

The Somali Peace Band

In Conversation with Royce Ng, by Vivian Gerrand.
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Australian artist Royce Ng and I met on Skype one Sunday night to discuss his collaborative artwork, The Somali Peace Band. Curated by Louise Neri, Alexi Glass, Deb Kunda and Pip Wallis, the work is taking place at Gertrude Contemporary as part of the 2013 Melbourne Festival. In this chronicle of musical collaboration, members of the local Somali diaspora, including the Aussom band led by Abdi Mohamed Abdi and artist Nadia Faragaab, are partnering with Royce and Gertrude Contemporary for the Festival. The Somali Peace Band artwork is of particular interest to me as I have been researching representations of Somali belonging for the better part of the past decade for a PhD study. Royce is not accustomed to making works for festivals. It is the first time his works have featured in the Melbourne Festival.

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V: What motivated you to create The Somali Peace Band piece for the Melbourne Festival?

The Somali Peace Band is a project I've been sitting on for a few years and I'd proposed it to Alexie as an exhibition at Gertrudes in 2012 and we'd had some discussions about how to go about it, though nothing concrete had really eventuated. It wasn't until Louise Neri approached me about doing something for the festival, actually a completely different work, that the idea of realizing a full scale exhibition based around my experiences working with Somali musicians in Melbourne and Nairobi became a possibility.

Originally, I'd suggested to Louise that I could just curate a performance by the Somali Peace Band. The idea was just to take the money from the festival and use it to bring the musician Daacad Rashiid to Melbourne for a performance.

V: What a great thing to do.

R: And reunite him with his bandmate Abdi Mohamed Abdi who lives in Melbourne who was a founding member of the Somali Peace Band. The idea was to 'take the money and run' and organise a performance and then also --- When we submitted the application two years ago, I tried to generate some publicity around the case to provide as supporting evidence for Daacad's application for asylum in Australia that I'd worked with him to submit while I was in Nairobi. But it was really hard actually. There was a woman from the Age who had written an article from a few years ago. I approached her asking if she wanted to do a follow up article since I had this experience of working with Abdi's bandmates in Nairobi. I approached a few other journalists but it was really difficult and no one was really interested so we just submitted an application as it was. I guess the thought behind my proposal for the Melbourne Festival was to generate a lot of publicity by organising this performance and then I could use that as supplementary material to help with the application, to show that he's got a strong fan base in Melbourne amongst the Somali diaspora and show that he would have a kind of support system here with family, friends and everything. So that was my idea and I proposed that to the festival but it didnt work out the way I would have hoped.

V: That's terrible.

R: So what I'm actually ending up showing is the compromise which is all this kind of audio and visual material from the last three years that I've been editing together into this video

installation which is all about the absence of Daacad. It's kind of interesting

V: Your work raises a fascinating set of questions about the role of art and role of I suppose art and human rights. How does art speak to human rights? How can it work as a vehicle I suppose in the promotion but also where are its limitations? It seems like you've come up against them very strongly and the fact that the Melbourne Festival probably receives a lot of funding from the federal government...

R: Yeah, I mean that was part of my idea: to take public money and give it to refugees to bring them to here as opposed to the inverse of that which is the policy of the Australian government to spend millions keeping them in detention and out of the country. I guess what it's brought up for me a lot is the idea of the relationship between art and politics and artistic autonomy. In a way, this started off as not an art project. I just saw Abdi playing in Fitzroy at a Multicultural Arts Victoria performance and I was impressed and it just so happened that I was going to Kenya in a few days and I thought - yeah, it would be cool if I could help him meet up with these musicians.

V: Yeah, I read the story on your website. It's a really interesting genealogy. So was it from hearing Abdi play that you decided to go to Kenya?

R: No, we were going to Kenya anyway. My partner's an anthropologist and she was going to Kenya to do her fieldwork. I wanted to tag along cause I've always wanted to go to Africa. And so I got in touch with an artist's residency there. It so happened that I saw Abdi play and then a few days later we were going to Kenya and after I saw him I googled him and found out more information and was able to quickly arrange a

meeting with him through Multicultural Arts Victoria.

V: Wow.

R: Have you been to Somalia?

V. Not yet. I'd like to go but until really last year it's been too dangerous to go. And even now when I talk to people about going to Mogadishu some people raise their eyebrows when I say I want to go but obviously I'd like to go with people who have links to the place - friends. But I am really keen to go. It seems to be rebuilding. My research has looked at experiences of belonging in two host countries, namely Italy and Australia. And so I've interviewed people in those countries and I've particularly looked at cultural producers such as artists, writers and filmmakers in these contexts. I've looked at representations, often artistic representations of belonging and identity. So it's a cultural study. It's multidisciplinary, really. It crosses over to try to understand the mechanics of contemporary belonging. I argue that art is a possible space of belonging. It creates a space for thinking about belonging and it's one of the reasons why I'm really excited about what you're doing because I think what you're doing is exactly this. It's asking questions about what it means to belong and, as you say, the intersection of art and politics. What is it to even find representation in an environment that's still very exclusive? And in this case you have someone part of the artwork who can't be here, who's missing, because of the way the political landscape is.

R: Deb forwarded me that excerpt of your thesis. It was really interesting. I feel like how you became interested in the Somali community - it's kind of similar to how I got involved. Through this one chance encounter and then being

gradually drawn in further and further into exploring the richness of Somali culture.

V: I wonder whether you could tell me about your artistic practice. I gather you use video a lot in your artwork.

R: I'm quite post-medium specific. It's a long story but I studied art history and anthropology and was involved in making music and a little production before I came to art. So I do take a kind of inter-disciplinary approach and use strategies from different fields. I really like to work site-specifically. So in that sense every one of my works is specifically geared towards a situation and an experience. I have a bunch of artistic tools and basically, whatever the project is, I choose the right one for the project. Whether that ends up being film or performance or some kind of social experience. A large part of the work I'm doing for the festival is animations, which are recreations of the experiences of Daacad and Abdi in the years prior to coming to Australia and their experiences in refugee camps. So I'm actually quite focused on digital animation at the moment.

V. I'm curious to know who your intended audience is - obviously the Melbourne Festival audience. Who else do you hope to reach, particularly when you're doing these works for the Melbourne Festival?

R: This is interesting because the Melbourne Festival is a much more mainstream audience than I'm used to communicating with because the guide goes into the newspaper and a lot of the other programmed events are a lot more accessible and so it has a much larger demographic, so I'm happy to be able to reach this more general audience outside of the contemporary art world I usually address. With the work I'm doing I'm hoping to communicate something of the political points of the situation of Daacad and Abdi and also-

because I'm working in the field of representation - present visual images of refugees and Somalis which they wouldn't see beyond Black Hawk Down or starving refugees in camps so that I'm focusing a lot on the 1970's and 1980's, pre-civil war Siad Barre era and the music scene in Mogadishu during that period. So I want to provide this kind of alternative vision of asylum seekers. I also want to communicate directly with the Somali diaspora in Melbourne, so to that end that's why we've got this parallel project of a community space in the front gallery and we're working with Nadia (Faragaab) and Susan (Forrester) and Katie (Jama) and the Aussom band also. I feel a little uncomfortable being this Chinese Australian kid pretending to represent the Somali community, especially to such a broad audience as the Melbourne Festival's, and I don't want to be mistaken as 'speaking for' the Somalis and wanted to have a direct voice coming from the Somali community itself. I guess the third audience would be the contemporary art audience which Gertrude Contemporary addresses - and it's usually young, middle-class, white kids, which is also the demographic I represent, though I am only economically 'white'. So I guess a part of it is to smash these three audiences together and force them to confront each other a little bit.

V: That sounds really good. How did you come into contact with Nadia? Did you know her already when you were making the work?

R: No, actually the So'maal event - my girlfriend found that somewhere - floating around on facebook and passed it on to me and I was like 'wow this is really interesting.' I had no idea about it and so we contacted Nadia cold.

V: Fantastic. Were you at the So'maal event?

R: No, I missed it. I could only make it down for one week and I missed it by a few days but I met Nadia several times before that. How did it go?

V: It was great.

R: I heard your talk went well and was really well-received.

V: Yeah. I felt extremely privileged to have been invited to speak and it was just a wonderful occasion. I'm really pleased that they are doing it again as part of the Fringe Festival. Are you going to go to that?

V: Anyway, it's really exciting to see what they're doing. I went to Nadia's exhibitions at the Blak Dot Gallery - she had a couple.

R: How did you meet her?

V: I met her through my friend Yusuf who's been living in Australia for the past ten years or so. He invited me to her exhibition and I was really excited because I hadn't really come across any Somalis making art about identity at all in Australia which is one of the other reasons I wanted to look at representations because it seemed like there was a real absence of representations - apart from negative ones in the media as you've highlighted - there wasn't really anything to archive Somali culture and so people were saying 'it's like we don't have any culture here' and 'what do we tell our kids?', you know? It seemed like a real anxiety. It was amongst the Somalis that I met anyway. I came across Nadia's exhibition right at the end of when I was writing my thesis so I was able to write a little bit of that in. It's really great that you're working with her cause she's also--- She may have talked to you about her view on I suppose representation and some multicultural arts organisations. I don't know that she's worked that closely with them. She prefers to do things

in her own right, in a way, with a grassroots approach.

R: Well, yeah, it's really amazing what she's built up from scratch. She did talk a lot about-- - I mean it is that kind of multicultural arts ghetto if you're an artist from a refugee background, you get put in. And it's really great what you can do but also there's a distinct separation from what goes into the Melbourne Festival and what goes into Multicultural Arts Victoria.

V: That's right.

R: One of my fears - or my worries - is that the audience that goes to Gertrude Contemporary is going to see The Somali Peace Band exhibition and think 'oh that's Multicultural Arts Victoria stuff, maybe Gertrude Contemporary got some funding to do something like that.' Or, 'they're just doing it to be topical. It's not really contemporary art' even though that's usually the context I work in and I'm really thinking hard about these things.

V: I think what you're doing is brilliant because what is contemporary art? Is it just conceptual art? Or is it something that can have a broader kind of investment in a conversation about politics, about human rights. Surely one of the functions of art can be to speak to those things.

R: Yeah, I think it's crucial. The beginning of modernism is intrinsically linked with politics. I think our reading of Modernism has been dominated by the Greenbergian view, certainly the way I was taught about it at school, which is that it reaches its apotheosis in pure, formal abstraction. Now, people like Jacques Ranciere are coming along and rereading the key texts of Modernism as expressions of radical new forms of sensibility and bourgeois subjectivities. So what Louise is doing is really interesting in her

choice of artists for the festival, it reminds me of when the University of Massachusetts in the 1970's hired a so called 'radical package' of Marxist economists.

V: What you're doing is very refreshing, for that reason.

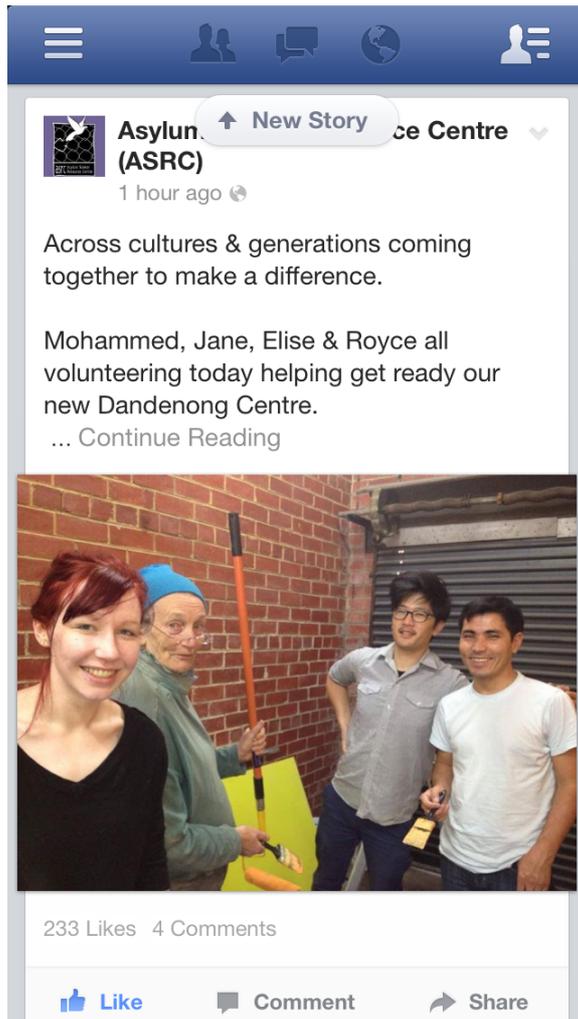
R: On the topic of meeting Nadia, she's really amazing. I really like her and we've had long conversations about our passion for Somali culture, but even when I went to meet her for the first time, I could tell that she was on her guard. And I think she's so used to being approached by these various multicultural organisations -NGOs and whatever, asking for some African dances to add ethnic colour to whatever the event is they're programming that she's not gonna take that really so I had to put it on the line and explain exactly where I'm coming from, what we want to do and I think we kind of came to an understanding, but I thought that was interesting the way she feels.

V: She's talked to me about this at length as well. I would say she's wary because she's had some experiences which are in the category of what you have just described which is to be in a way not taken seriously as an artist but more seen as a kind of exotic ethnic to be paraded, if you like. I'm not sure if you've read much of Ghassan Hage's work?

Royce: No.

V: He's an anthropologist and he's written a book called White Nation. He's also written essays about ethnic caging and things like this. He wrote a book called Against Paranoid Nationalism. But he talks about how for example at the year 2000 Sydney Olympic Games, he saw the opening ceremony and everyone was saying how fantastic it was and that was fine. But he was looking at it critically, thinking there's a sort of, there's a

core kind of 'Aussie' if you like Anglo-Celtic still perhaps legacy of a dominant idea of what it means to be Australian and then there are all these so-called 'ethnics' as though--- and the ethnics get wheeled out for these events and paraded so it's this wonderful diversity that we have, but not that we are necessarily. We have this, but we aren't this. He distinguishes between the multiculturalists that we are and the multiculturalists that we have and he claims that there's still a hierarchy between a core Anglo-Celtic, if you like, ghetto and the rest of Australia and that because there's this sense in which those in the centre are ethnicity-free, as though they had no ethnicity, in spite of everyone in Australia having come from somewhere, even indigenous peoples have all come from somewhere. He helps to see the invisibility that can come with being a dominant culture and he's interested in the question of how we get to a point where we're talking about being multicultural rather than having multiculturalism. The reason I say this is because some of these organisations, these multicultural organisations which are government funded, with the best of intentions nonetheless tend to circumscribe people into community identities consistent with the hierarchy that's at play.



R: Yeah, that's really interesting. When I was in Melbourne in June, I went to volunteer at the Asylum Seekers Resource Centre for a day. But, it's just funny, after that day I was on the train coming home and I saw on their Facebook page they'd posted a photo of me painting. And I was next to an Afghani kid and this old woman and at the front was an Australian Anglo-Saxon girl and the comment was 'Across cultures and generations, coming together to make a difference' which is a kind of generic, feel good idea of multiculturalism as a platitude of racial togetherness typified by that United Colors of Benetton bullshit from the early 90's. There were hundreds of photos, there was heaps of people there. I'm sure he chose that specific photo

because there was this like white girl with the Asian and the Afghani and it's this image of diversity, this kind of flattened out culture, I don't know. I thought it was funny, I wasn't offended or anything and I respect their work immensely but its interesting to see this kind of ideology of representation creep into their publicity, which is why I think contemporary art can add something valuable to this discourse by injecting a vein of criticality into the representation of 'difference' as such.

V: So what do you think about Australian multiculturalism?

R: That's a big question. I'm a direct product of it, of certain policies. My parents are from Hong Kong and they had immigrated to Melbourne and I was born here and I grew up in - I don't know if you know - Frankston?

V: Yes, I do, very well. My grandfather lives in Mt Martha. Not far away.

R: So I was born and raised in Frankston so I lived there for the first 20 years os my life and I was like the only Asian kid all through primary school and secondary school. This is a big part of my artistic mythology.

V: Wow, that's an extremely white part of the city, isn't it?

R: It is, and it's a very bogan part of the city. But, at the same time, what I would say is it's easy for me to paint it in a certain way but also I spent most of my afternoons at the next door neighbour's who would look after me after school and I would just hang out with their kids. These people you would call bogans were all really, really accepting. And I did have racist experiences but, at the same time, we had a little community and my parents and I were pretty much accepted. I had such a traditional

Australian upbringing its not funny. At some point, I decided to leave Australia and I think it's a part of that thing of being between cultures. So I'm really Australian in one sense but because of the way I look I never feel quite Australian enough to be accepted into that kind of mainstream society. It's purely me. I'm just neurotic and maybe just from growing up in Frankston. It's a bit different from an Asian who grew up in Doncaster or something.

V: Yes.

R: But at the same time I'd go back to Hong Kong every year to visit my grandparents and I'm not Chinese enough. And I think maybe you've come across this a lot with Somali community diasporas. My Chinese is really bad. I just don't know the customs and Chinese culture is so hierarchical and familiarly coded and if you're not familiar with them, you just make faux pas after faux pas. So I'm kind of in between those poles. But I do see it as a kind of space of agency as well. Because I don't belong to any culture, I'm pretty comfortable anywhere really because I don't have any rooted attachment to place so we were living in Korea for a while and we travel around a lot and we've moved to different places and now live in Hong Kong. I think - I couldn't make any definitive statements about multiculturalism outside of my own experience.

V: It's interesting though that you say there's a sense in which you don't feel completely Australian. I think that says a lot about the way multiculturalism has worked because I think that sort of discourse of tolerance that was quite alive in the 1990s is a really problematic one. The idea that there are some people who tolerate and other people who are tolerated.

R: (Laughs) What a word! It's like 'I tolerate you'.

V: So rather than a genuine interaction between cultures where each person comes away with something, slightly altered, if you like--- When you come into contact with difference you can be changed by that difference. If it's a two way street, if there's reciprocity, you actually come away a bit different when you have those sorts of encounters. And I wonder about how Australian multiculturalism - or the degree to which it has facilitated those sorts of interactions, or whether it's reproduced a sense of Australianness that's quite exclusive and hierarchical.

R: Yeah I think so. Australia, I mean it's been a short time, but it hasn't really produced a creole culture of any kind outside of that masterpiece of Australian literature, the TV show 'Fat Pizza'. I don't feel like a kind of hybrid. My real sense is that when you turn on the television and you open up the newspaper and stuff, I'm always outside looking in at another culture. They never could manage to keep an ethnic family on Ramsey street.

V: That's a powerful feeling to be outside looking in when it's actually the country of your birth.

R: Yeah, yeah. There's that line from Morrissey: 'When you walk without ease on these streets where you were raised.' I always felt like that living in Frankston.

V: That's fascinating. I think it's disturbing that that's still the kind of representation that we largely - I don't really watch television - see. Occasionally if I come across a television on, I notice that not a huge amount's changed. You know, we've got SBS, but in a way SBS sanctions a lack of cultural diversity perhaps on the other commercial channels.

R: Yeah, it's like they push it all to the outside -SBS is the excluded Other-while Seven, Nine and Ten represent the consensus culture.

V: How do you feel about Somalia now?

R: I'm kind of obsessed by Somalia.

V: (Laughs) I know the feeling.

R: Yeah, it's a weird thing. In a way it's because there's a relative dearth of information about it, compared to if you were obsessed with something else. And so it's like you can unearth these treasures but in Hong Kong I've met a lot of Somalis here and we've been co-teaching a discussion group with an anthropology professor here, Gordon Matthews- to African asylum seekers. And it's just that funny thing of you can meet Somalis anywhere in the world from the diaspora and you can kind of talk about the same things. And they seem to have this kind of common culture even without being rooted in a particular place for the past twenty years but the music is just amazing. Ever since I heard Abdi I've been getting deeper and deeper learning about the State band system they had there and the way that all these different influences from East Africa as well as American and Western influences fed into the music and produced something really unique and it just sounds amazing. And I think, there's something about Somalia as a - and I really hate using the term - a 'failed state'. I feel like it's a really unique case. I was talking with my Somali friend the other day and we were asking what's the model for rebuilding a country? When they start to rebuild, you're starting at year zero and you're having to start from scratch in a way and what's the model for rebuilding a culture with a twenty year ellipsis in between and I think there's something kind of utopian in it that I'm really attracted to maybe as an artist that at some point - in the hopefully not too distant future - there are

gonna be people rebuilding Somali culture based on the embers of what's been left over from the past. In a way, it reminds of the early post-revolution era in soviet Russia when all the progressive, avant-garde artists and designers like Rodchenko and Lizzitsky got to align with the state and produce a new vision and visual language for the future of the nation.

V: Yeah. That intrigues me.

R: One really interesting point--- there's a lot of Somalis in Hong Kong. They're traders and one of the points they make is that China has actually had an incredibly huge role in preserving Somali culture, maybe not in intention, but most of the objects and the textiles and clothing that Somali people wear in the diaspora, that's produced in China from often female Somali women traders, going to China, submitting these designs and getting them manufactured and then exporting them across the world to every corner where Somali diasporas exist.

V: Fascinating.

R: The only way it's been preserved is through cheap Chinese manufacturing which is really interesting. Nadia and I have been talking about maybe doing a project which develops from this because she wants to start some kind of business based on recreating Somali culture.

I work for a museum in Zurich and we're looking at the Asia / Africa relationship and so maybe there's the possibility of developing something together.

V: Do you have a background in music at all, given your interest in Somali music? Do you play any instruments?

R: Yeah. I kind of started off playing in bands in Melbourne. When I was young I was playing in

punk bands. It's an interesting--- I don't know how much you're interested in that kind of thing but I started off playing in Indian punk bands in Melbourne and being a part of that and a record collecting culture. And then , I think, around 2005 there came a--- there was a blog which came up called awesome tapes in Africa. I don't know if you're familiar with it. And it was just a guy who was sourcing cassettes from Africa, putting them online. Going from punk, you're always looking for the more rare musical artifact and the rarest record and then there came a point where I just transitioned over into listening to cassettes from Africa from the 70s - 60s and 70s. And the sounds were just as, in a way, progressive as anything experimental music I would be listening to. And so I became really fascinated with that and that kind of fed into the kind of music I was making. Yeah, it's kind of part of the trajectory of how I became interested in Africa in general. Also, my mother's family lived in Africa for most of the 20th century.

V: Which part of Africa?

R: Mozambique. They had a shop there. So my mum's first language is Portuguese.

V: How fascinating.

R: They were this micro-diaspora of Chinese in Mozambique.

V: And how many languages do you speak?

R: Just two. Just Chinese and English.

V: Just two. (Laughs) They're a pretty useful two languages to speak.

R: Oh but I dont speak the good Chinese. I speak Cantonese, which is like a dying language because it's only spoken by the diaspora. Mandarin's

taking over the world cause of the strength of China. So it's only useful in Hong Kong and Malaysia and Singapore and Southern China. It's still good. And you speak Italian.

V: Yeah, I speak Italian and English. So Italian's about - if we talk about usefulness of languages - Italian's about the same as Cantonese. I'm not sure how many Italian speakers there are around the world, but, then again, Italian's the language of fashion and music I suppose.

R: No but then Italian at least opens you up to the Romance languages. It would be easier for you to learn Spanish and French, right.

V: Well Cantonese I would think would open up the door for you to speak Mandarin. It would make it easier to learn Mandarin I would think too.

R: That's true, if I made the effort.

V: It's fascinating to think about all these connections.

R: Yeah, I think about it. You think about colonialism. I think about how I'm the product of varying versions of colonialism several times over: Portuguese colonialism in Africa, British colonialism in Hong Kong, English colonialism in Australia even and how these echoes of history somehow shape the kind of person you end up being.

V: Yes. I love that turn of phrase: echoes of history.

R: Have you read, I just got a book called Return to the Postcolony: Spectres of Colonialism in Contemporary Art by T.J. Demos?

V: Sounds great.

R: He's basically looking at European artists who have gone back to Africa and done projects. But he's reading it through this idea of hauntology.

V: I've read a book by another theorist, Sneja Gunew, called Haunted Nations. Have you heard of that one?

R: No. This idea of all these historical errors existing in parallel as spectres of history especially in a place haunted by the colonial past is really interesting. Demos looks at artists who deal with this. Just reading that has influenced how I've approached this work. Dealing with my own subjective experience and my relationships with these Somali musicians over the last four years and then learning their stories - like 17 years in a refugee camp and then pre-war Somalia and its kind of golden age in Mogadishu and everything. It's all these parallel times and then it all comes down to this little meeting. I was talking to Abdi in this poky little flat in Reservoir and there's all these things going on at the same time. It's really hard to assimilate it.

V: It's so bizarre. It makes one aware of I suppose the global power structures and the way that they circumscribe people but really, in reality, the traces are all there. The cultures are very much alive. By following the traces and unearthing these fragments, it is like a re-awakening. Many aspects of Somali culture have been dormant while the civil war has been going on: for example the way women dress changed in response to the dangers associated with the war.

R: It's been really interesting learning about the role of Somali women in Somalia before the war as well. It was really quite equal.

V: Very progressive.

R: Yeah, and it was more Sufist Islam I think.

V: I think the heyday of Siad Barre in the early 1970s was a really amazing time but as time went on he became more and more dictatorial and, eventually, even though he banned overt clan displays and affiliations, he himself employed people in his own clan as government ministers. I think his early days were his heyday and certainly the decade preceding that when Somalia became independent, that was a golden time for Somalia. But in the late 1970s there was the Ogaaden war with Ethiopia and from then on much of the government funding was going to into the military. People were starting to starve in Somalia even before the civil war. A lot of people left Somalia in the 1970s because the Siad Barre regime was draconian.

R: The government gave a lot of preferential--- Was it the Darood tribe?

V: My knowledge of clans is very limited. When I first started doing the PhD, I didn't really know much about clans and the family I became friends with in Italy are really anti-clan. They don't want to talk about clans because they see them as being partly the reason why the conflict continued and escalated and endured for so long. A lot of suspicion. And a lot of Somalis I have met have not wanted to identify with clans because it potentially creates divisions along the lines of what's happened in the civil war. History books I have read differ in their delineation and interpretation of clans too.

R: Is it purely the result of colonial territorialisation and division of geography?

V: I don't know if it's purely a result of that but certainly the colonisation created divisions where there previously hadn't been divisions. It created a need to establish who was really Somali and who wasn't. Scholar of nationalism Ernest Gellner described Somalia in 1983 as the ideal

nation state for what he saw as its relatively homogenous culture and religion. As we know, the reality is quite different. One of the legacies of colonialism in Somalia for example was the division created between the sedentary riverine populations who were in the hinterland of Somalia and nomadic Somalis who were privileged as the true Somalis. The riverine 'Sab' minority were discriminated against - they had darker skin, did not have the Arab lineage and they were not nomadic like most Somalis. Within Somalia there are hierarchies too along the lines of race. Some of those hierarchies were produced under colonialism. I don't feel I can speak objectively about the clans. It's a moving picture. I don't think it would be helpful to read the conflict purely through that prism. But I do know that the nepotism of Barre's government led to some Somalis seeking asylum elsewhere---I looked at the work of an Italian Somali author, Igiaba Scego, who was born in Rome to Somali parents and whose father had had a political involvement in Somalia. They moved to Rome in the 1970s, to escape from the Siad Barre regime.

R: I became aware of it - Daacad, the singer in Nairobi, was tortured at the outset of the civil war because he belonged to the same clan as Siad Barre so the rebels obviously targeted him. The other thing which is interesting is the possibility now of Somalia stabilising and then how do you rebuild a society from scratch? Do you do what Siad Barre tried to do? To start this new scientific socialist regime where all clans and the past is basically--- the slate is wiped clean, starting again with this new system? But then we're talking about the ghosts of history always seem to come back. It's like a return of the repressed. How the Somalis are going to approach rebuilding is really interesting. One of my friends here, my Somali friend, he is really anti-diaspora even though he's a part of the diaspora now. He feels like the people who should be rebuilding Somalia and be getting

positions and everything are the people who stayed in Somalia and stuck with it and had businesses and built up the networks that exist now and that Somalis who left are--- he sees them as traitors . So he sees them as being uneducated, especially the second generation diaspora who know nothing about Somalia. He really resents them coming back to Mogadishu and taking up roles of power.

V: That's interesting. Very interesting. I guess that there's a question of what sort of expertise the country might need to rebuild itself. I have a friend who was one of the speakers in the TEDxMogadishu talk. She was in Somalia until she finished high school and then she moved to Australia and was here for about twelve years until she moved back to Mogadishu. She's trained as a draughtsperson and is working in Somalia as an architect. In her case she actually does know what's happening on the ground well because she grew up in Somalia. There are in any case people who have certain kinds of training that the country actually needs in order to rebuild itself. So on the one hand I understand that it could be a cultural resentment, but on the other there are a whole of skills coming in as a result of what's happened.

R: My friend's actually arguing for the opposite. I guess there's a kind of skills vacuum and so anyone can come in. It's easier for someone to just come in - the same way convicts came to Australia and would just work their way up. Which I think is actually a really honourable thing that should be encouraged in a way.

V: Well I guess there probably needs to be more conversation and a sense in which there's a dialogue going on between people who have lived through the war and people who have come in or returned. I suppose that might be a hard conversation as I can imagine if you had been on the ground there the whole time you'd be

extremely traumatised for a start and probably quite bitter that these people escaped and now they're just coming back when it's convenient to do so. All sorts of difficult emotions would be surfacing.

R: One of our friends was talking about - you've probably heard about it - this thing called cultural re-education? Where they send second generation Somali kids back to Mogadishu to be recultured. It's specifically for kids who grew up in places like Minneapolis where the tropes of African American hip hop culture are not tolerated by their parents so they send their kids to Mogadishu.

V: Do you speak any Somali?

R: No, I haven't picked up a single word. I found it really hard. Everything I got taught I just forgot straight away. How about you?

V: I can speak a few words. I sometimes listen to the SBS Radio program in Somali to familiarise myself with the language. Nadia's going to start giving lessons so I'm hoping to start learning. Somali has a latin alphabet so it's easier for an English speaker to learn than some neighbouring African languages. I feel like I'm really alive when I'm learning a language.

R: Do you think, just say if in five or ten years time, I mean you're probably the kind of person who would be ideal for going into Somalia and being involved in reconstruction there perhaps.

V: It's interesting. When you talked about utopia I actually do feel a real sense of hope. I feel like anything could be possible really. I would consider it. Depending on how things go. I have a seven year old daughter so I'd wait until she was an adult. Maybe in ten years time.

R: When she's an adult - that's probably about the right time.

V: Like you I feel drawn to other places. My heart is in Italy a lot of the time. I 'm on Facebook partly because I have lots of friends in Italy on there and also lots of people connected to Somalia. Having contact with people who have an understanding of more than one reality who are moving in between different realities I find to be the condition of contemporary belonging. I feel at home most when I'm in that situation, much more than if I'm in just stuck in one way of looking at the world.

R: And so your parents were Italian?

V: No, they weren't. I have no Italian heritage that I'm aware of.

R: So why were your parents in Mogadishu?

V: My grandparents were. My grandfather worked for the United Nations. He worked in the aviation industry as a civil engineer. So he was involved in building the country's aviation industry in the 1970s. It's fascinating to think about that even within my non-Somali family there's a history of being involved with the future of Somalia.

R: But it's kind of sad as well. Rebuilding it then, they've got to do it all again a few generations down the line.

V: it is sad.

R: So you just learnt Italian as a language, not because you have a background?

V: Like many Australians I guess I had a lot of exposure to Italian culture, particularly in Melbourne growing up. I learnt Italian in primary school and started studying it seriously in

secondary school. I had really good teachers and I decided that I had to go over there for an extended period to become fluent. When I was about thirteen I thought: 'Right, that's it: in a few years time I'm going to go and live there.' And I had the opportunity when I was seventeen so I went there for one year, lived with an Italian family, went to high school and that set me up in terms of my outlook. It completely changed how I saw things. I felt more at home in Italy than I did in Australia after that year and when I came back to Australia I felt very dislocated and I think that was what gave me the appreciation for being in between different realities and different ways of seeing and thinking. Speaking more than one language I think does that too.

R: Definitely.

V: That's one of the reasons I chose to compare Somali settlement in Italy and Australia in my PhD. Also, as you know, Italy colonised the southern part of Somalia. There are many Italian cultural influences in Somali culture. This is another thing that appeals to me about living in Somalia: it would be bringing together all the different affiliations I now have. What about you? Would you consider it?

R: I don't think they have a dire need for artists in reconstruction. I could make some awesome video installations...

V: A lot can change in ten years.

R: That's true. I would love to go there. I'm trying to go there now but it's so hard to gauge the security situation. On an official level, the government's reforming, it seems like things are happening. But on the ground, it still seems really dangerous. And I was watching those TEDx talks where they had a security scare. I watched the one from last year. There was this girl who had made a documentary about camel milk and she

seemed to have just been fine, running around in Mogadishu. I don't know. I'd still really like to go and visit. A Somali trader friend of ours, he's taking a group of Chinese businessmen to Mogadishu to look at some potential business investments. I'm trying to proposed joining the group as a businessman, impersonate a business person but really just to document this kind of cultural encounter.

V: That sounds like a great idea.

R: I don't think I could tell my family though.

V: I was in conversation with one of my Somali friends who made me aware of some recent attacks that happened. Some kamikaze bombings that happened in Mogadishu in the evening. She said that at the moment in the morning and in the day everything seems really peaceful and then at night it's like these vampires come out. As you said, when you talk about repressed elements, they seem to still be--- I think if you went with people and you had the right protection, you'd probably be alright. It would be pretty amazing.

R: I read that story about that Canadian journalist who got kidnapped for two years and how her parents had to mortgage their house to pay the ransome.

V: That wouldn't be very good.

R: That wouldn't be very good at all. And to go off on a whim to fulfill --- There are other responsibilities to consider when doing these things. But I definitely would love to go.

R: Nadia went to Hargeisa, in Northern Somalia. It seems a lot safer and more stable.

V: I think it has been that way for some time, in comparison to Mogadishu which has been pretty volatile, even after the war ended. I think

Puntland too would be safer than Mogadishu but I'm not really sure.

R: The closest thing to Mogadishu that's outside of it is Eastleigh in Nairobi and that's where most of the Somali diaspora live. That's a really interesting place at the moment. It's utterly neglected by the Kenyan government. So the roads are rubble, there's no sewage or anything but it's just filled with these massive malls where Somali businessmen bring all these goods from Dubai and China and distribute them all across Africa. There are these Somali women selling gold with AK47's under their counters.

V: Incredible.

R: It's really nuts. I've never felt so--- Otherness is taken to a whole other level in that kind of environment. I'm not white, but in that environment people just see me as white. But I guess if your white skin isn't black, then you're just considered white. I think I'm economically white at least so I suffer all these kind of presumptions.

V: Interpellations.

R: Yeah.

V: It must be great having a partner who's an anthropologist.

R: It is.

V: The kinds of conversations you could have about your work I can imagine would be wonderful.

R: Yeah, I mean we work together sometimes as well so we've got this kind of interdisciplinary thing going on. I'm really interested in anthropology and she's really interested in art and so I think I mentioned at the moment we're working for this museum in Zurich and we're

working together to develop this project about trade relationships between Asia and Africa. I find it really fruitful as an artist to have that kind of perspective.

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It's getting late and Royce and I start to wind up our conversation. Not without a brief foray into the outcome of the Australian election, which saw the conservative Tony Abbott led LNP party elected. We express despair. Amidst this political landscape, we end our discussion by dwelling on the idea of utopia:

V: We need to find these utopias. When you were talking about the flat in Reservoir, I felt that the utopia is here now, we just need to unearth it.

R: I went and saw the Aussom band rehearse in Footscray. You go up these stairs and they'd rented out this whole level and it's just a Somali khat chewing social club. It was like entering a little Somalia in the middle of Footscray and I felt like they had created their little Somali utopia in there. I really liked that.