Mogadishu on the Mississippi: Language, Racialized Identity, and Education in a New Land

Martha H. Bigelow

Language Learning Monograph Series
Series Editor Lourdes Ortega

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Martha H. Bigelow University of Minnesota



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Series Editor's Foreword

This book by Martha H. Bigelow is seventh in the Language Learning Monograph Series. The volumes in the series are intended to serve as benchmarks for interdisciplinary research in the language sciences in the years to come, and Mogadishu on the Mississippi sets itself as a benchmark for future research on the relationships among racialization, identity, literacy, and education, exploring in novel ways how multiple-language learning and use are at the heart of these relationships, mediating them and being mediated by them.

Since the beginning of the Somali Civil War in the Horn of Africa in 1991, and all the way to the continuing conflict of the present day, the Somali diaspora has grown large and diverse across many parts of the world: in Eastern Africa (Ethiopia and Kenya), the Middle East (Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates), and the Western world, particularly the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, and northern Europe. Close to half of all Somalis live outside Somalia today. In her book, Bigelow recounts her 5year-long research engagement with the Somali community of the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and Saint Paul in Minnesota, the largest population of Somalis living in any given area of the U.S. geography. In a truly interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary spirit, Bigelow mobilizes knowledge across a dauntingly diverse number of areas inside and outside applied linguistics in order to do justice to her complex object of inquiry: poststructuralist theories of identity (chapter 1), psycholinguistic research on adults without alphabetic print literacy (chapter 2), critical theories of multiliteracy (chapter 3), sociology of minoritized identities (chapter 4), and educational research on English language learners with limited prior formal schooling capital (chapter 5). Remarkably, each of the six chapters could be read on its own, and in any order. Yet, each chapter carefully builds on one another and offers a needed piece of the rich, complete landscape that is host to the main argument of the book, which is indeed powerful and simple at the same time. Namely, highly contested racialized, religious, and gendered identities are intermeshed with in-flux oral and literate identities, and these processes of hybrid and multiple identity construction among vulnerable youth offer educators and researchers a central site for both understanding and supporting the struggle for access to equitable education by Somali and other refugee and immigrant youth in our societies.

I anticipate at least three ways in which the research that Bigelow reports in this book can influence the direction of future research undertaken by applied linguists, second language acquisition scholars, and educational researchers. First, her research on psycholinguistic processing by Somali youth with low print literacy points at the staggering gap in our disciplinary knowledge regarding how literacy and orality contribute to the psycholinguistic mechanisms of language learning. This question has attracted little empirical effort to date. Yet, the application of this new lens of literacy versus orality to old second language research problems would shed novel knowledge on constructs that have always been central in second language acquisition research, most particularly in ongoing debates regarding the theoretical status of implicit, explicit, and metalinguistic knowledge, which are relevant to most approaches to second language research. Second, in the notion of (in)educability, Bigelow's research offers an astute account for the social construction of blame when education fails. Through minoritization, racialization, and other oppressive ideological processes, powerful players in key institutions of our society, such as officers of the court (judges, attorneys, experts) and school leaders (teachers, administrators), place the responsibility on allegedly inherent characteristics of the youth whom we all fail. The construction of ineducability makes it possible for our institutions and their actors to continue their business as usual and to make themselves impervious to change. Much can be achieved if educational researchers and applied linguists are willing to engage in future studies designed to illuminate the inner workings of these ideological processes and help us see productive ways in which they can be subverted. Third, Bigelow's research will provide a model for other researchers who wonder how to balance the demands of academia and advocacy, because at a meta-level, the book is destined to be a guide to advocacy-integral research. The scholarly journey across multiple fronts that this book chronicles—the school and after-school life of Somali youth, their neighborhoods and community organizations, and the law enforcement and courts that interact with them—is fueled by Bigelow's determination to generate usable and useful research that helps "dismantle structural barriers in schooling, document the struggles and strengths of youth and their families, and help educators be more effective both within and beyond the walls of academia" (chapter 1, p. 2). She does not purport to hold definitive answers in this regard. Much to the contrary, she lets her book transpire vulnerability and honesty in her willingness to engage with the painful contradictions that characterize advocacy-integral research; nevertheless, the value and success of the integration will be undeniable to readers. Bigelow's research articulates and analyzes the abysses of experience that arise between literate educators and oral students (chapters 2 and 3) and the power-laden misconstructions of other and self that undermine our social structures, our scholarly disciplines, and our futures (chapters 4 and 5). Additionally, it documents agentive and affirming sources of strength among Somali youth and identifies transformational opportunities for action-oriented scholarship.

The Language Learning Monograph Series aims to advance knowledge in the language sciences with authoritative volumes that review recent findings and current theoretical positions, present new data and interpretations, and sketch interdisciplinary research programs. It began in 1998 under the editorship of Richard Young of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, who spearheaded it to the highest levels of scholarship by commissioning titles that have attracted repeated international recognition, including the Sage/International Language Testing Association award for best work in language testing and assessment, which went to McNamara and Roever's monograph in 2006, and the Kenneth W. Mildenberger Prize from the Modern Language Association to the outstanding scholarly book of the year, which went to Seedhouse's monograph in 2004. It has been a great pleasure for me to serve as editor for the past 4 years and two volumes. Mary Schleppegrell of The University of Michigan succeeds me as new Series Editor, and I know she will enjoy as much as I have the charge to identify innovative lines of interdisciplinary research in the diverse language sciences and invite leading scholars to craft volumes that are authoritative statements of the given domain.

It has been humbling and exhilarating for me to have played a small part in making Bigelow's *Mogadishu on the Mississippi* happen. I leave my role as editor of the *Language Learning* Monograph Series by offering readers her book, with pride and admiration. Few scholarly works can be read not only for their sheer research value but also for their intense moral and aesthetic enjoyment, and I commend this book to readers as one of such rare cases.

Lourdes Ortega University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

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A book of this nature could never be produced in a vacuum. I am grateful to the Somali youth and elders whose words and wisdom give this book meaning. I am continually amazed and educated by their experiences and insights. Their resilience in the face of injustice, discrimination, and bias is humbling. I have tried to represent their experiences and views, but I know that this account will remain incomplete. I do hope that this book captures some stories of the Somali Diaspora in Minnesota in a particular point in time. I would like to especially acknowledge Ladan Bashir Yusuf, who mentored me as I learned to respond to the advocacy and activism demands that were springing from the research. I am forever appreciative of her patience and the opportunity to learn from her. In 2009, when I was working most intensely on this book, I was afforded the privilege to work in Hanna Malone's English-as-a-secondlanguage classroom at Ubah Medical Academy High School. I benefited greatly from the opportunity to observe, tutor, and teach East African teens who were confronting the academic and literacy demands of a U.S. high school for the first time. My interactions with them were constant reminders of why it is important to understand their experiences and invest in their schooling.

I am grateful to the following friends and colleagues who gave me helpful and encouraging feedback on drafts of the chapters as they developed and as I learned: Connie Walker, Cynthia Lewis, Kendall King, Letitia Basford, Elaine Tarone, Kit Hansen, Sandy McKay, Bic Ngo, Jill Watson, Bonnie Swierzbin, Vichet Chhuon, Timothy Lensmire, Michael Anderson, and Marta Ljungkull. Their conversations and critique as I was writing were invaluable. I also must give special credit to Tara Fortune, who gave me many forms of intellectual and tangible support as I was in the final stages of writing and revision. Finally, I am particularly indebted to Lourdes Ortega, the editor of this series. She believed in this project from the beginning and masterfully guided me through multiple writing decisions that have helped me to communicate the breadth and depth of this book better. Her commitment to the roles of advocacy, activism, and social justice in SLA inspired and challenged me as this book was taking shape. Of course, none of these wonderful colleagues is responsible for the many limitations of the book, but I am so indebted to all of them for the help I received. They have added in countless ways to the potential of this work.

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CHAPTER 1

Engaged Scholarship in the Somali Communities of Minnesota

We must probe to find the sites of intellectual leverage, responsibility, and obligation through which our work can begin to fissure public and political discourse...

From Fine, Weis, Weseen, and Wong (2000, p. 124)

Introduction

This book brings together 5 years of interdisciplinary research with the Somali community in Minnesota and seeks to understand central and contemporary problems that tie the language learning of Somali youth in the diaspora to their broader experiences at school and home and how they experience the institutions of the dominant society. I chose the title Mogadishu on the Mississippi to locate the work solidly in the Midwest United States and evoke the sense of the large Somali community there. The subtitle Language, Racialized Identity, and Education in a New Land hopes to convey the interdisciplinarity of the endeavor, which taps into the fields of Applied Linguistics, Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Sociology, Anthropology, and Education. It also merely outlines the content of the book, which aims to connect dimensions of literacy and language learning to gendered, religious, and racialized identity. These descriptors are just some of the ways Somali youth are minoritized in the mainstream and dominant culture in Minnesota. The issues are old, and the experiences of Somali youth in U.S. schools and communities are highly theorizable and do compare with and contrast to experiences of other immigrant and refugee groups. On the other hand, the players and the context are new and require a reexamination of generally accepted theories and the way gendered, religious, and racial identities are shaped in a city in the upper Midwest elucidates various blind spots in the field, which will be explored throughout the book. Therefore, this book also aims to offer a model for how Applied Linguists can contribute to social justice and advocacy agendas that align with the communities in which they work, forwarding another argument for the centrality of sociopolitical issues in language learning and the schooling of immigrant youth. A strand throughout this book is the exploration of the question "What are some of the limits and possibilities of activist research?" This includes and goes beyond Applied Linguistics and SLA to include research that can be used to dismantle structural barriers in schooling, document the struggles and strengths of youth and their families, and help educators be more effective both within and beyond the walls of academia. Critical issues to be explored include how choice of methodology, choice of research question, and methodological rigor contribute to the usefulness of research for the communities studied and served.

The book is organized as follows. In this chapter, I introduce readers to the research and key constructs discussed in this book. To help me do so, I have chosen to narrate two pivotal events that drew me across institutional, professional, and personal barriers, real or imagined, and into adversarial conversations on behalf of Somali youth. In chapter 2, I depict the geographic and political landscape in which this research took place, providing information about the Somali Diaspora community in Minnesota and discussing some of the ways Somali traditional cultural perspectives and practices matter in today's Diaspora societies. In addition, chapter 2 offers an overview of research in the areas of orality and literacy among adolescents and adults as well as some of the documented consequences of limited formal schooling. In chapters 3-5, I report on the research I have carried out with Somali adolescent refugees since 2004. These chapters follow the chronology in which the research was conducted, which allows for an understanding of the progression and deepening of my understanding of the issues I saw in the community as well as my growth as an advocate. Specifically, chapter 3 reports on a case study focused on becoming print literate for the first time. In this chapter, I concentrate on the experiences of four Somali girls. Chapter 4 focuses on racialized identity formation among Somali youth in multiple contexts (home, school, community) and with a range of people (elders, peers, police). Chapter 5 offers an analysis of a lawsuit in which I served as an expert witness. This chapter explores issues of education and equity for adolescent refugees with limited formal schooling. The book closes with chapter 6, which distills what has been learned from all this research for theory building in Applied Linguistics and discusses and problematizes advocacy research in light of being an outsider.

Diaspora as a Construct and a Research Context

The Somali Diaspora is the result of the massive involuntary migratory displacement since 1991 of hundreds of thousands of Somalis due to the chaos and violence of a civil war that is still unresolved after almost 20 years. Diaspora is a powerful and useful construct in this research because, as Paul Gilroy (1993) said, "it breaks the dogmatic focus on discrete national dynamics" (p. 6) and "is cherished for its ability to pose the relationship between ethnic sameness and differentiation: a changing same" (p. 90). In other words, Diaspora communities retain unifying cultural or historical threads among them but change and adapt in innumerable ways across the places where those communities evolve around the world.

I choose the construct of Diaspora in discussing some of the research presented in this book because of the fact that being "Somali" still matters to many who have left Somalia; and that the notion of "Somaliness" still has great power in the ethos of Somali communities and identities around the globe. The concept of Diaspora has come to have local meaning for Somalis living in different countries and continents and the circumstances of the sudden creation of so many large Diaspora communities unifies many (not all) Somali communities in disparate places of the world. However, "[Diaspora] is not a matter of classification, but of being. It is an ontological question" (Echeruo, 1999, p. 9), and it includes a tangible feeling of connectedness to the nation state of Somalia and the imagined community (Anderson, 1983) of Somalis. It is imagined in the sense that it is not a concrete, actual community in everyday terms but rather a sense of belonging, an abstract affinity, and even a sense of loyalty associated with the community or, in this case, nation. Yet, the concept of Diaspora that I embrace allows for variations in and connections between communities around the world—from Canada (Ajrouch & Kusow, 2007; Berns McGown, 1999; Collet, 2007; Kusow, 2006), to Britain (Arthur, 2003; Berns McGown, 1999; Griffiths, 2002), to the United States (Bigelow, 2007; De Voe, 2002). This notion of Diaspora also embraces the pervasiveness and importance of mass media (see Appadurai, 1996). Media and technology connect Somalis through multilingual and interactive Web sites such as www.hiiraan.com as well as inexpensive telecommunications between individuals.

Evidence of the vibrancy and transnational nature of the Somali Diaspora includes many Somali organizations around the world that advocate for the stability of Somalia. For example, the Somali Canadian Diaspora Alliance states that their "vision is to strive for a sovereign and peaceful Somalia that is politically, socially and economically independent and just, a Somalia that is united and free

from institutionalized tribalism" (http://www.somaliDiasporaalliance.com/). Attempts to influence politics in the country of origin from the Diaspora is what Laura Pires-Hester terms a bilateral Diaspora ethnicity. In her research with Cape Verdean-Americans, she defines this as "a strategic use of ethnic identification with an original overseas homeland to benefit that homeland, through relations with systems and institutions of the current actual homeland" (Pires-Hester, 1999, p. 486). Bilateral Diaspora ethnicity is seen among Somalis, including adolescents. It takes shape through sending money to relatives in the Horn of Africa and travel back to Somalia and neighboring countries. Although individuals and families take short-term trips back, there have been reported instances of sending young people back to Somalia and Kenya for long or indefinite stretches of time (Integrated Regional Information Networks, 2003). Some of these young people have been returned for religious education, to recuperate Somali language skills, and to be culturally "reschooled." Sadly, there have been recent reports of Somali youth being recruited to join the ongoing fighting in Somalia (Ephron & Hosenball, 2009). These acts speak to a powerful diaspora identity in the Somali communities in Minnesota and elsewhere.

As immigrants before them, many Somali youth and their families live actual and figurative transnational lives, thus broadening the sociohistorical context beyond the borders of Minnesota or the United States. The examination of immigrant identity today should acknowledge that immigrant youth construct and contest identity in transnational worlds influenced by world and local political and historical events. The identities and allegiances of Somali youth often cross national borders, particularly when they still have family members in Somalia, Kenya, or Ethiopia, and when inexpensive telephone calls and Internet connections link them to friends, family, and news from friends and relatives around the world, including the Horn of Africa. Somali youth, like so many other immigrants, inhabit figurative borderlands (Anzaldua, 1987; Lam, 2006, 2009) where they move between religions, cultures, nationalities, and languages. Transnationalism adds another layer to the importance of understanding the identity of immigrant youth and families as multiple and shifting. In this sense, transnational identity is an important aspect of Diaspora that goes well beyond the scope of this book but is in need of further exploration in future work.

The way Somali adolescents imagine themselves within their local and global worlds influences the meaning they find in learning English, persisting through school and envisioning options for themselves beyond school. These identities (subjectivities) play a role in their investment in all manner of family

and community activities. By understanding the experiences and views of Somali teens, educators will gain a broader view of immigrant students who experience the intensely racialized environments of our public schools and urban communities. Hoping to improve our schools for immigrant students, this research begins by letting us see our schools and communities through these students' eyes and allows them to correct, complicate, or contest people's misperceptions of them.

Public Engagement Story #1: Meeting with the Police

As part of my ongoing research, I had gathered interview and focus group data on racialized identity among Somali youth and adult community members (see chapter 4). Ladan Bashir Yusuf, the president of a nonprofit agency called CrossingBarriers, helped organize and facilitate the focus groups with me. Ladan's organization advocates for and with immigrant youth, particularly in relation to issues involving secondary public education and equity. For example, she has worked with schools to afford immigrant students access to honors classes, communicating graduation requirements clearly to parents and students, and, in general, helping schools become more welcoming places for immigrant youth and their families. CrossingBarriers focuses on academic success through institutional transformation. Ladan knows how to organize and mentor young people and immigrant families. She is originally from Somalia and is bilingual.

Part of the interview protocol with the focus groups of Somali teens and young adults included the simple question "Have you ever been mistaken for someone you aren't?" Many, many of the participants reported having had this experience. They spoke of being mistaken for other East Africans (e.g., Oromos) or for African Americans by teachers or peers. Girls talked about how Somali girls who did not wear a hijab (veil) had more instances of mistaken identity. Sometimes they said they could not recognize co-ethnic Somali peers because they talked like (African) Americans. They spoke indignantly about how their elders mistakenly thought they were turning into criminals because of the way they dressed or wore their hair. However, the majority of the stories about mistaken identity had to do with our local law enforcement. The youth felt that they were treated unfairly and even criminalized. Many of the experiences they reported happened after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and seemed deeply anti-Islamic in nature. At the same time, participants said they were often mistaken for being "Black." Many Somali youth were having experiences with authorities that were distinctly racist and Islamophobic.

As the focus groups unfolded, Ladan and I were disturbed by what the participants said and we discussed how important these data were. Admittedly, my outrage and sadness about what was happening would likely have remained within the walls of academia without Ladan. Particularly angered by the accounts of educators discriminating against Somali youth and by hearing so many stories of police harassment, she took immediate action. She contacted the Somali Student Association at the University of Minnesota and arranged a meeting with a city council member. She invited me to come and present data from the focus groups. I had not analyzed my data but agreed to present the stories, but not without much discomfort in sharing data that I did not thoroughly understand, in a venue I had never traversed.

In attendance were two police chiefs and other police officers, many Somali community members and leaders, and numerous members and interns from the Department of Civil Rights. Ladan facilitated the meeting. Many of the young people who attended were angry at the police. They wanted to tell about their experiences and complain about how they were treated. Nevertheless, Ladan and the members of the Somali Student Association facilitated the meeting in a way that gave all of the young people present the opportunity to communicate their stories and ask questions about law enforcement procedures. This gave them the opportunity to say that they felt racially profiled, to say that they felt discriminated against because they are Muslim, and to complain that they felt their community did not get high-quality policing. To their credit, the police officers listened and there seemed to be an exchange of information, albeit through palpable tension.

As a result of this first meeting, leadership from the Somali Student Association and Ladan organized numerous follow-up meetings with the police chiefs, who cooperated in sponsoring a community event that would begin to repair the relationship between the community and the police forces. The police officers were asked to attend without their uniforms or guns. They spoke with a largely Somali audience about how to file a complaint, what to do if a police officer stopped them, and many other things everyone had agreed would be helpful and improve relations between the police forces and the Somali youth on campus and in the neighborhood. This work continues to this date and although some of the faces of those involved have changed, these early efforts undoubtedly mattered to some and empowered others.

The events portrayed in the Meeting with the Police story illustrate some of the ways research can link to engagement with communities beyond the university and serve concrete purposes of members of the community. The story also serves to exemplify how the academic exploration of the construction of identity among Somali youth intersects with a local problem: the racial and ethnic profiling among Somali youth. The phenomenon of profiling is an outcome of the racism in the United States—past and present. Discrimination is also part and parcel of life for Muslims in the United States and many other parts of the world after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Racism and Islamophobia are intertwined in this case, and among Somali youth, it is practically impossible to treat either system of oppression or Othering as a separate phenomenon distinct from the other. These systems of oppression also inform the multiple ways that Somali youth see themselves and each other and how they choose to display or contest representations of identity.

The Fluidity of Identity

Bonny Norton has framed identity as "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (2000, p. 5). She acknowledged identity as a site of struggle and sometimes contradiction; as constantly transforming across time and space and related to the desire for affiliation, recognition, and security (Norton Peirce, 1997). Norton demonstrated in her work that identity must be "understood with reference to larger, and frequently inequitable, social structures which are reproduced in day-to-day social interaction" (2000, p. 5). I add Stuart Hall's (1996) caution that identity is not so much about "being" but rather a "process of becoming" (p. 4), as well as his point that symbolism and representation are at constant play in identity processes. Following Norton, I see language and discourse as mediated in macro and micro ways by racialized, gendered, academic, religious, and other identities, all of which may be characterized by ambivalence.

Ambivalence, according to Block (2006), "is the natural state of human beings who are forced by their individual life trajectories to make choices where choices are not easy to make" (p. 26), because, clearly, an individual is not simply "half of what he/she was and half of what he/she has been exposed to" (p. 26). Ambivalence involves uncertainty that is heightened or lessened according to the situation. However, uncertainty in immigrant identity construction does not necessarily imply conflict. As Bic Ngo (2008) pointed out, "culture clash" is often an unhelpful metaphor in understanding cultural adaptation because it reinforces false dichotomies between cultural groups. She argued: