

## Hybrid Connections: An Immigrant Researcher Maneuvering' Access to a Refugee Community

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**Abstract:** Reflecting on the journey of a novice immigrant researcher trying to negotiate access to members of a refugee community, this essay proposes the undeniable value of exploratory stages in cross-cultural research. Drawing insights from the researcher's field notes, it describes snapshots of the multiple ethical and practical dilemmas, which shaped the route of the researcher's journey. It proposes that interactions in extra-research spaces provide fertile ground for identification through flexible forms of belonging, which in turn endorse intercultural understanding. Nonetheless, nothing is decisive. The novice international cross-cultural researcher juggles continually between the roles of a pirate and a fellow traveler.

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## 1. Introduction

Immigration is one of the central processes of globalization and has a shaping influence on many societies around the world (CASTLES & MILLER, 1998; HONDAGNEU-SOTELO, 2003; PAPASTERGIADIS, 2004; PORTES & RUMBAUT, 1996). Consequently, cross-cultural research that offers an enhanced understanding of the immigrants' and refugees' experiences becomes imperative these days (SHAH, 2004). In order to relate to our participants we, as researchers, are asked to transcend multiple layers of geopolitical, ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Additionally various contextual forces expanding from the local, to the international, or even global level may influence these journeys towards cross-cultural understanding (KENWAY & FAHEY, 2006). [1]

GONZALEZ Y GONZALEZ and LINCOLN (2006) propose a re-conceptualization of traditional research approaches in the field of international cross-cultural studies. This essay is based on the attempt of a novice researcher—immigrant

herself—to enter the space of international cross-cultural research. Yet, this essay's foundation draws on the preliminaries of the actual research. A journey, the researcher undertook sailing into the unknown seas of a refugee community in their common host country. The essay illustrates those intertwined practical and ethical dilemmas the researcher had to face accessing the field of international cross-cultural research. It reinforces the assumption that these journeys might be filled with uncertainties, emotional instability and challenges, but at the same time might as well be an enriching experience. [2]

Various scholars have hitherto acknowledged the multifaceted and unpredictable nature of qualitative research (DENZIN & LINCOLN, 1998; HARRY, 1996; SMITH, 2005; STRAUSS & CORBIN, 1998). Given that the researchers are the main instruments in this type of research, their complex relationships with the research participants are crucial for the outcome of their studies. Therefore researchers are required to reflect *on how aspects of their identity enhance or hamper the understanding* of the studied communities (BEHAR, 1996; VILLENAS, 2000; BRISCOE, 2005; see also MRUCK, ROTH & BREUER, 2002 and ROTH, BREUER & MRUCK, 2003). [3]

This paper is situated in the shade of these discourses, its focus, however, differs in three ways. Firstly, it describes the research of a novice immigrant researcher conducting research on a refugee community. Although the immediate context of the study is a city located in the US, its broader context transcends into three continents (Africa, Europe and North America). It is founded on the researcher's and the refugees' identities as newcomer immigrants—so the hybrid space of transitional identities in-between host and home countries (PORTES & RUMBAUT, 1996), in this case becomes a double bind of identification and differentiation emerging between the immigrant researcher and the refugee community. Secondly, this paper does not reflect on the actual research journey like SHAH (2004), VILLENAS (2000), BEHAR (1996) and others describe, but on its preliminary stages. The researcher's confrontation with multiple ethical and practical challenges during this investigation suggests its importance in international cross-cultural research. Negotiating cross-cultural access can never be considered a simple undertaking (GOKAH, 2006; SUBEDI, 2006; WATTS, 2006). Multiple decision-making processes are constantly—consciously as well as unconsciously—shaping the researcher's course. Like a ship in heavy fog the researcher might lose course, might have to return to the point of departure or think of forcing the ship towards a different direction. In this space, becoming a pirate or a fellow traveler is negotiated. The line in-between, however, figures blurry and ever changing. The third difference is consequent: it underscores the importance of extra-research interactions (that is interactions that are not initiated for research purposes but for social reasons) that facilitate relationship building and understanding in more natural situations in contrast to those available in formal research. By providing excerpts from my own journey, it is my hope to share the lessons that I have learned with other novice researchers who might be embarking into the vast seas of international cross-cultural studies. [4]

The paper is organized into four sections. In the first section, the context of the research is set and the researcher's social position is examined. This is followed by a description of the social status of the refugee community (Section 2). I then present theoretical tools that were used to make sense of the journey (Section 3). The following section illustrates three cases that fundamentally challenged me as a researcher and as a person. These cases lead to a reconsideration of the significance of a pre-research design as well as of my own role in the research process. In that, I will examine some alarming moments of uncertainty and contextual struggles I had to undergo (Section 4). The last section discusses the implications of such moments for conceptualizing and conducting international cross-cultural research (Section 5). [5]

## 2. The Context

The immediate context of this journey is set in a metropolitan city. At the time of this research it had a population of nearly one and a half million. Whereas the city is located on the United States' West Coast, the context of this research transcended into three continents. While the researcher came from a country in Southern Europe, the community of study has its roots in Somalia, East Africa. The virtual triangle linking three continents was critical for the development of this study especially because the researcher and the community, both, had newcomer status in the U.S.—less than ten years. [6]

I was the researcher. I had migrated to the United States in the mid nineties. Prior to this, I had completed a degree in sociology in my home country. Although the pursuit of my graduate studies has never been the cause for my relocation, it became a significant part of my life in the United States. Due to my own experiences as a first generation immigrant I maintained a strong interest in the experiences of fellow immigrants and refugees. BEHAR (1996) writes that "we invent research projects to ourselves, but ultimately we go back to prove to ourselves that we're not afraid to go back" (p.140). In retrospect, I consider my background crucial for my own drive for education and my theoretical interest in the field of immigration and education. The year prior to my doctoral studies, I was teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) to adult immigrant students in a community-based organization. This expanded my horizon of interactions with first generation immigrants. At the same time, my relationship with the well-established Greek diasporic community was at best sporadic. It seems that the experience of relocation shaped my life in ways different from those members of the Diaspora that belonged to the third and fourth generation (PAPASTERGIADIS, 2004). The truth is that I felt closer to fellow newcomers even if we did not share any common cultural or ethnic background. [7]

To begin with, my own exposure to theories of multicultural education and immigration as well as my own daily experiences with immigrants from various parts of the world sparked my interest in the local Somali refugee community; as well it contoured my initial introduction to its members. One of the coordinators, in the community center where I used to be employed as an ESL teacher, was from Somalia. On several occasions we talked about common experiences: the

experience of relocation, feelings of longing for our home countries, and cultural shock. My next contact was with a Somali woman whom I interviewed on purpose of a pilot study on educational experiences of immigrant women. In that the Somali culture and their newly established network sparked my interest. In retrospect, this might have been because it provided the network I had been longing for—that of newcomers. [8]

Soon after, I began to explore the history and the culture of Somalia. I found out that in 1990 a civil war in Somalia had displaced large numbers of people internally and externally. One of the consequences was the destruction of the educational system (ABDI, 1998; UNHCR, 2000). As well Somali refugees had to relocate throughout the world. According to informal estimations (unfortunately there was no actual statistical evidence) at the time of my introduction to the community, the Somali population in the city ranged from 4,000 to 20,000. Due to the newly constituted character of the diasporic community in the city, there were no written sources about its status, its cultural characteristics, or the process of cultural maintenance and loss. Nevertheless, it was evident that the resources and the status of the local Somalis were at the lowest ranks of the socioeconomic pyramid in the region. The inherent challenges of migration were obvious and widely discussed in the community. Besides, the lack of their own community center, a Somali school or at least a center for religious activities, were likely to cause social tensions. The community members were well aware of their own deprivation when compared to other, well-established immigrant communities in the city. [9]

Most Somalis are Muslims (GARDNER & EL BUSHRA, 2004). Due to the impact of multiple structural characteristics (race, religion, language, status in the U.S., educational experiences) the overall context of reception in the host country (PORTES & RUMBAUT, 1996) was negative for many of them. The negative context even intensified after the terrorist attacks of 9/11/2001. A document by the INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE (2003) that summarized findings conducted by the Refugees and Schools Partnership Initiatives (RSPI) in the area, furthermore exemplified that education was perceived as a major problem for Somali children and parents. Suspensions, high dropout numbers and low grades were among the main concerns. [10]

### **3. Theoretical Tools for Making Sense of the Journey**

It was this information that initially inspired me to conduct research on the Somali student population. The envisioned long-term destination of this research project, I hoped, would be an increased understanding of Somali students' experiences at school. These could eventually translate into the development of culturally sensitive educational approaches that could enhance the academic success of the Somali students (GAY, 2000). But prior to embarking on this grand journey I had to find an adequate point of departure that would reassure I could engage in a qualitative study with this group. This turned into a preliminary research stage, a journey that I consider crucial for the entire study. [11]

This preliminary journey provides the foundation for this essay. In that, I had to carefully explore the waters, in order to prevent being perceived as a pirate by the community members. [12]

At first, I had to explore how members of the community would perceive me. WOLCOTT (1997) writes that the researcher is the main instrument in qualitative research. The idea that the researcher assumes the role of a learner and interacts with people in order to collect insights into their lives, their experiences, feelings, and emotions etc. is well known in qualitative research theory (ERICKSON, 1986; DENZIN & LINCOLN, 1998; STRAUSS & CORBIN, 1998; MRUCK et al., 2002; ROTH et al., 2003). Given that I had no pre-existing frameworks to draw from in any of my efforts to relate to members of the Somali network, my instrumental role as a learner became especially important for this journey. There were no direct (or even indirect) links between our countries of origin; no common historical experiences; and no similar experiences of social stratification and organization. In addition, my position in the multicultural space, what SHAH (2004) calls the "historically loaded socio-political divides of black/white, east/west, colonial/imperial, developed/developing" (p.565), was not straightforward. My home country would fit somewhere in the middle of these divides. My "new" identity in my host country was also positioned somewhere in in-between. In the intense racial stratification system of United States (PORTES & RUMBAUT, 1996; WATERS, 1999) I was sometimes perceived as a "White," sometimes as a person of "Color." Nevertheless, this flexibility was not a luxury the Somali refugees had. If I were to envision my social location in comparison with that of the members of the Somali ethnic network, my privileged status would prevail in many other dimensions, i.e. the participants were refugees from a country that many people would not know where to find on a map—I was an immigrant from a country which holds somewhat of a visible status due to its ancient civilization and its modern tourist attractions. They were Muslim—I was Orthodox-Christian. Their socioeconomic status was low—mine was higher. Many had little or a disrupted education only—I was pursuing an advanced degree. My access to what are considered the interconnected power blocs of U.S. society (KINCHELOE & STEINBERG, 1997) supplied me with a larger and more flexible field of belonging. If necessary, I could have always withdrawn into the protective sphere of the Greek immigrant community, a community that has been negotiating access to the socio-political landscape of the U.S. for many generations. This was not true for any of the newcomer Somalis. Therefore, our actual experiences of relocation and adjustment to the host country were quite different. [13]

Nonetheless, it has been stated that the actual social location of the researcher does not determine the insider status within the studied community. Cultural, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds do not qualify as total categories of belonging (ALCOFF, 1995). Rather it is the researcher's willingness to maintain a highly reflective position and to recognize significant areas of identification (or difference) with the research participants (DELGADO-GAITAN, 2000; BRISCOE, 2005; LADSON-BILLINGS, 2001). It is widely assumed that increasing levels of identification with the research participants enhance the understanding of their perspectives (BEHAR, 1996; VILLENAS, 2000; SUBEDI, 2006; MANI, 2006). [14]

At first glance and although difference prevailed—in terms of race, ethnicity, language, religion, status in the host country, education—we did share the experiences of relocation, cultural shock, and the overwhelming longing for and the preoccupation with our home countries (PORTES & RUMBAUT, 1996). The experience of relocation can be conceived as central for the immigrants' identities (PAPASTERGIADIS, 2004). Given that complexity and hybridity are key elements of immigrant identities (NORTON, 2000; PAPASTERGIADIS, 2004), I assumed my relation to the Somali community had to be negotiated in interaction with them. PAPASTERGIADIS (2004) writes "self image is formed *in*, not prior to interaction with others" (pp.14-15). This assertion was the first major assumption I used trying to make sense of my position as a researcher. [15]

The second assumption was that although I would be able to shape the immediate context of interactions with members from the Somali network, I would have no control of any of the larger socio-political discourses that had a significant impact on my journey. VILLENAS (2000) emphasizes the strong impact dominant cultures' key discourses commonly have on research since they are transmitted through academia. As well VILLENAS refers to the impact of identification processes, i.e. identification with research participants due to similar historical backgrounds, cultural imprints or experiences. In my case, I had to recognize that although I was only in the preliminary stage of my research and the academic discourse had not yet formally entered the scene, multiple indirect socio-political influences started to influence my journey. I knew while the contemporary U.S. society was perceived to be more tolerant of ethnic diversity (LEVITT, 2001) the overall reception of immigrants, and especially refugees, was a negative one (McBRIEN, 2005; PORTES & RUMBAUT, 1996; SUAREZ-OROZCO & SUAREZ-OROZCO, 2001). For certain groups of immigrants and refugees this negative context had intensified after September 11. The overall reception of Muslim refugees was not welcoming; correspondingly it was not for members of the Somali Diaspora. [16]

Nevertheless, I never accepted any constructions of immigrants and refugees as victims (PORTES & RUMBAUT, 1996; PAPASTERGIADIS, 2000). I believed in the human capacity for agency (PESSAR & MAHLER, 2001)—even under negative conditions. Immigrant men and women are not merely passive victims, submissive to structural forces but—up to certain degrees—have to be considered active agents instead. The third major assumption in my efforts to make sense of my relationship with members of the community was that our unique positioning as outsiders in the host country provided us with a dynamic understanding of cross-cultural communication processes. After all, immigrants and refugees experience cross-cultural contact on a daily base. Thereby, they acquire unique intercultural competences. My basic assertion, however, was the conviction that authentic communication and understanding were possible across cultural differences. These three assumptions guided my efforts to pursue my preliminary journey and enhance it with meaning. Being prompted from my academic advisor, I decided to keep a journal of my experiences. In the next section, excerpts of this journal will provide reflections on research preliminaries and data supporting my assertions on the importance of extra-research spaces. [17]

## 4. The Journey

### 4.1 The outlook

As I set out to sail into the unknown seas of this journey, I made an initial strategic map. In that map I identified key people I would need to contact in order to avoid later crashes on reefs. I felt that if I wanted to relate and potentially understand members of the Somali Diaspora community living in my city, I had to gain first hand exposure to their social outlook, to their geopolitical context in the city and to understand more about the history and culture of Somalia itself. Initially, I relied on books I found in the library and information available on the World Wide Web. However, the most important part in creating these maps was to identify key informants. I already knew the general reception of Muslim refugees from Africa was negative and I presumed the community members would be wary of any outsiders trying to enter their community. In the initial navigations I marked down various stops on my map: with advocates and leaders of the local Somali community (such as presidents of various Somali organizations) and with those who worked with them at the community level (including members from the International Rescue Committee, non-profit organizations, etc). I assumed they would give me a profound sense of the journey's future direction. Eventually these interactions, in fact, translated into an opportunity to participate in a Somali language and culture class at a local high school, a chance that I grasped with enthusiasm. However, this exploratory journey was not smooth. Momentous practical and ethical dilemmas constantly challenged the journey and my decision to sail. Following, I identify three decisive stops on this journey and situate them in their symbolic and real dimensions. [18]

### 4.2 First stop: An island that does not seem to have a dock ...

Sailing into the unknown is an emotionally consuming experience. Enthusiasm, hesitation, and fear are all mixed together. In my initial trials to access the Somali community, I made phone calls and filled my calendar with meetings with various members whom I perceived would give me a sense of the journey's potential direction. Although I did feel awkward introducing my not-yet-set-in-stone proposal and myself, I felt that it was important to get initial responses. There is something cold and mechanic about approaching a person in the role of the researcher (VILLENAS, 2000). Then again I felt, any research plans would have to be negotiated with the community. [19]

The outlook of my calendar for that week included meetings with two Somalis in one day. The first meeting was with Labaan<sup>1</sup>, president of a local Somali organization; the second meeting was with Rhaxma, coordinator at the community center where I myself used to work at. I was more comfortable with the second meeting since I already knew Rhaxma. I was quite nervous about

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1 All names used here are pseudonyms. An Internet search engine was used to identify names that originate in Somalia, for the Somali people mentioned in the report. The same process was used for identification of European-American names for the European-American participants.

meeting Labaan, however. That is why I tried to mentally prepare myself for all potential outcomes—at least those ones I thought were possible. [20]

A day before, I drove by the building where I was supposed to meet Labaan, in order to ensure I would not get lost on the actual day of the meeting. His office was in a part of the city I was not very familiar with. After the tour I noted:

"I am trying to create a view of the area ... All I could see were signs of poverty. Old cars, dirty and dry yards. The building where I am going to meet Labaan is also quite old. It is not painted outside and some windows are broken. The parking is in the back yard and does not have pavement. There are some old cars here as well that do not look functional. We will see what he says, if he is going to be here tomorrow. Because he might not be. I know that having an appointment is not something universal ... We will see ..." [21]

The doubts I had concerning any possible outcomes of the meeting are evident in the last passage. Although there was no direct physical risk like in the case of GOKAH (2006) there were important challenges. Dynamics of cross-cultural interactions can be a source of frustration. Especially when there is no given institutional or communal context for interaction, but the researcher solely initiates the interaction. In our fast paced lives, nobody has any time to waste. The sole reason for my meeting was to introduce my ideas and get a sense for the possibility of conducting a study with the community. Labaan probably had very different things on his agenda. [22]

As I tried to prepare myself against any potential disappointment, I created an outline of my speech. I would mention that my goal was to talk to students about their school experiences in the U.S. I decided there were three potential outcomes: The first would be for him to like my idea, while the second would be a rejection. The third would be for Labaan not to turn up. Being a pessimist, I mentally prepared for the third option. But the meeting turned out to be disappointing in an unpredicted way. Labaan did come but the content of our interaction did not seem to be what I had anticipated. It was not a reaffirmation or a rejection of my thoughts. The excerpt from my journal reads abundantly clear:

"The meeting did not go well. Labaan was just speaking. I don't think he was even listening to what I was saying ... To what I was trying to say. He instead told me what I should do: to collect quantitative data that he could use to prove the status of the Somali students in the city. But this was not what I was trying to do and what I wanted to learn. I wanted to go deeper ... I wanted to see if I can explore underlying reasons ... I have doubts if I should continue with this community. Should I change my focus? Could I do it?" [23]

My inability to persuade a cultural insider of the study's vitality resulted in Labaan's instant criticism of the qualitative approach and left me with doubts concerning the entire project. After some reflections and attempts to understand his position, I could see his point of view: A qualitative study could not provide any measurable outcome. As I could neither guarantee any success at all, I felt



apprehensive, insecure, and unconvincing. If a merely quantitative analysis was needed, this would make my project unacceptable. In this meeting, difference prevailed. [24]

I was prepared to either alter my approach or to give up. Although I was prepared for the possibility of not having a meeting at all (quite a safe outcome in retrospect), I was not prepared to question the qualitative nature of the study and thus the possibility of entirely changing its character. This challenged me. But at the same time it very negatively shaped my disposition for the next meeting with Rhaxma: I did not want to go. I wrote into my journal: "I am going to the second meeting of the day with my head down." Of course, I did not write down that my initial thought was to cancel the meeting and refrain from any further endeavors. In retrospect, I was glad I did not give up because the outcome of the second meeting was quite positive. This becomes clear in the subsequent notes, again taken from my fieldwork diary:

"The meeting with Rhaxma went much better. She told me of various problems that the community faces, education being one of them. She talked about high numbers of dropouts and drug use. She mentioned that the parents are desperate and don't know how to deal with these. Some go back to Somalia for six to eight weeks only to realize the reasons why they left in a first place and come back. Others relocate to other U.S. cities. The situation is out of hand according to Rhaxma. She mentioned that she would be very interested in the potential of my research with Somali youth and that she would be more than willing to help. What a relief this was for me!" [25]

In a couple of hours, my disappointment and my willingness to give up were transformed into rejuvenating energy. Emotions have a central role in the ways we relate to others, especially in cross-cultural settings (BEHAR, 1996; VILLENAS, 2000). Had I let my emotions overwhelm me in the first place, I would not have attended the second meeting. I might have refrained from any further engagement. I might have chosen a study design with a more familiar population instead. Luckily this was not my choice. The dilemma in this case was both practical and ethical. It was practical because access to the community depended on persuading stakeholders of my goals and position. It was ethical because if only a quantitative study mattered for the community, then my idea of a qualitative study was too far-fetched and potentially meaningless. [26]

### **4.3 Second stop: The ship is sinking ...**

As I stated earlier, in order to get a holistic picture of the city's Somali community I decided to establish contact with members of various local non-profit organizations, which engaged with the Somali community. One of these approaches resulted in a large ethical dilemma. Meeting a member of an organization that had been formed immediately after 9/11 as a response to the increased hate crimes towards and discrimination of Muslims, Arabs, and South Asians—I faced a situation I had no control over. The meeting was with Elizabeth, a social justice advocate. As we were talking about her perception of the community's status in the city, Elizabeth mentioned how wary members were of

cultural outsiders. She added that the previous day's dramatic event had really upset the community and accordingly intensified these feelings. [27]

I felt awful to admit that despite the fact that I was living in the same city, I had no idea what event she was speaking of. I felt terrible for not knowing and did not dare to ask. Not surprisingly, Elizabeth read my non-verbal cues and informed me about the violent death of a Somali taxi driver—an event that had left his Somali monolingual wife and his two children in despair. She added that members of the community considered this death a hate-crime. After this conversation I wrote into my journal

"I was very sad to hear about the death of the taxi driver. I was mad at myself for not knowing. It makes me wonder. What significance can my pathetic little proposed project have in moments like this? How can I dare intrude in people's lives when they experience such traumatic events? Why would they even talk to me?" [28]

Prior to that moment, I had been fully consumed by the academic character of my research. I could not have thought of anything else, could not have read or written anything else. I had been keeping my journal, creating maps of the diasporic community in the city, visuals of my theoretical frameworks, combining insights from education studies and sociology, reading books, seeking further information and strategizing my future steps etc. ... but all these instantly froze. Instead I started to question my intentions and the importance of my viewpoint. I decided to stay away for a while and allow some healing time for the community and for myself. [29]

Like GOKAH (2006) I felt insignificant and naïve. In my case, discourses that were taking place on a global scale and were emerging to the local level were beyond immediate control. Besides, members of the community had so many things to worry about. I had no place in their lives. In times of fear maybe there was no room for meeting new people. There was no given organizational context facilitating my efforts to relate to the community members. Had I been their teacher, things might have been different. But I wasn't. I did initiate interactions with them and they were intrusive (SHAH, 2004). [30]

Now once again I felt that I was knocking at the wrong doors or perhaps, carrying the wrong agenda. Questioning the importance of my study was an all-consuming endeavor. I had been avoiding any self-reflections but these events eventually forced me to. It was far-fetched and idealistic assuming a research project could have any direct influence on the status of the community in the city. My idealistic and naïve view that education could provide a supportive space for newcomers was profoundly challenged. My sense of guilt was overwhelming. Potential indirect long-term benefits of this qualitative research would not improve any of the conditions in the participants' everyday lives. It is difficult to admit personal limitations. I felt everything was going down. The research ship was about to disappear right before my eyes ... [31]

#### 4.4 Stop 3: Fighting the pirate ...

So far the challenges were shaped by the larger context and somewhat beyond my control. The last struggle that will be delineated here, however, occurred within me. It was thus a micro-level challenge, which despite its volume entailed the potential to sabotage my relations with the members of the community. After having sustained contact with both, Somalis and non-Somalis in the city, and after having persuaded multiple stakeholders at the district level, I was able to access a Somali language and culture class held at a local high school. Getting access to a Somali language and culture class seemed to be ideal for my research project. Accordingly, I was very happy to attend the first class. I had never attended high school in the U.S., neither as a student nor a teacher. I felt as if I was returning to my own high-school years. I have to admit the experience was very enriching, despite the reefs and storms I encountered. The first day I was going to meet with Amina and Mary, two of my key informants who were working for community engagement in the school district. Amina was Somali and Mary was European-American. I thought that Amina's role would be central introducing me to the class and Mary's role would be important in getting me through the high school's front door. In my journal I wrote:

"Today I went to the appointment that I had with Amina and Mary at the high school. Both of them stood me up and I almost left. However, I did not panic and after not finding the class (well the people in the front desk sent me to the wrong classroom on the other side of the campus), I waited patiently and I met with Taban (the coordinator) after the class was over and when I finally found it. He was very nice. I introduced myself and my interests and he was very welcoming." [32]

I had to recognize that Amina and Mary had a very busy schedule and an agenda different from mine. That way, I was put into the position of a newcomer student who cannot find her way into the classroom. Nevertheless, and despite these initial reefs I was very excited to attend classes. I have had experiences learning languages before and I was looking forward to the new challenge. I was concerned about how the Somali girls and the Somali teacher would perceive me as the only non-Somali in class. The first dilemma, however, emerged soon after the introductions. I wrote into my journal:

"Today was the first class of Somali. The teacher is very welcoming. There were eight girls in the room. He was teaching us the letters of the alphabet and he wanted me to read. I felt awkward. I did not want to do it at first ... But I did not want to appear rude and I did read. It was fun in the end. The girls spoke very good English. They were questioning the teacher about the origins of Somali people and he said that he was going to bring history to class. We also talked about the symbolism in the Somali flag ..." [33]

Although at the moment, my decision whether or not to participate in the reading exercise seemed insignificant, I later realized it was central for the development of the relationship with my Somali fellow-students, some of which later on participated in my study. The truth is that I initially did not feel comfortable. I even

tried to persuade myself better not to interfere and take any study time from the students' and rather be an observer. I had to internally fight the pirate emerging in me: I realized that if I was not willing to participate, to become vulnerable by pronouncing words in incorrect ways, I would be acting like a pirate. In that case, I should leave the class. [34]

If I wanted to learn and relate with the Somali girls I had to put myself right on the spot. This decision, made on the spur of the moment, eventually turned out to be crucial for my relations with the other students. It offered me the opportunity to *be* in the class, and for them, to see me *being there*. This provided me with an important foundation for the development of any further relationships. Soon this turned into a more authentic and supportive bond. They were cheering with enthusiasm every time I was asked to write something on the board, speak or read aloud; they were giving me one-on-one lessons in pronunciation; and they were correcting my mistakes. The common context of learning a language gave us the opportunity to begin to create rapport and mutually learn from each other, other than initially planned. Language class provided us with an informal extra-space to relate to each other aside of the mechanistic or intrusive characteristics formal research designs implied. After that the island was re-emerging on the horizon ... [35]

## 5. Discussion

To sum up, I think in international cross-cultural qualitative research it is generally difficult to know if one will ever reach the research's final destination—or any desirable destination at all. After the bumps of this initial exploratory journey, I engaged in a study with Somali high school students, some of which had been my classmates in the Somali language and culture class. Although the actual journey then had its own joys and struggles—in the first place it was the exploratory, investigative nature of this preliminary journey that enabled any further development. I know now that had I not dared this leap I would have missed the moment to finally embark on my research. That is why I consider the exploratory stage of negotiating access essential for the study design in international cross-cultural qualitative research. [36]

The constitutive role of the actual interactions during this preliminary journey and its transformation into a study is evident throughout all three stops discussed. These stops, however, can only provide snapshots of an 18-month journey, while illustrating how my relation to the community and my (self-) perception as a researcher were negotiated *in* the actual interactions, and *not* prior to them (PAPASTERGIADIS, 2004). It illustrates that multiple ethical and practical dilemmas, both, enabled and disabled my navigation course and determined the procedure. Although I could handle some of these dilemmas, their constitutive role became clear and reaffirmed the idea that an exploratory journey is crucial for research projects in international cross-cultural studies. [37]

Despite its challenges, this journey led me to significant knowledge in two areas, which would have been impossible to access using different means. First, it

created an opportunity for me to relate to community members apart from any mechanistic and intrusive research contexts (SHAH, 2004). It provided me with the opportunity to put aside my goals and my agenda and to relate to real people. Participation in the Somali language and cultural class gave me the opportunity to not only be seen as a learner in a rather metaphoric sense but to actually take classes and thus become a learner. Knowledge of even a few words and expressions of a language can facilitate a level of intercultural connection. To me it seems essential for cross-cultural researchers operating without pre-existing contexts, to seek similar spaces facilitating authentic connections. It might also be that the foundation of such spaces is easier in the preliminary stages of a research journey, when a researcher has not yet been too preoccupied with the research agenda. [38]

Secondly, the preliminary journey contributed to my understanding of the dominant Somali cultural communication style. This understanding was then translated into the design of a culturally responsive research approach. Instead of relying on intrusive individual interviews that, according to SHAH (2004), can be perceived as "threatening, time consuming, lacking a transactional element, and the relative status of the participants" (p.557), I subsequently decided to use focus groups. The communication with Amina, the Somali advocate, allowed me to understand that providing personal opinion is not common in Somali communication. Rather, constructing collective positions by eliciting each other's thoughts is the common practice. As I was listening to Amina's description, I began to envision focus groups for my study, which could provide a more natural environment for conversation and allow the participants to draw from each other. [39]

However, and regardless of the enriching character of the preliminary journey, multiple struggles that were situated in larger discourses, with both local and global implications, shaped my interaction with the focal population. And despite the fact that I was aware of some of them, even prior to sailing out for my journey, I could not ever have envisioned their strong impact in advance. My relative status, both as an outsider and insider, was shaped by these discourses in neither ways I could have foreseen or controlled. In one sense, it could be that the overall societal climate for tolerance of diversity (LEVITT, 2001) enabled me to access members of the community in the first place. However, the negative context of reception (PORTES & RUMBAUT, 1996) also kept me at a distance, as shown in the case of the taxi driver's death. I never found out if the death was indeed a hate-crime, but the fact that it was perceived as one by the community became the key for my positioning. Wariness towards outsiders becomes more intense in times of fear and rather indicates outsiders to withdraw. [40]

In those less intimidating and threatening moments, I now theorize from a distance, that there were certain levels of identification with members of the Somali community that enhanced further contact and communication. Our common experiences as newcomers in the host country provided a strong foundation for intercultural relationship building. After all, our relocations, although under different conditions, were central in the formation of our newcomer identities (PAPASTERGIADIS, 2004). The fact that we were outsiders to the

dominant US culture and society eventually played a constitutive part in our relationship as it allowed insights into each other's perspectives. In retrospect, I believe this provided an entrance point for me (DELGADO-GAITAN, 2000; VILLENAS, 2000). Nevertheless, I should acknowledge that this was facilitated by my privileged status as a European immigrant and academic. Then again, while it is essential to acknowledge the researcher's privileged position, it should not halt the pursuit of intercultural communication and understanding, but motivate us to do so, acknowledging that difference and identification are relative constructs only (ALCOFF, 1995). In a fast and ever-changing world, people strategically position themselves to either facilitate or withdraw from connecting, relating, and understanding each other and they utilize multiple resources to do so. GAY (2000) writes "caring interpersonal relationships are characterized by patience, persistence, facilitation, validation, and empowerment for the participants" (p.47). International cross-cultural research could provide a pathway to creating and sustaining such relationships. [41]

In writing this essay, I initially hesitated using the first person. I theorize that much of what is being discussed is contextual as it took place in a relational space with the participants. I would have preferred to be able to write "we" as "with them." In retrospect, I perceive we exerted that agency in conjunction. All of us used our immigration experiences to relate and build commons, which would further facilitate discussions. However, in the end, it is I writing this essay. I fear that by doing so I am sabotaging the authenticity of my journey. As I once almost sabotaged my relationships with them by hesitating to participate in class, I now sense that I am disrupting the maps of the journey by presenting an all fragmented and partial view that entails potential misunderstandings. After all, it has been some time since I embarked on my journey. Time and distance allow for a somewhat romantic retrospective view—the actual journey is a distant story weaved into the memories of visions, events and interactions that cannot easily be rendered into words. In addition, I feel that something is missing since I can only talk about reaching my short-term goal—the realization of a research project. [42]

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