest program, adult literacy classes, included almost a hundred adult Somali students. The urgency Idris and his cohort felt for kids a few years ago is now directed at their parents.

While orchestrating literacy and citizenship classes for adults, SBYAM pursued another strategy to bridge the world of white institutions and refugee community members. With the help of a local white social worker, SBYAM became a state-recognized caseworker agency that could receive payment through MaineCare (Maine's public medical care program) for working with clients who were referred for casework assistance because they were receiving mental health services or involved in the juvenile justice system. Several board members became certified as caseworkers, and the agency hired a white caseworker and Somali caseworkers, the first time in the city that a white person or a Somali worked for a Somali Bantu employer.

The addition of formal caseworker services meant that the organization's staff became legally empowered as advocates for their clients rather than simply cultural brokers and information mediators. As caseworkers, they are in a position to establish requirements for schools to follow when one of their clients is suspended or expelled, and they can make demands of agencies that are supposed to be providing services to their clients but whose treatment of their clients is culturally incompetent, inadequate, or racist. Because many of SBYAM's caseworkers had previously worked for mental health agencies and in the hospitals and schools, they understand how those systems work, what

services are available, and how to work their way up through the management to demand services for their clients. Rather than throwing a child with behavioral problems right back into ELL classes after a suspension and brush with the law, for example, an SBYAM caseworker can require that the child receive special education services, which obligates different (and better) forms of engagement with the child and the family than are available through only the ELL program.

As it dawned on me what the addition of caseworker services meant, I realized the long road that Idris had taken to position himself and his organization as advocates for their community. Watching kids get suspended over and over and be disciplined without the benefit of cross-cultural counseling competencies or special education services for children who might qualify, watching parents emotionally withdraw under the mounting pressures of life in Lewiston, and feeling increasing urgency to learn how to advocate, Idris got a BA in social work, entered an MA program, got training through his jobs in the hospitals, schools, and a mental health agency, registered as a 501c3 nonprofit organization, learned the bureaucracy to become certified as a MaineCare-supported agency, hired a staff, and took on clients. It took him a less than decade to figure all of this out, and now he and his staff are in a strong position to advocate for their clients because they have a complete understanding of how the systems work that intervene in and interrupt the lives of Somali Bantu community members and they have the authority to demand changes. They are in a position not only to encourage Somali Bantu youths to stay in school but also to push for changes in school culture that will more effectively mitigate harm.

But of course, the catch is that Idris and his agency can only do casework for those people who have a mental health diagnosis (primarily PTSD, depression, and anxiety disorders) or for children who get arrested. And here we confront the greatest irony of all. A sink-or-swim definition of refuge means that the best opportunity for help for some impoverished, exhausted refugees only comes if they receive a diagnosis of mental illness or commit a criminal act. Turning refugees into the sick and the criminal is, for those so labeled, a catastrophic form of refuge.