Somali Stories in Ivory Towers: Narratives of Becoming a University Student

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Dedication

To Somali women and the girls they once were.

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Abstract

This study employed narrative methods to explore how two Somali-Canadian women formed and understood their identities as first-generation university students. In conceptualizing identity, the study draws on sociological literature that frames identities as a collection of social roles that are performed. Within this framework, university student is a cultural object related to specific kinds of capital. The data are presented in narrative form, based in life history and life story approaches. Within their narratives, participants recounted the ways in which their attempts at developing a university student identity were complicated by their identities as Black, Muslim, economically marginalized individuals from refugee backgrounds. The tension at the heart of each participants' narrative was not how to perform the university student role, but the cost of that performance on other parts of their identity. These findings reveal the narrow definition university student within the Canadian imagination and its consequence for the lives of marginalized communities.

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Introduction

The inquiry at the heart of this thesis began with a list. As part of a research project on equity policies in Ontario universities, I examined special funding designated for underrepresented groups of students. The list in question came from the Access to Opportunities Strategy launched in 2007 by the Ontario government. As part of the Strategy, the Ontario government pledged over $100 million of funding for grants, bursaries and programs to improve the "the post-secondary enrolment, retention and success of Aboriginal students, Francophone students, first generation students, Crown Wards, and students with disabilities" (CSA, OSTA & OUAC, 2011, p.23). While I had anticipated most of the groups on this list, I was surprised by the inclusion of first-generation students. I continued my research and found the list again, this time identified by the Ontario government as "students in special circumstances" (Ontario, n.d.). For each of the groups aside from first-generation students, I understood that the *special circumstances* in which they found themselves manifested as structural and cultural barriers in attending, financing, and completing post-secondary education. Beyond the financial barrier, I wondered what unique experiences first-generation university students had that earn them a place on this list.

The body of literature on the university experiences first-generation students overwhelmingly finds that issues of identity, belonging, and "culture shock" are the main drivers of dropout and general hardship among this population (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Lehmann, 2007, 2009; Read, Archer, & Leathwood, 2003; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2009; Smyth & Harrison, 2015; Stuber, 2011). In Lehmann's (2007) study of dropout among working-class, first-generation students more than two-thirds of his participants voluntarily left university for non-academic reasons. His study echoes the findings of a report published by Statistics Canada in partnership with Human Resources and Skills Development Canada that identified "lack of fit" (i.e. "didn't like the program/program not for me") as the most important reason reported for prematurely leaving post-secondary education on the Youth in Transition Survey (Lambert, Zeman, Allen, & Bussiere, 2004). Again, and again, I read that first-generation students struggled with or left university as a result of a kind of social displacement. Of the most extreme reactions to the social displacement, Lehmann (2007) found that some working-class, first-generation

students dropped out even when they had attained high academic standing in their first year. While much of the literature groups working-class and first-generation students, both Lehmann (2009) and Soria (2012) found that students who are the first in their families to attend face an acute lack of social and cultural capital needed for success in university life even when compared with other working-class students.

If issues with fit or belonging were such powerful factors in university completion for the mostly White students found in the Canadian literature that I was reading, I wondered what these issues would mean to *my* community. What did these tensions look like for Somali-Canadians, who are Black, historically Muslim, refugees/immigrants or their children attending institutions build for a White, settler colonial nation? If class culture alone was such an important factor in university success, I wanted to understand the experiences of those who live at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities.

While there is little written about students of Somali descent in Canadian universities, their experiences in Ontario K-12 schools – and the challenges they face therein – are well documented (Berns-McGown, 2013; Chang & Spyropoulos, 2014; Daniel & Cukier, 2015; Farrah, 2011). According to data from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), students who identified as Somali were disproportionately: in special education programs; in non-academic/non-university level courses; achieving below provincial standard on Grade 6 EQAO assessment; and suspended during their school career (Chang & Spyropoulos, 2014). The 2014 report by the Task Force on the Success of Students of Somali Descent found that 25% of Somali-speaking students left high school without graduating over the previous five years compared to 14% of all TDSB students (Chang & Spyropoulos, 2014). In qualitative studies, Somali students and their families report experiencing streaming away from university-bound courses, disproportionate disciplinary action, and instances of anti-Black racism in Ontario schools. In the face of all of this, the TDSB Task Force found that 47% of the Somali-speaking students in the board confirmed an offer of admission from an Ontario university or college at the time of their study (Chang & Spyropoulos, 2014). This thesis will narrate the lived experiences of students like those 47%, who overcame substantial hurdles in their K-12 schooling to attend the University of Ottawa.

The two young women in this study are first-generation university students but their experiences are not well captured by the literature on this group in Canada. While the work of

Lehmann (2007, 2009) and others have laid the groundwork for understanding the lives first-generation students in Canadian universities, this work is done almost exclusively through the lens of class and does not grapple with questions of ethnic culture, race, or religion. Where Canadian research exists that accounts for race and ethnicity, the category of "visible minority" is rarely disaggregated into its component groups (Birani & Lehmann, 2013; Thiessen, 2009). Building on this literature, my inquiry seeks to understand the ways in which Somali-Canadian students who are first-generation students develop a student identity and sense of belonging in a university setting.

Context: Somali and Black in Ontario Schools

Somalis in Ontario

The participants in my research are 1.5 generation Canadian students of Somali origin; that is to say, they were born outside of Canada but arrived before the age of 6 and were subsequently raised here (Berns-McGown, 2013). Given the similarities between the two groups, I have used literature on both 1.5 and 2nd generation Somali Canadians (those who were born in Canada to parents who were born elsewhere) in this work. This decision was also the result of the lack of scholarly literature on the lives of this generation of Somalis in Canada (Daniel & Cukier, 2015).

In his work *Migration and Identity Processes Among Somali Immigrants in Canada*, Abdi Kusow (1998) identifies 3 waves of Somali migration to Canada. Both the first and second wave of arrivals consisted of relatively well educated and financially established Somalis from various countries. Kusow (1998) numbers the first wave in the 1970s at "no more than a dozen" (cited in Mire, 2017, p.6), and the second wave in the 1980s in the thousands. The third wave of Somalis, the group to which my participants and their families belong, arrived in Canada after the 1980s as refugees. In the late 1980s and early 1990s Somalis left their territories as a result of several factors including escalating sociopolitical instability and widespread drought (Mire, 2017). Prior to this wave of refugees, official records indicate that there was "effectively no Somali community in Canada" (Berns-McGown, 2013, p. 6). By 1996, the Somali population in Ontario grew to between 60,000 and 70,000. Somalis refugees arriving in the early 1990s did not have the benefit of an existing co-ethnic community to assist them with translation or support them in navigating social services – of which there were few that were able to meet the group's particular

needs (Berns-McGown, 2013; Mire, 2017). The majority of Somalis settled in Ontario and, according to census data, most Somalis in Canada live in Ottawa and Toronto. Recent official reports on the Somali-Canadian population range in size from approximately 45,000 to 200,000 individuals (Berns-McGown, 2013; Mire, 2017).

The structure of the Somali family was deeply affected by their dislocation from their traditional territories. Many fathers, who were the heads of households and source of financial support, died in the civil war or were unable to flee with their families. For those who eventually made it to Canada, they found their credentials (acquired from institutions inside Somalia or throughout Europe and Asia) unrecognized in Canada (Berns-McGown, 2013; Daniel & Cukier, 2015). While this is the case for many foreign-trained professionals, Somali men were doubly impacted by other Canadian immigration policies.

> With many families forced to flee following the fall of the Somali government, they were unable to secure most of their official documents required by Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC). However, it does appear that Somalis were targeted by CIC as they were one of only two groups to have a five-year waiting period imposed upon them before becoming eligible to apply for permanent residency (the other group being Afghans). While waiting for their landed immigrant status to be approved, Somali immigrants have a number of restrictions imposed upon them. Primary among them is that they are unauthorized to leave the country with a guarantee of re-entry. Moreover, they are unable to sponsor family members to come to Canada, and are only eligible for temporary work permits. They also remain ineligible for employment offered through Human Resources Development Canada.
> (Daniel & Cukier, 2015)

The work available to them left many Somali men underemployed in low paying, entry-level jobs (Berns-McGown, 2013; Daniel & Cukier, 2015). Some fathers took these positions while others returned abroad for better earning opportunities, sending money back to their families in Canada. Mothers headed the new Somali-Canadian households. Somali women, however, faced hurdles of their own. Along with trauma, language barriers, and a new position as financial providers, their identity as Africans and Muslims meant they faced the “racist and Orientalist assumptions” of social service workers, policy makers, and the general public with whom they interacted every day (Berns-McGown, 2013, p. 6).

Somalis are racialized as Black when they arrive in Canada, an category that was not meaningful in the social structure from which they came (Ibrahim, 2004; Kusow, 2006; Berns-McGown, 2013). Traditionally, one was identified by family lineage, clan belonging, or regional

origin (with some movements promoting a national and Pan-African identity at various times). Parents who understood themselves primarily as Somali – with Muslimness being assumed and essentially interchangeable with that label – now had to raise Black, Muslim children: racial and religious minorities (Berns-McGown, 2013; Bigelow, 2007, Daniel & Cukier, 2015).

1.5 and 2nd generation Somali-Canadians face the task of navigating their complex identities and (re)defining their relationships to Somaliness, Blackness, Muslimness and Canadianness (Berns-McGown, 2013; Daniel & Cukier, 2015). With respect to identity, this generation of Somalis in Canada identify as *Somali, Canadian, Somali-Canadian, Black, Muslim* and every permutation of those terms, and report that how they choose identify themselves is often context-dependent (Berns-McGown, 2013; Daniel & Cukier, 2015). No matter how they identify, this generation of Somalis report experiencing anti-Blackness and Islamophobia in their interactions with both individuals and institutions such as police and schools (Berns-McGown, 2013; Daniel, 2015).

Somali Students and School Belonging

In his study of Somali students in American and Canadian schools, Forman (2001) argues that belonging is not simply the result of engaging in a benign set of actions that mimic those around you, but that belonging is deeply tied to the agendas of the state. Belonging is achieved when individuals and communities observe the processes and legitimating behaviours that the state has defined for its citizens; in this understanding citizens must "accept the dominant values and meanings of the nation while proving their worthiness (and personal worth) so that they will, in turn, be accepted into the nation" (Forman, 2001, p. 47). To this end, Bashir-Ali (2006) states that within the education system students are expected to "master the social, linguistic, and cultural codes of the dominant if they [ever] hope to enter into the social fabric" (cited in Daniel & Cukier, 2015, p. 14). Forman (2001) found that Somali students with the strongest sense of belonging were those who conformed most closely to the schools' ideals (the school serving as a proxy for the state): they were high academic achievers, engaged in academic life and pursuits, and were present in student leadership. In his analysis he makes an important distinction between belonging and fitting in. Forman (2001) notes that while Somali students that "belonged" received greater attention from teachers and administration and were more likely to be selected out of the student body as role models, many also began to be ostracized or marginalized from their peers and personally struggled with the pressures of being held up as the "good" Somalis (p.

48). Put another way, belonging is a function of one's alignment with the institution's goals and agendas, whereas fitting in is a function of peer relationships. This work is primarily concerned with the phenomenon of belonging but does touch on fitting in, as it emerged as a theme in each participant's narrative.

Somali-Canadian students consistently report experiencing race-based discrimination in school. The most common form of racism described by Somali students is poor assumptions about academic abilities and doubts about their potential to succeed in university and the workplace (Berns-McGown, 2013; Daniel & Cukier, 2015; Farah, 2011). Across socioeconomic status, the participants in Berns-McGown's (2013) study identified these experiences as being more heavily informed by their race than their actual academic ability or family background. Like other immigrant groups, Somali-Canadian families place a premium on the education of their children and see it as the primary benefit to leaving their homelands (Berns-McGown, 2013; Bigelow, 2007; Birani & Lehmann, 2013; Thiessen, 2009); conversely, like other Black Canadian students, Somali-Canadians are more likely to be streamed away from university-preparatory courses, held back a grade, and drop out of school (Daniel & Cukier, 2015; Farrah, 2011; Thiessen, 2009). While Somalis hold their own unique place in the Canadian social imaginary, their categorization as Black places them within a broader network of meanings, histories, understandings, and rituals associated with Blackness in Ontario (Ibrahim, 2004; Simpson, 2010). It is also worth noting that Somalis are currently the largest Black/African diaspora in Canada, so much of the recent work examining Black Canadian experience will include Somali voices (Mire, 2017). As such, it is critical to understand the history of Black students in this province's schools.

Black Students in Ontario Schools

While this thesis is concerned with the experience of forming an identity as a university students, that phenomenon can only be experienced once one has completed their K-12 schooling. Understandings and meanings of university studenthood are formed in these years. This section will provide context on the reality of Black students in these formative years.

In addition to its stated aim, the 2017 report *Towards Race Equity in Education: The Schooling of Black Students in the Greater Toronto Area* (James & Turner, 2017) provides an overview of the history of Black students in Ontario K-12 schools since the 1980s. "For at least 30 years, the provincial government has been aware of and has tried in various ways to address

unequal educational outcomes for Black students" (James & Turner, 2017, p. 6). James and Turner begin by presenting the findings of The Stephen Lewis report (Lewis, 1992), which they identify as the first government report to name anti-Black racism as a concern in Ontario. The report was commissioned by Premier Bob Rae after the so-called Yonge Street Riots in 1992, with the intention of exploring "race relations" in Ontario (James & Turner, 2017).

With respect to K-12 schooling, Lewis (1992) stated that in Ontario "it is Black students who are being inappropriately streamed in schools, it is Black kids who are disproportionately dropping-out" (p.2). Like James and Turner in 2017, Lewis in 1992 presents anti-Black racism in the education system as a widely known issue in the government and amongst educators – in his report he laments the lack of progress made given that knowledge and identifies the issue as one beginning the elementary grades (Lewis, 1992). Lewis' major findings from consultations with Black students were:

> …lack of racial diversity among teachers; Black people and Black history not reflected in the curriculum; tolerance of racist incidents in schools; harsher discipline of Black students; streaming of Black students into courses below their ability; and Black students being discouraged from attending university. (James & Turner, 2017, p. 7-8)

Streaming and being discouraged from attending university are also mentioned in Daniel and Cukier's (2015) consultations with Somali students in Toronto.

> One participant sharing their own personal experience within the school said that they saw "guidance counsellors telling Somali kids who were straight-A students that post-secondary education was too hard and they should look into getting a job in the trades instead. (p. 17)

Lewis's findings are consistent themes in many subsequent reports on the schooling experiences of various Black communities in Ontario (Daniel & Cukier, 2015; Four-Level Government/Black Canadian Community Working Group, 1992; James, 2012; James & Turner, 2015, 2017; McMurtry & Curling, 2008). Lewis outlined a series of recommendations including Affirmative Action policies in hiring teachers, revision of the curriculum to reflect the diversity of Ontario's population, and accountability measures tied to school boards' anti-racism policies.

In that same year, 1992, the Ontario New Democratic Party added several amendments to the Education Act that would affect the lives of Black and ethnic minority students.

> These amendments called for school boards to develop and implement anti racism and ethnocultural equity policies that would focus promote the identification and elimination

> of systemic inequities and barriers to equitable education for students and encourage equitable education practices for all staff. (James & Turner, 2017, p. 8)

These measures were only in place until the Progressive Conservative Party, led by Mike Harris, was elected in 1995. The PC government not only removed the NDP amendments, but also introduced amendments to implement a zero tolerance policy for inappropriate student behaviour, giving schools more power to suspend and expel students. James and Turner (2017) say of the policies: "[at] that time, there was also a great deal of research on the negative impact of zero tolerance policies on Black students in the United States, United Kingdom, and Nova Scotia" (p. 9). These policies proved to have a similar impact in Ontario schools.

> In responding to the concerns of Black and other communities, the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) initiated human rights complaints against the Ministry of Education and the TDSB. The complaints raised concerns about the discriminatory impact of the Act's zero tolerance policy on racialized students and students with disabilities. In 2007, the OHRC and the Ministry of Education finalized a settlement to end the provincial zero tolerance policy and replace it with a progressive discipline approach to dealing with inappropriate school behaviours (Ontario Human Rights Commission, n.d.). (p. 8)

James and Turner's *Towards Race Equity in Education: The Schooling of Black Students in the Greater Toronto Area* report was the result of a series of consultations with Black communities in the Greater Toronto Area in October and November of 2016 and January of 2017, as well as an analysis of student data from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB).

> The dataset combines four successive cohorts of students (the cohorts of 2003–2008, 2004–2009, 2005– 2010, and 2006–2011) and includes data from the students who completed the 2006 Student Census as Grade 12, 11, 10, and 9 students, respectively. (James & Turner, 2017, p.26)

The consultations were conducted with students, parents, educators, school administrators, school board trustees, and community members across the region, with approximately 80% of participants identifying as Black. As part of the consultations, participants were asked to reflect on two main questions: "What is happening in the schools that impact Black students that contribute to their educational outcomes?" and "What is happening in the homes and communities of Black students that contribute to these outcomes" (p. 4)?

In both the data analysis and the consultation responses, James and Turner found that Black students were less likely to be enrolled in courses within the university-bound stream than

their White and other racialized peers. See the figure below for a summary of their findings from the data.

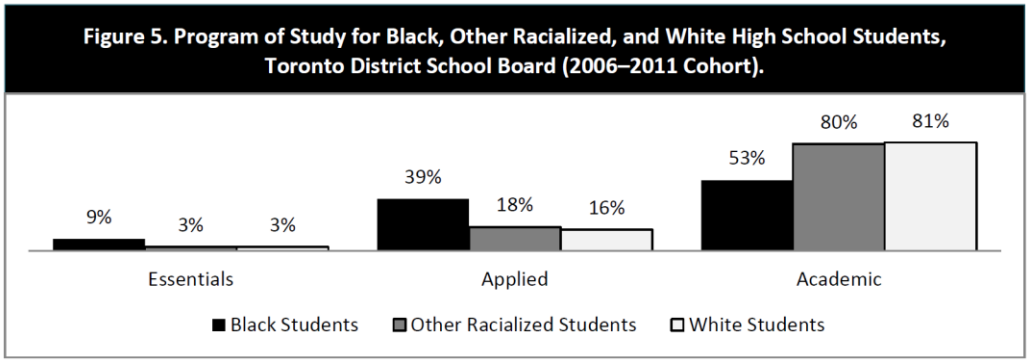

Figure 1. Streaming data (James & Turner, 2017, p.29)

In the consultations, participants consistently presented their experience with streaming as a result of low expectations held and even explicitly communicated by educators. To this end, James and Turner quote a participant in from the York region who said: "Racism is a barrier that blocks the ability of Black students to focus on academics" (p. 47). Participants expressed that stereotypes about Black students produced a "normalization of poor outcomes" in the TDSB, that even resulted in "teachers actively discouraging them from working hard" (p. 47).

Similarly to participants in other Ontario-based reports (James, 2008; James & Turner, 2015; McMurtry & Curling, 2008), James and Tuner's (2017) participants expressed that Black students came into their schooling with high academic aspirations, excitement to learn and strongly valuing education, but were "gradually worn down" (p. 50) by the negative experiences with the school system. As with Lewis's (1992) findings, James and Turner's participants stated that the discrimination they faced began as early as elementary school. Another way that participants identified their educators' low expectations was in the lack of assistance or information provided to Black students about post-secondary options, or assistance in the application process. They cited a lack of support in understanding the differences between college and university, between particular post-secondary institutions or the programs that they offered.

Disproportionate rates and severity of discipline was another theme that emerged from both the consultations and data set. Within the progressive discipline approach in Ontario schools, educators and administrators are given discretion to determine what types of measures

are used in response to student behaviour. Participants noted that Black students were more likely to be suspended and expelled, as well as being threatened with an arrest or actually having the police called on them. The TDSB data reflect this reality: from 2006 to 2011, 42% of Black students had at least 1 suspension compared to 18% and 15% of White and other racialized students, respectively; from 2011 to 2015, Black students made up 48% of all expulsions while only making up 12% of the student body (James & Turner, 2017).

Participants posited that cumulative affect of the both the subtle and overt racism experienced by Black students played a part in their behaviour.

> Some students theorized that the perceived negative behaviours exhibited by Black students, such as talking back to teachers or school administrators when they are being unfairly treated and speaking out in class so that their existence is acknowledged, are forms of active resistance to the racism and discrimination they experience in school. They also noted that these behaviours could be an effort to preserve their self-esteem and counteract the damage of racism they experience not just in school but in society.
> (James & Turner, 2017, p. 56)

One participant expressed concern for the impact of this hostile environment on student well-being, saying the following:

> Over time these negative interactions with teachers cause a great deal of emotional harm. If teachers aren't openly hostile, students are exposed to constant micro-aggressions. What impact does this have on the psyche of a young child?
> (James & Turner, 2017, p. 55)

Participants in James and Turner's consultations, as well as other consultations of this nature (James & Turner, 2015; Lewis 1992; McMurtry & Curling, 2008) highlighted the lack of Black teachers as a critical issue. With respect to academics, parents found that Black teachers had a positive affect on Black student achievement as a result of their high expectations for both academics and behaviour, and their willingness to "go out of their way to support Black students' successes" (James & Turner, 2017, p. 53). Participants also felt that Black teachers created a safer and more positive environment within the school for Black students, as well as their work in counteracting negative stereotypes about Black students' abilities. James and Turner cite several studies that echo these findings (see Nicholson-Crotty et al, 2016; Gershenson et al, 2017; Rosen, 2017).

Between *The Stephen Lewis* report in 1992 and James and Turner's *Towards Race Equity in Education: The Schooling of Black Students in the Greater Toronto Area* report in 2017, several reports and studies commissioned to investigate the lived experiences of Black youth have identified anti-Black racism as a major issue in Ontario schools. This list includes, but is not limited to: *The Roots of Youth Violence* report (McMurtry & Curling, 2008); *The 360 Project: Addressing Racism in Toronto* (Daniel & Cukier, 2015); and *Fighting an Uphill Battle: Report on the Consultations into the Well-Being of Black Youth in Peel Region* (James & Turner, 2015). These reports present the same list of issues:

- low expectations for Black students' educational abilities and outcomes;
- stereotyping and negative perceptions of Black students;
- disproportionate use and severity of disciplinary actions;
- lack of Black or racialized teachers;
- streaming away from academic and university level courses; and
- curriculum content and materials that do not reflect the realities of Black or racialized students.

With respect to recommendations, each of the aforementioned reports present some variation of the following: hire more Black and racialized teachers; update curriculum and resources to reflect the diversity of Canada's population; provide anti-racism education and training for educators; implement anti-racism policies to promote student wellbeing and safety.

Finally, *The 360 Project: Addressing Racism in Toronto* (Daniel & Cukier, 2015) was a project comprised of two parts: (1) Addressing the Discrimination Experienced by Somali Canadians; and (2) Racialized LGBTQ Homeless Youth in Toronto. I refer to the findings in *Addressing the Discrimination Experienced by Somali Canadians* in this work. The findings here with regards to the schooling experiences on Somali students in Ontario are in line with the broader Black student population. While Somalis sit at the intersection of several minoritized groups in Ontario (Muslim, immigrant, refugee) it is critical to understand their experiences in light of their Black identity, given the long history and well established social position that Black students occupy in Ontario schools.

Conceptual Framework

Habitus, Cultural Capital and University Experience

The body of literature exploring students' experiences of belonging/marginalization in higher education and their consequences is built on Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of habitus and cultural capital and deals principally with issues of class and class culture (Berger, 2000; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Lehmann, 2009; Reay et al., 2009; Soria, 2012; Stuber, 2011). Although my study does not deal solely or primarily with social class, this literature is the foundation of my conceptual approach to the question of which identities are seen as valid in a university setting and the experiences of those who are not. Also important to note is that while their culture and history do not necessarily align with the rest of the group, Somali-Canadians are socioeconomically positioned as part of the working-class.

Edgerton and Roberts (2014) provide a concise definition of Bourdieu's *habitus* as: "the learned set of preferences or dispositions by which a person orients to the social world. It is a system of durable, transposable, cognitive 'schemata or structures of perception, conception and action'" (p. 195). They also note that an important feature of habitus is that it "shapes the parameters of people's sense of agency and possibility" (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014, p. 195). This last point about habitus is crucial in my thinking about educational outcomes for marginalized groups. With respect to its relationship to cultural capital, Edgerton and Roberts (2014) put forth the idea that habitus be understood as a type of *embodied cultural capital*. The relationship between the two is presented as follows: habitus is a "socialized subjectivity" comprised of a set of dispositions that lead to particular behaviours; these behaviours are performed in order to receive social benefit for the individual – that is, they confer capital. Habitus is passed down in the same way as other types of cultural capital, and so one's habitus is a function of his family history.

Of all of society's institutions, the education system is seen by theorists to be the primary vehicle in the reproduction of the middle-class habitus (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Collier & Morgan, 2008). Dumais (2002) makes the point that schools do not explicitly teach these values or openly offer students the opportunity to acquire them, but that social reproduction occurs in the institutional recognition and reward of particular behaviours and ways of being. Thus,

students who arrive to school with the necessary capital are promoted more quickly and students who do not are further marginalized (Collier & Morgan, 2008).

For first-generation students from working-class backgrounds, adjusting to campus life is also a process of immersion into the world and culture of the middle-class. This experience presents a conflict for working-class students: their success in university is partially reliant upon the extent to which they are able to adopt the habitus of the middle-class. This adoption may be a partial one that affords them certain opportunities to navigate in the middle-class world while maintaining their working-class identity, or a complete adoption that entails abandoning their previous habitus (Lehmann, 2007, 2009). I would make the case that Black students attending predominantly White settler institutions are faced with a similar conflict.

To interrogate the specific experiences of students whose habitus differs from that of the institution – whether that is a result of class, race, or other factors – I adopt two premises put forth by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977). The first premise is:

> [T]he specific productivity of all pedagogic work other than the pedagogic work accomplished by the family is a function of the distance between the habitus it tends to inculcate (in this context, scholarly mastery of scholarly language) and the habitus inculcated by all previous forms of pedagogic work and, ultimately, by the family. (p. 172)

That is to say, the more one's habitus differs from the culture of the university, the more difficult it is to benefit from (and ultimately succeed in) the institution. The second premise from Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) follows in this line of reasoning: by virtue of their distance from the university habitus, working-class students undergo a more rigorous selection process in which they must become acculturated to habitus of middle-class while also mastering the necessary academic knowledge (p. 173). Before they can begin to adopt the legitimate habitus, however, working-class students must first come to realize the illegitimate nature of their forms of speech, language use and behavioural norms. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) describe this reality succinctly: "In an academic universe in which the ideal is to 'talk like a book', the only legitimate speech is one which presupposes at every point the whole context of legitimate culture and no other context" (p. 120). Again, questions of race and culture complicate this. As seen in Canada's history with Indian Residential Schooling system, legitimacy in this country is deeply tied to Whiteness and the creation and enforcing of a "legitimate culture" is not a benign act (Stanley,

2002). Even when Black students "talk like a book" and adopt the legitimate academic culture, their very bodies betray their efforts.

Nash (2002a) proposes an alternative approach to the issue of class habitus and school success by coining the term *educated habitus*. The educated habitus is not concerned with a set of class-specific traits or dispositions towards education, but **"**the desire to be educated and identify and to be identified as such" (see Edgerton & Roberts, 2014, p. 202).

Nash's educated habitus is a useful concept when thinking about the participants in my study, as they may find themselves in a working-class environment as a result of the immigrant or refugee experience but may come from middle-class backgrounds.

Bourdieu's cultural capital has also received critique from scholars of educational inequity, particularly when it is defined as a measure of one's familiarity with and enjoyment of the beaux-arts. In response to this, Edgerton and Roberts (2014) summarize the work of several scholars to produce a definition of cultural capital as "an adaptive set of cognitive skills and behavioural skills that are associated with academic and occupational success" (p. 197). In the context of university life, this definition of cultural capital is operationalized as a set of *micro-interactional skills* that enables students to act in ways that are expected and rewarded.

Not addressed in these discussions is the issue of race. Here, it is helpful to consider Ibrahim's (2004) definition of race as "a symbolic capital" that confers the status of authorized speaker to some in society and withholds it from others (p. 77). As Canadian universities have historically served a most White and male student body (with the notable exception of programs such as nursing and education), White students would be afforded the most symbolic capital and would have the easiest road to becoming an authorized speaker. Somali-Canadian students who are categorized as Black would not be afforded such capital in a Canadian university setting.

Community Cultural Wealth Theory

While Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital provides a clear description of the education system as a means of reproducing middle-class norms, it does not offer insights into the lives of people within the system. As my research is concerned with the agency and interior lives of individuals within the education system, particularly those whom Bourdieu's theory would frame in a deficit understanding, I rely on Tara J Yosso's (2005) concept of cultural wealth (or community cultural wealth) as a lens through which to view the participants' narratives. Yosso's

(2005) cultural wealth uses a critical race theory approach to challenge the traditional interpretation of cultural capital. She explains the need for this challenge as follows:

> ... while Bourdieu's work sought to provide a structural critique of social and cultural reproduction, his theory of cultural capital has been used to assert that some communities are culturally wealthy while others are culturally poor. This interpretation of Bourdieu exposes White, middle class culture as the standard, and therefore all other forms and expressions of 'culture' are judged in comparison to this 'norm.' (Yosso, 2005, p. 76)

Yosso (2005) takes an asset-based approach to investigating the lives of students from marginalised communities. Cultural wealth is a concept that asks what kinds of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts students bring with them to school as opposed to looking for the ways in which they can be deemed unfit or ill-prepared. Yosso (2005) does not give credence to the idea that marginalised communities produce children who are ill-prepared for school but identifies the problem to be that the skills and resources that these students possess are not recognised by the institution. While Bourdieu sets up a way to understand school as an institution, Yosso (2005) provides a path toward understanding the agency of the most marginalised individuals within the system. She presents 6 forms of capital that come together to make community cultural wealth: (1) aspirational capital, (2) linguistic capital, (3) familial capital, (4) social capital, (5) navigational capital, (6) resistant capital. My inquiry employed the following definitions of these types of capital:

1. "Aspirational capital refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" Yosso, 2005, p.77). Yosso's work and the work that she analysed reliably found that in Chicano/a communities with some of the lowest educational and economic attainment, parents still maintained and passed on high aspirations for their children's educational attainment.
2. Linguistic capital refers to the skills that Students of Colour gain from communicating in multiple languages and/or communication styles. Along with the documented benefits of bilingualism for children, Yosso also proposes that linguistic capital is built by exposure to different modes of communication like traditional storytelling practices passed down by elders. Experiences translating between languages, styles and modes also teach children a range of intellectual and social skills. For example, Yosso cites Marjorie Faulstich Orellana (2003) in saying that translating teaches bilingual youth "vocabulary, audience awareness,

cross-cultural awareness, "real-world" literacy skills, math skills, metalinguistic awareness, teaching and tutoring skills, civic and familial responsibility, [and] social maturity" (see Yosso, 2005, p. 79).

3. "Familial capital refers to those cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition" (see Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Yosso and the communities that she worked with hold a broad definition of kinship that encompasses extended family such as aunts and uncles, grandparents, cousins, and even close friends. This definition of family is also seen in Somali and Somali-Canadian communities. Familial capital is a rich concept that challenges the Eurocentric model of "family" while also grappling with the racial, class, and heterosexual assumptions the term traditionally holds. With respect to my work, I hold the following understanding of familial capital:

   > From these kinship ties, we learn the importance of maintaining a healthy connection to our community and its resources. Our kin also model lessons of caring, coping and providing (educación), which inform our emotional, moral, educational and occupational consciousness (Reese, 1992; Auerbach, 2001, 2004; Elenes et al., 2001; Lopez, 2003). (Yosso, 2005, p. 79).

4. Social capital within the Critical Race Theory framework that Yosso uses is similar to the definition given by Bourdieu but with the added dimension of "lifting as we climb" (p. 80). Social capital refers to the social connections one has and the access or resources those connections afford. Within marginalized communities, Yosso presents historical examples of how individuals and groups have gained knowledge of mainstream institutions or power structures and brought that information back to their networks. As well as instrumental support in navigating institutions, these kinds of social contacts provide emotional support.
5. "Navigational capital refers to skills of maneuvering through social institutions" (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). As a concept, navigational capital takes for granted the fact that institutions such as schools, hospitals, and the judicial system include an inherent level of inequity, as they were designed with a limited definition of human and citizen (male, White, Christian, heterosexual, etc.). As such, Yosso's navigation capital is concerned mainly with strategies that help one maneuver through institutions for which they are not the intended participant. With respect to education, Yosso highlights the development of academic invulnerability, or the "ability to 'sustain high levels of achievement, despite the presence of stressful events

and conditions that place them at risk of doing poorly at school and, ultimately, dropping out of school' (Alva, 1991, p. 19; see also Allen & Solórzano, 2000; Solórzano et al., 2000; Auerbach, 2001)." (Yosso, 2005, p. 80)

6. "Resistant capital refers to those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality" (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). Resistant capital also manifests as a commitment to maintaining cultural knowledge and ways of being. This form of capital is rooted in a history of resistance to subordination and often taught explicitly to children of colour by their parents; Yosso cites examples of Mexican and African American mothers consciously raising daughters as resistors to various power structures. Within the realm of education, Yosso draws from the work of Solórzano and Delgado Bernal: "Daniel Solórzano and Dolores Delgado Bernal (2001) reveal that resistance may include different forms of oppositional behavior, such as self-defeating or conformist strategies that feed back into the system of subordination" (Yosso, 2005, p. 81). This insight was especially helpful for me in understanding the decisions of Bilane and Amina as they came up against challenges in their school careers.

With respect to her use of the term "wealth," Yosso (2005) draws from the work of Oliver and Shapiro (1995) who, in their study of financial inequality, distinguish between income – a *type* of capital – and wealth, which is "the total extent of an individual's accumulated assets and resources" (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). Community cultural wealth is then "an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression" (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). I share Yosso's conviction that the problem of inequality within systems is not a result of something lacking within the most marginalized individuals, but a result of the system's inability or refusal to see the assets of those communities. I also share the conviction that there are particular assets that are developed with a life at the margins of power. Her cultural wealth theory is the primary means by which I analyzed my participant's actions and decisions.

Theorizing Identity: Role-as-Resource Framework

Connecting the concepts of race, class and culture discussed thus far is the question of identity. While identity has been widely theorized across disciplines and fields of study, I adopt role-as-resource theory as the framework for my inquiry. Role-as-resource theory is an extension of identity theory, which also utilizes Burke's (1991) concept of role identity and Bourdieu's (1986) concept of capital. Identity theory proposes that social roles (e.g. student, doctor, parent, wife) serve as the medium through which identity is understood by the individual and communicated to the world. Role-as-resource theory adds that social roles are "cultural objects" containing specific kinds of capital that are created within social structures and, when enacted, reproduce and maintain those structures (Collier, 2000; Collier & Morgan, 2008).

As each individual simultaneously occupies multiple social roles, no one role captures a person's full identity but each one is incorporated into a larger identity that encompasses them all. As individuals enter new social situations or institutions they are expected to perform a corresponding role – for example, in a university setting one may take on the role of student, professor, administrator, etc. (Collier, 2000). Upon identifying their role, a person must then develop "a concept of self in terms of that role" (Collier, 2000, p. 285); this is what Burke (1991) calls a role identity.

Individuals engage in various processes in the development of a role identity. Two processes that are particularly relevant to my inquiry are reflexivity and self-verification, described by Burke (1991). Once their desired role has been identified and understood individuals engage in the process of reflexivity: comparing how closely their self-definition matches the "identity standard". Next, they seek self-validation, which occurs when others in the group recognize their role identity (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Burke (1991) presents these two processes in a "discrepancy-reducing feedback loop": through reflexivity, the individual identifies the ways in which they deviate from the identity standard and then works to remedy those deviations by performing "role-associated behaviours" (Collier, 2000, pg. 286), the purpose of which is to signal their role to others and solidify the role identity. The loop continues if and until one's reflexivity turns up no more discrepancies.

Although not addressed in this literature, the self-validation process raises critical questions about the nature of peer relationships and the reasons why one may or not be recognized by the group. As Black, Muslim students from low income communities in White,

secular, middle-class institution the participants in my study may not be recognized by their peers as legitimate university students for reasons that are unrelated to their understanding of the student role. Here, Forman's (2001) distinction between belonging and was helpful to guiding my thinking. As stated previously, belonging is a function of one's alignment with the institution's goals and agendas, whereas fitting in is a function of peer relationships. It is possible, then, for my participants to experience belonging in the university while not fitting in with their peers. I understand the phenomenon of belonging within an institution as a feeling of legitimacy within oneself, which may or may not be reflected back by one's peers. Lack of belonging or displacement, then, would be experienced as an internal sense of illegitimacy within the institution. Both fitting in and belonging emerged as themes in the participants' narratives and are discussed in the later sections of this work.

Adopting the University Student Role

The role considered in my research is that of *university student*[1] (Collier, 2000; Collier & Morgan, 2008). In each of the aforementioned frameworks students who arrive with a deeper knowledge of the university student role are bound to be more successful within the institution (Collier & Morgan, 2008). While individuals with prior knowledge may have a head start, they must still undergo the process of role identity development. Adding detail to Burke's (1991) processes of reflexivity and self-validation, Collier (2000) outlines three stages in the development and acquisition of the student role identity:

> First, there must be recognition and understanding of what it means to be a student. In other words, "college student" must be viewed and understood as a legitimate cultural object. Second, the college student role must then be used as a resource for defining oneself. This is the point at which the role comes to serve as the basis for individual identity. Finally, a correspondence between the meaning of the role and the meaning of self develops as a consequence of using the role to define oneself. (p. 286-7)

Developing the student role identity is not simply a question of self-perception, belonging, or fitting in; Collier and Morgan (2008) present mastery of the student role as a critical component of university success. The researchers propose that academic skills are only part of the explanation for student success and that mastering the student role is a distinct and

[1] Collier and Morgan use "college student", as they are American researchers. The colleges included in their work are analogous to Canadian universities, as opposed to Canadian colleges.

crucial factor. In their study of the challenges faced by first-generation university students, Collier and Morgan (2008) measure participants' understanding of the university student role, using understanding of professor expectations as a proxy. The following model summarizes their conceptual approach to student success.

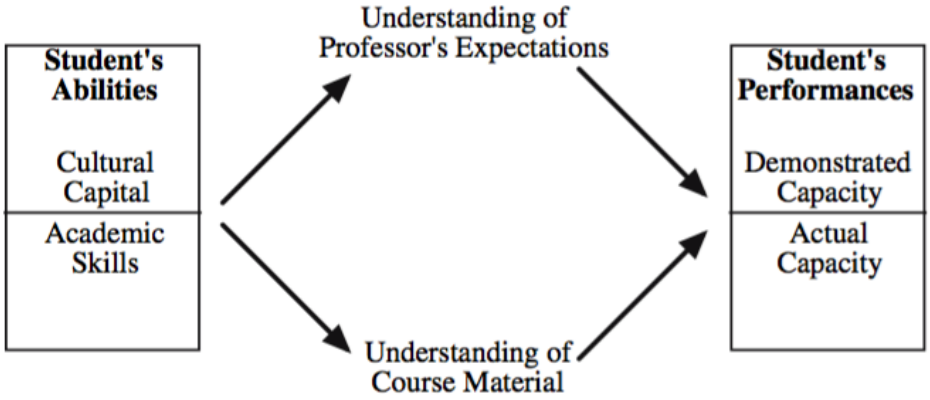

Figure 2. Model for University Student Success (Collier & Morgan, 2008, p. 429)

In this model, a student's cultural capital is the source from which they draw to understand the professor's expectations and the student's academic skill is the resource upon which they rely to understand course material. The key feature to consider in this model is the distinction between *actual capacity* and *demonstrated capacity*. It is a distinction between mastering the explicit content being taught and mastering the tacit expectations of the university and its actors. Here, Collier and Morgan (2008) show the importance of mastering the student role: how can a student benefit from their actual capacity if she cannot effectively demonstrate it to the institution?

Along with expectations about behaviour and ways of communicating, there are also implicit expectations of which bodies in society are expected to perform the university student role. Read, Archer and Leathwood (2003) suggest that it is still possible to speak of an overarching "academic culture" that authorizes particular ways of speaking, thinking, and writing as more or less legitimate. Within this academic culture is the construction of an archetypal student who embodies the legitimate ways of being and against whom individuals can compare themselves to determine their potential place or fit within the institution. In the Western world,

while it is not the only model, the traditional archetype has been constructed as White, male, and a child of the middle- or upper-class (Read, Archer and Leathwood, 2003).

While it is currently politically and socially unacceptable to explicitly define or promote this image of the legitimate student, universities communicate their image of the "normal" student through their brochures, websites, open houses, campus tours, etc. (Magolda, 2000; Read et al., 2003). In a study of campus promotional materials, open house events and campus tours, Magolda (2000) found that the upper/middle-class, White, male students continue to be the archetype displayed, in addition to presumed heterosexuality. The inevitable consequence of this particular student construction is the othering of women, the working class, people of colour, mature students, and others who fall outside of this narrow definition. Tett (2000) notes that potential students who perceive their otherness and internalize the traditional student discourse are deterred from applying to certain institutions and programs or applying to attend university at all (Read et al., 2003).

Collier (2000, 2001) adds nuance to the idea of the archetypal student or student role proposing that there can be multiple or even alternative versions of the university student role depending on the particulars of the context. He draws the example of the varying expectations placed on students at elite universities, public universities in large urban centers, and community colleges (Collier and Morgan, 2008).

Research Questions

My overarching research question is: How do 1.5 generation, Somali-Canadians who are first-generation university students understand and engage in the process of becoming university students?

The sub-questions are:

1. How do these students understand the university student role?
2. How do they view themselves in relation to the student role?
    a. Are feelings of belonging and/or fitting in a factor in their self-perception?
3. What types of capital do these students possess that aid or hinder them in adopting or performing the university student role?

Literature Review

Racialized Students in Canadian Universities

Farah (2011) builds off of the work of other scholars to define racialization as a

> [a process that] emerges in the context of a racial hierarchy, which serves as the background for continued oppression. This perspective is made concrete through the construction of racial categories as real, but also unequal, for purposes that impact all spheres of life. Unfair treatment is the direct product of racialization, leading to differential and unequal outcomes. (p. 2)

While the majority of literature on Canadian universities treats Canada's diverse racialized communities as a single demographic group, recent studies have begun to disaggregate the experiences and statistics of groups within this category (Birani & Lehmann, 2013; Thiessen, 2009). Early studies found that racialized Canadian students both aspired to and attended university at higher rates than their White counterparts. However, when this group is separated into its component groups it is clear that Asian-Canadians are the primary drivers of the discrepancy. In fact, some authors argue that the gap in educational achievement *between* racialized groups is wider than that between racialized groups as a whole and White Canadians (Thiessen, 2009). To this end, it has been found that students of African, Latin, and Aboriginal descent are all far less likely to attend or complete university than European- and Asian-Canadian students (Birani & Lehmann, 2013; Frenette, 2005; Thiessen, 2009). Even as education levels have risen over the last several decades, African-Canadians remain among the least likely to attain a university degree, particularly if they are Canadian-born (Birani & Lehmann, 2013; Thiessen, 2009).

Along with their status as racialized people, when studying the likelihood of attending and completing university it is important to consider the fact that the Somali-Canadian community comprises almost entirely of refugees/immigrants and their children (Berns-McGown, 2013). Thiessen (2009) used data, from the longitudinal Youth in Transition Survey, to compare the educational outcomes of immigrant students to their Canadian-born counterparts. In keeping with earlier research, he found that racialized students as a whole were one and a half times more likely to say that they aspired to attend university than Canadian-born youth. When looking

specifically at African[2] immigrants, they were found to be five percent more likely to attend university than Canadian-born students of African descent, as well as five percent less like to report "high school diploma or less" as their highest level of educational achievement (Thiessen, 2009). The difference in educational outcome does not seem to be a result of a difference in educational aspirations, as Thiessen (2009) found no difference in the aspirations or expectations for attending university between immigrant and Canadian-born racialized students. The difference in outcomes must then be attributed to other factors, some of which are explored in the author's analysis.

Thiessen's (2009) analysis approached the data using three cumulative models:

1) Participants' structural location (included features such as parental education, prestige of parental occupations, private school attendance);
2) Cultural features (included features such as academic effort, personal university aspirations/expectations, parental aspirations); and
3) Academic performance (measured by grade retention, marks in math and language courses, and number of university-preparatory math and language courses taken).

Triangulating the results of these analyses paints a clearer picture of the causes of African-Canadian students' gap in achievement (as measured by degree attainment). When the structural disadvantages faced by African-Canadians are controlled for, their likelihood of participating in post-secondary education is increased, especially in the case of immigrants. Controlling for cultural features, however, decreases African-Canadians' post-secondary participation, which suggests that they benefit from "culturally protective factors, such as their parents' high aspirations" (p. 30). Thiessen (2009) presents the educational attainment gap as a result of both structural disadvantages and academic performance, including students being streamed away from university-preparatory courses in high school. Commenting on the trends in academic performance of African-Canadian students, he states:

> These patterns suggest that what happens in school (such as low teacher expectations) may be particularly salient for the educational pathways of African Canadians. Dei…argues that we ''must examine not only how schools promote academic success, but also how schools are engendering student failures." (Thiessen, 2009, p. 30)

[2] Thiessen groups African and Latin students together as a single category.

This analysis echoes the findings reviewed in a previous section about the experiences of Black students in Ontario schools.

For the purposes of my research I prefer the category of Black Canadian to "African-Canadian," as it better reflects terminology used in the body of literature written about the educational and social experiences of this group of Canadians. In the process of being racialized as Black, Somali-Canadians join a social group that is over-represented in the justice system, economically disadvantaged, socially marginalized, and seen by the wider Canadian society to be "low educational achievers" that are pushed out of the school system by persistent educational inequalities (Farah, 2011).

Social Class and Belonging in Universities

The abstract concepts of habitus and capital manifest at the personal level as issues of belonging. Belonging, not simply as a question of whether or not one is able to form social bonds on campus, but a larger question of which types of people society expects to attend and graduate from university. In multiple qualitative studies about the experiences of working-class students and students who are the first in their family to attend university, participants expressed the sentiment that university is not a place for "people like us" (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Lehmann, 2007; Reay et al., 2009; Smyth & Harrison, 2015; Stuber, 2011). Working-class students described their middle-class peers as possessing skills, values and understandings that were more congruent with those of the institution. Working-class students generally described their values of hard work, determination and humility as important traits that their middle-class peers lacked, but acknowledged that these did not necessarily give them an advantage in university life (Lehmann, 2007; Stuber, 2011). In Lehmann's (2007) study of dropout among working-class, first-generation students more than two-thirds of his participants voluntarily left university for non-academic reasons. His study echoes the findings of a report published by Statistics Canada in partnership with Human Resources and Skills Development Canada that identified "lack of fit" as the most important reason reported on Canada's Youth in Transition Survey for prematurely leaving post-secondary education (Lambert, Zeman, Allen, & Bussiere, 2004).

While working-class students feel the effects of their habitus mismatch quite acutely, class and class privilege are rarely spoken of on university campuses and remain largely invisible to the middle-class student body (Lehmann, 2007, 2009; Soria, 2012; Stuber, 2011). This tension

between the invisibility of class in universities and its very salient affects on the lives of working-class students leads many students to internalize their challenges as personal deficits or as reasons to retreat more intentionally into their working-class identities by rejecting university (Lehmann, 2007; Soria, 2012). Rejection of university may result in dropping out altogether, or switching to less elite institutions, colleges or trades programs (Lehmann, 2007). Of the most extreme reactions to the social displacement of attending university, Lehmann (2007) found that working-class, first-generation students might drop out even when they have attained high academic standing in their first year. In order to address this tension, Soria (2012) recommends "all practitioners actively work to make social class visible in first-year programs such as new student orientation or in first-year courses" (p. 51). Soria (2012) and Stuber (2011) both propose that socioeconomic status or class be included in the discourse around diversity on campus along with the categories of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc.

Some researchers explain a portion of the differential experiences of traditional students and working-class students by observing their participation in extracurricular activities (Stuber, 2011; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). Stuber (2011) makes the case that participation in extracurricular activities is the primary means by which students use and acquire cultural capital in university. She also found that working-class and first-generation students are less likely to engage in extracurricular opportunities but attributes their disinterest to the ways in which the opportunities are promoted. Working-class students approach post-secondary education primarily as an endeavour that will yield access to middle-class professions and lifestyles; however clubs, study abroad programs, and student government are often promoted as opportunities to "make a difference", socialize with diverse others, and "have adventures" – messages that generally appeal to the middle-class habitus (Lehmann, 2007; Stuber, 2011; Terenzini et al., 1996). To encourage wider participation, Stuber (2011) proposed reframing these activities to reflect values held by working-class students: "[r]ather than framing study abroad as a fun experience that builds tolerance and understanding, speakers could frame it as an experience that builds independence, leadership and academic competencies" (p. 170). This recommendation raises the issue of habitus mismatch discussed in my conceptual framework, and begs the question of what other ways a university's messaging may be appealing to or missing sections of the student body.

First-Generation University Students

Among working-class students, students who are the first in their families to attend face an acute lack of social and cultural capital needed for success in university life (Lehmann, 2009; Soria, 2012). Even when compared to other working-class students, first-generation students report experiencing self-doubt, intimidation, and feelings of inadequacy in elite universities more severely than their peers (Soria, 2012; Stuber, 2011). In classes, first-generation students report more difficulty understanding the content and level of vocabulary yet are less likely to ask questions of their professors or attend office hours. This difference is further compounded by the fact that first-generation students are less likely to participate in study groups or use support services on campus (Soria, 2012). A reluctance to seek help, especially from the professor, was a common theme across the literature (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Lehman, 2009; Soria 2012; Stuber, 2011).

The differences between first-generation and traditional students do not exclusively reflect a willingness or unwillingness to engage in various behaviours, but instead point to the degree to which students understand the expectations of the institution. Collier and Morgan (2008) conducted a series of focus groups to explore the differences between first-generation and traditional students' expectations for various aspects of university life; the authors used accuracy of expectations as a proxy for cultural capital. Faculty were interviewed as well to develop a standard against which to measure student responses. The researchers identified three areas in which first-generation students' lack of cultural capital could be observed: "(1) situations in which instructors evaluate student performance, (2) the assumptions and expectations that instructors use, and (3) the resources that students have for recognizing and responding to their instructors' expectations" (Collier & Morgan, 2008, p. 428).

Ethnic Communities and Capital

For the purposes of my research it is important to explore the ways in which Bourdieu's habitus and capital function specifically in ethnically diverse communities. Along with their status as middle-class institutions, Canadian universities are also institutions built on Eurocentric models of learning, knowledge production and cultural norms (Birani & Lehmann, 2013; Farah, 2011). Put another way by Stanley (2002): "School is about and for white people" (p. 14). Theoretically, this would produce an added level of habitus dislocation for ethnic minority students. In a four-year study of Asian-Canadian students who were the first in their families to

attend university, Birani and Lehmann (2013) found that this was not the case for their participants. While these students began their university careers with the same insecurity as their working-class peers, they were able to successfully integrate into campus life and excel in their respective programs. The authors attribute this success to strong relationships with parents, co-ethnic communities, teachers, and peers (Birani & Lehmann, 2013). The work of Birani and Lehmann (2013) echoes two findings by Thiessen (2009) in suggesting that: 1) the success of racialized students is influenced by support offered by their particular cultures – such as high parental expectations, family support, and "specific knowledge acquisition strategies" (Birani & Lehmann, 2013, p. 289); and 2) Asian students experience academic success at higher rates than their racialized peers.

Somalis and Cultural Capital: Parent-School Relations

When thinking about the Somali community in particular, Kilbridge's (2000) definition of cultural capital is helpful: "proficiency in, and familiarity with, dominant cultural codes and practices: for example, linguistic style, aesthetic preferences, styles of interactions" (as cited in Farah, 2011, p. 231). To operationalize this concept let us look at three aspects of cultural capital that parents may possess: 1) knowledge of the school system's rules and procedures, 2) knowledge of parent, student, and teacher roles in Canadian schools, and 3) linguistic capital, which I understand as proficiency in one of the official languages. Both Scott (2001) in her survey of Somali and Eritrean newcomers in Toronto and Farah (2011) in his study of Somali-Djiboutian students in Ottawa found that parents had a limited understanding of the Canadian school system and that this negatively impacted their children in the form of harsher disciplinary actions and streaming away from academic/university bound courses (also see Forman, 2001). With respect to knowledge of student and teacher roles in Canadian schools, Somali parents may still hold understandings from their experiences in school. In Somali culture, teachers are held as respected authorities to which deference should be paid. Within this view a child's education is primarily the school's responsibility, with parents proving material support and engaging when discipline is necessary (Farah, 2011; Forman, 2001). The Somali approach to parent-school relationships differs drastically from the Canadian approach which expects parents to be actively involved in every aspect of student learning, such as attending field trips, signing off on

homework completion or expecting parents to volunteer in the classroom (Farah, 2011; Scott, 2001).

Challenges in communication with school officials is a common theme across the literature on academic experiences of working-class families; for Somali-Canadians this problem is compounded by the lack of English proficiency in the older generations. Bigelow (2007), Farah (2011), Forman (2001) each present a litany of stories in which a school's failure to effectively communicate with Somali parents (e.g. lack of translation services) led to negative outcomes for their child; in Scott's (2001) survey she found that over two-thirds of the parents interviewed reported being uncomfortable with the English language.

Bigelow (2007), however, critiques the discourse around Somali families and schools as a "discourse of deficiency" (p. 1). In response, her work explores the strengths and types of capital that Somali students acquire in their homes and communities. With respect to social capital, the main sources for immigrant students is their families and co-ethnic communities. The strength of the social capital that immigrants stand to acquire depends on the social standing of their existing co-ethnic communities and the warmth of their reception by both that community and the wider society (Bigelow, 2007). In her case study of a Somali refugee student, Bigelow's (2007) findings on ethnic culture as a source of capital in school success are in keeping with Thiessen (2009) and others: the family's prioritizing of education and high academic aspirations for their teenage daughter (despite being a refugee with no prior schooling) served as a protective factor against her challenges and the key to her eventual high school success.

Methodology:

Research Design

Narrative inquiry methods were used in this qualitative study with the aim of producing a rich, detailed account of the student role identity formation. Prioritizing the depth and not the breadth of an experience, I limited my study to two participants. In order to get at the abstract concept of identity and its evolution I invited participants to share stories that address my research questions. The use of narrative inquiry in studying identity is fitting as Riesman (2008) and others describe stories and storytelling as the means by which individuals and groups construct their identities (Somers, 1992; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

I conducted a series of in-depth interviews with two fourth-year students enrolled at the University of Ottawa. The inclusion criteria for my participants are as follows:

1. Participants' parents must not have attended any college or university in Canada or abroad.
    - Parents may have participated in apprenticeships, technical or vocational training.
2. Parents must have arrived in Canada during or after 1990.
3. Participants must be born in Canada (second-generation Canadian) or arrived before the age of 6 (1.5 generation Canadian).
4. Participants must have completed their schooling in publicly funded K-12 schools (i.e. no private school or home schooling).

A recruitment letter was sent to relevant community groups and campus groups (e.g. Somali Student Association, Muslim Student Association) and was distributed via email and social media. Two female participants were selected because none of the males who expressed interest fit the selection criteria.

Story and Identity

My methodology is based in life history and life story interview and data analysis approaches, though I did not conduct a full life history or life story project. While life history is usually used when studying the lives of adults, the method has begun to be used to study the experiences of first-generation university students (Clemens, 2010; Tierney, 2010, 2013) as well as urban high school students applying to university (Tierney & Colyar, 2009). My work will contribute to this growing body of literature. With respect to the nature of a life history project, I

am guided by the words of Tierney (2013) in his life history study of the university experiences of a young, first-generation Mexican American man:

> By its very definition, those who undertake a life history neither seek to develop theoretical generalizations nor attempt to offer policy recommendations. What a life history can do, however, is offer a glimpse into one person's life and hopefully provoke questions and ideas about how that individual lives his or her life and makes sense of it. (Tierney, 2013, p. 260)

This work is done in the hopes of providing a window into the sense-making of my two participants and does not aim to provide policy recommendations or new theory. As the literature deals primarily with the lives of White students, diverse stories are contributions in and of themselves.

In regard to the question of identity formation, story is again a tool recognized in the literature; across various fields of study identity and identity formation have been described as stories and narratives. Within the field of narrative psychology, McAdams (1988) said: "identity is a life story ... the problem of identity is the problem at arriving at a life story that makes sense" (p. 18). Yuval-Davis (2006) puts it concisely when she stated: "Identities are narratives, stories people tell themselves and others about who they are (and who they are not)" (cited in Riesman, 2008, p. 8). In studying racial identity formation, Ibrahim (2004) describes race as "a collection of stories we "tell" ourselves and others" (p. 77).

The most important justification for the use of story and storytelling in this study is that it is the most culturally appropriate tool for a study with Somali-Canadian participants. Somali culture is an oral culture that traditionally relies on stories to pass valuable information and lessons between generations and employs story as a meaning making tool. As a Somali researcher engaging with Somali participants, I understand this to be the most natural way to engage in meaningful conversations.

Three-Interview Method

I used using Seidman's (2013) three-interview method to conduct my research. Seidman's method is based in life history research but is conducted over a shorter timeframe and relies mainly on interviews and less so on documents and observation. Given the limited time I have to

complete my Master's project, this method provides an ideal alternative to conducting a full life history or life story project.

Through a series of three interviews each, participants recount their lived experiences and are guided to reconstruct as many of the fine details of those experiences as possible. The goal of this method is to guide participants through a process of making and articulating the meaning of particular lived experiences. The meanings that individuals hold for their lived experiences, Seidman (2013) explains, do not live in the experiences themselves but is created when one returns to those experiences in an intentional manner.

Three, 90-minute interviews were conducted with each participant, with three days to one week between respective interviews (there was one exception due to illness). This amount of time between meetings helped me to establish a rapport with the participants and allowed participants to reflect on the previous content in order to expand on and making meaning of it in subsequent interviews. The goal of the first interview is to explore the participant's past experiences and establish a context for the phenomenon to be studied. In the first interview I invited participants to share a brief life history focusing on stories of early schooling experiences, family life, and the events that led to their enrollment in university. The second interview in the series asks participants to reconstruct, in detail, a particular lived experience. I asked participants to recount the story of a critical incident in which they felt a sense of belonging in the university setting/legitimacy as a university student, and a story of displacement within the university setting/illegitimacy as a university student. In the final interview participants are asked to reflect on what personal meaning the previously discussed experiences hold for them.

With respect to the validity or trustworthiness of the collected data, several features of the interview process help improve trustworthiness. The space between interviews helps the interviewer to establish an internal consistency (or identify inconsistency) in the participants' responses, as well as mitigating the affects of "off days". Asking participants to derive their own meaning from the experiences helps decrease the likelihood as well as the magnitude of misunderstandings by the interviewer.

Researcher Positionality

I sit at an intersection of insider and outsider with respect to my participants' identities. I am an insider as a Somali-Canadian, the daughter of refugees, and an alumna of the University of

Ottawa, and a 1.5 generation Canadian. In addition, as someone who has done a fair amount of volunteer work in the local Somali and Muslim communities over the last decade, participants may view me as a familiar face – which may have positive or negative affect on their willingness to share their narrative. My outsider status lies in my position as a graduate student who is not a first-generation university student. Given my social proximity to the participants, I was mindful during each phase of my research not to make assumptions or fill in gaps based solely on my interpretation or an assumed shared understanding. I worked to clarify and verify my understandings with participants throughout the process.

Data and Analysis

The data collected from the interviews with each respective participant will be presented in the following sections as narratives with analysis interwoven throughout the text. While the narratives are presented in a mostly chronological fashion, themes are also extracted to be analysed in light of the various theories outlined in the conceptual framework. This decision was made in order to: (1) honour the voices and agency of both Bilane and Amina by presenting their stories as they chose to tell them; and (2) maintain the integrity of their narratives and the meaning making process that they presented.

Narrative Analysis

I used a narrative analysis based in life history and life story methods to draw meaning from the collected data. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and then edited for clarity and ease of reading. The process of narrative analysis entails reading, rereading and coding data in search of patterns and narrative threads in order to produce a coherent, chronicled account (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008). Stories and extended accounts in the data are to be maintained and interpreted as units – the sequence and structure of data are preserved rather than broken up into thematic codes. Data were coded for recurring characters/figures, important locations or settings, “story lines that interweave and interconnect, gaps or silences that become apparent, tensions that emerge, and continuities and discontinuities that appear” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.131; Riessman, 2008). Once the data was coded, I produced a summary of the narrative to share with participants for validation; Clandinin and

Connelly (2000) call this type of summary an interim text. While my original intent was to share a written version of this interim text with my participants, due to time constraints I began each interview by verbally presenting the interim text and seeking validation and clarification from participants.

Critical Rereading: Analytical Addendums

This thesis was originally written without the work of Yosso (2005). Once completed, I found that the conceptual tools that I had been working with were not robust enough to address one of my sub-questions (*What types of capital do these students possess that aids or hinders them in adopting the university student role?*) and returned to the literature to find an answer to the gaps in Bourdieu's work and the work of subsequent scholars who build on his conceptual framework. I engaged in a critical rereading of my own work in light of Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth theory. I have chosen to reflect this process of rereading by inserting analytical addendums. Throughout the participant narratives, these addendums will appear as this section does: in text boxes with a different font and line spacing than the original text.

The challenge I came across with the body of literature on first-generation students was that it clearly offered a framework to identify the ways in which these students would struggle but did not offer tools to name and analyze the strategies that they used to find success. The limitation in the literature is built into its foundation: Bourdieu's theory of capital. Bourdieu's framework defines cultural, social, and economic capital in terms of the norms of the powerful or elite in society. Within this framework, the only language that I had to describe the lives of my participants – individuals from marginalised communities – was one of deficit. They did not know the right people, they did not have enough money, they did not yet know the ways of being or cultural relics of the people in power.

Another troubling aspect of the work based on Bourdieu's notions of capital is that it presents institutions and their standards as, if not neutral, at least not a particularly harmful force in the lives of individuals – this did not prove to be the reality for my participants. The pain and psychic violence of the expectation to inhabit a White, middle-class university habitus emerged as one of the major themes in the lives of my participants.

I found the work of Yosso (2005) offered a powerful tool to name and highlight strategies that each participant used to navigate through the various institutions of schooling. In addition to reflecting my rereading process, I hope that having these critical addendums stand out among the text will emphasize: (1) moments in which the participants are exercising their capital; (2) the utility of Yosso's (2005) work in identifying the personal agency of people of colour in mainstream institutions.

Participant 1: Bilane

The Road to University

> A lot of it was me navigating by myself because of the fact that English isn't my mom's first language and I'm the oldest as well…so a lot of it was just me figuring it out…even 'til, like, now.

Bilane arrived in Ottawa from Somalia at the age of 3 with her mother and father. By age 6, after the birth of a younger sister and brother, her parents' marriage ended and her father moved back overseas. At the time of our interview Bilane had completed two and a half years of an undergraduate program and was currently taking a semester away from the University of Ottawa to earn money for tuition. Bilane is intelligent, articulate and deeply curious, but her road to university was rocky from its beginnings. And, as illustrated in the above quote, it is a journey she felt that she was taking alone. From her earliest years of schooling, the classroom was not a space in which she existed comfortably. Elementary classrooms, she recounted, were not academically challenging but proved to be a fraught social and cultural terrain for Bilane to navigate as a child.

> I feel like I wasn't an amazing student, I wasn't a horrible student I was just, like, in there. I would get in trouble sometimes, I would get sent to the office sometimes, sometimes you wouldn't hear from me at all – I feel like I just got lost in a sea of students. … I don't feel like any of the teachers actually ever understood me until I got older. Maybe it was because I didn't know how to express myself. But…there was teachers who really, really liked me and there was teachers who…didn't. … It was all the same, actually. It was 'she's smart but she doesn't apply herself' or comments like that.

Bilane was disciplined for 'inappropriate' behaviour and failing to comply with classroom rules throughout her elementary education. She shared stories of violent outbursts, defiant clashes with teachers, and misunderstandings that grew into conflict.

> I was also, like, I was very explosively angry up until… actually university. So I would be totally fine and I would never, like, pick on kids and things but as soon as I felt any whiff of injustice, [I was] just like a storm [*laughing*]… Also, I would just blurt things out, like answers, out in class. I don't know, I was just a carefree little kid. But I think the teachers didn't understand me until I got to like Grade 6.

The sixth grade Bilane had her first Black teacher, Mr. Thomas. Mr. Thomas is the only teacher mentioned by name in the course of our interviews, and the first teacher that Bilane remembers forming a positive relationship with. Mr. Thomas was a man of Jamaican descent

who identified as Black and made a point of mentoring Black students. In the following quote she recalls her time with Mr. Thomas.

> He was very adamant in preparing us on what we were going to face as Black students, and he would just talk to us about current events and he would just, like, basically explain to us the reality. I remember he had this one conversation with us 'when you go to middle school, when you go to high school, you're going to become a number. So be ready.' And he would tell us things like 'you have to work twice as hard as everybody else' and he'd look at us specifically – the hijabi little girls – and be like 'you guys have to work very hard'.

Mr. Thomas is the first in a series of educational mentors that Bilane will have in her life. While these mentors appear at different stages and offer her lessons particular to their setting, Bilane's mentors share three important qualities: (1) they belonged to communities that Bilane identified with, (2) they engaged her in a culturally relevant way, and (3) they offered her lessons to navigate both the academic and socio-cultural terrain of school. The next mentor in Bilane's life is Sylvia. Sylvia is a Muslim woman of African and White Canadian descent who worked as a tutor and youth worker at the neighbourhood homework club program. Like Mr. Thomas, Sylvia identified as Black and made a point of engaging her students in meaningful conversations about the world in which they lived.

> We were in like Grade 2 to Grade 8 and we would talk about current events. She would tell us 'what do you guys think about this and this?' and she would listen to us. She would listen to our absurd, childish views on the world.

Bilane was keen to engage with the world and valued attention from adults who could help her in the process, but it was important that these adults validated her and understood her reality as a Black, Muslim, Somali girl.

Bilane's relationships with Mr. Thomas and Sylvia are early examples of her growing navigational capital. It is worth noting that the lessons she remembers learning from them are not curricular in nature, or even about the process of learning, they are about navigating and understanding institutions, reality, and current events. These are the salient memories from a time when Bilane's largest challenges in the classroom were not academic, but behavioural. The challenge of behaving "correctly" is a persistent one in her educational journey. At each new stage in her schooling, we will see the ways in which Bilane is able to further develop and employ her navigational capital.

These relationships are also the earliest examples of Bilane's development of a broader familial capital. While they were both technically in her life in academic roles, Bilane identifies Mr. Thomas and Sylvia as *her people*. The mentors also saw themselves as belonging to a shared community with Bilane and engaged her with a level of intimacy and candidness reserved for these kind of community/kinship ties. Their respective relationships with Bilane exemplify what Yosso (2005) described as a hallmark of community/kin ties: they informed Bilane's "emotional, moral, educational and occupational consciousness." (Yosso, 2005, p. 79)

While she thrived with Mr. Thomas and Sylvia, Bilane's engagement did not extend to many other classroom spaces. By the end of 8th grade, Bilane says she was known to her school as an active child with a big temper, one who they assumed would not likely be successful in an academically challenging high school classroom. When it came time for her teachers to recommend the appropriate stream for Bilane to be placed in for high school, they mostly settled on *applied* level courses as opposed to the *academic* level. Below are Bilane's thoughts on that recommendation and that time in her life.

> I think it was a lot of underestimating me, which I really didn't like – I know this sounds dumb, but I was like "don't underestimate me" but I wouldn't try harder until I got into high school. I remember, like, in Grade 8 they had to sign these papers to recommend you to what level you should go to. And I remember going to every teacher and a lot of them gave me applied and I was really angry about it 'cause I remember hearing "only stupid students go to applied". And so I remember being so mad about it, and then one teacher he was like – and he was a guy teacher, I feel like the girl teachers didn't understand me as much as the guy teachers did – so he told me he signed academic and he's like "you have to try hard, but I think you can do it". So then after, I got into high school and I took all academic courses 'cause I was like "you're not telling me what I'm gonna take".

In this anecdote we see Bilane employ both aspirational and resistant capital. Bilane maintains a belief in her academic abilities even as her school "underestimates" her. Like the teacher who recommended academic level courses, Bilane understood her challenges in school to be a function of effort, not ability. Throughout her educational journey we will see Bilane resist the institution's construction of her and assert herself as a capable learner. Her struggle with effort in school will also persist; in a later section we will further examine some of the reasons for her disengagement.

It is with all of this behind her that Bilane enters Lester B. Pearson Secondary School. Pearson was a large, well-resourced school in a middle- and upper-class neighbourhood a short distance from Bilane's own. The Pearson student body was predominantly made up of White students from the surrounding, wealthy neighbourhoods – a drastic change from the ethnically diverse and low-income populations of her previous middle and elementary schools. Now one of a handful of Somalis and less than 10 Black students in her grade, Bilane characterized the transition to Pearson as a "huge, huge culture shock". It was in high school that Bilane began to face the challenges foretold by Mr. Thomas. Bilane felt the negative perceptions of her teachers and peers from the outset; again and again in describing this time in her life, Bilane used the word "underestimated". Along with being Somali, Bilane understood the underestimation to be a result of a handful of factors: "growing up in a low-income neighborhood, growing up in a single-parent household, being Black, being a girl, being a first-generation Canadian". These factors, as they intersected and overlapped, resulted in paternalistic or patronizing interactions with teachers.

> I remember one time I had a test in Grade 11... I was like sick or something or had a doctor's appointment. I came the next day to do the test during lunch. And so, I came, she told me "oh, come back to the class after you get your lunch". So, I went, ate my lunch, came to her to do the test, and she's like "did you eat anything?" And I'm like "Yea, I ate". I've been eating good my whole life, that's why I'm chubby. [*laughing*] I've been eating good my whole life, you don't have to worry about my missing food. She's like "did you eat?" and I'm like "yea, I ate", and she goes "okay, let me be back". She went into her room, she goes and gets me this little granola bar and a juice box and she brings it to me like "this is for you because I know you didn't eat. There's no way you ate that fast." And I'm like "I ate! And if I was hungry, this wouldn't satisfy me." I was just looking at her like [*makes a face*]. So I wrote my test and I'm thinking the whole time "what the hell?". So, I wrote my test and I give her the test and then after I left the juice box and granola bar on the table like "this is for you, I'm not hungry, I ate." And I remember, like, teachers, if they were to give me extra attention it would be because they were giving the little, Black girl who came from the 'hood extra attention. So, they would make that clear. [*laughing*] They'd make that really clear. … Yeah, it was a lot of underestimating. It's either the teachers don't pay you any mind or they really underestimate you, you know? Or they take an unhealthy liking to you, which is also weird.
>
> *Idil: What do you mean by an unhealthy liking?*
>
> An unhealthy liking is like they are almost rooting for you. So, like, you disappoint them, it kind of affects your relationship. It's unhealthy because it's like, I'm already pressured by everyone else and everything else to do well. I don't need you as well. Like, you do your job and you teach me.

Resistant capital allows Bilane to read the subtext of her teacher's insistence that she was lying about eating lunch. Where this incident provides a clear example, Bilane's construction of an "unhealthy liking" demonstrates the depth of her resistant capital. Bilane's refusal to accept an *unhealthy* form of liking or investment from her teachers is a level of nuance that leaves her vulnerable to be labeled as ungrateful. This distinction and commitment to only accepting *healthy* relationships into her life also speaks to Bilane's fierce protection of her personal well-being – a theme that will recur throughout her educational journey.

The perception of a "little, Black girl who came from the 'hood" was also one held by many of her wealthier, White peers.

> And a lot of the other students would underestimate me. … And I remember like, specifically there was one girl in my World Issues class, she would look at my paper and she would be like "how did you get more than me?" Like she would be very – she would be fine with everybody overachieving her, but she would be very angry when she saw that I was getting better marks than her. So, like, things like that, being a Black student. Like being taken out of the box of being Muslim.

Her time at Pearson was also the first time in some years that Bilane was not wearing a hijab. Throughout middle school and the 9th grade Bilane was identifiably Muslim, in 10th grade she removed her hijab and describes a shift from being seen primarily as Muslim to becoming "a Black girl".

> I didn't deal with all this as a hijabi. I asked my hijabi friend, same age, same everything – I asked her, I said "yo, how do you deal with this stuff". She said "yo, I've never experienced people underestimating my mental ability, ever. I go to class, I do what I have to do, I leave." But [when I no longer wore the hijab] I was really underestimated. [*laughing*] I was underestimated...

Muslim identity becomes quite important to Bilane in university, but her time in K-12 schooling is marked mainly by Somaliness and Blackness.

> I think [Somali] was my first identity. It was my first identity for a long time until like, recently actually. Yeah, I didn't identify with much else. I didn't identify with being Canadian because I always associated being Canadian with being White. I didn't feel the need to identify with it because I had so many safe spaces to be who I was, I never felt like I had to compromise that to fit in anywhere. So I didn't ever feel like I needed to. So being Somali and being Black were always my number one identities.

At each stage of her life, Bilane speaks fondly about her various support networks, her family, friends, and communities. No matter the isolation or tensions in her school life, she is

able to identify places and people with whom she feels at home. Later sections of this work look closely at these places and communities. In high school, Bilane's circle of friends was almost exclusively comprised of the Somali kids in her school and those from her neighbourhood who attended different schools. Bilane felt a discomfort with her White, middle-class classmates at Pearson, she did not find their interest in her to be genuine. When it came to White boys, their interest was one of sexual fetishization: they wanted to "try a Black girl". Her stories of fetishization echo those of many young, Black women. As for White girls, she felt that those who did take an interest in her were only interested in engaging in some sort of cross-cultural exchange with an exotic friend. Further examples of her concept of an unhealthy liking.

Here again we see Bilane's rejection of an unhealthy liking. Bilane's decision not to befriend her White peers and instead invest in relationships with other Somali youth illustrate the overlapping nature of the categories of capital that Yosso (2005) describes as part of her community cultural wealth model. In rejecting the fetishization and exoticization of her White peers, Bilane employs her resistant capital – but this choice is facilitated by a deep sense of connection to other Somali youth, or familial capital. If she were disconnected from the Somali community and did not feel an inherent kinship with other Somali youth, the decision not to make friends with her peers would have entailed a (greater) sense of social isolation. This combination of resistant and familial capital is also seen in her apparent comfort *not* identifying as Canadian. There has been much written about the angst of diasporic youth living between cultures, but Bilane does not describe her lack of connection with Canadian identity in those terms. In resisting Whiteness, she feels a de facto disconnection from Canadianness, but her kinship with the Somali community gives her a place to build her sense of self. Put more succinctly: "I didn't feel the need to identify with it because I had so many safe spaces to be who I was, I never felt like I had to compromise that to fit in anywhere."

Social life was not the only way in which Bilane experienced a culture shock at Lester B. Pearson Secondary School. Compared with her peers from more privileged backgrounds, Bilane was unprepared for the academic standard at Pearson, and her challenges only compounded over the four years.

> In Grade 9 I tried but I felt like I wasn't prepared by my school to go to that high school and academic classes where a lot of these kids have multiple tutors you know? They don't try to figure it out alone, you know?
> So, grade 9 was really difficult and I started to fall behind so in Grade 10 and Grade 11, I kind of gave up. I would skip class, I would go to other schools to visit my friends, sometimes I would sleep, I would go to class sometimes, you know. I fell behind. And then when I got to Grade 12, I realized that I need to go to university.

By the time Bilane was entering her fourth year at Pearson, she was 11 credits away from graduating in a school that offered 8 credits per year. It was at this point that adults in her life – her guidance counselor, vice principal, and Student-Parent Support Worker – began to tell her that university was no longer a reasonable goal. A series of conversations during this time spurred Bilane to reengage with her schooling.

Before continuing with these conversations, a note about the Student-Parent Support Worker (SPSW). Throughout high school Bilane was enrolled in the Pathways to Education Program (Pathways), an educational support program for students from low-income and marginalized communities. Started in Toronto's Regent Park neighbourhood, the program provides tutoring, free sports and afterschool activities, mentorship, and Student-Parent Support Workers to act as liaisons between students' families and their schools. Bilane had 3 SPSWs during her time at Pearson: Abdullahi, Kyle, and Kamala. Abdullahi, a young Somali man and a religiously observant Muslim, was the first.

> Basically, he was my first parent-teacher support worker. He was amazing, he was like really nice, he was not rude at all, he did not underestimate me. Like he would tell me like "you're doing this wrong". He was really religious, but I remember, Allahumma barik [God bless him], he would never make me feel…like I remember I wore hijab and I took it off when he was my SPSW. I didn't care that he was religious, he didn't make me feel like I had to care about that. … He was really great, he was good at communicating with me, my teachers, my mom, everybody.

Next was Kyle, a young White man.

> And then I got Kyle. Kyle sucked; he was White. He sucked not because he was White but because he couldn't identify with us at all. Yeah, I hated him. And then I got Kamala. Kamala was amazing.

Kamala was a young Muslim woman of South-Asian descent. Like Abdullahi, Sylvia and Mr. Thomas before her, Bilane praised Kamala for her understanding of Bilane's culture and ability to communicate appropriately with her and her family. Kamala, like Abdullahi, could discipline and motivate Bilane to be better without making her feel underestimated or patronized. But for reasons that were unclear in our interviews, Kamala's time as Bilane's SPSW was limited. Kyle returned to the position at the end of Bilane's 11th grade year when she was in need of the most urgent support.

A conversation between Kyle and Bilane's mother was the first to spark a change in her behaviour.

> When Kyle came back, he actually had a meeting with my mom before I went to Grade 12. And he told her, like, "I don't think she's going to be able to go to university, she might not even be able to go to college. She should take an extension year to finish her courses." That really pissed me off because he told me what I was going to do. One thing that I always have known that I wanted to do was to go to university, because it was so important to my mom. So, I just remember looking at him and I told him – and this is a time in which I was kind of a firecracker – so I told him "get out". I told him "get out, you are not going to tell me what I'm going to do. I'm going to university da da da [etc.]". Anyway, so he told my mom there's no way she's going to university. So, my mom is just sitting there bawling, and then after I get into Grade 12 and I kick it into overdrive. Mainly because he told me I wasn't going to go. I didn't like to be told what I was going to do and what I wasn't going to do.

The other catalytic conversations were with a guidance counsellor and vice principal.

> My counsellor told me the same thing [as Kyle]. She told me "you're not going to university, forget about it". My vice principal told me the same thing he said "you're not going to university, forget about it". I remember all these people, all of these White people telling me "yo Bil, you're not going to university. You're not going anywhere. You're not going to university, you're lucky if you graduate". So, I remember it thinking "Yo, this is what Mr. Thomas was talking about" you know? I was like "I'm going to go to university". So, I literally took 100 classes to get to university. I got Kamala then, at the end of Grade 12, and she was really good helping me. … It was really easy to communicate with her. When I needed something from teachers, I would tell her, and she would go to communicate with them. She was able to understand me on a Muslim, immigrant, first-generation student level. Like it was really, really easy for her to understand me. … So basically, Grade 12 I just really went hard because they told me I wasn't going to go. You know? That, like, really made me angry.

Bilane's final year of high school is one in which she draws heavily on her resistant capital and Kamala emerges as another source of familial capital to support her transition into post-secondary life. Again, familial capital fortifies her ability to resist. Pearson Secondary is a site of resistance for Bilane's entire time as a student; in our interviews she does not share any stories of community or connection at the school and there is no figure like Mr. Thomas to provide a space of kinship within its walls. Bilane's decision to stop attending school regularly can be understood as an act of self-preservation, but the act is fraught. She chooses to maintain her personal well-being by avoiding a site in which she is underestimated, fetishized, exoticized and socially disconnected, but this choice is complicated by the fact that this site is her school. The tension between self-preservation and educational access is the most powerful theme that emerged from the narratives of both participants. I expound on this theme in *Section 4: Is It Worth It?*

In the twelfth grade when most high school students take 6 or 7 out of a potential 8 classes, Bilane took a total of 11 classes: all 8 courses during the regular school day as well as 3 classes in night school. With her renewed commitment and Kamala's support, Bilane successfully completed the 11 classes and was able to graduate on time. At her graduation she took a moment to confront those who told her that this day was not likely.

> I took my degree the day I graduated, first of all, Kyle…I told him "why are you here?" And then I remember seeing my guidance counsellor and my vice principal…and I remember showing them "hey, remember you told me I wasn't going to do A, B, C? I got into this program, this program, da da da". And I remember just telling them, I just kept looking at them like "what?" [*making a face*] Yeah, I was really excited about that period.

The tumultuous end to Bilane's K-12 schooling left me with two thoughts: 1) Bilane always had the intellectual capabilities to succeed in her schooling but they were so rarely engaged; 2) her earliest tensions and conflicts in school were never resolved. School remained a site of conflict until the end of her time there.

Learning to Be a University Student

While university was always a goal for Bilane, it was a nebulous one, and a goal passed down from her mother. Bilane's mother made it clear from a young age that Bilane was to attend university and to become a professional of some kind – though the details had always been hers to determine. This freedom, however, also manifested as a lack of direction in her educational journey.

> My mom would have helped me if she could have, but she didn't know. Also, we never talked about the game plan of when I get into university. What are you going to do after? It's like hoop dreams. We talk about hoop dreams like "I am going to do this, and I am going to do that". You have no idea what you need to get in, to stay in, to end it. What do you want to do practically? I didn't know any professionals personally. So, there was no [*pause*] it was just kind of like, I'll figure it out, you know? Still don't have it figured out.

Although Bilane states that she does not "have it figured out", she proves over the course of our conversations that she has a clear understanding of university and what one needs in order to succeed; but we will return to this later. Let us look briefly at the phrase "hoop dreams". Hoop dreams is a term that was popularized after the 1994 documentary of the same name. The documentary follows the lives of William Gates and Arthur Agee, two Black boys from Chicago,

over the course of 5 years as they attend a private school with an elite basketball program in the predominantly White suburb of Westchester, Illinois. The film presents the boys' lives in a segregated, economically marginalized community, their love of basketball and their dreams of improving the lives of their families by becoming professional basketball players. Outside of its connection to basketball, the term hoop dreams began to be used in popular vernacular to describe audacious aspirations of Black youth in marginalized communities. Along with connotations of scale, there is an implied understanding of a hoop dream as being an aspiration that is far-fetched or unrealistic. Bilane's use of hoop dreams to describe her university aspirations is a telling one. Just as her Lester B Pearson classmates came into high school more prepared than she had been, Bilane could see the ways in which they also entered university with an advantage.

> I remember like all the White kids in my school, like my White counterparts, they had a detailed plan of what they wanted. So as soon as they got out it was almost like going through the ribbon [in a race]. It was just like breaking the threshold and going. "I want to do this because it leads to that, and then I'm going to save money and then I'm going to do this." I had no idea… I think I was going through school just like a light-up staircase. Just one step and then another step would light up and then another step. And it wasn't really thinking about where I was going and what, really, I was doing, you know what I mean? I wasn't really focused, you know? Just kind of trying to get to the next step.

What Bilane is describing above is a disparity in cultural capital. Her White counterparts seemingly belonged to families or social networks that gave them detailed information about how to navigate, and ultimately succeed in, university. Bilane remarks again and again in our interviews that middle-class, White students have professional adults in their personal lives – their parents and their parents' friends – while she and people from her community do not. "They had help along the whole way." These professionals serve not only as a source of knowledge about university life, but also social capital that opens the door to employment.

This lack of social and cultural capital affected Bilane from the earliest part of her transition to university: selecting programs to apply to. After enjoying her twelfth-grade law class Bilane thought she may like to become a lawyer and looked for an undergraduate degree that could serve as a "launching pad" into law. She selected, and was admitted to, the Ethics and Society program at the University of Ottawa.

> I took a law class in high school and I applied before finishing that law class. And although I like the idea of law, I realized when I got into it, I didn't like it. And so, when I

> got into the program, I took a couple of classes just to make sure and I knew I didn't like it. A friend was taking her first-year international development class. And so, I took it as an elective and I ended up really liking it.

At the time of our interviews Bilane was enrolled in the International Development program. It is notable that for both her current degree program and the original program for which she applied, Bilane had no real understanding of the fields before entering them. She did not know anyone who worked in these fields nor did she have a grasp of the what one would be expected to do in those programs of study. When Collier (2000) speaks of the student role, he states that there are layers of specificity to the construction of this role: there is the generic university student role, and there are specific modifications one makes based on their institution or field of study. For example, the details of the student role for a student studying pure mathematics at a large, research-focused institution will differ greatly from those of a literature major at a small, liberal arts college. Looking at Bilane's path to university – the tumult in Grade 12 and the lack of information in the selection process – it is clear that she did not have many ideas about the student role in general, let alone her specifics of her discipline.

Here, let us return to the idea of "hoop dreams". Based on Bourdieu's definitions of capital, the metaphor of hoop dreams and the light-up staircase analogy are most easily read as descriptions of deficits in Bilane's cultural and social capital. In contrast, Yosso (2005) offers the concept of aspirational capital. Aspirational capital is:

> the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers. This resiliency is evidenced in those who allow themselves and their children to dream of possibilities beyond their present circumstances, often without the objective means to attain those goals. (Yosso, 2005, pp. 77-78)

Bilane's mother instills in her a desire and commitment to attend university in order to build a better life, despite not knowing the specifics of university life and success. The "light-up staircase" that Bilane describes is quite an apt analogy for the experience of employing aspirational capital.

To uncover her broadest understanding of the university student role, Bilane and I discussed what it means to be a successful university student. Bilane says that at the beginning of her undergraduate degree, her definition of a successful university student was one who graduates in four years and finds a job right away. A simple definition that did not include any information about academic or social behaviours, grades, experiences, or campus involvement (which would become a large part of her university experience). Given her limited exposure to the institution it

would be expected that her earliest perceptions of university were not particularly detailed; it could also be expected that Bilane would find many aspects of academic and social life surprising.

> The first shock came at the size and nature of her classes.
>
> A lot of times you have a class like 200 people, 100 people, and it's really a lot of like you working by yourself. You're coming to class, you're working by yourself; doing the work, you're working by yourself; communicating with the profs, you're working by yourself, developing relationships with people in the class. Everything you have to do completely by yourself.

While she had little interest in befriending her peers at Pearson, the small class sizes and amount of time spent together meant that Bilane was "forced" into forming relationships with her classmates. Forming relationships with other university students emerged as a major theme in Bilane's narrative, one that will be dealt with in the next section, but her initial thoughts can be seen in the following quote.

> The thing I was shocked about on campus was you really only interact with people you want to interact with when you go to university. In high school it's kind of like that, but your classes are so small you have to interact with everybody. I don't know, you're in the same class for so long that you're making friends, you have to because you've been in school 4 years together. In university like, you don't really have to make friends. You don't have to really interact with people. So, for me, I spent my years in university just with my friends and then maybe branching out to the MSA [Muslim Student Association] and then that's it. Yeah, nobody else past that.

The newfound autonomy was something Bilane struggled with on the whole. Time management, a common issue for all students and especially first-generation students according to the literature (Collier & Morgan, 2008), was one of the major challenges she identified.

> How to study, starting things ahead of time, not to procrastinate, I wish somebody told me. What else do I wish somebody told me? Like a school-social life-work balance, how to maintain that, you know?

Time management was made increasingly difficult by the fact that Bilane was solely responsible for her education for the first time. In her K-12 schooling Bilane always had *someone* supporting her schoolwork, from homework club mentors to Pathways SPSWs. University was the first time that she did not have an adult actively involved in her education. As she put it "no one knows if you're actually working".

Like her transition to Pearson, Bilane once again found her peers to be better prepared for academic life. When asked if she felt academically prepared for university, she said

> No, because of the amount of reading. So, for each class it was like 100 pages a week. You have five classes, how do they expect you to do all of these? Also juggling everything, I didn't feel prepared to. I felt overwhelmed by everything. Also, I didn't have any friends in my program, so that was overwhelming. The virtues of having friends in your programs. [*Idil: it makes a difference?*] It makes a huge difference. I just went at everything by myself. So that was very difficult.

Bilane's transition to university was a challenging one, but it was only the beginning of her journey. At the time of our interviews, Bilane was about 3 years into university stationed somewhere between second- and third-year status. After deciding to forgo student loans for religious reasons, she began to attend university part-time, taking semesters off to earn her tuition. When applying for her loan Bilane did not fully understand how loans worked, nor was she aware of the position of some Islamic scholars that interest-bearing loans are prohibited under any circumstances. I will discuss the financial challenges that both participants faced in a later section.

The shift to part-time status was not only a signal of her growing religiosity, but a shift in her attitudes about what it meant to be successful in university. Bilane was gaining a clearer understanding of the university student role and developing a deeper, more complex definition of what success in the institution was to her. Once set on simply finishing in four years and getting a job, Bilane now saw a successful student as "somebody [who] actually goes into school and learns. And also affects change where they can". While she always had a curious mind, she did not experience school as a place to authentically learn, only to survive. In university, where the courses were engaging and Bilane was finally able to discuss "current issues" in a classroom setting, she felt as though she was truly learning.

> So, I never thought about learning. I didn't like to learn in high school, I just went, did what I needed to do and went home. But in university I really realized that when you take a program that you very much like – I like my program Alhamdulillah [praise God] – I just like learning outside of being in your class hours. Like looking up the things that have to do with your program. Like enjoying politics and hearing about economics, hearing about the world. And also seeing the effects of what you learn in the real world is also really cool. So learning, also being involved in making changes on where you are, like wherever you touch. So, in your specific schools, in your classroom, in your school, in your city, and then hopefully one day around the world.

As Bilane's definition of a successful student expanded to include "making change" she began to look for ways to change the world around her. For her part, Bilane worked with a group of friends to organize a townhall event on gun violence in the Somali community. But the place where Bilane dedicated most of her efforts toward social change was the Muslim Student Association (MSA). Soon after joining the club, Bilane was elected the head of one of the subcommittees. While she enjoyed the club and found the committee to be a safe space to participate in university life as a religiously observant Muslim woman, she was discomforted by the lack of Black Muslims involved in the MSA. Bilane again gathered her friends together and worked to make the space more welcoming for Black Muslims. The group supported each other in running for executive positions and rallied Black Muslims to get out the vote. The group also worked to educate the club's mostly Arab and South Asian membership by creating art that explored Black members' experiences of anti-black racism in the Muslim community. Being a part-time student meant that Bilane would no longer meet her initial vision of success in university, but now she was living by her new standard: she was learning and making a change in her community.

Both resistant and social capital can be observed in Bilane's experience with the MSA. As a religiously observant Muslim woman, Bilane was invested in the MSA and saw the club as a space in which she could belong but was troubled by the anti-Black sentiment that she witnessed. In response to this, she did not leave the space or conform to it by minimizing her Black identity, she actively worked to dismantle the culture of anti-Blackness through organizing and educating others. She resists and supports others in resisting. Unlike earlier instances of resistance, this instance involved building a social support network to fight alongside with. Once Bilane is elected as part of the MSA executive board, she becomes a source of social capital for others by engaging in what Yosso (2005) calls "lifting as we climb" by encouraging and supporting other Black Muslims in campaigns for executive positions.

As Bilane's understanding of the university student role evolved, she was also able to outline successful student behaviours. When asked what she would tell another young woman from her background about university success, she advised:

> I think a lot of university is like, if you want something – if you don't have a disability – like if you want a grade or something it's all about the work you are willing to put into it. And so, in times when I didn't put that work into it… I don't know [*laughing*]. But then when I was willing to put the work into it, I would do much better. … Don't defer [exams], don't start the deferring train. Once you start it is very difficult to get out of the habit. Study ahead of time. Don't cram, but study bit by bit. You know? Every day take

> your notes home, look over them for a little bit and then close your book. Go to all of your classes. It is going to save you a lot of stress and you paid money for this. Go to all of your classes. I would tell them to be friends with your professors. I would tell them to work hard but party hard properly. Because I guess it works for people, right? [*laughing*]

There was a seeming contradiction between Bilane's ability to lay out a detailed plan for another student's success and her earlier proclamation that she still doesn't "have it figured out". It was unclear to me at first how she believed both statements to be true, especially as a reflective and self-aware individual. By our final interview it was clear to me that what Bilane was trying to figure out was not *how to be* a traditionally successful university student but whether or not she was willing to do those things. Before this tension can be explored, we will first look at how Bilane views herself as a student.

Bilane, the Student

"I think everybody just looks at you like 'student', like you got here somehow." Underestimated was the most common descriptor used for Bilane's life before university. She felt underestimated by her teachers in her younger years, leaving middle school with the recommendation that she continue in applied level courses. She was underestimated by her wealth, White peers in high school, some even incredulous when she outperformed them academically. She felt underestimated by her guidance counsellor and the other adults when they told he that her goal of attending university was unrealistic. The University of Ottawa, however, was a fresh start. No one that she interacted with knew of her past academic challenges; in university Bilane felt free from the stigma and the expectations of others. She was now able to construct an image of herself that was not a response or reaction to the thoughts of others. In university she also returned to wearing the hijab everyday, a decision that meant her Muslim identity, not her Blackness, was at the forefront of others' perceptions.

> I started wearing hijab in university and I realized that I wasn't as underestimated as I was in high school. Number one, because I got here. But also, I think also it was because I was a hijabi. I wasn't seen as Black, I was seen as Muslim. I didn't understand that, because I'm still the same person I'm just wearing a hijab. It's like your Muslim identity overshadows all of your identities, you know? So, I wasn't as underestimated. And also, I experienced so much more Islamophobia. Which was crazy.

Bilane shared stories about discomfort on public transportation and disparaging comments made by strangers, especially in the days following terror attacks committed by Muslims in other parts of the world. Overall, being visibly Muslim made Bilane move in the world with more vigilance: "as a hijabi it forced me to be aware of my surroundings". This change was not one that Bilane identified as having any impact on her education – these negative percepts were not related to her intellectual abilities.

Large classes sizes meant that Bilane no longer felt the scrutiny of being one of a few people of colour in her classes. While this removed some pressure from the expectations of others, the large classes also left Bilane feeling slightly insignificant in a sea of students. Not having friends in her classes began to take a toll on her motivation and she began to attend class less frequently. "You're kind of like, nobody is going to miss you, you know?" When she did attend, however, she felt seen by at least one person:

> [I am] active when I am there, the teacher can really feel my presence, my hand is always up. I had many classes that I would go to half of the classes, and half of the classes I wouldn't go. And the teacher would know. To the point that they were like "you were not here last class". There's 200 people in this room. How do you know if I'm here or not? … I think my professors really liked me because I feel like a lot of students don't care. And so, if they find one student who cares just a little bit, they love it. So, I think they would describe me as active, I think they think I'm bright. I don't have a bad relationship with them, they're really good.

Bilane's relationship with her professors was the opposite of her contentious relationship with her K-12 teachers; this shift will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

Authority issues and negative expectation having been removed, Bilane was now left to contend with herself. While she largely found the content of her courses interesting, she inevitably ran into tasks or assignments that were not compelling. Where she would have quit in high school, Bilane had now developed strategies to keep herself engaged.

> I always try to spin things for myself, does that make sense? Like when I'm doing research [I choose] something I would like to research in real life. I realized that there are people who could easily do things they don't want to do, but I have never been any good at it. So, I realized, okay, I have to pretend like I want to do this, you know?

Where her K-12 schooling journey was a story of resistance to external pressures, Bilane's time in university has been about the internal: understanding, facing and improving

herself. Education was not the only arena in which she took on this project of self improvement, with her return to the hijab she was also began to work on her spiritual life; more on this later.

When asked to share a story that she identified as an important moment in her university career, Bilane shared an anecdote that succinctly captures the essence of her new journey of self discovery:

> There is a feminism class that I took in second year university, and before this I wasn't really vocal in my classes at all. But I remember putting up my hand and saying things, and everybody finding them ground-breaking. I'm just saying regular stuff, I remember she put up [a list of] feminine qualities on the board. Like what it means to be a woman on the board and then beside it she put up what it means to be a man. And all of the feminine qualities were like meek, quiet, da, da, da. And I remember looking at that and thinking that's not a Somali woman. None of these things is my mom, my aunt, all the women I had around me. Me, my friends. I don't know people like this, you know? And I remember, I put my hand up and I'm like I don't know anybody like this, I don't know any women that are like the first category. Or strive to be like this category. And I remember she was so shocked. Anyway, that class was like, anything I would say the teacher would find ground-breaking. And I didn't understand it, and then I realized, it's because I'm saying something that is very different, my outlook on the world is very different. So, I think that I realized that, Alhamdulillah [thank God], especially in my program there's no real right answer, you explain the answer that you have. So, I realized that just having a different perspective brought something different to the table and valuable. So just that my perspective was one that was very valuable. And then after that, my hand was up in class all of the time. I mean before that it's not like I thought my perspective was not valuable, it's that I didn't care to [give it in class].

Once unseen and misunderstood by her teachers, Bilane was now being validated by her professors. The contrast in her previous relationship to K-12 teachers and now with professors is quite stark. In the next section we will examine the role of this relationship and others in university life.

The Role of Relationships

Relationships with Professors

> "Build a relationship with my profs – I wish I knew that."

The role of a high school teacher and that of a university professor are quite different. The former includes some element of nurture and a type of authority like that of a parent. Professors do not occupy this same social space. This difference is obvious, seen in the very different histories, goals and aims of elementary schooling and the university education. Even without

direct contact with university, one can glean the general difference between a teacher and a professor from popular cultural representations. The details of the professor role and the norms for how students are meant to relate to professors are not as easily or widely known. Relating to professors is one of the major challenges found in the literature for first-generation students (Collier, 2000; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Lehmann, 2007, 2009; Stuber, 2011). Students are often unsure of how to address professors appropriately in person or via email, and how to appropriately express dissenting opinions when compliance was the norm in high school classrooms. First-generation students also struggle to understand the nature of the student-professor relationship, carrying old ideas from high school with them. For example, since seeing the teacher outside of class was only done in high school when students were struggling or being disciplined, first-generation students don't often take advantage of professors' office hours (Collier, 2000; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Lehmann, 2007, 2009; Stuber, 2011).

Students from university educated families may be told about the importance of forming relationships with professors and coached on how to do so. Their parents may have modeled the kinds of speech and writing that are effective in engaging with institutions to advocate for one's self. Perhaps their parents wrote emails to their schools and teachers or brought their children along to meetings with the school. This was not the case for Bilane, whose mother did not speak English comfortably and had a series of SPSWs act as liaisons between herself and the school. She came into university without any specific instruction on the nature of student-professor relationships. To her delight, this relationship was to be quite different from the kind she had experienced with teachers in K-12 school.

> I think I was just too lazy to go to their office hours for a while, and then I realize that it's just talking to another adult. It's different because when you're in high school it's like you're speaking to your teacher. You calling them Miss [So-and-So], you know? But when you're talking to your prof, you're calling them by their first name. You're talking to an adult you know? Which is more a comfortable relationship to have.

The fact that Bilane did not view her professors as authority figures greatly facilitated her experience forming relationships with them. She identified her challenging relationship to authority as a major contributing factor to her K-12 school struggles. At the end of our first interview, I asked Bilane if there was anything else that she would like to tell me about her K-12 school experience, she said the following

> I think with my encounters with authority, specifically in school, the only way I was able to survive is by defying it. So then now you have to work in workplaces and kind of be able to deal with authority. But the only way I survived this long is being defiant to authority. So how am I supposed to, like, engage with it as an adult, you know? Like, despite all of those teachers having low expectations, despite people telling you what you're going to do and your capabilities, doing the opposite of what they told you to do. ... So, me almost like getting this far, has been like despite of the system. And now I have to work with it. And I don't know how to do it.

She specifies in our conversation that "controlling authority" is the issue and not authority as a general concept. I understand Bilane's definition of "controlling authority" to mean power, as she consistently describes struggles with authority figures who openly exerted their power over her. She felt that she had thrived with authority figures who gave her general direction but respected her ability to navigate the details on her own. She attributes this not only to her personality, but the fact that she grew up with a single mother and no father – that is, no disciplinarian – in her household. Bilane also credits her mother with parenting in a way that was responsive the children's individual needs, raising Bilane and her brother with a more hands-off style and her sister with a closer watch. While Bilane understood that this was a preference of hers, she learned from her brother that successfully interacting with "controlling authority" was a skill that could be learned despite one's personal disposition.

> My little brother is a lot more like me, a lot more independent, but he played competitive basketball, so he has positive relationships with authority. He knows how to talk to them. I remember going to his basketball meeting recently and watching him speak to his coach and it's like, he knows how to talk to this guy. He doesn't take when [the coach] bosses him around offensively. But for me, you know, it's very difficult. Even 'til now it's very hard for me.

University and the new student-professor dynamic offered Bilane a fresh opportunity to establish relationships with authority in an educational space.

> How to interact with authority figures, I never learned. That's why I like university profs because it's not like you're an authority figure. You come and talk with them about business and you don't have to interact with them outside of that. And it's like they don't want to talk to you as much as you don't want to talk to them. So, you can build a more genuine relationship with your professors.

The question of genuineness in relationships is an important one for Bilane, and one that will be explored further in the next section about relationship with peers. For now, it is enough to

know that genuineness is one of Bilane's core values and attributing it to her professors is a significant act. Once Bilane sorted out the nature of this new authority figure, she was able to construct a fuller picture of how and why professors should be engaged. Positive relationships with professors was one of Bilane's new criteria for success in university.

> Being close with your profs, they're really useful if you have something like a midterm or an exam or paper that you need your grade bumped up on and I never knew that either. … Another thing, they'll be familiar with you so that even when your exam gets handed in to be marked, they'll be like "Oh Bilane, I know Bilane."
> I feel like if they think that you like or you care at all about the class, they're pretty open to helping you out. I haven't come across a prof that is not willing to help me out.

As cited before, appropriately engaging with professors is one of the major hurdles that first-generation students mention in the literature. Bilane was not only able to construct an understanding the student-professor relationship but was also able to use it effectively to advance her academic growth.

Here, in developing an understanding of the importance of professors in university success and evolving in her relationship with authority, we see Bilane developing navigational capital. Bilane comes to see the ways in which professors play an instrumental role in navigating successfully through the university.

Relationships with Peers

Along with professors, Bilane recognized the importance of connecting with peers to university success.

> I wish I knew that I should make friends in class. I never learned to make friends in class.
> *[Idil: so how did you learn that that is important?]*
> Like when it's exam time, or midterm time, and you're missing something in your notes, and you have nobody to ask directly. Also, people have study groups. People have different ways to study and I was just going it alone for so long. … It was difficult.

While university offered her a new student-authority dynamic in her professors, the social dynamic created by being a Black, Muslim girl from a low-income community in a largely White, upper-class student body persisted. Bilane's reluctance in forming relationships with her classmates remained as well. In the ninth grade Bilane opted to keep her circle of Somali friends from childhood instead of befriending her new classmates, and in her first year of university she did the same. Reflecting on this decision she said

> I think that I felt like I had somewhere to belong, but I also othered myself. So, I didn't feel like I had to communicate, nor did I want to communicate, nor did I want to integrate with the rest of the school. But like I have the space here [in university]. I don't have to talk to you I don't have to deal with you, you know? I just didn't want to mix a lot of the time because I felt like I don't have to explain to the other Somalis a lot.

Bilane speaks about going through university alone in several ways: it suits her personality, it is the reason she prefers university to high school, it is socially difficult, it is academically challenging. Bilane is an extrovert and leader in spaces where she is comfortable but would rather be alone than integrate into a space in which she feels othered. Like her high school classrooms, Bilane feels othered amongst her university peers, and decides early on not to try to befriend them. Bilane's understanding of her peers and the types of people who fit in socially at university is at the heart of this decision. When asked to describe the type of student that "fits in", she draws a very clear image

> Physically, it's coming in pyjamas to class, unless you're an international student. They come dressed. Coming in pyjamas to class with a high messy bun, with your laptop like sluggishly taking notes, with your Starbucks coffee. Grovelling for marks in front of everybody, and then leaving, going home, getting dressed to go to the club. … In my classes I would say that's how the student looks like. You know, it was a White girl with her hair messy in the bun that's what the prototype student looked like. But then student life was very different.

Student life, or life in campus clubs and organizations, is where Bilane blossomed. In her first year she took notice of the wide variety of events on campus and began attending with her friends. She noticed that many of the clubs that she was interested in were led by Black students and other students of colour, even the university's student federation. These would be the spaces where Bilane invested her efforts to make new friends. As previously mentioned, Bilane joined the Muslim Students Association. The MSA is where Bilane began to feel like she fit in on campus.

> When I joined and I did our first event, that's when I started to feel like that, I think. Because it's like you're the host, you're seating people so you're kind of in control. And then after that people start to recognize you, "Oh you're from here." And then you have to go and help new students out and then you just start to know more and more and more people. I feel like [it's like that] everybody though, the longer you go to school and the more involved you get on campus it starts to feel like you're home almost.

Bilane did not find other Muslim women in her classes to befriend and befriending Muslim men was not an option that she entertained. This left her in essentially the same position she found herself in high school: with no true friends in her academic life and all of her meaningful relationships elsewhere. Unlike high school, though, Bilane found this dynamic to be problematic in her university life. When asked how she would advise a younger girl from her background to approach university she repeated "make friends" several times. Not having friends in her program was one of the things that left Bilane feeling overwhelmed by university, something she said would have made a "huge difference" in her university career. Yet, it is also something that she does *not* intend on doing when she returns to her classes.

> I feel like if I make this friend, it's not genuine it's because I want something from you and so I feel bad making friends. And so, when someone wants to make friends with me, I know that they want something from me. Although I would give them what they want, I still don't want to be their friend. So, I don't know how I'm going to get over that, I haven't figured out yet. That and it's just like people I don't connect with – like 95% of my class is White girls, right? And I've noticed that nobody wants to be your friend until they find out that you can offer them something. So before you being active in class, you just look cool and you're coming by yourself, and as soon as you start to be active and you seem like you know anything it's like "Oh, we have a study group. Do you want to come join it? Oh, we have this do you want to be in it?" And I'm just like, no I don't want to be in it.

Understanding the utility of peer relationships in university success is a demonstration of Bilane's continued development of navigational capital. While she can clearly identify how these relationships are integral to succeeding in university – even advising others to befriend their classmates – she does not employ this capital for her own success. This decision can be understood as an exertion of resistant capital. I have previously identified instances in which Yosso's (2005) categories of capital intersect and reinforce one another, but this is the first example I saw of types of capital in direct conflict with one another. As they are not discrete categories, there is work to be done in understanding the interplay of capital within Yosso's community cultural wealth model.

As we have seen thus far, Bilane was able to successfully transition into university and uncover the unspoken elements of the student role. She determined proper student behaviours and habits, even those that she struggled with in high school. She came to understand the importance of relationships in university success. She deciphered the nature of the student-professor relationship and determined the utility of peer relationships. After this growth and work to construct the details of what it takes to be a traditionally successful university student, Bilane was

left with an unexpected question: given what it takes, does she actually want to be a traditionally successful university student?

The Price of Success: *Is It Worth It?*

For Bilane, the question of *how* to be a traditionally successful student proved to be a simple one with clear answers: go to class, review your notes, connect with your professors, befriend your classmates, and join a club to find belonging. Once she had figured out the details of the role, the much more complex question of *whether or not* to be a traditionally successful student began to trouble her. Bilane's educational journey was always a reflexive process; with every new piece of information she seemed ask herself two questions: 'Can I do this?' and 'Is this worth doing?'. Throughout her university career, the answer to the first question had by-and-large been 'yes', but 'is this worth doing' proved to be a much more complex question to answer. The question can be asked more explicitly as: "is the outcome of this activity/behaviour important enough to endure the efforts and sacrifices that I must make?" For most of high school, Bilane did not find that successfully completing courses was important enough to endure the negative social interactions and attacks against her well-being that she experienced at Pearson. When her goal of attending university, a lifelong ambition that also meant a lot to her mother, was in jeopardy Bilane found the wherewithal to endure Pearson all day and then take evening courses. While academic challenges occasionally proved an issue Bilane's schooling, her most persistent and powerful challenges are often a function of motivation and forbearance.

To this end, Bilane describes an inability to engage in uninteresting tasks as a major feature of her personality. She struggles with social interactions that are not genuine, she struggles with schoolwork that is not interesting – she is not good at doing things "against her will". Networking, for example, is something Bilane chooses not to do, even while acknowledging the social and tangible value it may bring to her academic and professional life.

> If I don't want to be friends with somebody, if I don't want to talk to them, if I don't want to interact with them, I won't. There are a lot of people who push themselves. They are like "if I'm friends with that person then I can be friends with that person, I can get this, I can get that." But that whole push for me is just something that I'm not interested in doing. Even in the workplace. ... I feel like you have to have these relationships. I just have to figure out a way, because not every relationship is going to be balanced you know?

Bilane sets a a high bar for what and who she deems worthy of her time and efforts. This appears to be the major hurdle in forming genuine connections with her peers, she does not hold them in high regard. Bilane's description of university success, remember, is that one should dedicated to learning and changing the worlds that they inhabit. When reflecting on how most university students approach their education, she said the following:

> I don't know if this is conceited but I don't think a lot of people think when they learn. Like, I really don't think a lot of people go into the class and think about the content of that they're learning, like deeply, not just surface level, not just "I'm going to pass this exam". Deeply. Like "yo, how does this affect the world? How does this affect my world? How can I incorporate this in my life? Where can I connect this in my life?" ... A lot of people go in order to get a grade and I think that's one of the reasons why school is very difficult for me, like it's more than a grade. You're learning all of this information, it's so much more than a grade.

In both the physical and philosophical descriptions that Bilane provides of her peers, it is clear that she sees herself as an outsider in the space. It is not a role that she is ashamed of, in fact she wears the badge proudly.

> And then being the "other" in the class it helps you be detached from the class. So, you come here, you do your work, you go home. That helps a lot of people do very well. Or sometimes you even find other "others" in your class and you guys stick together. Maybe someone that people wouldn't talk to, that smart kid in the corner, and then you guys get through it together.

It is notable that social cohesion or even social advantage are not powerful enough incentives to encourage Bilane to socialize with her university classmates. Befriending one's peers or ingratiating oneself to authority figures come with all kinds of social benefits, but often come at the cost of engaging in some level of conformity, compliance or outright obedience. In social psychology conformity is an adherence to the unspoken norms of a space; compliance refers to one's willingness to respond to requests made by others, which is differentiated from obedience which is one's response orders given by authorities or higher status individuals. As discussed in a previous section, Bilane has always pushed back against obedience to what she calls "controlling authority". Aside from simply being unpleasant, she says that is not a constructive relationship for her learning.

> If they go "you have to do this, and you have to go here, you have to do this" it's not very constructive for me. And it never has been constructive for me. You can give me tips, you can tell me how to get there faster, you can help me, you can help figure out how I can get

> there faster. But strict – and this is why I'm bad with deadlines – strict deadlines, strict guidelines are all things I don't really like. I feel suffocated.

Aside from the deadlines, Bilane has found university to be conducive to her learning style. She hails her program as especially good in this regard, as a space in which original ideas are valued over conformity of thought. She has felt free to come to her own conclusions and pursue her own areas of interests, while remaining within the broad boundary of the intended learning goal. Yet even in this new space the issue of *social* conformity remained, and as she has begun to work in more professional settings, she once again had to grapple with the requirement of obedience that plagued her K-12 schooling. The dilemma that Bilane now faced was that she understood these issues to be endemic to the professional, middle-class world – the world that her education was leading her towards. University might be, in her mind, the last mainstream space that will accommodate unorthodox approaches. The goal that she had been working towards for so long would only lead her to an environment similar to the ones that she has been trying to escape. I asked her what it would mean for her education, and in fact her life, if she learned to tolerate socially conformity or obedience to controlling authority.

> I don't know. I never want to learn it, so I don't know. I look at it and I'm like, it's probably easier for you at this moment but afterwards you've done all this work to get to where you want to get, that you could have done it – maybe I'm crazy – but you could have done it easier… like… your own way. There is some figuring out, I agree.

The easier way that Bilane mentions is not one that will require less effort, but one that will be psychologically and emotionally easier for her. The tension she feels around conforming (or even relating) with her peers or obeying authority figures is a result of a dichotomy that Bilane sees between her identity and personality and that of a traditional university student. Succeeding in the traditional university student role means renouncing part of herself.

> I don't know if the system is meant for me to fit into it. I don't know if school – although I like to learn, I really like the content, I like the classes that I've taken, I learned something from each class, almost each class that I've been an active student in, the teacher really likes me, and I like them as well – I don't think that…[pause] school might not be for me. I don't know…
> *Idil: okay, what does that mean? That school might not be for you? What does that look like?*
> It could mean two things: it could mean I never go back, which I hope it doesn't mean that, and it could mean that I have to go back as someone that asks for help, that makes relationships in class, all that stuff. So, it might not be for this version of me.

Idil: so how do you feel about the other potential version of you?
Bilane: I don't like her. [whispering]
Idil: what?
I don't like her. [*said louder*]

Bilane has rejected conformity and obedience from her earliest days in school but facing them at this stage in her life is different. Where before she felt that she could reject the norms of school and still achieve her goal of going to university, she is now left to reconcile the reality that success past university seems to value these same norms. She must now contend with herself: why has she rejected these concepts, what do they mean to her, and can they be engaged without losing herself?

The struggle that Bilane articulates here is not unique for first-generation and working-class university students. In their analysis of Canada's Youth in Transition Survey, Labmert et al. (2004) name "lack of fit" as the most important reason reported by individuals who left post-secondary education prematurely. In qualitative studies examining the experiences of first-generation university students at various institutions, students consistently report that completing university requires adaptation to a culture that they do not belong to and a degree of renouncing parts of themselves (Lehmann, 2007, 2009; Soria, 2012; Stuber, 2011). Even students who are academically successful report this tension and in some cases drop out of university a result (Lehmann, 2007).

School as A Game

For all of the ways that university felt new and different to Bilane, after some time she came to regard the norms of the institution with the same disdain she felt for high school. Even in the new terrain, the rules for behaviour, once discovered, were strikingly familiar. She likened school success to a game.

> People participate in this game of school: to write down on paper exactly what the teacher wants for you, even if you have a different opinion. To go and grovel for marks. If they get the mark and they know they deserve it [they will still] go back and be like can you raise it. Emailing the teacher, a lot. ... Like there is a lot of games, so many games.

Bilane also raised the point that these "successful" behaviours are impacted by gender.

> You know what, women in general, I think that the school system is amazing for them. Because if you're somebody who is always good at taking orders, you're always good at shutting up when someone tells you to, you were always good at mediating authority, you

> were always good at keeping the peace, you were always good at following orders, you were always good at like these things. ... But I feel like a lot of girls, that they succeed because of all of these things, [or] despite of all of these things.

This description of feminine traits is similar to the one that Bilane objected to in her feminism course.

Bilane invoked the game analogy in another part of our interviews, when describing the nature of university life.

> Do you know that game where that plane starts dropping parachute people and you shoot them? That's university. ... Because at first, it's easy to keep up. You're shooting one here and then one there. And then all the parachute guys start falling, and if you don't keep a steady pace you're going to die. That's university. It's easy to drown in all the stuff you have to do. And I think also, a lot of people start to deal with anxiety, depression.

The pressures of university life, while universal, were not equally distributed; those from communities like Bilane's faced unique challenges.

> And then there's the pressure of coming from single parent households, or even like in refugee household where you're first-generation Canadian, where your parents are depending on you to finish. So, there's the pressure of that, there is not only the pressure to succeed for yourself but to succeed for other people too.

While she mentions many elements of her identity that present unique pressures, I will explore the two that she returned to most frequently in our interviews: being Somali and being from a low-income household.

Opportunities and Challenges of Being Somali

Bilane has always strongly identified as a Somali and maintained her closest relationships with other Somali girls. During her difficult transition into the predominantly White Lester B Pearson Secondary School, she connected with the handful of Somali students and leaned heavily on her Somali friends from other school instead of befriending her classmates. Even when Bilane joined the Muslim Student Association in university, she joined with a group of Somali girls and took on the mission of making the club more welcoming to Black students of all backgrounds. Throughout her educational journey and at every venture into an unfamiliar space, Somali students provided her with a sense of belonging and a home to return to.

> It's kind of like I did the exact same thing I did in high school. So, I just had class and then my main friends, so that kind of shielded me for even wanting to [change]. I just looked at it and said I have my own friends. I feel like a lot of people change because they

> feel like they need somewhere to fit in. But if you already have that place there's not much change you need to do because you have somewhere you feel like you already belong, you know?

In university, Somalis continued to provide the home that Bilane sought, but she now had to be more discerning in who she befriended. Many of her Somali peers faced similar struggles with the demands of university and the newfound independence. The regular stresses of university life compounded by the pressure to succeed from their struggling families left many of Bilane's peers unable to cope. The people that she once counted on began to falter.

> Then there are Somali girls, some of them did change, some of them started to drink, some of them started to go to the club. A lot of them dropped out of school, some of the boys dropped out of school by the boatload. There's a pub on campus and you see them in there, ... and you're just kind of like, I knew him. It's so sad.

As she watched old friends change Bilane was changing too, she was growing more religious. Her renewed commitment to school and burgeoning religious practice felt too delicate to withstand the influences of her old friends, the threat of falling back into bad habits, and the prospect of picking up new vices.

> It's like the riskiest thing is slipping, reverting back to where you were before, and the scary thing is nobody stayed where you were before. Everybody went downhill, so it's kind of like you're at the top of the slide. You go back to where you were and you're just going to go all the way down that slide.

Where she would usually retreat to the Somali community as a whole, she was now in search of religiously observant, Somali girls to keep her on track. While she viewed her new standards as necessary, she admits the change was a difficult one.

> So, it was difficult at first because you used to have all of these people to talk to and now you have this group of people that you can talk to. And I am really, really social. I like having a lot of people to talk to. ... But then your core group of friends gets smaller, and you start to realize you're really trying to survive and any deadweight has to go. And it's kind of sad because you don't think that you would be this cutthroat, but you have to be sometimes, to survive.

In university, Bilane's relationship with the Somali community grew more complex, and she began to grapple with its flaws. Instead of shying away from Somalis, Bilane felt a strong sense of responsibility to address the ills that she saw damaging her community.

> In high school I was just Somali. I never tried to understand the community, but in university I started to realize the amount of responsibility that all of us have as Somalis, right? So, number one: we have a responsibility to take care of the generation that is older than us. We also have a responsibility to build a foundation for the generation that is younger than us. So just trying to figure out what problems can we iron out and fix. And how to attack unhealthy habits within our community. ... For boys, it's like they get into drugs and alcohol abuse and get incarcerated at crazy rates, and for girls we burn ourselves out, and all around we don't talk about mental illness.

Somaliness shifted from an external experience in K-12 (i.e. it affected the ways in which others perceived Bilane's academic abilities) to an internal one (i.e. it affected the way Bilane saw herself and place in the world), but it remained at the core of Bilane's identity and school experience.

Bilane's sense of responsibility for the challenges in the Somali community is an aspect of familial capital. Earlier manifestations of this capital were about the ways in which being part of the community benefitted her (i.e. a place to belong), as her understanding of the community came to include its challenges, her familial capital manifested as a commitment to addressing those flaws. She sees herself as bound to generations of Somalis, taking on parts of their respective challenges as her own. Like her position in the MSA, this demonstrates Bilane's shift from a recipient of capital to a source of capital for others.

Financial Challenges

> I think that a lot of it is lack of resources. Like lack of time, lack of money, lack of knowledge of the system. ... Also, money. We don't know anything about money. I, to this day, I think that is my biggest weakness. I will get money and I will blow it like crazy. A lot of Somali people they're like that. Like we don't know how to handle money at all.

Before university Bilane had not worried about money. While she identifies her family as low-income, Bilane stated that she never felt as if she was missing anything that she wanted. University was the first time that Bilane had a large sum of money at her disposal, and she once again navigated that situation alone.

At the end of one of our interviews I asked Bilane if there was anything that she would like to add about her time in university, she replied with an emphatic "yeah, OSAP sucks." While she had previously been receiving student loans through the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP), Bilane was taking a semester away from university to earn money for tuition when I met

her. She did not have even a broad understanding of what it meant to take the loan or what the process of repaying it would entail in the twelfth grade when she applied for OSAP. She had not learned about loans from her mother or in school, and the SPSW who helped her fill out the loan applications simply gave her instructions on the process. She did not quite understand how the interest calculations would work or what they would mean for her repayment, or the difference between loans and grants. Bilane did not recall anyone explaining the gravity of a student loan or providing her with alternatives. Left to navigate her finances alone, Bilane behaved as many young people do when given credit for the first time.

> They would give you so much extra money, they would give you like thousands of dollars a semester and you just blow it because you didn't know. Even the grant, you're blowing everything. So, I remember one specific year, it was second year university, first semester and I got my OSAP and when I got my OSAP I spent it in like a day…or three days. So, I got it and then had a whole a lot of [online] baskets at different stores. So, I was sent my tuition and just spent it in different stores, you know.

It is around this time that Bilane was growing more religiously observant. She learned of the Islamic prohibition on giving or receiving interest-bearing loans and decided that she would no longer take OSAP. While the loan offers a six-month grace period upon graduation, Bilane had seen people with degrees like hers struggle to find work in that amount of time, let alone pay back their student loans. The loan was too risky, she would now complete her degree as she earned the money to pay for it herself.

Throughout all of the challenges Bilane faced in her transition into university, she identified money as the biggest and most difficult obstacle in her education.

> [My experience paying for university was] the worst. The worst. I think that is why it has taken me so long to finish. Not the actual school. That sucks that what is difficult about school isn't the school, what's difficult is the money. So OSAP, because you are paying for school, can toy with your life at anytime. They send you stressful letters while you're in school, they send you stressful letters when you are not in school, they can stop your funding at anytime. Your – literally – your life is in someone's hands. And as soon as you sign the dotted lines and you sign your soul away your life belongs to Uncle Sam.

As a low-income student without a loan, paying for school has been a daunting task for Bilane.

> So, paying for yourself, it's also difficult because a lot of the jobs that you can apply for, because Ottawa is very competitive, a lot of the jobs need more qualifications, right? So, you end up – like if you do get a job – getting a job that does not pay that well if you're

> students. And then you have to pay thousands of dollars to go to school. And for you to pay those you have to put in an unimaginable amount of hours and not touch a dollar of your money. Don't get coffee, don't do this, don't do that.

In the face of this challenge, Bilane still does not regret her decision to go off of OSAP, in fact her challenges finding work thus far have made her more resolute. Witnessing recent graduates in her community leave school with large sums of debt, she recognizes that her degree will not necessarily lead to gainful employment within the six-month grace period. Bilane's challenge finding gainful employment and the struggles that she witnessed in her community are consistent of Daniel and Cukier (2015) in their consultations with Somalis in Toronto. Barriers to meaningful employment such as racial, ethnic, and religious discrimination were reported by both Somali elders and younger, Canadian-born and educated Somalis in their consultations. As she sees it, taking on any more debt would simply put her in a worse financial situation and be compounded with the guilt of betraying her religious beliefs. Despite her moral conviction, it has been hard to watch others graduating and reaching milestones like marriage while she is working her way through school. That has been one of the more challenging aspects of studying part-time: the external pressure. Where her family and community had previously stood behind her decisions, Bilane now has to stand on her own in a decision that others may not understand.

In the end, her biggest regret with respect to financing her education alone is taking on a student loan in the first place. She recognizes her inexperience in the situation, but also faults the adults in her life for not explaining it to her more thoroughly.

> Honestly, it's disgusting. I wish somebody had a conversation with me about OSAP. What does it mean to sign up for OSAP. You're not going to die if you take a semester on and a semester off. ... And I'm just mad at myself because I feel like I did this to myself because I wanted to please my mom and I wanted go and start school, because everybody else was starting school. I didn't do it on my own accord. ... Like a real conversation about OSAP, you know? Give people a dollar figures, you know, not just six months [before the] interest starts. No, like, you're signing up for the interest when you sign the dotted line. I didn't know that. Because they didn't – I don't think I even read it.

Here, again, we see this issue of conformity. Bilane took the loan for her mother, she took the loan because "everybody else" was taking it; she conformed to the expectations of others and she regretted it.

Bilane: Conclusion

From her earliest days in school Bilane's educational experience has been characterized by her challenges with obedience and conformity. In the end, her journey to discover and embody the university student role has been marred by the same forces. Bilane now she sits at a crossroad. As long as the dichotomy between her identity and the specifics of the student role remain unreconciled she sees only two, untenable options: 1) compromise her well-being and sense of self to succeed in university and stable, middle-class employment or 2) hold entirely true to her values and personality and give up on her previous dreams and potential economic stability. While she clearly articulated the difficulty of her position, Bilane's remained thoughtful, resilient and hopeful for a path forward. With her faith and social position in mind, she says about her situation:

> But also, like, Allah. He gives everybody the struggles that they can handle. You have the tools in your toolbelt that you can handle these specific struggles. Bilane is Black, Somali, Muslim in a world that hates Black people, Somali people, Muslim people, and women. But I can handle that, I am not a person that is easily trampled upon. So, it's never something that I looked at as an inconvenience.

Participant 2: Amina

The Road to University

At the time of our interviews, Amina was a third-year law student at the University of Ottawa; getting to this place in her life was neither an inevitability nor an easy feat. Amina arrived in Canada as a refugee with her mother and brothers (one older, one younger) at the age of three. Her father, a much older man with 12 children from previous marriages, joined the family when Amina was in middle school, after years of working in the Middle East. Amina's father did not attend formal schooling but did completed traditional Islamic schooling in Somalia; he married young and began working to support his growing family. Her mother did receive some formal schooling but left during her high school years to marry Amina's father and begin a family. Amina's mother would later attain a high school diploma in Ottawa when her children were teenagers. All three children attended and graduated from the University of Ottawa. Amina says that while her brothers worked on getting good jobs and building comfortable lives, she is someone who "dreamt big" from a young age. She remembers thinking "I really want to make an impact. Like, I want to be able to look back on my life and think that I helped people". With only a year and a half between them, and her grand aspirations, Amina's older brother was not able to provide the kind of mentorship and support that she was in search of.

With respect to her extended family, many of whom live in Ottawa, Amina describes their relationship as one of "limited contact when I compare it to other Somali people." Somali culture places a strong emphasis on kinship ties and community connections; children are rarely truly raised by single parents or even in strictly nuclear family units. Uncles, aunts, grandparents, and cousins are often involved in childrearing or provide regular childcare. Through the course of our conversations it becomes clear that this relationship with extended family reflects her mother's protective parenting style. While Amina's mother made it clear that she wanted the children to succeed academically, she was not overly involved in their academic lives ("no one was on top of our homework, no one was making sure shit was done, nothing like that"); she was, however, very involved with their social lives. Worried about losing her children to the negative influences of their low-income neighbourhood, Amina's mother closely regulated who the children spent their time with, often opting for them to spend time at home. As a result, school became the place where Amina would do the majority of her socializing. School was also a place where her curiosity and love of learning could thrive; she loved it from the very beginning. She attended a

small, socioeconomically and ethnically diverse elementary school and had friends from a variety of backgrounds. Social success, however, did not come as readily to Amina as her academic success. While Amina did have friends, she describes herself as a solitary, independent child. She recounted feeling uninterested in some of the things her peers did during recess and occasionally opting to spend time talking with her teachers. She detailed one such recess in the fourth grade as a turning point in her educational journey. While the other children played, Amina was walking the schoolyard with the supervising teacher when another student approached:

> …a student came up and asked something, like for a piece of advice on something, and I answered instead of [the teacher] and then the person went away… [the teacher] was like "you know, you're a really good kid" or something like that. I don't remember the exact words, but I was like "oh, this is good. I see what's happening here and I kind of like this and I want to be able to be remembered in this way."

In retelling her personal narrative, Amina sees this incident as the birth of a trait that she credits for school success: a desire to please adults. Throughout our interviews Amina highlights the ways in which she has benefitted from her approval seeking behaviours with teachers and school staff, but also defines it as the cause of great personal anguish.

> I knew that if I did certain things, I would get praise or just help along the way. And its actually kind of messed up when I think about it because, like, it's now something that I'm trying to unlearn

This tension between the utility of seeking adult approval and the personal cost emerges as one of the central themes in Amina's school history. This will be explored more fully in later sections.

This story captures the beginnings of Amina's development of navigational capital, which Yosso (2005) defines as "skills of maneuvering through social institutions" (p. 80). Amina is not told that winning the favour of her teachers will grant her the kind of success she is looking for but learns it through interactions such as this. Again and again in her K-12 schooling, Amina learns that relationships with authority are the most useful tool in navigating the school system. We also see in this interaction that Amina is keen to develop this kind of capital. She is a very driven individual and we will see her drive manifest in her commitment to deepening her navigational capital throughout her education journey.

When the time came to pick a high school, Amina had 2 main options in her catchment area: (1) Terry Fox Secondary School, a large school with mostly middle-class students and some ethnic and socioeconomic diversity or (2) Beacon Hill High School, a small school in her

neighbourhood where the majority of students were racialized ("Somali and Arab") and from low-income homes. Amina hoped to attend Terry Fox with most of her friends, but her mother insisted that she attend Beacon Hill. Several of Amina's cousins were attending Beacon Hill at the time and more would attend in the years to come. While they were not particularly close with these family members, her mother saw the cousins as a protective factor against the negative social influences that high school was sure to present. The nature of Beacon Hill presented two major tensions for Amina, one social and one strategic. As someone who had not grown up socializing with many other Somali kids, or even kids from her own neighbourhood, Amina felt that she was seen as an outsider. She had no shared history with the students who had largely grown up playing and learning together. Her struggles with Somali identity and connection to other Somalis continue to be a theme throughout our interviews and will be discussed in a later section. Although her time at Beacon Hill was marked with a level of social disconnection, Amina left high school with a close friend whom she describes as "just like a sister". Bethel, an East African girl from a Catholic family, shared Amina's cultural and faith-based values and was similarly ambitious in her long-term goals. Amina knew Bethel's family well and felt that they had always been supportive of the girls' dreams. At the time of our interviews, the two had been friends for 10 years.

The second issue that Beacon Hill presented for Amina was strategic in nature. Amina feared that she would not get the life opportunities that she wanted at a school with a predominantly poor, immigrant population from highly stigmatized neighbourhoods; she saw Beacon Hill as a place that had lower expectations for its students than she had for herself. Amina did not believe that the school could push her to the lengths that she desired, but she was determined to find a way to achieve her dreams in spite of it.

> I don't know if you've ever heard stories of people who've like "gotten out of the hood" [*air quotes*]. It's so stupid, but I actually think it's very similar to the way I thought then even before I'd heard these stories. ... It was 'I want more for my life than this, and **nobody's** [*emphatic*] going to give it to me, so I have to be doing X, Y, Z. I have to be involved in this, I have to be doing that' and I mean I generally loved what I was doing. I never did anything I didn't like but I was **always** [*emphatic*] looking at the bigger picture.

Amina's challenge with Beacon Hill demonstrates her aspirational capital. After she was unable to convince her mother to let her attend Terry Fox Secondary School, she found herself in a school that she believed would not give her what she needed to achieve her goals. Even in this situation, Amina is determined. This highlights an important aspect within Yosso's (2005) definition of aspirational capital: "the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, **even in the face of real and perceived barriers**" (p. 77). Amina maintains her commitment to her dreams and pushes herself in the face of the barrier that she perceives Beacon Hill to be, and the real barriers the school will pose as an under-resourced school serving an already marginalized population.

Much like she did in elementary school, Amina found an adult ally at Beacon Hill and describes it as "the best thing that could have ever happened" to her. The head of the guidance department, Ms. Raymond, took Amina on as a mentee. Ms. Raymond recommended Amina for countless extra-curricular programs and enrichment opportunities with organizations outside of the school. She attended conferences and participated in programs with students from schools across the city. University outreach programs were especially beneficial.

> …by the time I finished Grade 12, firstly this place [University of Ottawa] wasn't unusual to me and secondly, I just felt like I knew things. I felt like I knew how to navigate space in a way that I swear I would not have been able to before. I knew how to talk to adults; I knew how to talk to my professors.

Ms. Raymond also played a key role in addressing some of the social validation that Amina was missing from her peers.

> I think that prior to high school I struggled with confidence and just talking to people… I also knew I was smart with my peers, but I was like 'how do I show an adult that I was smart?' That's a different thing. So [Ms. Raymond] helped me with that just by very simple things, just talking to me, asking my opinion on stuff that I was like 'oh I don't have an opinion about this, but I'll think about it', you know? So, it was really helpful and then coming to conferences at U of O, I met other kids.

For Amina, attending Beacon Hill represented a closing of doors. She feared that the small school, with its predominantly poor, immigrant student body would have fewer academic and extra-curricular opportunities. She also worried about making new friends, as most of her middle school friends were attending Terry Fox Secondary School. As it turned out, the nature of the school also presented Amina with an opportunity. Where she may have had more competition at Terry Fox, Amina stood out as a "big fish in a little pond" while attending Beacon Hill. Amina

was always among the first to be selected for exclusive opportunities, like a trip to Newfoundland as part of a nation-wide youth program in her final year. Beacon Hill is not a place the Amina looks back upon fondly, in our conversations she reflected : “I don't think high school was the best years of my life, but I got a lot out of it, I got a lot of opportunities that a lot of people never have.”

Aside from the tangible experiences, one of Amina’s major lessons from her high school career was how to be a successful student. In the next section we will look at Amina’s process of constructing the student role before she entered university.

Amina’s relationship with Ms. Raymond offered her the opportunities that she needed to develop Yosso’s (2005) navigational capital. While it may not have been the teacher’s main objective, the exposure to various extracurricular activities and students from high performing schools gave Amina a window into the middle-class school expectations that she worried about missing by attending Beacon Hill.

Her time with Ms. Raymond itself is a clear example of social capital; that is, the relationship afforded Amina access to resources that she would not have otherwise had. This example of social capital is more in line with Bourdieu’s definition in which the benefit comes from a relationship with a more powerful/resourced individual.

Learning to be a Student

Academic success came easily to Amina. She was an intrinsically motivated student and her personality fit neatly within teachers’ behavioural expectations in the classroom: she completed her homework, sat still, raised her hand, and remained on task. Amina’s process of understanding the student role was more concerned with the intangible factors that led to success, chief among them was building relationships with authority. Throughout elementary and middle school, Amina worked tirelessly for her teachers’ approval.

> I don't think that I ever found that it materialized into anything useful [in elementary and middle school], I don't find that in those years I saw anything come out of it. But I found that because I was already this formed person who was already using these skills, um, networking skills in a way, at that age, by the time I got to high school I was like ‘whoa, I get stuff out of this!’

This realization was the beginning of Amina’s strategic approach to school success. Throughout high school and university, she was reflective and deliberate about her actions and decisions, each one filtered through the question of what it would mean with respect to her progress towards her goals.

> I would say that high school's when I started to see school as a game. I was like 'okay be nice to that person, do this for that person, be the golden child that everybody loves.' And I mean I do come off that way naturally, but it was definitely also an act because I wanted...people to like me. I wanted, when an opportunity came along, "I want Amina to do this, I trust Amina to do this". I always say I don't think high school was the best years of my life but I got a lot out of it, I got a lot of opportunities that a lot of people never have and I attribute that a lot to – yes doing well in my classes so that people could see that I was capable of doing things – but also just genuinely being liked by teachers. I feel like it paves the way for everything.

The teacher-pleasing behaviour Amina developed in elementary school continued into high school, but now with a clear intention and goal. She became an avid volunteer both in her school and in the community, earning more than 400 community service hours (10 times the amount required to receive her Ontario Secondary School Diploma). Within the school she joined clubs, served on the students' council, and voluntarily took on tasks that she knew others would find undesirable. Even when she was not actively involved in the planning of a school event, Amina would seek out the responsible teacher to offer her services for any tasks that needed doing. Where this kind of behaviour was once a bid to win validation, it was now a strategic act to build a reputation and good will for herself around the school.

> I did it because I knew I would get [volunteer] hours and I really wanted a certain amount of hours before I finished. But I also knew...like... this person might help me out a year from now. Some of them did, most of them didn't, but some of them did. Some people helped me in a really important ways, especially at the end.

Amina goes on to elaborate that the help "at the end" was in reference to a teacher who excused her from a summative project in her final year of high school. Amina won an award from a national organization that included a trip to Newfoundland; the trip would cause her to miss a large summative project in one of her classes. She planned to work on the project throughout her trip, during evening breaks and in transit. When she approached the teacher with her plan, he simply excused her from the course requirement.

> He just said, "forget it, you literally have an A in this class already, don't even worry about it, I want you to enjoy it when you're there." Like I don't think you could ever have a teacher say something like that to you if you weren't like...I don't know, you have to be able to give a lot to be able to get that kind of respect and like trust from teachers

Amina's strategic approach to school is a journey of developing navigational capital and her relationship with teachers is a key feature of this capital. Because they function as gatekeepers, a student's relationship with their teachers has an outsized effect on their potential success in school. This is especially true for Black students, whose most consistently reported challenges in Ontario schools (streaming, low expectations, disproportionate discipline) are related to the ways in which teachers relate to them. Amina's positive relationships with teachers make her navigation of the school system easier. Throughout her narrative we see how deeply she understands this and invests in these relationships with the intention of benefitting from them at a later time.

The trip to Newfoundland was significant for Amina in other ways as well. Her fellow award winners came from schools across Canada, giving Amina a glimpse into the lives of high achievers from diverse communities. Being among these students also highlighted the limits of her own school and confirmed her suspicion that Beacon Hill was not a rigorous enough environment. As a result of this experience and others like it in which Amina was able to mingle with other students who were labelled exceptional by their respective schools, she concluded that being the smartest of her Beacon Hill peers was not a high enough standard. Amina described the impact of these other students on her thinking.

> There were other kids who went to the International Baccalaureate program and I wasn't in any sort of program like that, but it was interesting to talk to a kid where I was like 'this person's really intelligent, I need to step my game up'. So anyway, all of these things, just being exposed to different people, it was helpful for me.

The trip was one of many extracurricular opportunities that Amina gained access to through her relationship with the guidance counselor, Ms. Raymond. According to Amina, Ms. Raymond recommended her for any opportunity that came across the counselor's desk. Amina credits this relationship and the experiences it resulted in most strongly for her university success. By the time she was enrolled at the University of Ottawa, she had visited the school so many times that she was comfortable with the campus. Her extra-curricular experiences and relationship with Ms. Raymond also provided her with a set of soft skills that would be necessary for her university success; namely, an ability and comfort communicating with adults.

> I just felt like I knew things. I felt like I knew how to navigate spaces in a way that, like, I swear I would not have been able to before. I knew how to talk to adults; I knew how to like talk to my professors. I always went to office hours and I truly believe it was because I developed a really good relationship with someone who is significantly older than me and smarter than me and I was like 'hey, I can carry on a conversation, I can do this.'

Communicating with professors is one of the most oft-cited areas of weakness and struggle in the literature on first-generation students (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Lehman, 2009; Soria 2012; Stuber, 2011). Much of the advantage that traditional, middle-class students have in this area is a result of their access to professional adults by way of their parents' social networks. They have generally spent more time speaking with university educated adults and learning the social mores of the group that their lower-class peers; middle-class parents are also better positioned to advise their children on how to approach professors once they are in university. Parents with more social capital may also have modeled effective ways of communicating with schools and authority figures during a child's K-12 education. In all, there are many ways in which traditional, middle-class students would have easy/passive access to the kind of soft skills that Amina had to acquire through a set of intentional and deliberate circumstances.

As an overachiever in a small school with a large proportion of English Language Learners and students from marginalized communities, Amina was given opportunities that granted her access to a world outside of her school and communities. While her scholastic drive and work habits were of her own making, Amina's relationship with Ms. Raymond was instrumental in developing the soft skills that would facilitate her university success. After years of dedication, Amina could be described as a model student. Her path to mastering this student role, however, was complicated along the way by her race, ethnicity, and religion.

Being A Student While Black, Somali and Visibly Muslim

Amina's social position in school created some unique tensions. Her behaviour made her the type of student that was favoured by teachers, but her belonging to various marginalized communities meant that she also faced prejudice in the school system. Concurrently, Amina's positive standing with authorities in the school exacerbated the struggle she was already experiencing in relating to her Somali peers, who were often not afforded the goodwill that she was. It also did not help that she was often the only Somali student in the various school initiatives she was involved in – though given the nature of her school population there were always other students of colour.

> I think it was the relationship with teachers that caused problems sometimes, like people were just like 'oh, Amina gets this and that' and I feel like it came from a point of feeling like there wasn't an equal distribution of resources, opportunities, that kind of thing. And

> I can recognize that, that I was kind of maybe tokenized. They were just like ‘oh let's bring her as the token person’ and I benefited from that, but at the same time I noticed that a lot of the students that were even somewhat interested in doing these things, couldn't commit to it. They cared about their image and they just didn't follow through. Like, I was a consistent person, that''s why. If someone asked me to do something, they could rely on me. If someone asked me to go to an event on the weekend, they didn't think I was going to flake last minute. There was an understanding, whereas I feel with some people it was just like ‘oh, why do you get these things?’

There is a lot to unpack in this quote; let us begin by discussing image and commitment. While Amina had spoken about struggles making many friends in elementary school, a new challenge in connecting with her peers emerges as she grows older. In high school, aloofness becomes a part of being cool and Amina’s zeal for achievement is seen as a negative quality. To her peers, she cared too much and tried too hard. The same attributes that were such an asset in her relationships with adults were a discredit in the social realm. “They cared about their image and they just didn’t follow through” speaks volumes about how Amina understood the relationship between her (approval-seeking) behaviour and its impact on her social standing. Yet Amina persisted in her zealous approach to school success and pleasing teachers with the knowledge that it would hurt her social standing. She persisted not only because of the depth of her commitment to making it out of the neighbourhood, but because of a series of negative experiences that she had in her early years of schooling. During elementary school, Amina both experienced and witnessed incidents of prejudice by teachers against Black, Somali and Muslim students, as well as observing a double standard in the way rules were enforced amongst her peers. These experiences taught Amina that average behaviour would not be enough to succeed in school, or even to be treated fairly. For someone with her identity, the only alternative she saw to teacher favouritism was punishment.

> I had a couple of experiences in elementary school where I still remember to this day that I felt less than, and I felt like it had to do with the fact that I was Black, Muslim, whatever. And so, I was like ok… I was a good kid and if I’m not being accepted by this person and I’m doing all of this stuff – I’m trying – I’m like okay…it has to be because I’m Muslim, it has to be because I’m Black. Like there’s no other reason because I’m better than that kid. That’s how I thought at the time.

While her personality may have been the genesis of her teacher-pleasing tendencies, her experiences with prejudice from teachers served to fortify the tendencies into habits. Amina

shared a few small anecdotes throughout our interviews, but the most impactful incident she recounted was one involving as student teacher.

> In sixth grade I had a teacher which I got along with so well, it was like probably one of my favourite teachers up until this incident. And she had a student teacher for a while, and [the student teacher] was just treating me very weird. I was just very uncomfortable, she was rude to me, she was just generally very unkind towards me and, you know there are teachers who are just like that and they have that air but they're like that with everyone, but I felt like it was targeted at me. And because I was so close to this teacher I thought I would tell her – and I think that even if a kid comes to you…anyway I'll tell you what happened – so basically I came to her during recess and I told her 'Miss Whatever, this student teacher is just making me feel very uncomfortable. She did this, she said that. I feel like there's something wrong here.' And then her response was essentially, not essentially, exactly: 'do you think I would believe you over her?' And it was shocking to me. I had never, ever, ever in my life experienced anything like that. It's literally probably the most vivid memory to date that I have where I thought: oh my gosh, this is someone I got along with and for whatever reason they…I don't know…they had an impression of me that maybe always existed, that has nothing to do with the way that I've treated them or the way I've just participated. It was so from left field. And she never apologized, she never addressed it again, like it was just the most weird thing that I have ever experienced and I probably from that point was like, okay I cried about it and then I was like 'step it up, girl!' I didn't think of it as 'this girl has a problem', I thought of it as 'you have to recognize, Amina, that this is the way people are viewing you when they meet you, and sometimes it doesn't go away and sometimes you have to put in X amount of effort to be accepted by people.' And I think that's where it goes back to the whole people pleasing thing, I think it always existed but then after that incident I was just like, you know...

Up until this interaction Amina believed that hard work and rule following were enough to win the approval and favour of authority figures; her treatment at the hands of the student teacher and the lack of support from her own teacher were a direct attack on the assumption that underlined her people-pleasing. In this experience Amina learned that her race and religion – things that had nothing to do with her actual behaviour – could place her at a deficit in the eyes of some adults. Where other students may have balked at the realization and reevaluated their strategy, Amina's resolve was strengthened. On its face, her renewed commitment to people-pleasing is an unexpected reaction to such a powerfully negative experience, but as she recounted further experiences of discrimination in school Amina made her rationale clear.

In the seventh grade, the year after the student teacher incident, Amina was sent to the office when she responded to the insults of another classmate. A White student called Amina an expletive and she responded in kind, but only Amina was sent to the office. While in the office, a

former teacher saw her and remarked to a colleague that he was very disappointed in her. The teacher hadn't spoken to her, but Amina overheard his comment from where she sat. Again, an adult with whom Amina had a strong relationship quickly sided against her when she had been attacked. After relaying the events, Amina reflected on how this incident and others like it affected her outlook.

> I feel like I've heard many stories like this from other Black students, where it was just like, they were never even given a shot, right? Fortunately for me, I was just someone who was determined to – and maybe not fortunate for me because its an actual issue that I have to overcome, which is like 'stop caring about what all of these people think. Like, you have to place value on yourself and it needs to be internal as opposed to constantly seeking external validation', which I feel like I have always been doing. But yeah, I feel like being Somali and also, I was wearing hijab at the time, so I feel like being Muslim has made me feel like I can't mess up. ... I am going to the office and I'm not going to come back from that. You know what I mean? I'll never recover, they'll never see me as a good kid, they'll never see me as a kid worth helping. I was so concerned with that. I was always super concerned with my image, especially how adults viewed me, that I was run by that for a very, very long time. And someone viewing it from the outside sees it as success, but it's caused me a lot of mental anguish and issues with respect to how I deal with other human beings that I don't really see it as success. Like, I wish I could have done this without the constant stress.

A set of behaviours that were born of a desire to be regarded positively were now perpetuated by something darker. Amina's people-pleasing was now the product of an ultimatum presented by her experiences and those she witnessed in racialized peers: please adults or be written off as unworthy. Given her perceived options, the choice was clear, she doubled down on people-pleasing.

When confronted with the reality of bias and double standards in her schooling, Amina's choice to bear these forces is a demonstration of academic invulnerability. Building from the work of earlier scholars studying the lives of Mexican-American children, Yosso (2005) presents academic invulnerability as a subset of navigational capital. To be academically invulnerable is to maintain high levels of achievement despite experiencing acute stressful events or persistent life circumstances that may lead others to do poorly in school or drop out.

Tensions with Somali Identity

The threat of being deemed unworthy was strengthened as Amina became aware of the negative perception of Somalis in the Canadian imagination. In the media, Amina saw Somalis portrayed as a community plagued with gang activity and gun violence; she felt that portrayal

affected the ways in which her teachers saw Somali students. She noticed that the neighbourhoods and classrooms label "bad" were those with large numbers of Somalis and Arabs. Amina came to understand herself as part of a "targeted community". It is interesting to note that while she struggled to feel accepted by the community itself, Amina understands that where external forces are concerned, she belongs firmly within the Somali community.

As mentioned in an earlier section, Amina did not feel meaningfully connected to the Somali community as a young child. She described feelings of unease and struggles to belong throughout her life, and high school was no exception. She did not strongly identify as Somali at the time. Amina felt most comfortable in her identity as a Muslim, despite being a high school student during the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the political and social aftermath,.

> I felt like the Muslim identity was really big then as well. Because it was like, I could never be Somali enough… but as a hijabi it was obvious that I was Muslim so that was an identity that I felt like was a big part of the way I viewed myself and also how other people viewed me, right?

The question of being "Somali enough" was one of her major challenges in high school, because of the large Somali population at Beacon Hill.

> I found the problem with Beacon Hill was that...um...uh...I don't know, I just felt like I never fit in with those kids. I've always been a Somali person where I was like – and literally this just happened a couple of days ago and I'm like come on, let's move past this, like it's not even funny or interesting anymore – I went to the Somali Festival and then I saw someone I knew and they're like 'I'm surprised you're here' and I'm like '**why?**' [*emphatic*]. It's just stupid, it's the whole 'you're not Somali enough' thing and I'm like, I came here because it's the first year of the festival and I want to be supportive of my community – community that, by the way, has never been accepting towards me. But still I am Somali, I identify as a Somali person, I **care** [*emphatic*] about this community and I care about a lot of the issues in this community and I find that I'm always trying to be helpful in whatever way that I can. I'm also a very busy person, but I find that it's like 'well you're never at this, or you're never at that'. I'm never at anything! I'm not **choosing** [*emphatic*] other events over Somali events, I'm just not a very, like, catch-me-here, catch-me-there person, right? So, yeah, Beacon Hill was difficult for those reasons. And I found that for anyone who was Somali who wasn't the 'typical Somali' – I even hate using that term – you didn't fit in, you always had trouble.

Connecting with her peers had never been something that came easily to Amina, but it was not something that caused her much grief in her younger years. She maintained a few friendships but directed her social efforts largely towards relationships with teachers. In the

narrative that Amina tells about the social sphere of her life, her early years are a time of introversion and comfort being alone or spending time with her best friend Bethel, but high school is a chapter of disconnection tied closely to her struggle with Somali identity. This struggle is evident in her use of the term "typical Somali". Amina is hesitant to use the term and finds the definition troubling, but the archetype is a social reality that she acknowledges. Where she describes the stereotype of Somalis in media to be primary concerned with criminality, the 'typical Somali' archetype that she grappled with personally was a social construction understood by her and her peers. Although she does not believe it to be a true or accurate representation of Somaliness, Amina says the social archetype produced a set of behaviours and ways of being that she was judged against. I asked her to describe the typical Somali, as she understood it.

> …so the typical Somali is someone who...is from the hood and is proud of it, like the way that they talk, the way that they walk, the way that they…the things that they are interested in doing...um...even if they have aspirations, don't say it. Like, they're not explicit about it, it's never like "I want to be a this, I want to be a that" you kind of have to keep it under wraps. I don't know, sometimes it's just like a charicatuer of a human being, it's not a real person ... I think the typical Somali is just someone who is...I don't know...like, just like adopting also an African American culture which is also very limiting, because it's not really what being African American is.

Even as she struggled to clearly articulate the boundaries of the "typical Somali", the impact of the archetype in her social life was very tangible. She experienced a level of isolation from her Somali peers and does not mention any Somali friends throughout the entirety of our conversations. Amina said that her disconnection from her Somali peers was exacerbated by the fact that she did not see them outside of school. She did not ride the bus or walk home with the other Somali kids because her parents picked her up as soon as the school day was over, and she did not spend time hanging out in the neighbourhood with them (or anyone for that matter). She spoke differently, she didn't know their jokes or norms. Amina's social circle consisted of the students with whom she volunteered – spaces in which she was often the only Somali. She states later in our interviews that, Somaliness aside, she didn't feel that she had much in common with many of her peers from that time and has barely kept in touch with any since. Placing her relationship with her Somali peers in the larger context of her general relationships, while unique in its personal significance, her challenges connecting with other Somalis peers make sense within the larger struggle of making friends at Beacon Hill Secondary School.

Amina's story of her time in K-12 schools exemplifies the findings of Forman (2001) as well as his distinction between belonging and fitting in. Where he frames belonging as a function of a student's alignment with the institution's goals and agendas, and fitting in is a function of peer relationships, it can be said that Amina both *belonged* in high school and struggled to *fit in*. This tension is also consistent with Forman's (2001) findings that as Somali students who belonged received greater attention from teachers and administration they began to be ostracized or marginalized from their peers and personally struggled with the pressures of being held up as the "good" Somalis.

Perhaps because of the preference-punishment ultimatum that she found in her schooling experiences, these challenges with her peers did not affect Amina's construction of or performance the student role in high school. By the end of her high school career, Amina's academic success and extracurricular experiences left her feeling ready and confident to attend university. As stated earlier, she had been to the University of Ottawa campus so often already that she found it comfortable and familiar when she arrived in her first year as a student. She had mastered the student role at the K-12 level, she was ready and eager to take it on at the post-secondary level.

Learning to be a University Student

> I was always told that I was capable, I didn't have the same kinds of experiences I know some of my friends did where they got negative ideas of what they were capable of doing, that wasn't really my experience and that's why I went to university.

Amina had always expected to go to university. As the "golden child" of her class at Beacon Hill, college or vocational training were never presented to her as viable options. In fact, by the end of high school she was already making plans to go to law school. With respect to her academic life, Amina found the transition to university to be very smooth. In fact, when asked "what does being a successful undergraduate student look like to you?", Amina responded confidently: "it's actually very easy to be successful in undergrad. Like, I could write a book and be like 'if you follow these tips, you will do well'."

When asked to expound on these tips, Amina presented a clear set of advice. She attributes her success in undergraduate studies to three main behaviours: (1) treating school like a job; (2) reviewing every exam; (3) making strategic friendships.

Behaviour 1: Treating school like a job

Scholarships gave Amina the opportunity complete her undergraduate degree without needing a job, which she described as a privilege. This meant that she could behave as if her university courses were her full-time job. Regardless of her daily class schedule, Amina would arrive to campus between 7 and 8 o'clock each morning. She met her best friend Bethel in the library and together they began their day's work. The two would work until their respective classes and return back to their meeting place afterward; they would break for lunch and other tasks but continued working until the afternoon or evening. Having each other for support and company, even when they worked independently, made the schedule easy to maintain and created accountability. Amina sees this level of discipline as necessary to succeed in university, so much so that she would advise prospective students who are unable to commit to this schedule to consider enrolling part-time.

> You have to do that, honestly, you have to treat it as a job. If you have that ability, treat it as a job. If you have an actual job, make sure it is not taking over to the best of your ability, like try and make it so that it gives you an opportunity to really learn. If you can't do that then go to school part-time, because the thing I've noticed is that you can't get rid of bad grades, it's just very, very difficult and if you're certain that you're going to go into an academic space one day unfortunately that's just one of the things.

Behaviour 2: Reviewing Exams

> The second thing – and no one believes me when I say this – I, in undergrad, I reviewed every single exam [and] midterm I ever had. Every single one. I would get the exam back, I'd look at it myself, I'd go to the office hours, I'd have it reviewed.

Amina did not explain when or how she developed this habit of reviewing exams but sees it as a key strategy for anyone who takes their education seriously. The practice, she explained, was helpful because it gave her specific feedback to improve her understanding. Amina was able to identify the particular concepts that she misunderstood and correct her understanding for future assessments or courses. In addition, there was the possibility of identifying a calculation error in the assessment.

> Second thing, you're catching a lot of mistakes, a lot of miscalculations. People don't understand there are a lot of math errors, like someone just not doing the math right. A lot of times I would go in and be like 'this is 50, not 45' and it's like 'Oh, sorry'. Change. Now you're at an A, you were at a B+ before. You have to take your education seriously, again, if this matters to you.

Here we see both Amina's general commitment to learning and her knack for strategic thinking. Strategic thinking was not simply limited to the academic sphere of her life, Amina approached her social life in university in a similar frame of mind.

Behaviour 3: Making Strategic Friendships

> I find that on top of every other thing, this is a crucial element: having someone in your program who is also academically oriented and wants to succeed and is also open. That's so important because you just get different insights that you wouldn't get otherwise, and you can't speak to someone outside the program because they just don't get it, right?

Amina invested a great deal of energy in forming and maintaining relationships with the adults in her K-12 schooling; forming relationships with peers was not something that she identified as strategically beneficial at that stage. In university, however, she came to see peer relationships as crucial. For example, she credits her friend Bethel as a major reason that she was able to maintain her rigorous study schedule, Bethel was also her partner in founding a few extracurricular projects in their undergraduate years. Although their friendship was academically beneficial, Amina makes it clear that her relationship with Bethel was never a strategic one. The combination of their deep personal connection and sharing the same academic goals made Bethel Amina's "rock" throughout their educational careers.

It was important to Amina that any new friends she made were people who shared her commitment to academic success; these kinds of friends could not only provide personal support and companionship but could tangibly support her in achieving her goals. She told me about one such relationship with a new friend in her undergraduate years.

> And then my best friend in undergrad, aside from Bethel was this guy who I did my criminology degree with. He also went to law school, he's practicing now, and he was the best. It was just great (a) to have a male friendship what wasn't weird and (b) he actually helped me at times, and I helped him whenever needed. ... He was helpful because he was in my program, we had the same goal and he was also just a good person, he was one of the people that I called when I was struggling financially in law school. And he was like 'how much do you need?' He was someone who would have wired me money. I didn't take it ... but just good energy and someone who knew how to play the game too. I remember once we went over our exams together – also very few people let you see their exams. ... So, we were at a level where we were like 'we both want A^{+}s, correct? Ok, let me see your exam.' ... It was nice to have someone to go through it together.

This young man, like Bethel, was dear to Amina because he was a companion to her in both the personal and academic spheres of her life. They were good friends not only for the emotional connection and support they provided, but because they could and did help her achieve her goals. Amina's dedication to her goals – academic success, becoming a lawyer, economic advancement – was the organizing principle of her school life and personal commitments, social or otherwise. Given her struggles with peer relationships in her K-12 years, it is worthwhile to examine how her experiences and thoughts around the issue evolved in university.

In this section we see the depth of Amina's navigational capital: she has not only developed this kind of capital but understands it to the extent that she can summarize her knowledge in 3 main ideas.
The two main peer relationships in her undergraduate years demonstrate an employment the kind of social capital that Yosso (2005) writes about. These relationships exist within communities of colour and provide material, navigational and emotional support to successfully make it through an institution in which they are the minority.

Relationships with Peers

> Bethel says there shouldn't be anyone in your life who you can't benefit from and who you can't benefit. It needs to be that way otherwise I don't see the point in it, but again I have to say that underlying it is always love. It's people who are good people. I don't care if you can help me if you're awful and I feel uncomfortable asking you questions or whatever. You need to be someone who I'm comfortable saying 'I got a D in this class, what do I do?' and there's not a lot of people who I feel comfortable exposing bad grades to. So, it needs to be someone that is fairly kind and wants to help, and its always mutual. I find that anyone who has been able to help me, I have always been able to help them. So that's what I would say strategic friends are.

Amina's approach to forming peer relationships shifted from an externally focussed process during high school into an internally focussed process in university. The primary issue at the heart of her early peer relations was whether or not Amina fit in with those around her. Did they get along, what did others think of her, was she "Somali enough"? During her undergraduate years, Amina began to ask herself whether or not the peers fit with her own standards. More pointedly, she questioned potential relationships' utility in her life. She considers whether or not a relationship would be worth the dedication of her precious and limited time. Amina tells me that she made very few friends during her undergraduate degree; she says that the young man who became her law school colleague was, in fact, the only close friendship formed during that time. In this new phase of life, she attributes her small friend circle to a busy schedule: her long,

structured days at the library with Bethel and her commitment to a few demanding extracurricular clubs. Aside from the other members of those clubs, Amina says that she did not have time to socialize and does not remember attending any parties. At present, Bethel and her law school colleague are the only peers from that time that she is still in touch with.

Knowledge Gaps

When asked plainly how to be successful in university, Amina was able to provide a clear set of behaviours that were the foundation of her success. Given the clear articulation one could assume that university success came easily to Amina, but this was not entirely the case. While her academic and extra-curricular success in high school made her feel prepared to enter university, when she arrived she was shocked by how much her peers from more affluent families knew about navigating the university space – from administrative rules and jargon to larger issues about the professional fields they were preparing for. Amina's rules and methods for succeeding were bound by her prior knowledge of university, law school, and the professional life of lawyers – all of which she had pieced together on her own. While her hard work and determination allowed her to accomplish her goal of getting into law school at the end of her undergraduate degree, she grappled with a deep sense of injustice when she saw how much harder she seemed to be working than her peers. In this section we will explore the challenges that Amina experienced as a result of her gaps in knowledge.

> There was a lot of stuff [about university] that I did not know to ask. ... You have to spoon-feed people. I learned through trial and error, but I don't think the next person should have to learn through trial and error. Learn from my mistakes, and whenever I talk to students. ... I tell them what I told you [about the behaviours that led to my success].

Much of what Amina learned about university success she discovered on her own. She speaks convincingly about the personal actions necessary to be a university student because she has dedicated a great deal of time and reflection to figuring them out. In order to understand how much of her student role knowledge came from those around her, I asked Amina about the ways in which her family and school prepared her for university. With respect to her family, Amina did not remember any conversations with her parents about university preparedness or the particulars of the application process. She and her father did experience some conflict about her pursuing law as opposed to medicine, but that was a discussion about their respective values.

When asked how well Beacon Hill prepared for university, Amina lamented that her transition out of high school and into university was full of "unknown unknowns". In this case, she was referring to the application process and administrivia she would face in her first year. Amina had not been given any instruction at home on what to inquire about and so she asked any question that occurred to her throughout the transition and trusted that the adults around her had provided the rest of the pertinent information. From the beginning of her undergraduate experience, however, Amina felt as though she was missing much of the basic information that her peers possessed. Her high school teachers were not as helpful as they could have been because, she says, much of the information she did not have was "so elementary" that they didn't think it was worth mentioning. Her teachers must have assumed that this was information that students would be getting at home, Amina offered. I asked what this elementary information was and Amina provided two examples.

> First and foremost: I didn't know what a CGPA was when I got here. That alone would have changed my life. And why that needs to be told is because in high school you are told that you can essentially mess up until Grade 12 and you can do really well in your final year and you can get into pretty much any program you want. And you can. [In university], you can't run away from a single class, it's all calculated. And the fact that law school was always the dream for me, when I realized that I had already kind of had a couple of classes under my belt that were bringing me down – and again, this is me being a good student but just took a class that I just didn't do well in because the content was hard and the teaching style and you're learning so many things at the same time – that was frustrating. And when I found that out it was random. I was just in the hallway and someone was talking about it and I'm like 'hey' – and I didn't even know this person – 'what's that?' And they're like, you know 'blah blah blah'. And I'm like 'What?' So that was messed up.

Amina entered university unaware of the concept of a cumulative grade point average (CGPA) and its importance in qualifying for graduate studies. She did not remember any adult along her educational journey giving her that information or even communicating that her grades in the early years of university would be important later on. When she struggled in a few courses and earned grades that were below her standard, she did not know that she could have dropped the courses early enough to have them removed from her CGPA calculations. To her recollection, no one in the university had communicated with her about grade point averages either, she came by the information accidentally. Amina shared this story as an example of the deeply unfair position that first-generation students are in when compared to their peers with parents who have

attended university. Missing this key information, she said, can cost first-generation students years of their lives and thousands of dollars to correct.

The potential to waste time and money comes up again in Amina's second example of overlooked, elementary information.

> This is something that my friend noticed: what the school knows to be full-time and what some programs consider full-time is very different. So [for] the school it's 4 classes [per semester] and the fifth is essentially free, that makes up your full course load. But a lot of other programs, like I think medicine is one of them, full-time is 5 classes, it doesn't matter what your school says is full-time. It's just making those connections for students because once you've made that mistake you've had a year where you're doing 4 and 4, that year is useless for a lot of programs. Now you have to do another year, it's just, it's a waste of time. Like, if you have a parent that is a professional that has gone through these programs, they can tell you 'make sure you're doing 5 and 5.' Those are 2 example of things that I didn't know.

Amina identified two crucial pieces of information that produced tangible effects on her life and the lives of other first-generation students. It is notable that these are pieces of administrative information. When Amina discusses experiences of unpreparedness throughout our interviews, she is most often speaking about missing concrete information; misunderstandings or gaps that could have been remedied with some kind of explicit explanation. She does not speak about norms, expectations, and strategies for navigating the university space. As discussed earlier, she felt that the relationship with Ms. Raymond and all of the extra-curricular opportunities set her up to succeed in this regard. It is interesting that Amina did not mention something like "understanding rules and regulations" in her advice to other students on university success, although she identified that as a major area of challenge for herself and other first-generation students.

The distinction that emerges above between the behaviours/norms and the administrative knowledge illustrates a distinction made by Collier and Morgan (2008) in their description of the student role. In their understanding of the knowledge that informs one's construction of the student role, Collier and Morgan (2008) describe knowledge as falling into two categories: implicit and explicit. Through her exposure to university spaces during high school, Amina developed a fairly strong grasp of the implicit knowledge (or norms) of the university space, but the explicit knowledge that she was missing was seemingly so basic that the adults in her school did not address it.

Amina also identified her gaps in explicit knowledge when discussing her decision to become a lawyer.

> I never met a lawyer until after I got my acceptance, which is really problematic. A lot of things I realize now is like I would have known X, Y, Z if I had spoken to someone in the profession, even shadowed someone to see what it was really like to be a lawyer. It's not 50/50 clients and research, it's almost entirely sitting at your desk and doing stuff like that, especially in your early years. So, I would have benefitted from someone just actually telling [me] 'let me tell you, you're actually just sitting longer than you think you are'.

Amina did not have any relationships with adult professionals outside of her teachers and had no contact with actual lawyers. She states in our interview that her decision to pursue law was initially because she was looking for a "prestige career". Looking back, Amina identifies the gaps in her explicit knowledge as a consistent source of pain and frustration in her educational journey and personal life. In a coming section (*The Cost of Success*) I will discuss the emotional impact of these gaps and the toll that Amina has seen on her wellbeing. Motivated by a desire to help other first-generation students avoid her struggles, Amina and her friend Bethel developed a program to mentor and support high school students who would be the first in their family to attend university.

Amina and Bethel designed the First Steps program to pass on the kind of explicit knowledge that they thought would have been helpful to them before entering university. The program served high achieving, first-generation students and offered them concrete advice about academic success and general information about life in university. She described her motivations and intentions for the program as follows:

> First Steps was the one thing that wasn't strategic in my entire life. It's the one thing I did because I was truly passionate about it and, like, I just can't stand unfairness. And nobody looks at an application and thinks 'well, this kid was first-generation.' They are comparing you against other kids who've had access to all of these different things and it's not fair. It's not fair, but we can't change that so let's change it from the beginning – which is 'how do I get this kid an A in this class? How do I make this kid into an A student?' And they want to be A students, they are in high school, they just need the tools to continue that.

While she could not make up for the time that she lost due to missing information, Amina worked to pass that information along to others in a similar position. Throughout her educational career Amina contended with the fact that various forms of injustice mean that her particular

social positions/identities could negatively affect her life outcomes. She saw, from a young age, that individuals from her communities did not often have the kinds of life outcomes that she wanted for herself; she saw the ways that Somalis and other Black, immigrant, and Muslim communities were marginalized. Amina was intent on making more of her life than these unjust forces would easily allow, and she worked throughout high school – in fact, even before high school in her attempts not to attend Beacon Hill – to close whatever gaps may exist between her and her more privileged peers. For all of her work and planning, she did not anticipate the gaps in explicit knowledge that would have such a large impact on her. She understood that race, ethnicity, and class could create inequalities that would need to be compensated for, but she did not know that generational student status was axis along which inequality existed.

The First Steps program is another example of the overlapping nature of Yosso's (2005) categories of capital, in that it can be understood as a demonstration of resistant and social. With respect to social capital, at the heart of the First Steps program is the idea of *lifting as you climb* – the concept that Yosso uses to distinguish social capital in communities of colour from Bourdieu's conceptualization. The program is a clear example of Amina becoming a source of social capital for others for her community – here defined as first-generation university from Beacon Hill High School. Also in line with Yosso's conceptualization of social capital as opposed to Bourdieu's is that the program's stated purpose is to bring knowledge of how to navigate a mainstream institution back to a marginalized community via one of its own members.

We also see resistant capital – the capital formed through resisting inequity. This is most obviously exemplified in Amina's statement: "It's the one thing I did because I was truly passionate about it and, like, I just can't stand unfairness." While it is easy to see the ways in which rebelling against or working to dismantle an institution is a form of resistance, preparing marginalized individuals to successfully inhabit a mainstream institution can be understood as a form of resistance as well. Yosso (2005) highlights the work of Solorzano and Bernal (2001) who sort resistant behaviour into 4 categories: reactionary behaviour, self-defeating resistance, conformist resistance, and transformative resistance. In creating a program to train other first-generation students to better compete in the university world, First Steps takes a conformist approach. Conformist resistance includes works that "strive towards social justice within the existing social systems and social conventions" (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001, p. 318) but do not seek to challenge the systems and conventions themselves. As she moves into law school, we will see a shift in Amina's thinking away from this kind of conformist resistance and a critique of the conventions of the university space itself.

By most measures, one can confidently state that Amina successfully mastered the student role in both high school and university. She left Beacon Hill with multiple accolades; she earned a large scholarship in her second year of university that would free her from working for 3 years; she established at least 2 clubs/organizations during her undergraduate career; and finally, she was admitted into law school. Amina's story can be told as one of triumph over daunting odds, a testament to the potential for social mobility in multicultural society. From the inside, however, she does not see it as neatly. Amina's mastery of the student role was not only hard won but came at what she describes as a great personal cost. In the next section I will explore the ways in which performing and mastering the student role have impacted Amina's personal life and wellbeing.

The Cost of Success: *Was It Worth It?*

> Someone viewing it from the outside sees it as success, but it's caused me a lot of mental anguish and issues with respect to how I deal with other human beings that I don't really see it as success. Like, I wish I could have done this without the constant stress.

Amina's story is, on its face, one of incredible success. She is a law student from the most unlikely beginnings: the daughter of parents who did not complete their formal education; raised in her formative years by a single mother who came to Canada as a refugee with 3 children; graduating from a small high school with a largely poor, immigrant student body. This story, however, is told from the perspective of an observer. The story Amina tells from the inside is not as neat.

At some point in her university career Amina came across research literature that presented the challenges of first-generation university students. Discovering the concept of a "first-generation student" and the findings of the research were a pivotal experience for Amina. Similar to earlier awakenings as to what her race, religion and class meant for her school experience, the literature on first-generation students put Amina's current struggle into focus. There was a reason why her peers seemed to know so much more about university life than she did, even as she outworked so many of them. It was not simply a matter of their being White or middle-class, it was about generational knowledge; this is the gap that Amina had been feeling between herself and her peers. Along with Black, Somali, and Woman, Amina now came to identify as a first-generation student.

Her first-generation identity became a framework within which Amina could better understand her path to university and the difficulty she had faced upon arrival. Throughout our

conversations, Amina frequently used the term *unfair* when describing her experience in school and the decisions that she made in pursuit of success. Initially, this seemed to be a contradiction to her assertion that "it's actually very easy to be successful in undergrad." The unfairness emerged for Amina when she viewed her school journey in relation to those of her peers. Ideas around generational knowledge and the benefits it bestowed on her peers gave Amina a means to unpack the discrepancies.

Amina identified decision-making as the primary site at which unfairness could be seen.

> If I came from a different background that gave me access to a lot of things, I wouldn't have to be strategic. I remember hearing someone say something like 'first-generation students don't have the privilege to follow their passions all of the time, that's something that is more afforded to their children.' And that's the thing, even though I think that a lot of the ways that I have approached these things have been sort of unhealthy at times, I've always felt like I had no other option, I always felt like I had to do something to get noticed, whether it be good grades or getting involved in the community. And I've never ever done any thing that I genuinely hated, but I feel like to be successful sometimes you are doing stuff that you don't always enjoy, but I enjoy the end result. ... It's what I've felt I had to do.

For Amina, success would only be available to her if she made a narrow range of decision; she understood the same to be true for other first-generation students. Amina recognized this kind unfairness throughout her schooling in the double standards for her behaviour and that of her White peers. In elementary school, she decided not to act out or express her negative emotions for fear that it would lead to stigmatization. She decided to do whatever it took in high school to gain access to extracurricular opportunities, regardless of whether or not those were things that she wanted to do. Amina decided to make these sacrifices and compromises because she understood them as necessary in the pursuit of her goals. Seeing the lives of her privileged peers offered a new perspective on the decisions she had made in order to succeed in school.

> I just never wanted to be left behind and I feel like that forces you to abandon a lot of dreams – dreams you might not have even considered because you're just trying to move to the next thing. ... It's unfair when a lot of these other kids who have the privilege of being born with white skin, who have the privilege of being in a society that values their faith background [or] non-faith background can just get by. Like, there are people who were not trying as hard as me and were doing alright and are just as fine today. I had to do more than that and do damaging things to myself on a psyche kind of level to get to the same place, and that's not fair. And I'm not going to look at some kids in high school now and say 'be like me' because I don't think that that's the answer either.

Amina's success in high school was a result of outworking her peers and adhering to a strict set of behavioural norms defined by the limits of adult approval and praise. She was calculated and strategic in all of the curricular and extra-curricular choices she made, and even considered potential friendships through the lens of school success. During high school she had brief interactions with more privileged students in enrichment programs and conferences. At that time, she found the interactions helpful; the ways that these students presented themselves encouraged Amina to "step her game up". In university, when she was able to see their lives up close, she learned the details of their schooling and upbringing. Her privileged peers had not made the same sacrifices that she had, and yet they all ended up in the same place.

In the previous quote Amina mentions that some of the decisions that she made were damaging to her psyche. As was the case with experience of unfairness, decision-making was the site at which she experienced the damage. Amina reiterated throughout our time together that the actual activities she was engaged in (clubs, volunteering, long hours studying) were not damaging in themselves, but that the process of choosing and the rationale that she employed in her choosing were the problem. She sums the idea up succinctly as follows:

> Not all kids are going to do what I did. It's very hard to do, you basically just have to just not be a human being. Which is hard, it's hard to just… [*pause*]
> *Idil: what do you mean by that?*
> I mean, like, I had to abandon my own wants and needs and desires to be myself fully and completely because I was more concerned with the way that I appeared to other people and getting by. ... And so, I feel like now I am feeling the repercussions of that ... it's like an identity crisis of sorts where I've just been like: Ok, what's really me? ... I feel like I kind of became another person so long ago that I don't even really remember like 'oh, what did I want to do? Why am I even in law school at all?' Those are questions I never asked myself because I just wanted to be successful.

From an early age Amina's criterion for decision making was almost solely whether or not a choice would facilitate her academic success; she gave some consideration to social impact and feasibility but those things rarely dissuaded her from choosing what she identified to be the academically advantageous option. At this point in her life Amina began to see that her strategic choices came at the expense of more authentic, personally fulfilling options.

The Cost of People-Pleasing

Much of Amina's strategy for succeeding in school centered around pleasing authority. As mentioned previously, Amina learned from an early age that validation from her teachers was something that she enjoyed and so she began to adopt what she calls "people-pleasing" behaviours. In later years Amina's people-pleasing would take on a new dimension as she experienced the effects of prejudice, anti-Black racism, and double standards. Instead of a means to win people over, she saw it as a defense mechanism to protect her from discrimination. In reflecting on the origins of her people-pleasing and its relationship to experiences of prejudice she said:

> I just didn't want to be bothered; I didn't want to have to deal with that stuff. And I genuinely believed for a very long time that if I do enough of it, I'll never experience that thing that I experienced in fourth grade…fourth or sixth grade, I don't remember.

Perhaps the most prominent damage wrought by people-pleasing was a degradation of Amina's sense of self. Instead of centering her own wants, needs or even preferences, Amina's main concern when making life decisions was the opinion of the adults in her academic life. In this vein, she recalls her goal of completing 400 community service hours in her high school career as opposed to the 40 hours required to earn a secondary school diploma in Ontario. When she told me about the goal I asked if it was related to some kind of award or prize. She said the following:

> No, there wasn't any award that I was thinking about ... I don't even know why I wanted it. ... I think it was just to say 'I did 400 hours, where you guys just did the 40'. 'Cause I knew so many people who were like 'ah, I'm done the 40, I'm done' but I think it was like the 2 pieces to it where I knew that if I did certain things I would get praise or just help along the way. And, uh, it's actually kind of messed up when I think about it because it's been like…it's now something that I'm trying to unlearn.
> *[Idil: In what way?]*
> In the sense that I feel like...um...I got to the point where I was living to be praised by other people. ... It just becomes exhausting at a certain point. It made sense at the time. What I was doing made sense but somehow it continued on and I was like 'oh, why am I doing this? I don't even like this person, who cares if they like me.' So it was, um...for that reason. But I found that it worked in high school. ... I was so concerned about how adults viewed me that I was run by that for a very long time.

The realization that her decisions and motivations have not been entirely her own led to what Amina described as a kind of identity crisis. In centering the views and standards of others for so long, Amina no longer had a grasp of what she valued. Even the experiences that she sees

as necessary in her path are cast under the pall of this realization. While she may not have *chosen* differently, she wonders how her life would be if she *reasoned* differently. The nuance here gets at the heart of what Amina is mourning: a psychological burden that she carried from childhood that other people did not have to bear.

Another consequence of the people-pleasing behaviour that Amina touched on briefly was something that only began to affect her in law school. As an overachiever used to being at the top of her class, Amina found that her self-perception had become linked very deeply to her grades. In law school she faced financial challenges that would come to negatively impact her grades. She noted the degree to which this lower academic performance negatively impacted her sense of self. Being a good student was an integral part of how Amina understood herself in the world, but in law school as she struggled to maintain her grades, she also felt that she was losing a part of herself.

Pleasing Whom?

An important consideration that Amina raised in her reflection on people-pleasing was the optics of seeking approval from White adults as a young, Black, Somali, Muslim woman. Amina worked to conform to the standards and expectations of her teachers and other authority figures as a means to a personal end, but she recognized the ways in which her behaviour may be perceived as an attempt to conform to the standards of Whiteness. Given the disparities that exist in Canadian schools with regard to which kinds of students are seen as leaders and selected for special opportunities, Amina was often one of only a few non-White students receiving recognition and special attention from her teachers. This led to accusations from her peers of "acting White". From an early age Amina rejected the idea conforming to Whiteness and actively claimed her various identities. Whiteness was never the thing that Amina was after, it was access and power that she was interested in.

With respect to her White peers and the social standards of Whiteness that existed in her schools, Amina made no effort to conform. She stated multiple times that she did not have time for many casual social relationships in her undergraduate degree and that her social circle was made up primarily of other members of her extra-curricular clubs.

> I had school [and] I had the very few extra curriculars that I did, which I take very seriously. I don't join a club to have it on my resume, I join it so that it's a successful club and we achieve our goals and I feel like that takes a lot of time to do.

Among the few spaces Amina went in search of community was the Muslim Student Association (MSA). She frequented the prayer space on campus and attended some MSA social events, but ultimately did not find a sense of belonging with the group. She found the space exclusive and prone to cliques, a harsh contrast to what she had expected to find when she sought it out.

> I do have an expectation for marginalized people to be better ... socially better. No offense to a White person, I don't care about them. I'm not here to make White people feel comfortable, that's not my role. But sometimes it just boggles the mind that you're not making someone in your own community feel comfortable in this space. ... This should be a refuge and it's not. And why would I come back? ... I just don't understand why you wouldn't want to bring someone into the fold.

It is helpful to think of this response in relation to Amina's strategic conformity and people-pleasing. In the rest of her academic life Amina held herself to a very narrow set of norms and worked tireless to perform the expectations of studenthood held by authority figures – norms and expectations informed by Whiteness. Amina retreated into Muslim student spaces in hopes of finding a community in which she could be herself and be understood by her peers. She saw the MSA as a potential refuge from the constant experience of performing in mainstream spaces. As such, the cliquey nature that she observed in the club was especially hurtful.

In response to her negative experience in the MSA as an undergraduate, Amina went on to join and eventually serve as the president of the Muslim Law Student Association (MLSA). She worked to create the welcoming environment in the MLSA that she did not find in her undergraduate years. Amina described her MLSA community as warm, welcoming, and non-judgemental. It is notable that even in a space cultivated as a refuge from the White gaze, its impact looms large.

> My standard for Muslims is so much higher than for non-Muslims, I just feel like you have to be better, you have to be more welcoming. Honestly, if a White person is rude to me, that's something I expect. When a Muslim person is rude, I find it weird. And maybe that's requiring a lot of Muslims but ... you're a marginalized group, you can't afford to be rude. At the end of the day MLSA or any MSA, you know that sometimes non-Muslims are walking into those spaces, so you have to be hyper aware of this. I'm sorry, but we're living in a time where, yeah, Muslims have to be better.

Here Amina reflects a reality of many Muslim and marginalized communities: even in their most intimate spaces the presence of dominant group's expectations can be felt. Throughout her youth and undergraduate degree Amina was identifiably Muslim because she wore a hijab. In her transition from undergraduate into law school, she began to experience the aforementioned identity crisis. It was a time in which she re-evaluated whether or not the decisions in her life were of her own choosing. Upon a great deal of reflection on her relationship with the hijab, Amina ultimately decided to stop wearing it. She notes that this was not a re-evaluation of her faith, as she was serving as the president of the Muslim Law Student Association at the time, but a question of whether or not she really wanted to wear a head scarf as part of her religious observance.

Without her hijab, Amina was now read as Black in the world and no longer seen as Muslim unless she identified herself as such. This was the first time since childhood that her Muslim identity was not on display to the world around her; Amina noticed a stark and immediate shift in the way that she was treated by strangers. People were nicer to her in public spaces, her classmates showed a greater interest in getting to know her and, overall, she noted "people gave me the benefit of the doubt" in a way that she had not experienced before.

Amina's experience of shedding her public Muslimness was so poignant that she was moved to share her realizations with others. She submitted a piece of writing to an online magazine as part of a feature exploring the lives of young, Black Canadians. The series invited writers to reflect on the ways in which living Blackness in Canada had impacted their sense of self. In her piece, Amina writes about how removing her hijab granted her access to a "basic level of humanity" that she had not known she was previously being denied. She wrote that cashiers would forgive her when she forgot her wallet and tells me in our interview that this is something that she had never experienced while wearing hijab – even if she was just short by some small amount. She wrote about how strangers would ask for her opinion on their purchases while shopping and told me how she noticed more people smiling at her in the street. Her law school peers were now friendlier to her, laughed at her jokes "even when they weren't funny" and invited her to parties from which she had previously been excluded. Where her Muslimness had made others uncomfortable, she found that her Blackness made her cool.

Amina struggled with a sense of belonging for multiple reasons and in a variety of ways throughout her schooling and now, without her hijab and in a predominantly White environment,

she was so easily being welcomed into the fold. Unfortunately, the conditions of this embrace, or what she learned when she "pulled back the curtain", made it impossible to accept. Along with the welcome and invitations, Amina was also now privy to people's candid conversations about Muslims. She was disheartened to find that even in progressive spaces some people who self-identified as allies expressed a discomfort with women in hijab; in the worst cases, she was exposed to people's Islamophobic views. The tension between these two new realities – her social acceptance and insight into the extent of the hostility towards her Muslimness – made Amina anxious and distrustful of kindness from strangers. To resolve this tension Amina developed a habit of intentionally identifying herself as Muslim and made a personal commitment to use her voice to "shine a light on the Muslim community and its concerns". These are the conditions under which she served with the MLSA and shared the blog post about her experiences taking off the hijab. In her private life, Amina made a personal commitment to support Muslim women in hijab where she could. She still makes an effort to say hello, get to know or check in with hijab-wearing women in her life "because I know that a lot of times, at least in my experience, you're kind of written off as a person worth getting to know and so I'm just very mindful of that."

Race, ethnicity, and religion affected Amina's academic and social life in every stage of her educational journey. In her undergraduate year Amina's generational status as a student became a new axis along which she felt the impact of power and privilege. In law school, her race and religion again moved to the forefront of her life as she navigated the social space. All of these factors not only impacted Amina's interaction with the external world, but her internal construction of herself.

In this section I hoped to illustrate the complicated nature of Amina's academic and social success as she progressed from her undergraduate degree through law school. On paper, Amina had finally achieved all of the things that she had been working so tirelessly for since high school, but the reality was not what she had anticipated.

Financial Challenges

> I care a lot about money, that's actually something that's been a really important ... a piece that has followed me a lot with respect to school. I find that now whenever I think about school I always think of money.

Money was the first thing Amina mentioned when asked about her university life. In the span of our 90-minute interview dedicated to exploring her post-secondary experiences, almost a third of the time was spent discussing finances in some capacity. In this time Amina addressed other issues like race, class, culture and belonging, but all were connected by the thread of money: not having enough, learning how much others had, and the lengths she had to go to in order to get enough.

As previously mentioned, Amina was mainly interested in becoming a lawyer because it was a prestigious profession. Medicine was an option for a short time because "the only careers that I had been presented, especially in high school, that made money was law and medicine". Amina eventually decided against medicine because she did not enjoy her science classes; she was only drawn to medicine as an opportunity to help others. Amina envisioned law as a profession in which she could help others and still make a lot of money. Throughout the course of our interviews I came to understand that Amina used the term "prestige" as a proxy for financial security. This idea was most clearly articulated when I asked about prestige as her motivation and what it would mean to be part of a prestigious profession.

> I never, ever – and I still am like this to be honest – I never want to worry about money. That's something that I just don't want to ever think about beyond, I would say the end of my 20s. You know, insha Allah [God willing], that is my goal, to never have to think about money. ... I'm not a frivolous spender it's just more of like the essentials have always been difficult in my life and I just – you get to point where its just like 'I can't do it' and I'm with people in law school where it's just like 'money this, money that' and I'm just like 'shut up, like, your parents have money, I don't.' I actually have to think about not just providing for myself but providing for my parents one day, and that's a lot of money if you're just not thinking about one person. Like, I am someone who likes kids but I could easily live the rest of my life and never have children. But if I were to actually have children and I have to take care of my parents – of course ideally there would be two incomes involved here but its still like something I think about every night before I go to sleep and I just don't want to think about that anymore.

Amina was motivated from a young age to move out of her neighbourhood and build a life that was bigger than what she saw around her. Money had always been a motivational force in her life but her early construction of money's role in her life was simple: work hard in school to get a prestigious job, make lots of money, improve your life circumstances. University, and law school in particular, taught Amina the complexity in each of those steps. Acquiring money, she was learning, was not a simple function of working hard. Where money was once a

motivating force in her life, it was now something that she saw as dictating her life path, as we see in her thoughts about having children. Money, or the lack of it, was now also becoming a part of Amina's identity; in law school Amina began to see herself as "poor".

> I knew that I wasn't well off, but it never became such a core part of my identity until I started law school because it became so evident. Not just the fact that I couldn't pay my tuition without really struggling, but the fact that there's so many things people talked about that's like 'this is normal life' where I was like 'what the hell is that?' I'd never been to a cottage – I mean I knew what it was – or, like, private school. How common it was to meet someone who went to private school.

Amina quickly found herself an outsider among her wealthy law school peers. Along with cottages and private schools, she spoke of classmates who went on lavish vacations during their time off, and one student who was the child of a Supreme Court judge. After Amina struggled to cover the cost of her tuition and various expenses throughout the application process, she became acutely aware of how much money those around her must have had in order to cover these costs with such relative ease. At one point in our conversation she spent some time reflecting on classmates who lived alone in the downtown and kept house pets. She laughed as she enumerated the various expenses that pets would create and remarked "give that extra dog money to me, that will literally save my life". While she was speaking lightheartedly, it was a vivid example of how deeply she had thought about the economic gap between herself and her peers.

While having more money was always a part of her vision for her life, she said that it "never really factored into my decision making" in her high school and undergraduate years. She earned scholarships out of high school, and while she lost the initial funding after her first year of university, she acquired student loans and grants that comfortably covered her tuition and living expenses for the second year. During this second year she won a prestigious award that would pay for the remained 3 years of her undergraduate degree (she completed the degree in 5 years). Paying for her law degree, however, was significantly more challenging.

> Everything changed when I started law school. That was like a huge, huge eye-opener for me because the tuition was like double what I was paying [in undergraduate] and the year in between undergrad and law school I was paying for a lot of stuff. So I had to pay for my application fees, help with the LSAT, all of these things and there was like a certain point it got to where my parents actually couldn't financially pay for it anymore and because I was so determined to get in that year – like I just didn't want to spend another year not doing it – I was like 'okay, I'm just going to start swiping this credit card for school stuff and I'm just going to pay it off'. I wasn't financially literate at the time so I

> wasn't really thinking about the fact that I was taking months before I actually finished paying off that card and it really screwed me over because when I went to go get a line of credit to pay for law school, even though I had a clean credit history up until that 6 month period before I started law school, they were like 'this is a very recent, but also a very bad mark on your financial whatever.' So, I found out the first week of law school that I didn't have a student line of credit and I thought 'how am I going to pay for this? Am I going to have to drop out right now?'
> And I spoke to so many people at the school. You know, the same rigamarole 'apply for scholarships, do this, do that, why can't you get a student line of credit?' Being thrown around everywhere and by the end of my first semester is when I finally got a scholarship to pay off the rest of the year. But I was so defeated by that point because months had passed at that point and I was going into exams, I hadn't prepared because I was so stressed about this that I couldn't focus on school. And even after that when I started my second semester, I just couldn't get it together, like, I was just so defeated.

At the end of her first year of law school, Amina decided to take a year of leave from the program. She said of her decision:

> I did it as a making money year, but it also – what I didn't tell a lot of people was just like, I was so done. I couldn't go on if I went into that year, I would have just failed it. Like I wasn't mentally in a position to continue...yeah...

Amina, in her own words, was not financially literate. She had not understood how her credit card use could affect her eligibility for a line of credit or the ramifications of taking months to pay back credit card debt. She had never carried significant credit card debt before, and she had never received a meaningful financial education at school or at home. While she had been in a similar situation having lost her scholarship after her first year of her undergraduate degree, the cost of undergraduate tuition could be easily covered by OSAP. The costs associated with law school, however, were prohibitive without a line of credit, even for more financially advantaged families. When her efforts to earn the money and her parents' support was exhausted, Amina saw the credit card as her only option. Along with the toll this experience took on Amina's academic output, it also caused her quite a bit of personal distress. Amina began to question her place in law school and whether or not it was a worthwhile path for someone from her background.

> I think what I realize now looking back on it is...um...you know...I am the exact person that did everything right except for that financial whatever, and I couldn't understand why – and I'm not one of those people who thinks 'good people should only have good things happen to them' but it was just like one of those 'I'm exhausted, I actually shouldn't be here...I actually shouldn't be here [in law school]'. If I just let it roll like a lot of my classmates, see where life takes you, I wouldn't be in law school. I had to basically kill

> myself to be in this position, to be here, and to also find that not only was it difficult to pay for but nobody was helpful. I don't know any of my new classmates, there was no one I could talk to and I didn't really have a huge friend group prior to law school, I had like one friend. Anyway, it was just really, really hard. And that's kind of been my more recent issue, is like paying for school. Because this problem hasn't really gone away, I'm just trying to change my perspective about it. And it's like, if you don't have a line of credit, you're kind of left in a position where OSAP pays for a portion and then you're kind of 6000, 7000 [dollars] where you have to figure it out on your own and my parents have tried their best to help in whatever way they can.

Amina pursued the legal profession as a path to financial freedom. Money was her motivation because she grew up struggling to cover "the essentials", and now she was faced with the reality that she did not have enough money to follow her plan to climb out of poverty.

While she did not meet any law school peers at the time who were struggling as she was, Amina learned that she was not alone when she came across a 2013 essay in Globe and Mail newspaper entitled "What I Learned at Law School: The Poor Need Not Apply". The author, Eric C Gerard, was a University of Ottawa law school alumnus. Amina described reading his essay as "eerie". While Girard's life circumstances differed greatly from her own, his challenges navigating the University of Ottawa as a poor law student were the same. In a passage of his essay, Girard expresses a sentiment that I, too, found eerie in light of Amina's life and school journey.

> The university shrugged its shoulders as the "hard work equals success" myth dissolved in front of me. Don't come to law school if you are poor, was the message. Don't try to become a lawyer if you are poor. (Girard, 2013)

It is easy to see why Amina was so struck by the piece. Law school was the place that eroded her long held belief that "hard work equals success". Girard's internal journey to this conclusion mirrored her own, and the two shared the same breaking point: a meeting with the university administration.

> Basically, his experience is exactly like mine in terms of his experience with the administration where they're just like 'well, we have an emergency fund but emergency funds are only for students who have unforeseen financial difficulty and yours is foreseen so you don't actually qualify.' And it's that, just kind of like ridiculous things, and the more I've been open about my experience the more I realize that there's not a lot, but a few people who've encountered this. So I'm like 'so, the school is aware that this is a problem and there's nothing that they've done' ... and really I do kind of agree with the statement in that like if you don't have the money, I say don't even go. It's not worth,

> like… law is not really an area at this time where you can get out and find a job anyway, it's not the ’60s anymore, you know what I mean?

In the entirety of our time together, Amina does not mention any academic challenges during her legal studies. After years of pushing herself academically and cultivating a strong work ethic, Amina was ostensibly prepared for the demands of the program. When she eventually returned to her studies, she began engaging in extra-curricular activities again, like joining and heading the MLSA. With respect to her social life, she formed a new friend group and social home in the MLSA. The challenges and obstacles that Amina described were all centered firmly around money: she couldn’t pay for school and she couldn’t relate to the lives of her wealthy classmates. When Amina says “I actually shouldn’t be here”, she means that someone from her financial background and class position should not be in law school. Amina saw from an early age that the life outcomes that would have come easily in her community were not options that she was interested in – she could not settle for where life would take her. She had resolved to build a life of her choosing and continued to make the sacrifices necessary to reach it. Up until law school Amina had met every challenge with a determination to overcome; again and again she adjusted her behaviour to accommodate new lessons about school success. When her small childhood transgressions were met with disproportionate punishment and experiences of prejudice, she committed to behaving so well that prejudice could not stop her. When she was made to attend a school with fewer academic and extracurricular opportunities, she worked harder than her peers and positioned herself such that she was first in line for the few opportunities that did arise. When she lost her scholarship in undergraduate studies, she put together an application for a large prestigious award that would pay for the remainder of her degree. These experiences were difficult, but in Amina’s retelling of these stories, she maintained a resilience and commitment to her vision of success throughout. Her experience paying for law school, however, is different than any of the challenges before: it shook both her will to continue and her self-perception. After finding that her law school experience, both the logistics and the personal turmoil, was similar to that of other law students from poor families Amina came to the following conclusion:

> Honestly, if you're poor don't do it. There are other professions with guaranteed income at the end of it. I wouldn't do it if I had the chance to go back. It's crazy because it's the thing I always wanted to do, and I think it goes back to I never actually knew a lawyer. But

> even if I did, to be honest, the financial stuff would have never been something that would have come up. I have met with many people since then that have never mentioned financial difficulty. And the fact of the matter is that most people in professional programs come from families where their parents are professionals. So, this is not a rare occurrence but it's not common in the experience.

In reflecting on the compromises that she made in her educational journey, Amina often wondered how her life might have been different if she had not made those sacrifices. Throughout our conversations she expresses the unfairness of the conditions that led to her decisions, but always concludes that these were the only decisions to make in order to have the life that she desired. Law school is different. This is the only major educational decision that Amina expresses a level of regret about, and even goes so far as to warn others against. The cost of law school, both financial and personal, is too high for the poor.

Amina: Conclusion

Learning the student role was, for Amina, a multifaceted process. The necessary classroom and behavioural norms came easily for her and Amina's relationships with teachers gave her the soft skills that would aide her throughout her educational journey. Her relationship with Ms. Raymond, the head of the guidance department at Beacon Hill, was pivotal in a couple of respects. In her conversations with Ms. Raymond, Amina learned how to speak with adults in a way that would set her up to confidently communicate with her university professors. Secondly, Ms. Raymond gave Amina access to a world outside of Beacon Hill; it was a world in which she could meet other high achievers and form a new standard of student excellence. With respect to the forces of race and class, Amina's relationship with Ms. Raymond exposed her to the social norms of White, middle-class life embedded in the Canadian student role. These are the intangible pieces of school success that so often elude first-generation university students, whether they be immigrant, refugee, or working-class.

Race, ethnicity and religion also impact Amina's experience in the classroom, particularly as sites of prejudice. As a result of a series of negative incidents with teachers, Amina formed the conclusion that prejudice would be an in inescapable part of her schooling. Amina's experiences presented two potential paths forward: (1) a path in which she could behave in any way that she liked but be subject to prejudice or (2) a path that would lead to school and life success, but

would demand she contort herself – her wants, desires, interests and behaviours – into the model of a perfect student. Amina committed herself to the second path.

The strategies that she employed in order to succeed came at what she describes as a great personal cost. While conformity to adults' standards granted her favour and access to opportunity, in centering others' expectations and preferences Amina was not able to tend to (or even explore) her own preferences and wants. Becoming an ideal student came at the cost of not becoming something of her own particular choosing.

Conclusion

In this section I will outline the next step of this inquiry, the tensions I faced as a researcher, and final thoughts on the answers to my research questions.

Next Step: Coethnic Community Capital

Bilane highlights throughout her interviews the role that the Somali community played in supporting her throughout her struggles in school. The literature that I had began my inquiry with focused primarily on White, working-class students, as such it could not present or explore the impact of coethnic clubs or peer groups. As part of my critical rereading I returned to the literature to find examples of racialized or immigrant first-generation students. While there is a dearth of published literature here, recent works do present the idea of engagement with coethnic communities as a protective factor against university drop out and a motivating factor for attaining a university degree (Beattie, 2018; Birani & Lehmann, 2013; Tang, Kim & Haviland, 2013). In their study of first-generation Asian students in Canadian universities, Birani and Lehmann (2013) found their participants to be more successful in university that their White counterparts. The authors attribute this success to strong relationships with parents, coethnic communities, teachers, and peers (Birani & Lehmann, 2013). The work of Birani and Lehmann (2013) echoes the findings of Thiessen (2009) in suggesting that the success of racialized students is influenced by support offered by their particular cultures – such as high parental expectations, family support, and "specific knowledge acquisition strategies" (Birani & Lehmann, 2013, p. 289). In her review of sociology research on first-generation students, Beattie (2018) found that the beneficial impact of coethnic communities also includes ethnic student

organizations on campus. Tang, Kim and Haviland (2013) also echo the above findings in their study of first-generation Cambodian American college students.

With respect to motivation to attain a university degree, Beattie (2018) cites a study by Stephens, Hamedani, and Destin (2014) in which they found that first-generation students were 20% more likely to state that they wanted to help their families and/or give back to their communities. Both Amina and Bilane state this as a motivating factor for attaining a university degree as well.

As "culture shock" is seen as the primary driver in first-generation students leaving university prematurely, it would stand to reason that campus based coethnic clubs, organizations, or less formal friendship groups would lessen the impact of this social dislocation and improve retention rates. Aside from providing a type of antidote to the culture shock – that is, a sense of belonging – coethnic groups also serve as social networks that could provide crucial knowledge about university success or access to coethnic peers in the same area of study.

Tensions Throughout the Research Process

While the purpose of this work was not to compare or make value judgements about the decisions made by Amina and Bilane, I recognize the impulse to compare and contrast when presented with two parallel narratives – I have chosen not to do so. One of my main objectives in this work as a researcher, as a member of Amina and Bilane's community, and as a human being, was to honour Bilane and Amina's stories and respect their agency as individuals. I also understand that no matter how thorough my interviews were, they do not capture the full complexity and reality of a life lived or the sum total of the factors that go into making decisions. These reasons, above any theoretical or methodological justifications, are what have informed my choice not to present a comparative analysis of their decisions. That being said, this decision is also reflective of my methodological framework, life history. In the words of Tierney:

> By its very definition, those who undertake a life history neither seek to develop theoretical generalizations nor attempt to offer policy recommendations. What a life history can do, however, is offer a glimpse into one person's life and hopefully provoke questions and ideas about how that individual lives his or her life and makes sense of it. (Tierney, 2013, p. 260)

The above quote also addresses the question of *policy recommendations* – which I have also not presented in this work. The aim of this study was to better understand the lives and agency of two Somali women as they navigated university life and to explore how they made sense of that journey. With respect to policy recommendations to address the social and systemic barriers that Bilane and Amina faced, much has been written about the ways in which universities need to reform in order to better serve students from marginalized communities – the issues they raise are well known and the fact of their existence speaks more to the will of a given institution than it does to the complexity of the solutions.

The greatest tension I faced in the research process was in situating my work within the existing body of literature. My challenges with the deficit framework that emerged from literature based in Bourdieu's work has already been detailed in the section outlining my critical rereading process, but there was another widespread theoretical model in the first-generation student literature that I found similarly problematic: the work of Tinto (1987), who presented university success through the lens of integration/assimilation. As one of the early models for understanding university success, much of the literature on first-generation university student outcomes employs Tinto's (1987) idea that students struggle because they are not well integrated into campus life and that assimilation is the most effective means of university success. This idea and the literature that build up on are obviously problematic when looking at racialized students in a university system designed for White students, and especially problematic when used with students from immigrant, refugee, or Indigenous communities. Tinto's (1997) framework does not account for the role of ethnic culture or race in students' experience of belonging/displacement in university, framing it instead as a question of individual choice to adopt the dominant culture of the university space. When applied to immigrant, refugee, or Indigenous communities his assimilationist strategy cannot be decoupled from larger, violent assimilationist ideologies that these communalities face. I struggled to find any critical engagements with the integration/assimilation framework before coming across the work of Muñoz and Maldonado (2012) and Hurtado and Carter (as cited in Beattie, 2018).

In future studies or extensions of this work I would draw from Critical Race Theory for a more thorough and robust engagement with the issues of race, culture, gender and class, as well as tools to name the structural barriers that Amina and Bilane faced in their schooling journeys.

Final thoughts

The overarching question that I sought to answer in this research was: How do 1.5 generation Somali-Canadians who are first-generation university students understand and engage in the process of becoming university students? To answer this question more thoroughly, I will begin by responding to my sub-questions.

1. How do these students understand the university student role?

In each of the narrative portions of this work, both Bilane and Amina laid out the specifics of what they understood of the university student role. Both were able to identify behaviours that would lead to university success and some of the more intangible features such as professor expectations. They both demonstrated an understanding of the middle-class habitus that was valued by the university, though they both responded differently to the pressure to embody that habitus. Where I had initially thought that the issue of *understanding* would be at the heart of my inquiry, it proved to be the simplest part of the university student role question.

Returning to Collier and Morgan's (2008) conceptual model for university student success (see Figure 2), we can understand that both participants eventually made up for the cultural capital necessary to demonstrate their capacity to the institution. Amina even designed a mentorship program for other first-generation university students to pass on the capital that she lacked coming in.

2. How do they view themselves in relation to the student role? (Are feelings of belonging and/or fitting in a factor in their self-perception?)

When viewing themselves in relation to the archetypal university student role, both Bilane and Amina moved past the question of *whether or not* they could perform the student role to the question of *what it would cost* to take the role on in their lives. Bilane, from high school onward, felt that any role that would require her to change the parts of herself that she liked or required her to be in an environment that she found harmful to her well-being would not be worthwhile. For Amina, her early fortitude against such environments (those with double standards and prejudice against her communities) was sustained throughout her undergraduate degree but fell away in law school. Here it is helpful to return to Burke's (1991) identity control theory, with which I designed this inquiry.

Burke (1991) presents a few processes by which individuals build identities, but I focus on reflexivity and validation. Reflexivity and validation work in a discrepancy-reducing feedback

loop: through reflexivity, the individual identifies how they deviate from an identity standard and then works to remedy those deviations by performing role-associated behaviours, the purpose of which is to signal their role to others and solidify the role identity (see Collier, 2000). Next, they seek validation, which occurs when others in the group recognize their role identity (Collier & Morgan, 2008). The loop continues if and until one's reflexivity turns up no more discrepancies. As Black, Muslim, low-income students in a White, secular, middle-class institution the narratives that Amina and Bilane share expose major gaps in Burke's identity control theory, particularly with respect to reflexivity and validation. The two women faced various disruptions to Burke's reflexivity-validation feedback loop as a result of factors unrelated to their understanding of the student role or performance of role-associated behaviours. They both described their racial identities, religious affiliation, class, and immigration backgrounds as factors that caused powerful and painful tensions in the reflexivity process.

In identifying what Burke calls "deviance", "errors" or "discrepancies" in their performance of the student role, participants grappled with the realization that fundamental parts of themselves were perceived as deviant/erroneous/discrepant and grappled with the structures and histories that produced the conditions for these contradictions. The tension at the heart of each participant's identity formation process was not a question of how to successfully perform the student role, but rather the cost of that success on other parts of their identity.

While Burke introduced emotions into his later work on identity control theory and hypothesized the ways in which power might be implicated in how individuals experience "discrepancies" during the identity formation process (Stets & Burke, 2005), his work is not robust enough to address the realities of my participants who live at the intersection of multiple social groups and power structures. The necessity of validation in the identity formation process raises critical questions about the nature of peer relationships and the reasons why one may or not be recognized by the group. Prejudice or racism do not seem to be addressed but emerged as a major theme in each participants' narrative reflections on validation.

3. What types of capital do these students possess that aids or hinders them in adopting the university student role?

Returning to this question in light of Yosso's work (2005) and the narratives of Amina and Bilane, I am now troubled by its assumptions. While the two women possess all manner of capital that make them successful in various respects, I am now uncomfortable identifying

"adopting the student role" as a desired outcome of employing that capital. Throughout this work I have identified the kinds of capital that have aided Amina and Bilane in successfully navigating the school and university spheres, but they have been clear about the problematic effects of employing their capital to adopt the student role.

Where I began this inquiry with the assumption that the student role, as it is currently identified as White, male, heterosexual, and middle-class was – while not by any means positive or morally correct – a fact that could be understood and exploited to help those outside of the classic definition succeed, I have now come to see it as particularly damaging. While I understood the archetype itself to be problematic, Amina and Bilane's experiences highlighted the ways that the *pursuit* of the archetype was a *violent process* – one that meant the erasure of their personal identities. In further studies, I hope that we explore the relationship that other first-generation and non-traditional university students have to the archetypal student role, and the decisions that they make in whether or not to engage with it.

Finally, returning to my larger research question: How do 1.5 generation, Somali-Canadians who are first-generation university students understand and engage in the process of becoming university students? For my participants, the answer is that they understand the process well, and engage with it in ways that are complex and not easily categorized as positive or negative.

Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Interview 1: Brief life history and early schooling experiences

- Can you tell me a little bit about your family - parents, siblings, any other relatives in your household?
    a. Do your parents currently work or go to school? Where/doing what?
    b. How and when did your family come to Canada?
2. What do you know about your parents' school history?
    a. If you have siblings, what level of schooling did they complete?
    b. What were your siblings' experiences in school?
3. What kind of conversations, if any, did you have with your parents about education while you were growing up?
    a. Alternately: How did your parents talk about school your place in it?
4. Can you tell me about your experience in elementary and middle school? (prompts: How did you feel about school? How did you feel about learning? What about social experiences?)
    a. How would you describe yourself as a student?
5. Can you tell me about your experience of high school?
    a. How would you describe yourself as a student in high school? Is this different from how you were in younger grades?
6. How would you describe your relationship to Somali culture and identity growing up?
7. Did being Somali affect your experience as a K-12 student?
    a. How? With teachers? With administrators? With peers?
8. Did being Somali affect the way you saw yourself as a K-12 student?
    a. How?
9. Were there any other factors (*prompt if necessary:* gender, race, religion, class, etc.) that affected your schooling experience or perception of yourself in school aside than being Somali?
    a. More or less?
10. As a high school student, what were your thoughts about university?
11. What kinds of conversations, if any, did you have with your family about university at this time?
    a. What did you kinds of expectations, if any, did your parents have for you with respect to attending university?
    b. What ideas or messages did you get from your parents about the purpose or goal of attending university?
12. What kinds of conversations, if any, did you have about university with you friends and peers?
13. What kinds of conversations, if any, did you have about university with your teachers, guidance counsellors or other school staff?
14. Will you tell me a story that you feel represents/captures your experience in K-12 school?

Interview 2: Becoming a university student

- How did you decide to attend university as opposed to other post secondary options?

- How did you selected your current program of study?
- When you think about success in university, what does it look like to you?
- What does a successful student look like to you?
    - Can you tell me about the things that you do to be a successful university student?
- What expectations did you have about university before you arrived?
    - How does your experience compare to your expectations?
    - Is there anything that you feel like you should have known when you arrived?
    - Is there anything that you wish someone had told you about being a university student before you came?
- How would you describe your social experience in university?
    - Can you describe what it looks like to fit in as a university student? Can you tell me about times you felt like you fit in? What about times when you felt you didn't fit in?
    - Did you feel the need to change when you came to university? How so?
    - Does being Somali affect your social experience in university? How?
        - Are there any other factors or parts of your identity that you felt have affected your social experience in university? How?
        - Would you describe these as larger or smaller factors than your Somali identity?

In the first interview you described your relationship to Somali culture and identity growing up, how would you describe that relationship in this part of your life?

How would you describe your academic experience in university?

- Does being Somali affect your academic experience in university? How?
- Are there any other factors or parts of your identity that you felt have affected your academic experience in university? How?
- Would you describe these as larger or smaller factors than your Somali identity?

How would you describe yourself as a university student?

- How would your professors describe you as a student?
- How would your parents describe you as a university student?

Has there ever been a time when you have considered changing programs? Tell me about it.

- How about leaving university altogether? Can you tell me about it?

Will you tell me a story that you feel represents/captures your experience in university thus far?

Interview 3: Meaning making

Review interview summaries, clarifications, discuss major elements of emergent narrative.

Appendix B: Social Media & Email Mailing List Recruitment Script

Hello, my name is Idil Abdulkadir and I am completing my Master of Arts degree in Education at the University of Ottawa. I am conducting a research study entitled *"Somali Stories in Ivory Towers: Narratives of Becoming a University Student"*. I am looking for 1 male and 1 female participant currently attending the University of Ottawa to share their stories of what it is like to be a first-generation university student and how they view themselves as Somali-Canadian university students.

My aim with this research is to understand and share the stories of Somali-Canadian students with academics and educators. The final results of the study will also help address lack of literature written about Somali-Canadian university students, advancing our understanding of their unique experiences in Canadian universities.

Eligible participants should meet the following 4 criteria:

1. Born in Canada.
2. Completed their K-12 schooling in public, English schools.
3. Parents have not attended university or college.
    - Parents MAY have technical or vocational training, or skilled trades apprenticeships.
4. Parents must have arrived in Canada in 1990 or later.

Appendix C: Consent Form

Title of the study: ***Somali Stories in Ivory Towers: Narratives of Becoming a University Student***

Researcher
Ms. Idil Abdulkadir
Masters Student
Faculty of Education
University of Ottawa
Tel:
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Thesis Supervisor
Phyllis Dalley, Ph.D.
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Faculty of Education
University of Ottawa
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Email: pdalley@uOttawa.ca

Invitation to Participate: I am invited to participate in the abovementioned research study conducted by Idil Abdulkadir as part of her Masters Thesis under the supervision of Dr. Phyllis Dalley at the University of Ottawa.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to explore the personal university experiences of Somali-Canadian students who are the first in their families to attend university. Specifically, the researcher hopes to understand and tell the story of how these Somali-Canadians view themselves as university students.

Participation: My participation will consist essentially of engaging in three, 90-minute interviews during which I will be guided through a semi-directed conversation about my schooling and university experiences. Interviews will be audio recorded. The interviews will be scheduled at a time and place that is convenient for me, to be determined. Subsequent interviews will take place between 7 to 10 days apart. I will also be asked to review a short (approximately 1 page) summary of each interview written by Idil Abdulkadir.

Risks: My participation in this study entails no foreseeable risks. However, if I experience any discomfort, Idil Abdulkadir has assured me that she will make every effort to minimize this discomfort by pausing or stopping the interview in progress. I may decide to stop the interview at any time.

Benefits: My participation in this study will give me the opportunity to share my story as a Somali-Canadian student. This study will help address lack of literature written about Somali-Canadians university students, advancing our understanding of their unique experiences in Canadian universities.

Confidentiality and anonymity: I have received assurance from the researcher that the information that I share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used only for this research project and any academic articles written by Idil Abdulkadir about this research project, and that my confidentiality will be protected through the use of a pseudonym and other anonymity efforts. The raw content of my interviews containing my real name and personal information will only be available to Idil Abdulkadir.

Anonymity will be protected through the use of a pseudonym and Idil Abdulkadir will obscure/change any details that could be used to identify me in the data.

Conservation of data: The data collected in the form of audio recordings and verbatim interview transcripts will be securely stored as password protected electronic files and will be kept in a secure manner at the University of Ottawa for 5 years, after which it will be deleted (this is a policy at the University of Ottawa). Only Idil Abdulkadir and her thesis supervisor Dr. Phyllis Dalley will have access to the files while they are in storage.

Compensation: No compensation will be provided for my participation in this study.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be destroyed.

Acceptance: I, _____*(Name of participant),* agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Idil Abdulkadir of the Faculty of Education, under the supervision of Dr. Phyllis Dalley.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher, Idil Abdulkadir or her supervisor, Dr. Phyllis Dalley.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5
Tel.: (613) 562-5387
Email: ethics@uottawa.ca

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

_____

Participant's signature: *(Signature)* Date: *(Date)*

_____

Researcher's signature: *(Signature)* Date: *(Date)*

Appendix D: Letter of Information

Title of the study: Somali Stories in Ivory Towers: Narratives of Becoming a University Student

Researcher Ms. Idil Abdulkadir, Masters Student
Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa
Email:

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Idil Abdulkadir as part of her Masters Thesis under the supervision of Dr. Phyllis Dalley at the University of Ottawa.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to explore the personal university experiences of Somali-Canadian students who are the first in their families to attend university. Specifically, the researcher hopes to understand and tell the story of how these Somali-Canadians view themselves as university students.

Participation: Participating in this study entails engaging in three, 90-minute interviews during which you will be guided through a semi-directed conversation about your schooling and university experiences. The interviews will be scheduled at a time and place that is convenient for you. After each interview, you will be provided with a short summary of the conversation to approve. Interviews will take place between 7 to 10 days apart.

Risks: This study will not explore any themes that are very private or sensitive to participants. As such, participation entails no foreseeable risks. However, if you experience any discomfort, you may decide to stop the interviews at any time.

Benefits: Participation in this study will give you the opportunity to share your story as a Somali-Canadian student. The final results of the study will help address lack of literature written about Somali-Canadians university students, advancing our understanding of your unique experiences in Canadian universities.

Confidentiality: Information that you share will remain strictly confidential and will only be used for this research project and any academic articles written by Idil Abdulkadir about this research project. The raw content of my interviews containing my real name and personal information will be stored in password protected files only be available to Idil Abdulkadir.

Anonymity: Anonymity will be protected through the use of a pseudonym and Idil Abdulkadir will obscure/change any details that could be used to identify you in the data.

Conservation of Data: The data collected in the form of audio recordings and verbatim interview transcripts will be securely stored as password protected electronic files and will be kept in a secure manner at the University of Ottawa for 5 years, after which it will be deleted (this is a policy at the University of Ottawa). Only Idil Abdulkadir and her thesis supervisor Dr. Phyllis Dalley will have access to the files while they are in storage.

Compensation:	No compensation will be provided for your participation in this study.
Voluntary Participation:	You are under no obligation to participate and if you choose to participate, you can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. If you choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be destroyed.

If you would like to participate in the study of have any questions, please contact researcher, Idil Abdulkadir at the email or phone number at the top of this document.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5.
Tel.: (613) 562-5387
Email: ethics@uottawa.ca

Please keep this form for your records.

Thank you for your consideration,

Idil Abdulkadir

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