

Reconstructing a Film in Fragments: *Xasuuqii means Massacre*

by  
Zacharia Jama

M.F.A., Cinematic Arts  
Red Sea Institute of Cinematic Arts, 2013



B.ASc., (Hons) Systems Design Engineering  
University of Waterloo, 2009

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**Signature redacted**

Signature of Author:...

Department of Architecture

May 10th, 2019

**Signature redacted**

Certified by:.....

Renée Green

Professor of Art, Culture and Technology

Thesis Supervisor

**Signature redacted.**

Accepted by: .....

Nasser Rabat

Aga Khan Professor

Chair of the Department Committee on Graduate Students



## ***Thesis Committee***

RENÉE GREEN

Professor of Art, Culture and Technology, MIT  
Thesis Supervisor

NIDA SINNOKROT

Professor of Art, Culture and Technology, MIT  
Thesis Reader

WILLIAM URICCHIO

Professor of Comparative Media Studies , MIT  
Thesis Reader

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### ***Abstract***

The thesis discusses techniques for reconstructing a film about mass graves in Northern Somalia (Somaliland), the search for unanswerable questions, and navigating the trauma involved in the cinematic process.

In 2019, Somalia is just as fragmented as it was during colonization. During the Somali Civil War 30 years ago, the dictatorship of Siad Barre was challenged; he responded with collective punishment on groups of civilians based on their tribe. In Somaliland, this punishment meant mass executions and the indiscriminate bombardment of cities.

In 2015, I visited Somalia for the first time. I filmed forensic anthropologists exhuming mass graves and the following year, released an investigative documentary about the mass atrocities in Somaliland. In retrospect, the selectivity of victim interviews and greater emphasis on confronting war criminals seem problematic given the sensitivity of the topic: victims relived the trauma of mass atrocities and in doing so, it may have caused further trauma.

This thesis and the accompanying film attempt a more dignified and respectful approach to uncovering the events in the Somali Civil War. The new iterations of the film discussed in the thesis use a more essayistic approach (Minh-ha, Farocki, Marker) and a more temporally-fragmented editing style. The resulting film aims to create a more appropriate experience that resembles the filmmaker's reality and the way memory works.

Thesis Supervisor: Renée Green

Title: Professor of Art, Culture and Technology

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# 1. Introduction

In 2019, Somalia is broken into a number of autonomous and separatist states with no central functioning government that controls the entire country. This might change in my lifetime but the division of ethnic Somalis into disparate states is not unique to the 21st century. This fragmentation began in the 19th century with colonization.

I grew up in Canada and was born outside of Somalia during the volatile 1980s period when the dictatorship was being challenged. Somalia's dictator, Mohamed Siad Barre, served as President of the Somali Democratic Republic from 1969 to 1991, with his leadership coming under attack from 1978 onwards. I knew nothing about the violence that the challenges to Barre's power caused within Somalia, the dangers my family escaped and this aspect of not knowing will be discussed heavily in this thesis.

Somalis were colonized by three different European powers: the French colonized Djibouti (1894–1977), the British colonized the northwestern region (1884–1940, 1941–1960), and the Italians colonized from the northeastern region (Puntland) until southern Somalia (1889–1947 and under Italian administration 1950–1960).

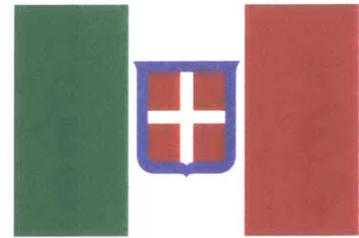
Table 1 - Flags of Colonial powers in Somalia



French Somaliland Flag

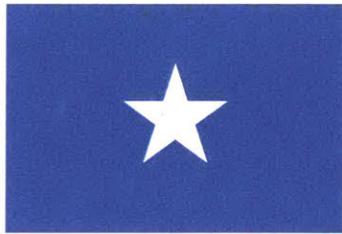


British Somaliland Flag



Italian Somaliland Flag

Table 2 - States where ethnic Somalis traditionally live



Federal Republic of Somalia



Somaliland (Self-declared)



Puntland State of Somalia



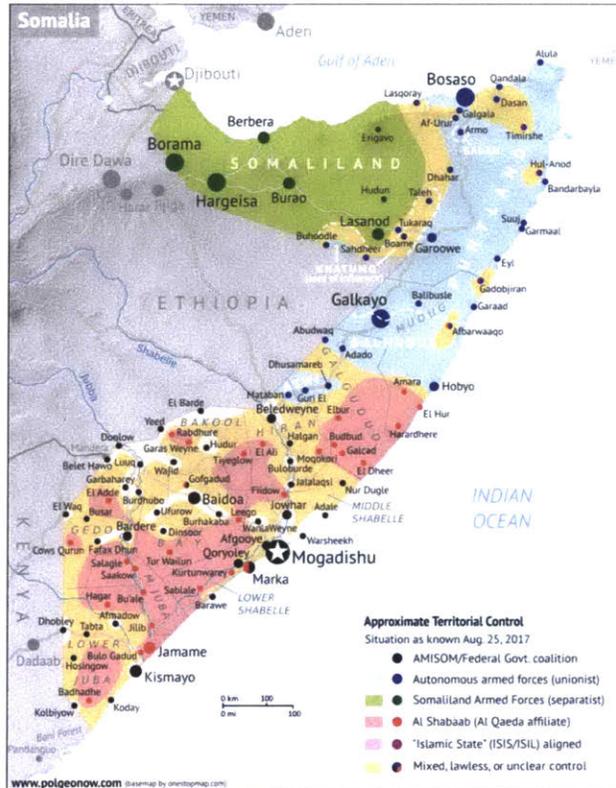
Republic of Djibouti



North Eastern Province (Kenya)



Ogaden (Ethiopia)



### Figure 1 - Map of Somalia Control Areas (2017)<sup>1</sup>

The five-pointed star featured on Somali flags represents each of the three colonized areas where ethnic Somalis traditionally live and the other two points represent the Ogaden region of Ethiopia and the North Eastern Province of Kenya – both predominately inhabited by ethnic Somalis. I have visited two of the five areas where ethnic Somalis reside and this thesis will concentrate on Somaliland: the area I had most access to as an artist and filmmaker. I had access because Somaliland is where my family originates from and where my father lived after the Somali Civil War.

Somaliland is a self-declared state that is autonomous and currently has not been formally recognized by any country. It has a stable government with its own currency, national elections, and has been more or less peaceful for the last 28 years. It is impossible to speculate whether or not international recognition of Somaliland will happen in my lifetime or whether Somaliland will unite again with the rest of Somalia, Puntland and the many disparate semi-autonomous states.

100 years ago, the northern region of Somalia fought against British colonial rule under the leadership of Mohammed Abdullah Hassan (dubbed the “Mad Mullah”). This 20-year resistance culminated in the eventual aerial bombardment of the former Dervish

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<sup>1</sup> "Somalia Control Map & Timeline - August 2017," *PolGeoNow*, accessed May 10, 2019, <https://www.polgeonow.com/2017/08/somalia-war-who-controls-somalia-map.html>.

state<sup>2</sup> by the British Royal Air Force (RAF) in February 1920. The RAF dropped their bombs and soon after the conflict ended.

In Canada, I grew up singing the Canadian national anthem every day in school and as a child I knew all of the lyrics to “God save the Queen”. We sought refuge in Canada from the Somali Civil War and the aerial bombardment of the Siad Barre regime. I was three years old at the time.

On June 26, 1960, Somaliland gained independence from the British. Five days later, on July 1, 1960, the former British Somaliland chose to unite with former Italian Somaliland to form the Somali Republic. The unity lasted until the turmoil of Somali Civil War and eventual collapse of the Somali government. In 1991, Somaliland declared its independence from the rest of Somalia.

In 2015, I traveled to Somaliland for 15 days. It was my first time there. I traveled to visit my father and to make a documentary film about remittance – the money my mother would send back to support our family members. At the time, I had no interest in learning about the Somali Civil War. My plans changed after five days. In retrospect, the trip became my memory of a war I never knew.

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<sup>2</sup> The Darvish state (also written Daraawiish) existed from 1897 to 1920 under the leadership of Sultan Mohamed Abdullah Hasan, also known Sayyid Mohamed. He is a well-known Somali nationalist hero that fought against the colonization of Somali people and desired the unification of the Somali state.

“All of our memories would become significant, only in retrospect”  
**Basma Alsharif**, *We Began by Measuring Distance* (2009)

## 2. Thoughts on a War I Never Knew

In Somaliland, I am an outsider. My physical traits appear as though I belong, but my overall way of being is different. My clothes are foreign. My language is English and theirs is Somali. I can understand Somalia but I cannot speak it. In the Somali language, I am a mute. I listen while being unable to reply and contribute to meaningful exchange.

Somalis call those born during or after the civil war part of the “lost generation” – this especially includes Somali youth in Mogadishu that have never known a stable environment. Being mute in one’s parents’ language is not uncommon to members of lost generations abroad or refugees. I was born in Kenya in 1986 when the Somali north was already full of unrest. I was raised in Canada from the age of three, making me part of “generation 1.5”, neither the first generation nor the second. Rumbaut and Ima describe the generation 1.5 as follows:

They are neither part of the “first” generation of their parents, the responsible adults who were formed in the homeland, who made the fateful decision to leave it and to flee as refugees to an uncertain exile in the United States, and who are thus defined by the consequences of that decision and by the need to justify it; nor are these youths part of the “second” generation of children who are born in the U.S., and for whom the “homeland” mainly exists as a representation consisting of parental memories and memorabilia, even though their ethnicity may remain well defined.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Rumbaut, Ruben & Ima, Kenji, *The Adaptation of Southeast Asian Refugee Youth: A Comparative Study*. (Washington, DC: U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, 1987), 7.

I had never been to Somalia until 2015. I was never told what happened, I just knew we left because of war. I grew up interpreting what it meant to be Somali using references in the news and environment around me in Canada. At home, we rarely spoke about what life in Somalia was like. My associations of Somalia from popular media were famine, war, piracy and terrorism. I worried for a people I did not know during droughts: “Somalis ‘give names to the droughts, and they give names to the wars’”.<sup>4</sup>

It was only upon knowing that I could define what I did not know. I did not know that the dictator targeted the tribe (Isaaq) I belong to in Northern Somalia for extermination. I did not know that my immediate family was killed and that my cousins ran away at night from aerial bombardment. I did not know the price of peace paid by those in the north and still do not know much about what this means for those in other parts of Somalia.

I remember the shock of learning the unspoken history. Not much is ever said directly. Statements are said by elders and relatives – like the city of Hargeisa and Burao were virtually destroyed – and then not elaborated on. I do not know which details I lack but I feel the lack of information. Is it a lack of memory, lack of practice in speaking of their trauma or a fear that it may repeat which keeps so many silent on the subject?

When I arrived in Somaliland, I was surprised at the prevalence of tribalism that still exists there today. The city of Hargeisa is divided into the sub-clans of the Isaaq tribe.

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<sup>4</sup> “The Key to Saving Somalia is Gathering Dust in the British Countryside,” Foreign Policy, accessed May 2019. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/31/the-watson-files-somalia-climate-change-conflict-war/>.

You can choose where you live based on your sub-clan and your sub-clan helps you get a job – some youth told me it is impossible to get a job without using these connections. Migrants and people from outside of major clans – such as the Oromos from Ethiopia – struggle to find a job because of their lack of tribal connections.

The conditions that keep silence are still there. Clan loyalty doubles as both your insurance and identity. The Somalia I witnessed in Somaliland is just as tribalistic as I could have ever imagined. History and the narratives from the war are handed down through the tribal lens. Should people inherit their truth or find and learn it for themselves?

I question why I am interested in reflecting on war crimes that were committed over 30 years ago – approximately when I was born - given the prevalence of atrocities that are committed in Mogadishu today. Many of the elected presidents of Somaliland once worked for the Somali government. My father worked for the Somali government for most of Siad Barre's regime. Many of the rebels that helped remove the dictator were once complicit in the crimes during his rule. The question of whether it is better to forgive and forget plagues this thesis.

“For the nature of poetry is to offer meaning in such a way that it can never end with what is said or shown, destabilizing thereby the speaking subject and exposing the fiction of all rationalization”<sup>5</sup>

T. Trinh, *Speaking Nearby*

### 3. Methodology

The writing in this thesis serves as an opportunity to reflect and centralize my engagement with the topic of the Somali Civil War, a war I never knew. My experiences in 2015 in Somaliland are analyzed in retrospect and through the artistic works I produced afterwards. The thesis describes my encounters with a past I am bound to and still uncovering. It is a thesis that is as much about me and my family, with a particular focus on my father, as it is about the ancestral land that inspired the work.

It is not my intention to provide a comprehensive history of Somalia: there are books and an array of African Studies papers available on modern Somali history<sup>6</sup> and clan cleansing<sup>7</sup>. Context is given where necessary and the majority of historical exposition is in the introductory section and first chapters. The question I am asking is how can I make sense of something that does not make sense to me? It is a critical inquiry into a past I experienced in retrospect, through interviews, narratives and forensics – a type of excavation into my fragmented memory.

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<sup>5</sup> Nancy Chen, ""Speaking Nearby:" A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-ha," *Visual Anthropology Review* (8): 82-91.

<sup>6</sup> I.M. Lewis, *A Modern History of the Somali: Nation and State in the Horn of Africa* *Eastern African Studies* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003)

<sup>7</sup> Lidwien Kapteijns, *Clan cleansing in Somalia : the ruinous legacy of 1991*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

The questions are not necessarily intended to be answered but are discussed and influenced by approaches from documentary film, experimental and essay films, virtual reality (VR), and related artistic work. Topics such as photography and psychological trauma are related. The writing marks the beginning of a journey without an end.

The main focus of the thesis is a reflection on my attempts to communicate something I never understood. I am an outsider to the Somali region and inhabit the gaze of an outsider. I strive to translate my experiences by redeveloping a cinematic language that enables me to reconstruct my memory and reclaim my narrative. I am not interested in speaking of, as there is much I still do not know; I am interested in developing an ability to speak around the Somaliland's traumatic civil war past.

## 4. An Earnest First Attempt

In 2015, I set out to make a film about the remittance money my Mom would send back to Somaliland. It was a time when Barclays bank wanted to close the accounts of wire transfer businesses (like Dahabshiil, the largest money transfer business in Somalia) out of fear of vulnerability to money-laundering and the funding of groups accused of terrorism. I interviewed students and people in the street. I asked them about whether or not the money transfers are indeed a “lifeline” and how they will go on living without them.

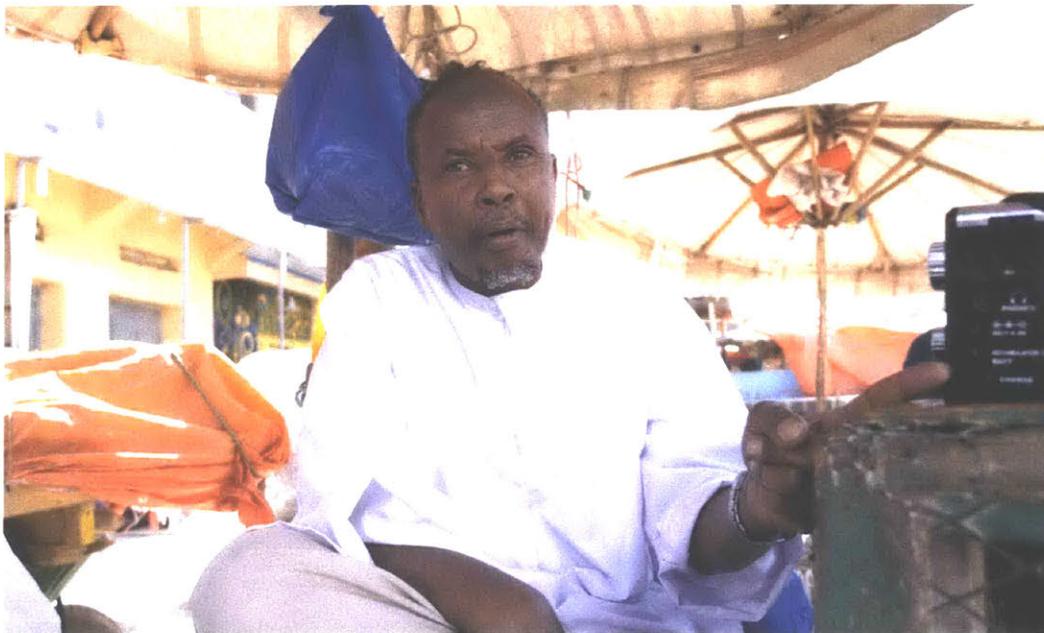


Figure 2 - A shopkeeper proudly tells me about his independence from money transfers. It surprised me to find that in at least half of the nearly 20 interviews I conducted people said the end of wire transfers could be a good thing. For example, the shopkeeper depicted in Figure 2 felt that less people would sit around chewing khat – a popular plant

that is used as a stimulant drug. He felt that people would be forced to do more with their time if they were not supported by relatives abroad. I am unsure if answers like this were out of pride and a reaction to the pressure of filming because, “Somaliland remittance is by far the biggest contributor to the economy (i.e. 54% of the country’s GDP)”<sup>8</sup>. I hit a deadlock on the topic of remittance and only students would admit to their heavy reliance on money transfers from relatives abroad.

It was then that by chance I was confronted with death through a new form of knowledge from the past: forensic anthropology. I met José Pablo Baraybar, the Executive Director of the Peruvian Forensic Anthropology Team (EPAF) and learned about their exhumation of mass graves. I learned about the over 200 mass graves in Somaliland. I learned about how in the middle of 1988, the Somali government used collective punishment on all the people of the north because of a group of rebels, known as the Somali National Movement (SNM). I learned about how they sent mercenary fighter pilots from South Africa and alongside the Somali Air force bombarded its own people.

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<sup>8</sup> “The Role of Remittance in the Economic Development of Somaliland.” SomalilandPress, accessed May 10, 2019. <http://unohrlls.org/news/the-role-of-remittance-in-the-economic-development-of-somaliland/>.

## *Walking in the Footsteps of the Forensic Anthropologists*

“‘Would a post-mortem examination have told us something you wouldn’t want us told?’ said he to the corpse. ‘What if we had you cut up and re-stitched, what if we had science do its bit, would that reveal an untoward secret?’”<sup>9</sup>

**Nurridin Farah**, *Sweet and Sour Milk*

I began filming everyday with the forensic team and documented all of their processes over the next two weeks. I was confronted with the idea that it could have been me in the graves and the fact that members of my family were killed by the Somali government. On the first day, José Pablo Baraybar described the city of Hargeisa as a giant graveyard. The new knowledge of a lack of separation between the living and the dead changed the way I perceived everything I saw.

EPAF conducts their forensic anthropology investigations in the interests of justice and the humanitarian needs of victims’ families. Through the organization of a field school, EPAF mobilizes international and Somali students to help locate, examine, exhume and analyze mass graves for approximately one month every year. Their time limitations are due to a lack of external funding and the availability of the international students. The students pay a course fee and this covers the costs associated with the field work.

In Somaliland, their work brings attention to the existence of the mass graves. It provides evidence in an environment of competing truths and tribal narratives. EPAF’s

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<sup>9</sup> Farah, Nuriddin, *Sweet and sour milk*. (London: Allison & Busby, 1979). 22.

forensic investigations became my primary source of information on what happened. I wanted to follow and document all of their work because it felt like it had the potential to change a lot. It was my entry point to a history I never knew existed. At a rate of one exhumation site per year, the over 243 suspected mass graves across the region means their work is not necessarily a solution in itself but rather a start. They train local Somalis with the international students and significantly increase the capacity of the Somaliland's War Crimes Investigation Committee (WCIC).

Before their work, only the approximate locations of alleged mass graves were known. Through interviews with local witnesses, EPAF staff determine where to dig and later work with victims' relatives to identify the remains after exhumation. In most cases, the families know when the Somali government took their relatives, where they were detained then tortured and sometimes when they were executed. I filmed at the mass grave sites in Gabiley, just outside of Hargeisa.

One day, I noted that there were piles of small rocks next to the suspected burial location. I was told that school children maintain a ritual of tossing rocks near the grave in an effort to show respect for the brutally murdered. Until that moment, I imagined the mass grave sites as an invisible part of the subterranean landscape and now seeing three decades of small rocks in unorganized piles, I felt a type of poetic appreciation for the diverse ways in which people remember.

Looking back, I do question what good science (or knowing, uncovering the "truth"?) can do, especially in an unrecognized state with a significant lack of funding. DNA tests are not available and remains are difficult to identify through clothing and dental work alone. EPAFs work brings attention to the atrocities but cannot provide all

of the much-needed answers. In the process, life is interrupted and loved ones are forced to relive the atrocities of the past.

## *A Television Film (2016)*

Later that year, a fellow filmmaker and I pitched a commissioning editor from Al Jazeera English. We won a full commission to co-direct our proposed project, “Kill All but the Crows” for the People & Power series. It felt like the best way I could contribute and I was excited to bring attention to the work of EPAF and the existence of the mass graves. In 2016, we returned to Somaliland with a filming schedule of 15 days and a film crew. The film we made is entitled *Kill All but the Crows (2016)*.

*Kill All but the Crows (2016)* follows the interconnected stories of survivors in Somaliland - such as Aziz Deria, a Somalilander who has lost many family members to the Barre regime. The film also follows Jose Pablo Barabyar, a world-renowned Peruvian forensic anthropologist and Kathy Roberts, an American human rights lawyer at the Centre for Justice and Accountability (CJA). Together, they work to bring to justice one of Siad Barre’s most brutal killers: Colonel Yusuf Abdi Ali (nicknamed “Tukeh”, which coincidentally means “crow” in Somali). Despite being a known war criminal Col. Tukeh now lives freely in Fairfax, Virginia.

During the production, we knew we had to more or less conform to the television format regularly used in the series. For *Kill All but the Crows (2016)*, this meant a voice introduction to the film, almost wall-to-wall narration by a British-sounding voice actor, and lots of talking head interviews. It also meant a limit on the number of characters present in the film and a greater emphasis on searching and confronting the alleged war criminal (Colonel Yusuf Abdi Ali) than on the healing of Somalilanders in the film.

One of the comments we received during the editing process was that we needed to limit the number of victims giving their accounts in the film. The broadcaster wanted to keep it simple. Below, Table 3 shows a list of all the contributors present in the film.

Table 3 - Contributors in “Kill All But the Crows” Film

<b>Name</b>	<b>Role</b>
Aziz Deria	Activist and Relative of Victim
José Pablo Baraybar	Director of the Peruvian Forensic Anthropology Team (EPAF)
Trusten Frank Crigler	Former U.S. Ambassador to Somalia (1987-1990)
Dr. Hussein A. Bulhan	Doctor and Academic
Ibrahim Mohamed Abdullahi	Tractor Driver for Malko Durduro Mass Grave
Farhan Warfaa	Plaintiff in case against Colonel Ali
Ahmed F. Adare	Somaliland Minister of Justice and Judicial Affairs
Zaynab Nour Alin	Wife of Victim
Kathy Roberts	Attorney of Fahran Warfaa
Joseph Drennan	Attorney of Yusuf Ali (Colonel Tukeh)
Ahmed Aw Musa Madar	Brother of Burned Victim
(Group of Three)	Sheikhs from Somaliland Ministry of Religious Affairs
Hussien Ciisa Ahmed	Tractor Driver for Gabiley graves
Zaynab Nour Alin	Wife of Victim

There are a number of contributors that are not present in the film. For example, Kosar Osman, the brother of a victim that was tied and dragged behind a military truck across the city for all to see, is not in the film. While we were filming Kosar took us to his brother’s old house. We interviewed him in that location and it brought back all his painful memories of his brother. I left the interview thinking that it was one of our strongest. Kosar and a dozen other interviewees, archives, landscapes and sounds are missing. This is one of the main reasons the television version is only my first attempt and not a final one. Looking back, I feel we behaved irresponsibly by focusing on our objectives and to a degree assuming our contributors understood that the filming process contains no guarantees. I would not know what to say to any of the contributors that are not present in the film.

At the time, it was my first one-hour documentary film and involved multiple contributors. I felt the more stories I could capture, the better. As I increasingly realized how much of the content would not be present in the television version, I put my hope into creating an interactive website with videos of all the contributors - originally this was a possibility as part of our Al Jazeera commission but as oil prices decreased in 2016, Al Jazeera's state funding from Qatar was impacted and the offer for an interactive website was withdrawn.

I still feel the weight of all those unheard stories and a responsibility to the pain I caused in recording them. When filming, often one contributor leads you to the next. It feels unfair to take one and not the other, giving us the role of narrative gatekeepers. It is as if we treated our interviewees like expandable assets for the medium. We stored them all so we could analyze then trade one narrative for another, depending on what would resonate more with an audience. I now wonder how similar this is to the decision-making process of the forensic anthropologist in Somaliland, with so many alleged grave sites, how can you choose? And more importantly, who are we to choose?

### *Walking in the Footsteps of the War Criminals*

While our film crew tried to be respectful, I feel that before I can return to this project, I must acknowledge the pain we caused. Somalis are very welcoming to the requests of guests and it is not every day a group of foreigners is interested in something you have to say. Filming an interview with us was a choice for each contributor to weigh and we were transparent about where the film was going to be broadcasted. Our film crew attempted to be empathetic and attempted to make our contributors comfortable through

all the usual superficial comforts during interviews (like water and seating) but none of us were trained in dealing with victims of trauma.

In some ways, we inadvertently retraced the footsteps of the war criminals from 30 years ago. We visited the same locations, starting with the graves then working back to the barracks and eventually reaching victims in the homes where their relatives were snatched. We prompted the retelling of stories that cause echoes of the same trauma that the Somali government inflicted all those years back. Imagine describing your worst day on earth to a film crew (we were always at least 4 people), breaking down crying in front of your family during the interview, and then finding out that your contribution did not make the cut of the film when it broadcasts. Even those present in the film need to deal with the constant trigger of their narrative being broadcasted to a global public. Looking back at the filming process, I wonder how I could tell a more dignified truth today? How I can avoid inflicting more pain while at the same time returning to the topic?

One of the key features of *Kill All but the Crows* is the use of military archival footage filmed by Somali officers themselves for their military commanders back in Mogadishu. The reign of Siad Barre lasted from 1969 to 1990 and during the mid to late 1980s the dictator's rule was challenged by a separatist movement called the Somali National Movement (SNM). As efforts to quash the SNM rebels increased, the Somali Armed Forces increasingly indiscriminately targeted all members of the Isaaq clan as a form of collective punishment. This led to the mass atrocities that were committed.

The military used film for their documentation and to communicate what a good job they were. In Somali, we refer to the tragic events they documented as "Xasuuqii ." Africa Watch estimated the Somali government murdered over 50,000 Isaaq

noncombatants from June 1988 to January 1990<sup>10</sup>. Other journalists and people in Hargeisa estimate up to 200,000<sup>11</sup> women, men and children were executed and buried in the mass graves. The actual number of murdered citizens is a constant point of dispute, an unknown, especially because the limited use of forensics has only uncovered a fraction of the deceased.

The military archival footage shows Somali generals planning and carrying out the decimation of Hargeisa. The tapes were discovered in the dictators mansion after he fled the country. A meeting of military commanders shows them discussing the details of the campaign. The transcript reads as follows:

“Attack and eliminate them. Kill even the wounded. Destroy water sources and reservoirs. Burn down villages, pillage and kill their residents, everything. Whoever submits, tell him his medicine is in the ground, and bury him there. You must eliminate all. Allow no activity, no life. Kill all but the crows.”

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<sup>10</sup> “Somalia: A Government at War With Its Own People,” The Africa Watch Report Committee, (London: The Africa Watch Report Committee, 1990). accessed May 10, 2019  
<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/02/investigating-genocide-somaliland-20142310820367509.html>

<sup>11</sup> Investigating genocide in Somaliland. James Reinl, accessed May 10, 2019.  
<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/02/investigating-genocide-somaliland-20142310820367509.html>.

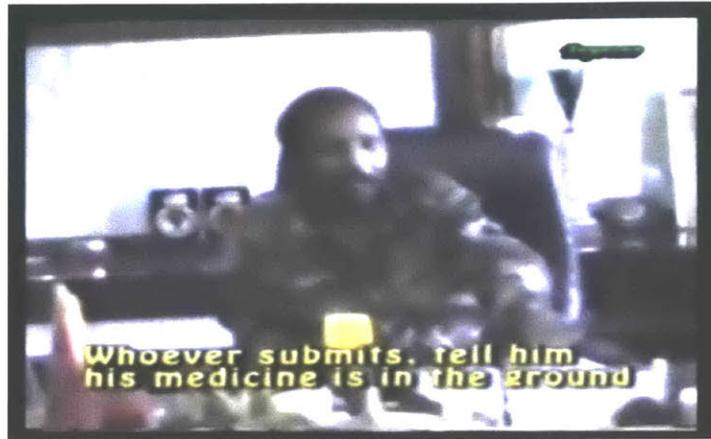
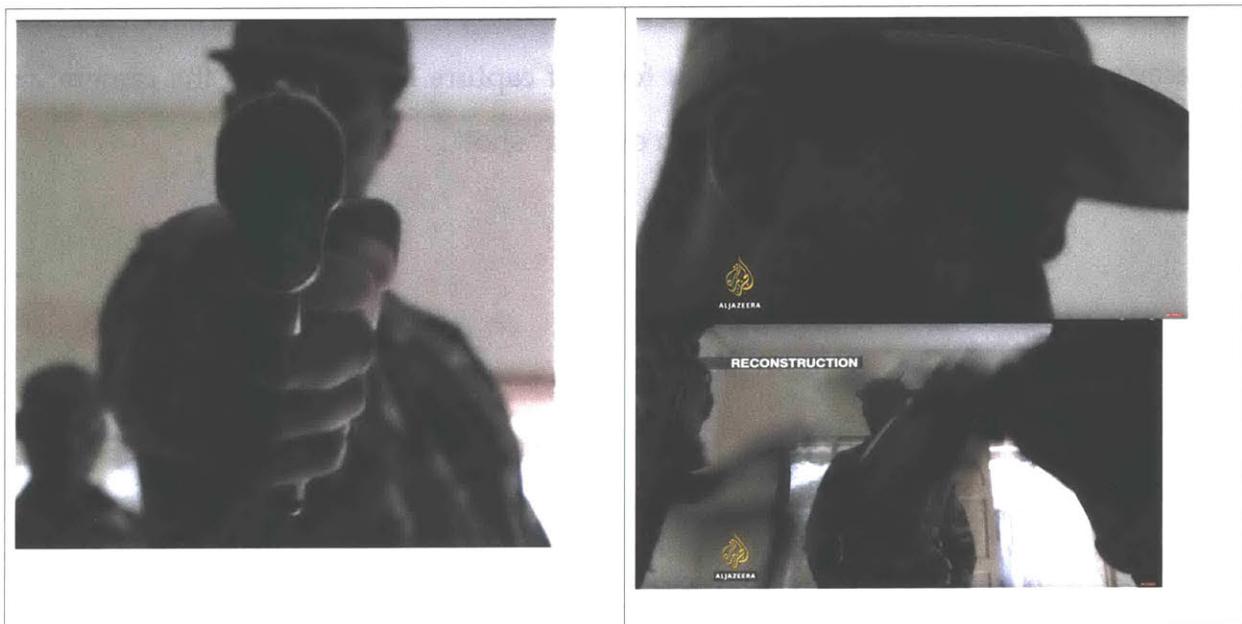


Figure 3 - Still frame from leaked Somali military footage

During our filming in Somaliland, we wrote in a reenactment of a time Colonel Tukeh allegedly shot a man (Fahran Warfaa) 6 times at close range, shortly after an attack on the prison by SNM. In this recreation, I played the role of Colonel Tukeh because we did not have budget to pay a professional actor. I wore similar clothes to the Somali military colonel and I depicted the motions a torturer did over 30 years ago.

Table 4 - Still Frames from "Kill All but the Crows" Reenactment



It felt awkward and like a sudden switch of allegiance, going from interviewing the victim in this torture scenario to suddenly playing the perpetrator. I attempted to channel the anger Colonel Tukeh must have felt after a military confrontation at his base with the rebels he was meant to be suppressing. It was the first time I can remember holding a gun and certainly the first time I ever wore a military uniform.

My experiences in the making of the television version of *Kill All but the Crows* implanted my view that in documenting the crimes of war, one might unintentionally reenact echoes of the alleged war criminal. Step where they stepped, bring memories of the same pains they caused and, in that way, enter their shoes. Today, I relate this experience to the parallels other artists and writers have made between the tools filmmakers hold (cameras) and the tools war criminals hold (guns).

The early prototypes for cameras even looked like a gun: Étienne-Jules Marey created a fixed-plate chronophotographer in the Victorian Era (late 19th century) that was shaped like a gun. Is this the true shape of the camera I was pointing at survivors? I see Marey's camera as proof of the violent form of capture inherent with the camera: you point and shoot. Filmmakers today even call it a "shot".



Figure 4 - Étienne-Jules Marey's chronophotographer

"Just as weapons and armour developed in unison throughout history, so visibility and invisibility now began to evolve together, eventually producing invisible weapons that make things visible."<sup>12</sup>

**Paul Virilio, War and Cinema**

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<sup>12</sup> Virilio, Paul, *War and cinema: The logistics of perception*, (London: Verso, 1989), 71.

“The return of the traumatic experience in the dream is not the signal of the direct experience but, rather, of the attempt to overcome the fact that it was not direct, to attempt to master what was never fully grasped in the first place.”<sup>13</sup>

Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*

## 5. Digitally Going Back

What does it mean to return to my 2015 material in order to reconstruct something new? I cannot physically go back to Somalia at the moment but through the footage I shot in 2015, I have an archive of first impressions. The footage I shot in 2016 is owned by Al Jazeera Media Network and I have decided against requesting permission to use it at this point. I find my early impressions of Somaliland to be more honest. I am interested in unpacking the ways I related to the forensic anthropologists and to the surroundings. The goal in the next chapters will be to build fragments of these impressions from the individual shots, then to discuss outside inspiration and finally to speculate how to render an honest experience of it all in cinematic form.

The act of returning to the footage feels more akin to a dream than I suspected. I have had four years to process the trip but what it means to me is always evolving and even this remains something I can never fully grasp. I do find I can remember some of the shots but often it takes seeing the visuals for my memory of filming it to return. I find myself avoiding the editing process because the reality depicted at the mass graves is

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<sup>13</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2016.), 62.

difficult to engage with and it is even harder to write about. There is still much I do not know, including my true motivations in returning to it and searching through it.

When I look at the footage, it is as if I travel and relive what I felt. I interpret what the images and sounds mean to me now. I interpret them after a multitude of events thanks to them: after having pitched a commission using them for the proposal, after having returned to the same site in 2016 to refilm them for television, after having edited what the television version required from their reshot versions, after having ignored much of them, after having tried to forget ever having worked with them. I reflect and resolve the complicity I feel in causing trauma through the filming of the television version. I search for new insight in order to rewrite what the footage means while generating the unanswerable questions that this thesis aims to verbalize into consciousness.

In Harun Farocki's film *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (1989), the film describes the early motivations for developing techniques for measurement by photograph as opposed to the dangers of climbing building facades for physical measurement: "A picture at your desk is safer." This feels like what I am doing. It is more dangerous for me to go back (perhaps not physically dangerous but I would be exposed to more unknowns) than to sit at my editing desk and work on the footage in isolation. I feel as though I am measuring the impact of the 2015 trip on my life through the images produced as opposed to physically returning and reengaging with the people of Somaliland directly.

A lot changed for me since 2015. Through this writing process, I realized I developed a memory of a war I never knew and I developed it through the act of filming others (the forensic anthropologists) investigating it. My memory is triggered by the

material stored on digital memory cards. The traumatic stories of people I interviewed are difficult to recall without referring to this digital memory.

On February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2018, my father passed away. He was my link to the past I never knew. I never had a chance to discuss what he thought of the television film. It is impossible for me to imagine his response because we never talked about the subject of the Somali Civil War at all. I know that for the majority of the time we lived in Canada, he held various governmental positions back in the newly independent and unrecognized state of Somaliland. I find myself searching for traces of him online now as I attempt to build an understanding of what his experiences of the war were. In a chronological report compiled by the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB) (see Figure 5), I find a reference to him as “Somaliland minister of resettlement and reconstruction.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> "Somalia Issues Paper Chronology of Events June 1994-April 1995," Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB), accessed May 10, 2019, [https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/eoir/legacy/2013/12/13/Issues\\_Paper\\_chronology\\_of\\_events\\_june\\_1994.pdf](https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/eoir/legacy/2013/12/13/Issues_Paper_chronology_of_events_june_1994.pdf)

## 1994

### 1 June

The president of the Republic of Somaliland, Mohamed Ibrahim Egal, accuses the UN special envoy of partiality in his efforts to reconcile the various Somali factions ( AFP 1 June 1994).

### 5 June

**Yusuf Jama Burale**, Somaliland minister of resettlement and reconstruction, updates the Somaliland press on the ministry's work with Somaliland refugees ( Voice of the Republic of Somaliland 5 June 1994). **Burale** reports that his government has held discussions with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) over the past eight months on the issue of repatriating refugees from neighbouring countries. **Burale** also states that the Somaliland government has explained to the UNHCR its planned preparations for their resettlement ( ibid.).

### 18 June

A peace accord is signed by nineteen southern Somali clan leaders, supporters of two main warring factions in Juba. The accord is endorsed by the leaders of the two factions, General Mohamed Said Hersi "Morgan" and Osman Ato ( AFP 19 June 1994; AFP 20 June 1994; *Keesing's* June 1994c, 40043). Osman Ato represents General Mohamed Farah Aidid's Somali National Alliance (SNA) ( ibid.), and

## Figure 5 - Traces of my Father online #1 (IRB Canada report)

While I was in high school, I know he worked in Ethiopia as a representative of Somaliland and attempted to help the state gain recognition as an independent country from Somalia. I find another reference to him in a google search result but cannot access the article anymore without paying for it; all I can see is what is shown in the google search description under the link (Figure 6), "... of his functions in Addis Ababa and replaced by Yusuf Jama Burale."

### SOMALILAND : Debate on Recognizing Israel ... - Africa Intelligence

<https://www.africaintelligence.com/ion/.../debate-on-recognizing-israel,11790170-art>

Oct 2, 2004 - A humanitarian initiative by Israel's **ambassador** to Ethiopia, Doron ... of his functions in Addis Ababa and **replaced by Yusuf Jama Burale**.

## Figure 6 - Traces of my Father online #2 (Google Search Result #1)

My father grew up during colonization under the British rule. He once told me that as a boy he would sneak into the colonial cinema, which I imagine as a tent with a projector

in it. He would sit up at the front and watch the new American and British films. My father does not know his exact birthday because he was born in a rural pastoral town, called Burao, and at the time birthdates were not recorded.

I have a lot of questions about his life and surely too many to list here. I know that as a teenager he was kicked out of high school for something like joining a communist club or I have heard another version where it was a socialist-leaning club that was calling for complete independence from the British – exactly what he was kicked out for is a question that lingers. Afterwards, he was sent to Moscow to study because of a group of elders with links to the USSR. While he was working for the Somali Republic's Foreign Department, the 1969 coup d'état occurred. Siad Barre was installed as the president through a new governing body, the Supreme Revolutionary Council (SRC). The country was renamed the Somali Democratic Republic<sup>15</sup>. I recently found a report from the year before the coup d'état (1968). I've included the title page in Figure 7 and the two relevant pages with references to my Father are shown in Figure 8 and Figure 9.

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<sup>15</sup> "Coup d'Etat," Library of Congress, accessed May 10, 2019, <http://countrystudies.us/somalia/20.htm>.

# UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON THE LAW OF TREATIES

First session  
Vienna, 26 March–24 May 1968

## OFFICIAL RECORDS

*Summary records of the plenary meetings  
and of the meetings  
of the Committee of the Whole*



UNITED NATIONS

Figure 7 - Traces of my Father online #3 (UN page)

*Experts*

M. Gwidon Rysiak.  
M<sup>me</sup> Renata Szafarz.

**Portugal**

*Représentants*

S.E. M. Armando de Paula Coelho, ambassadeur à Vienne (*chef de la délégation*).  
M. Luis Crucho de Almeida, assistant à la Faculté de droit de l'Université de Coimbra.  
M. Manuel de Sá Nogueira, ministre-conseiller d'ambassade.

**Republic of Korea**

*Representatives*

H.E. Mr. Yang Soo Yu, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to Austria (*Chairman of the Delegation*).  
Mr. Won Ho Lee, Counsellor, Embassy to Austria.  
Mr. Tae Woong Kwon, Second Secretary, Embassy to Switzerland.  
Mr. Chang Choon Lee, Treaty Section, Ministry of Foreign Affairs.  
Mr. Jae Tac Lim, Second Secretary, Embassy to Austria.

**Republic of Viet-Nam**

*Représentants*

S.E. M. Phan-Van-Thinh, ambassadeur extraordinaire et plénipotentiaire en Suisse et en Autriche (*chef de la délégation*).  
M. Trinh-Tich-Loan, conseiller d'ambassade, membre de l'ambassade en République fédérale d'Allemagne.  
*Secrétaire*  
M. Trần Kiêu, attaché d'ambassade, membre de l'ambassade en Suisse.

**Romania**

*Représentants*

S.E. M. Gheorghe Pele, ambassadeur extraordinaire et plénipotentiaire à Vienne (*chef de la délégation*).  
M. Gheorghe Saulescu, directeur, Département des traités, Ministère des affaires étrangères.  
M. Alexandru Bolintineanu, chef de la section de droit international public, Institut de recherches juridiques, Académie de la République socialiste de Roumanie.  
M. Gheorghe Secarin, conseiller juridique, membre du Ministère des affaires étrangères.  
M. Ioan Voicu, membre du Ministère des affaires étrangères.  
*Conseiller.*  
M. Iftene Pop, membre du Ministère des affaires étrangères.

**San Marino**

*Représentants*

S.E. M. Georges Filipinetti, ministre plénipotentiaire, chef de la délégation permanente auprès de l'Office des Nations Unies à Genève (*chef de la délégation*).  
M. Wilhelm Muller-Fembeck, consul général à Vienne.  
M<sup>me</sup> Clara Boscaglia, chef de cabinet du Secrétaire d'Etat aux affaires étrangères.  
M. Jean-Charles Munger, chancelier de la délégation permanente auprès de l'Office des Nations Unies à Genève.

**Saudi Arabia**

*Representative*

H.E. Mr. Aouney W. Dejanya, Ambassador, Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

**Senegal**

*Représentant*

M. Abdoulaye Diop, conseiller à la Cour suprême.

**Sierra Leone**

*Representatives*

H.E. Mr. Justice C.O.E. Cole, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, Permanent mission to the United Nations (*Chairman of the Delegation*).  
Mr. Abu A. Koroma, Attorney-General.  
Mr. P. E. B. Doherty, Principal Assistant Secretary, Department of External Affairs.

**Singapore**

*Representative*

Mr. Chao Hick Tin, Legal Officer, Attorney-General's Chambers.

**Somalia**

*Representatives*

Mr. Mohamed Saeed Samanter, Political Counsellor, Embassy in Rome (*Chairman of the Delegation*).  
Mr. Yusef Jama Burale, Acting Head of Treaty Service, Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

**South Africa**

*Representatives*

H.E. Mr. Johannes Van Der Spuy, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to Austria (*Chairman of the Delegation*).  
Mr. John Dudley Viall, Law Adviser, Department of Justice.  
Mr. Charles Brothers Hilson Fincham, Under-Secretary, Department of Foreign Affairs.  
Mr. Peter Hugh Philip, Minister-Counsellor, Embassy in Vienna.

**Spain**

*Representantes*

Sr. Federico de Castro, Catedrático de la Universidad de Madrid, Asesor Jurídico del Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores (*Jefe de la Delegación*).  
Sr. Santiago Martínez Caro, Secretario de Embajada, Asesor Jurídico Adjunto del Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores.

*Consejeros*

Sr. Antonio Poch, Ministro Plenipotenciario, Catedrático de Derecho Internacional.  
Sr. José Luis Lopez-Schümmer, Consejero de Embajada Director de Organizaciones Políticas Internacionales.  
Sr. Juan Ignacio Tena Ibarra, Secretario de Embajada.  
Sr. José Cuenca, Secretario de Embajada <sup>1</sup>.  
Sr. Julio González Campos, Profesor de la Universidad de Madrid.

*Secretario*

Sr. Ramón Villanueva, Secretario de la Embajada en Viena.

<sup>1</sup> El Sr. José Cuenca asumió las funciones de representante del 5 al 13 de abril.

Figure 8 - Traces of my Father online #4 (UN attendees list)

distinguishing treaties from agreements not intended to produce legal effects.

17. Mr. NETTEL (Austria), referring to sub-paragraph (iii) of the Hungarian amendment (A/CONF.39/C.1/L.23), observed that a declaration as to interpretation did not interpret the legal effect of certain provisions of a treaty: it interpreted those provisions in order to give them a certain legal effect in their application to the State making the declaration. He therefore proposed that the last part of article 2, paragraph 1 (d) should be drafted to read: "... whereby it purports to exclude or to vary the legal effect of, or to interpret, certain provisions of the treaty in their application to that State". He proposed that the matter should be referred to the Drafting Committee.

18. Mr. HAYES (Ireland) said that the effect of inserting the word "interpret", as proposed in the Hungarian amendment (A/CONF.39/C.1/L.23), would be to include in the category of reservations declarations intended to clarify a State's position. However, as was brought out in the International Law Commission's commentary, the rules applicable to reservations should not be extended to cover such declarations. The word "limit", in the Swedish amendment (A/CONF.39/C.1/L.11), and the word "restrict", in the amendment of the Republic of Viet-Nam (A/CONF.39/C.1/L.29), might not have that effect; if they did not they would not in any case add anything to the word "vary", which was already in the text. He was therefore opposed to those three amendments.

19. Sir Lalita RAJAPAKSE (Ceylon) observed that no substantive objection had been raised against the Ceylonese amendment (A/CONF.39/C.1/L.17). A reference to the use in treaties of the terms used in the draft articles would certainly be valuable. Many agreements used the term "contracting States", for example, in a sense differing from that given to it in article 2, paragraph 1. It might perhaps be better to add the words "or in any treaty". He would leave it to the Drafting Committee to find the best wording, but asked that the substance of his amendment should be maintained in its entirety.

20. Mr. OWUSU (Ghana) remarked that the many statements to which the amendments had given rise showed that at first sight they fell into three classes: substantive amendments, drafting amendments and mixed amendments. On further examination, however, an amendment which had seemed to be a drafting amendment might well turn out to be an amendment of substance. He therefore proposed that the Committee should defer decisions on the proposed amendments to article 2 of the draft articles before it until all the other draft articles had been fully discussed and decisions taken on them. He asked that the Committee should vote on that formal proposal after all the speakers on the Chairman's list had been given the floor.

21. Mr. BURALE (Somalia) commended the International Law Commission's work and expressed the view that the substance of article 2 required no amendment. It must be recognized, however, that the importance of international law had increased during the last few decades because the international community had understood the need to harmonize its efforts to ensure co-operation and understanding between States. General

multilateral treaties were of interest to all States and participation in them should be universal. His delegation therefore supported the eight-country amendment (A/CONF.39/C.1/L.19/Rev.1) inserting a definition of "general multilateral treaty" in article 2.

22. Mr. GON (Central African Republic) said he supported the amendment by Austria and Spain (A/CONF.39/C.1/L.1 and Add.1), which made the text of article 2, paragraph 1 (c) more precise. On the other hand, he was afraid the Chilean amendment (A/CONF.39/C.1/L.22) was too restrictive, for it drew a distinction between treaties which produced legal effects and those which did not, which seemed rather strange. The same comments applied to the Mexican and Malaysian amendment (A/CONF.39/C.1/L.33 and Add.1). The amendments in documents A/CONF.39/C.1/L.13, L.22 and L.23 related to reservations. In so far as they restricted the scope of reservations, his delegation supported them. It could not, however, accept the amendment in document A/CONF.39/C.1/L.19/Rev.1 at that stage. It was important that the draft should not be overloaded with unnecessary definitions; moreover, the commentary by the International Law Commission on the definition of multilateral treaties in the context of articles 2 and 12 showed the difficulties which would have to be overcome if a definition of that class of treaties was incorporated in the draft. The Commission had shown good sense in omitting that definition. The Central African delegation supported the French amendment (A/CONF.39/C.1/L.24). The definition of a restricted multilateral treaty filled a gap, for that type of treaty was referred to in article 17. Furthermore, the amendment took account of an existing situation in international law. His delegation thought that the final decision on article 2 should not be taken until the substantive articles had been examined.

23. Mr. MAIGA (Mali) referring to the amendments submitted, said that the fundamental problem in law was to find a firm basis to justify and enforce the legal rules. A definition of the term "treaty" would be valuable only if it corresponded to a basic reality. There were two essential elements to be taken into consideration: the agreement must be freely consented to and States were legally bound by it. The amendments by Ecuador (A/CONF.39/C.1/L.25) and France (A/CONF.39/C.1/L.24) took those elements into account. In view of the evolution of international life, the general multilateral treaty and the restricted multilateral treaty should be included in the definitions. His delegation therefore supported the amendments in documents A/CONF.39/C.1/L.19/Rev.1 and A/CONF.39/C.1/L.24.

24. Mr. BROCHES (Observer for the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development), speaking at the invitation of the Chairman, said he thought that the words "negotiating States" in the French amendment (A/CONF.39/C.1/L.24) might cause some difficulty. In using the term "negotiating States", it was assumed that the text of a treaty would invariably be formulated by States, whether in direct negotiations, or at an international conference, or in a plenary organ of an international organization. In certain cases a different technique had been used, especially with respect to three multilateral treaties concluded under the auspices of the Bank: the

Siad Barre and the SRC were supported by the Soviet Union. My Father was one of the few Russian speaking trained diplomats and for the next 25 years he worked as an ambassador for Siad Barre, including representing the Somali regime at the African Union and in the Arab League. This means he worked for the same Somali government that would later cause mass atrocities and completely destroy his hometown of Burao in northern Somalia. My Mother told me that my Father saved the dictator, Siad Barre, from two separate coup attempts by giving him forewarning – she excuses it by saying, if he didn't share the information and the coup attempts failed, the information trail would have led back to him.

Sometime in the late 1980s, perhaps shortly after the bombardment in north Somalia (I am not sure when), my Father defected and joined the Somali National Movement (SNM). The SNM along with a number of other Somali rebel organizations, including the Somali Salvation Democratic Front in the northeast (Puntland) and the United Somali Congress in the South, eventually deposed Siad Barre in 1991 and sent him into exile – in 1995, Siad Barre died in Nigeria. I find it strange that I can find no online traces of my Father's work from 1969 to 1991 or anything regarding his time working under Siad Barre. The only possible link I found with information leads to a broken website. Under the google search description, it lists his name and the words "Very Senior Diplomat" shown in Figure 10.

### February 2016 – Page 3 – Hadhwanaag News

[wp.hadhwanaagnews.ca/2016/02/page/3/](http://wp.hadhwanaagnews.ca/2016/02/page/3/)

Feb 29, 2016 - 3- Yusuf Jama Burale, Very Senior Diplomat. 4- Maxamed Sh .... Hadhwanaagnews  
marnaba masuul kama aha Aragtida dadka kale. Qoraaga ...

Figure 10 - Traces of my Father online #6 (Google Search Result #2)

From the online traces I found, I can put together a vague picture of his professional life: my Father worked for the Somali Republic's Ministry of Foreign Affairs department, then Siad Barre took over in a coup and a veil of invisibility took reign (at least with respect to online traces). Afterwards, from 1994 onwards, his visibility online slightly returns.

Moving forward, I want to use the footage I have on memory cards to piece together not only traces of my memory in 2015 but also to reveal new information about what the war means to me now and to answer remaining questions about my Father. The last footage I have of him is from that 2015 trip and it is stored on the same memory cards that hold footage of mass graves and victim interviews. In other words, in my digital memory, my Father and the war footage I filmed live side by side. In the rare appearances of my Father on the memory cards, he is driving me around or drinking tea and discussing the news with his friend. The promise of an interview with Dad always lingered. My investigations into Somaliland's past kept us from spending more time together because I filmed the forensic investigation work every day: it was like the Somali Civil War separated us again. It felt as if without knowing more, I could not randomly bring up the topic with him because there was too much I did not understand. Perhaps if I grew up knowing more about what happened, I could have arrived prepared with the questions I have today.

“The cinematic account may in fact be far from ‘smooth’ – it is often deliberately unsmooth and oblique – but we still feel the urgency of completion, even of abstract and ‘impossible’ connections.”<sup>16</sup>

David MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image*

## 6. Translating Footage into Experience

The question remains, how can I contextualize what still does not make sense to me? My experience of the Somali Civil War is from recording footage of forensic anthropologists as they investigate the past. I have over 25 memory cards documenting the 15-day trip from start (in the airport) to finish (final interviews with the forensic volunteers). I also conducted witness interviews and collected historical archives of the military destruction, colonial period and reconstruction efforts afterwards.

The task of translation begins with recognizing my own changes in perception: how do I view the footage differently now? In this chapter, I describe my first iterations working with the footage and not the changes as I recognize them. I’ve never edited without knowing where I intend to go. I describe the process of editing footage instinctually. I allow the material to tell me what it wants to become, filtered through my current understanding, which is constantly evolving. Each day I feel differently and each day the type of cuts I choose create a different atmosphere and highlight different elements of what I am searching for.

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<sup>16</sup> MacDougall, David, *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography, and the Senses*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 25.

The translation starts internally (invisible) from subconscious connections in memory to recognition in order to render those connections into a visible experience. The process starts within and involves detaching my connections from the original intentions when I was filming. My objective is to take the audience on a journey that is truer to the grappling and psychological state involved in editing now and filming back then: a process of discovery and unfolding.

As mentioned earlier, the word “Xasuuqi” does in a general sense mean massacre but in Somaliland it is used to refer to the specific bombardment and mass killings of 1988 in Hargeisa. The working title *Xasuuqii means massacre* is itself a translation and symbolizes my shift from a documentary filmmaker to a translator of experience.

### *First Iteration*

I first approached the material using only my memory. I did not search through the material from beginning to end. I pushed myself to remember which impressions from 2015 endured even after the 2016 filming. On one of the memory cards, I remembered José Pablo Baraybar (the lead forensic investigator) saying, “the thing that strikes me the most is that this place is a cemetery and you got this coexistence of the living and the dead.” I feel those words guided my imagination of the past during this first edit.

The first image I associated José Pablo’s view that Hargeisa is a giant cemetery with was street sweeping. While walking through Hargeisa after midnight, my cousin and I found the street sweepers. They sweep at the dust, unable to clean the streets. Every night street cleaners attempt to rid the streets of the never-ending dust. It is endless and feels like a futile effort. The environment is full of dust everywhere and seeing pavement, unless it is behind an enclosed wall, is a rare site. I associate this with the policy of

“forgive and forget”. As much as they attempt to clean it away, the past is always present. The trauma of the Somali Civil War and the destruction is ever-present, whether the administration in Hargeisa or Mogadishu recognizes that pain or not. The street sweeping also foreshadows the digging that takes place during the forensic scenes in later cuts.



Figure 11 – Still frame #1, *Xasuuqii means Massacre* (1st iteration), sweeping streets

I then intercut the street sweeping with the military archive of the massacre planning in Figure 11 (same archival clip as mentioned in Figure 3) to make the connection visible. From the sound of sweeping, you suddenly are confronted with a foreign language and subtitles that are so grotesque they are difficult to understand, “kill all but the crows”.

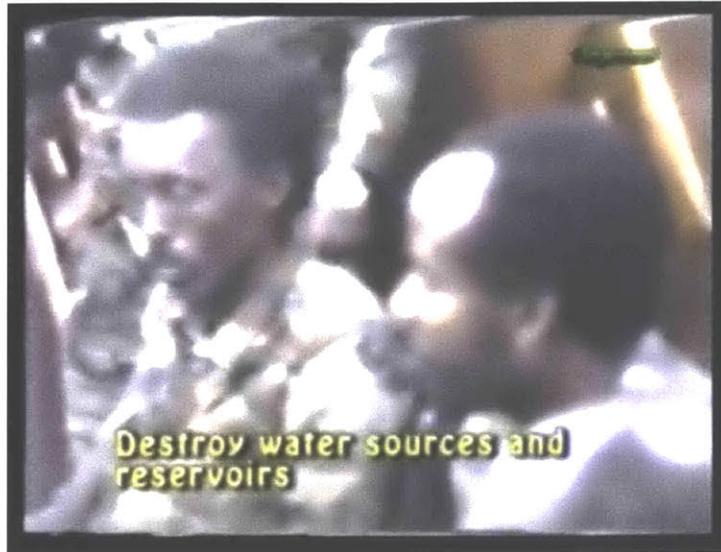


Figure 12 - Still frame #2, *Xasuuqii means Massacre* (1st iteration), military archive

I then instinctually made a cut to my father. I wonder how much he knew about their planning. Did he hear about it before it happened or only once it was too late? If he did know, what else could he have done other than quit his governmental position and join the rebel movement. We first see his hands in two separate frames, depicted in Figure 13 and Figure 14.



Figure 13 - Still frame #3, *Xasuuqii means Massacre* (1st iteration), Dad's right hand



Figure 14 - Still frame #4, *Xasuuqii means Massacre* (1st iteration), Dad's left hand



Figure 15 - Still frame #5, *Xasuuqii means Massacre* (1st iteration), Dad blurred

After both the hands, we see his face blurred as shown in Figure 15. It slowly comes into focus. I imagined my Father driving me into the past. Each of his hands carry traces of interactions with men responsible for those crimes, in the past they were colleagues. The opposing hands makes me think of different directions, perhaps self-preservation versus the risk of fighting for what one believes in. He is blurred and fuzzy, difficult to understand. One time when we were sitting in a café, I asked him if he could tell me a principle of diplomacy. He answered by telling me that the key is to gain as much information as you can while divulging as little information as you can. The first edit then cuts back to military archive again, as depicted in Figure 16.



Figure 16 - Still frame #6, *Xasuuqii means Massacre* (1st iteration), military archive

The second use of the military archive is focusing on the action of bombardment. The soldiers stand on a hill close to the Hargeisa airport and not far from the hotel I stayed at in Hargeisa. The captions now brag about a successful mission. I am not implying that my Father is responsible for the bombardment but rather loosely connecting the complicity of his generation. At this point, I made another instinctual cut from memory, I chose to show firsthand testimony of my cousin, as depicted in Figure 17.

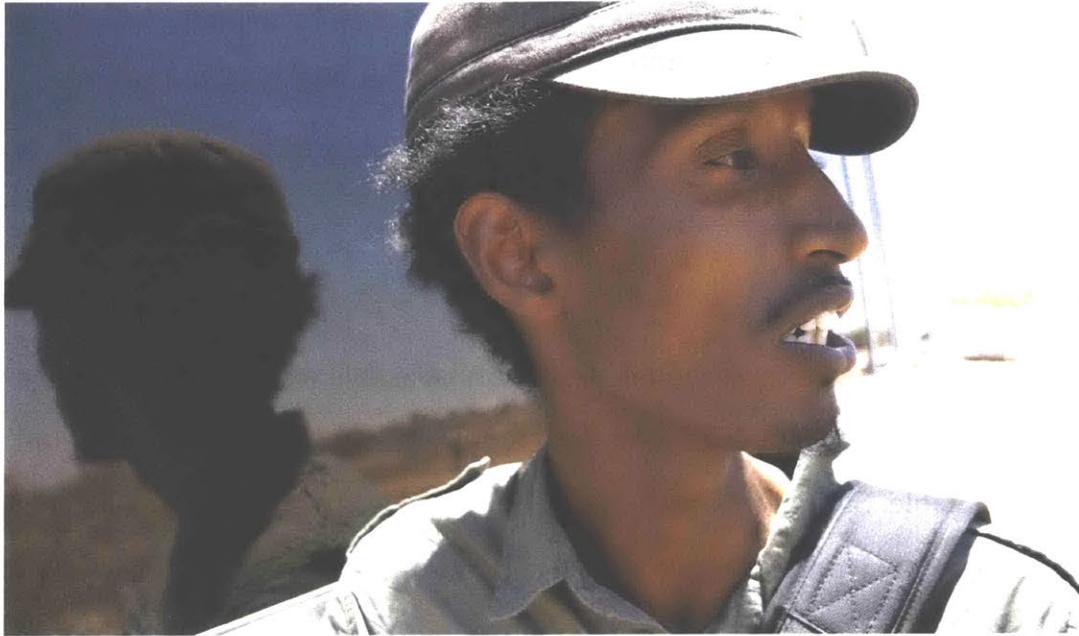


Figure 17 - Still frame #7, *Xasuuqii means Massacre* (1st iteration), cousin

My cousin and I met for the first time in 2015. He grew up in Kuwait and studied civil engineering in Russia. We grew up in separate worlds but immediately connected when we met. Hearing him describe what it was like escaping the bombardment at night is probably my most salient memory of all. He describes how they were targeting civilians, including women and children. The cut ends as he finishes his testimony.

The first iteration is 5 minutes and is difficult for an audience to understand without a text such as this to outline the significance of each visual element. One can recognize that the film takes place in a foreign place, likely somewhere in Africa. From the archival footage, it can be seen that a military operation took place and that it involved bombardment. The significance of my father is coded. The testimony of my cousin sheds some light on the effects of the military bombardment but all other contextual information is not present. I feel that the first iteration successfully achieves the mood I

was aiming for. My main lesson from this first cut that was driven by memory is that the street sweeping and the military archival footage create a tone that is useful for future iterations. You can access the first iteration using this link (the runtime is 5 minutes): <https://vimeo.com/334358051/d263165333>.

## *Second Iteration*

When I returned to the footage for a second iteration, my objective was to try to integrate the minimal amount of contextual information required and to make the overall experience more relatable. Still, at this point, I did not thoroughly go through all of the material. I chose to again work with my memory of the material, finding the shots I wanted to work with by stumbling upon them on the many memory cards.

The second iteration is 10 minutes and begins with the title card, “Never had I ever been to Somalia.” The title cards act as a type of narration voice. I feel that the lack of voice-over allows for the sound and image in the cut to take precedent over anything else. Audiences must rely on interpreting what they see. I attempted to avoid making these cards too direct and rather tried to “speak nearby” the images presented. It was not about the dissemination of information but rather expression of a series of moods and impressions. For example, “never had I ever been to Somalia” sounds childish and playful. It is indirect and somewhat coded, all shades of narration I wanted to experiment with.

The first shot in the second iteration is the exterior of an airplane with people waiting to board their flight. Once everyone is on board, a passenger walking through the aisle first moves forward towards the center of the screen and then suddenly walks in reverse, back towards the background. The image is depicted in Figure 18. The footage moves in reverse because I thought of this point on the flight, before we are in the air, as

the absolute last point I could have abandoned the trip. What if I got of the plane in Ethiopia and never went to Somalia in 2015? What if we could reverse the past and choose to not know?



Figure 18 - Still frame #8, *Xasuuqii means Massacre* (2nd iteration), walking in reverse



Figure 19 - Still frame #9, Xasuuqii means Massacre (2nd iteration), plane landing

The audience can relate to the experience more because the idea of flying and traveling somewhere exotic is more relatable. We know it is Somalia from the title cards and that it is my first time there. In this iteration, we meet my father immediately after we arrive at the Hargeisa airport. This cut can be described as I arrive, I meet my guide into the past, I sense the city that was before, I am told about the bombardment, I imagine the past people and the subterranean, the invisible. As my father describes the city, the camera looks out of the window and eventually two images overlay over top of each other, as depicted in Figure 20.



Figure 20 - Still frame #10, *Xasuuqii means Massacre* (2nd iteration), double exposure

The use of double exposures enables me to create impossible images that hint at the presence of another dimension. If Hargeisa is a giant cemetery, then how can I represent those we cannot see? In Figure 20, the disorientation of arriving in a place is represented through the classic use of a Dutch angle. The past peoples and further imbalance then culminate into the consistent use of double exposure. We somehow see even more people and vehicles present in frame.

The aesthetic quality is visibly rough at times: it's shaky, out of focus and is more conducive to experimental cutting. I show more in a cut than I would normally show. For example, in the car as I look out of the window, the camera zooms in then out, attempting to focus before the shot is framed. Then before the driving tour and disorientation process is over, the footage is reversed again – this frame is depicted in Figure 21.



Figure 21 - Still frame #11, *Xasuuqii means Massacre* (2nd iteration), reverse in car

By reversing time, I imagine or at least play with the idea of being able to return to the past in order to rewrite it. In this case, the reversal is used to expose something new, something I found while searching through the footage in multiple ways: a moment where I am accidentally shown in a mirror. The edit pauses for a beat on this frame, allowing the audience to take note of me in the mirror (Figure 21). My presence on camera (through reflections and my hands) helps to clarify the intention that the film is my subjective experience translated, almost like a road film. Like in *Man With a Movie Camera*, I act as the translation vassal that gives the context of the footage – instead of the story involving various large cities in USSR, it is my discovery of Somaliland.

After seeing me, the same shot from Figure 21 pans towards my Father and he is introduced using a title card: “My Dad is a retired Somali Ambassador. Born during colonization, he worked the cold war and lived in Hargeisa since the civil war.” I have received negative feedback regarding the placement of this title card because it occurs too late in the cut and goes unnoticed – meaning, that if I am having a title card for a character in the film, convention dictates that I should use it when that character is first introduced.

The next title card says, “with no international banks, Somalis rely on money transfers.” The footage in the money transfer branch is of a different style. Suddenly the cutting pace becomes less experimental and takes on a more conventional documentary tone whereby there is intercutting within the scene between the characters (myself and Dad). The actions we see feel like they are in real-time or rather more continuous, as if the camera is following us as time unfolds naturally. My Father and I exchange money and misunderstand each other.

In the next series of shots, a similar tone of intercutting to what I described in the first iteration takes place. I attempt to achieve the same tone but through a different arrangement of shots. Now it starts with military archival footage then drone footage and finally the street sweeping shots. The title cards do not continue at this point – this was not necessarily a conscious decision. In the drone shots, as depicted in Figure 22, I use double exposure in much the same way I did outside of the car window. The audio is testimony of a witness to the bombardment. It is old quality and cuts out, almost like she is undergoing bombardment as she speaks.



Figure 22 - still frame #12, *Xasuuqii means Massacre* (2nd iteration), drone shots

In this second iteration, I consider the military archival footage (same as in Figure 16) to represent more of a film within a film – borrowing again from *Man With a Movie Camera*. It services as the bridge into Somaliland’s dark past and opens up a parallel timeline. Meaning, we have myself discovering Somaliland in the present and we have shots of a crime in the past unfolding. Shots like the double exposure driving and drone shots in a way fit in between the two different story lines. While I was unsuccessful in achieving the layering of story in this cut, the thought sets up an interesting idea to experiment with in future work.

After the military archive showing the bombardment, images of dirt and digging during daytime attempt to foreshadow the presence of forensic anthropologists later in the cut. When I see the mass grave, the unearthing and exhumation, I now feel they appear to be arbitrarily placed. While I attempted to hint at the presence of mass graves

through digging within the city, it is not set-up clearly enough and perhaps title cards could have helped this part of the second iteration.

I see value in how the second cut ends: it shows images of my relatives over top of the open mass graves. I was directly stating: it could have been me or any of my relatives that were brutally murdered and then thrown in the grave. Each image shows a face looking forward and then in profile, in reference to a mug shot, while we can still see remains from the site in the background.



Figure 23 - still frame #13, Xasuuqii means Massacre (2nd iteration), another cousin

The second cut can be accessed here: <https://vimeo.com/318383671> and using the password: "zach".

## *Third Iteration*

One of the reasons I describe the first two iterations to an almost shot by shot description, in the last two subsections, is that I want you, the reader, to become familiar with the material on the memory cards. The first two iterations were not organic. They were constructed top-down using the memory I still have of 2015. I do not feel I translated any specific experience effectively. I do find aspects of each of the first iterations to be interesting, especially in relaying the type of tone I am interested in. I never intended for either of those attempts to be conclusive. I think of them as best guesses that were used to get me over the static friction that prevents one from starting something new.

The challenge now is to go back and gain exposure with the minute details of the footage free from prior expectations and thoughts while filming. To open up to the vast endless potential of what critical inquiry into one's self with experimental cutting techniques can yield. To look at each moment in each shot as a potential shade to make visible and to interpret it given the knowledge and understanding of the war I now have. In order to do so, at this point, it became clear that a more systematic and thorough approach to editing was necessary.

In this new approach, I scroll through each shot/clip multiple times, forwards and then again backwards. Each memory card holds about 40 clips, depending on the length of each shot. On average, I filmed about three memory cards a day but some days I filmed up to 5. The first phase of this process is to create 2-3minute sequences from each memory card or in the least from each day (if most of the footage in a day does not feel relevant), as a way of refamiliarizing myself with all the shots.

Each shot I edit into the sequence has its own prescribed length based on the content it contains and what came before it. I do no worry about how to shape the

individual sequences at this point or about how to assemble all of the disparate sequences. I continue to search instinctually. I do not necessarily have an objective of what I am searching for but rather a way of looking at the footage. I conduct my search for the sake of knowing what questions to inquire about the past and about my father.

As I gain comfort with the footage, I can feel it lose its weight and the power that it once had over me. At times, it feels like some of the footage is missing, mainly because I want there to be more. I wonder where all the mystery I have been avoiding is hiding. After a thorough review, all I can see are regular shots with much less weight than they once had. Material. Data. An imperfect capture of something that happened but was not understood.

Sometimes I can hear people talking about within the shots. My search unveils a new interpretation of how I understand I was perceived. In one case, they assume I am from America. I can hear them speculate on what I might be filming. In another case, when I was filming in the car, I could hear people outside talking about the filming, telling me to stop and hiding their faces. Much of this went unnoticed during production.

Whereas before in the previous iterations, I looked for what was framed attractively (like the street sweeping) and what was self-explanatory (like the action of arriving at an airport), I now search for what is hidden. At some points in the second iteration, I found the reveal of the mass graves to be explicit – this felt reminiscent of my qualms with the television version. Now I hide what there is to show. I look for the unintentional and I attempt to hide even my past intentions when I was filming. I work against what the footage was filmed for. I search for a deeper meaning into my state of mind then and what it means to me now, looking back.

When I film the forensic anthropologists as they analyze clothing and I work around their bodies and space to get new perspectives, it is as if I perform a forensic investigation on them, as they do so on distant relatives of mine. The exercise becomes more of an exploration into how I felt investigating my past when I was filming forensic anthropologists as they investigated another past, a type of double-layered inquiry.

The ability to detach myself from the original intentions of the footage produces interesting results. When I am able to look and see what is there and not necessarily see the memory of what was, I find more ways to adapt and uniquely interpret what is there. This is the development of the type of perspective I imagine Harun Farocki uses when editing material he shot but is now using in an unintended way. I would like to call this *farockonian lense*: the ability to detach myself from the original intentions of the footage. An ability to shape form from molded parts that serve a larger role in interpreting what I want to say; in my case, the shots help interpret what it means to be Somali, a refugee, a member of the diaspora, and to lose a parent.

I am tempted to apply new rules, like only being able to use the first one second and last one second of every clip. What type of film would this yield? How would I interpret it all differently?

I especially avoid faces, they somehow date the footage or lock it within a specific use and make it about a certain group of people. The film is becoming much more about the idea of the forensic archeologist and much less about them as them. Their hands work dutifully and perhaps at times against the desire of their minds and what they would rather be doing in that moment, maybe their faces betray their true intention – where their work means the world for us, it could just be a necessary task for them. A stepping stone for some.

The spaces between the shots feel magnified. I think about what is between people in the shots, the connections I was making through framing, focus and movement. From victims to the forensic investigators, the camera has unifying people when unity was not necessarily there. In the first iteration, I was creating comfortable barriers between shots and making things feel orderly and timely – moving at an expected pace. Now I implore more erratic cutting, repetitions, cutting to black, and rewinding – it almost feels like it would be tiring for the viewer. The viewer finds solace in the digging. Peace from the uncertainty and the panic of a camera constantly looking away. Suspenseful at times, not knowing where it is all going.

The fact that the frame rate is 30fps makes the footage feel sped up, abnormal, off-putting at times. In most occurrences, it feels like a lucky accident. I have been told that 30 frames per second is a frame rate used more regularly by journalists and tv news, some associate it more with something looking even more “real” but I feel all that is clear to us is that it is not 24fps and so it does not have that class cinematic look.

As I finish more sequences in this third iteration, I notice that it almost feels like I am protecting the audience, much like my parents protected me from the knowledge of the war. I am preventing them from having a full view but they can feel the psychological weight of the footage, just as I could, without knowing why.

By focusing on my own story, I no longer have to worry about disappointing any contributors. The exercise of recreating a film with new knowledge has been extremely healing, at least for me, the filmmaker. It enables me to fix past mistakes with techniques from filmmakers and artists I admire. Perhaps such a personal project is never done but rather forever in progress. In the next iteration, I approach the editing process more systematically.

## 7. Inspiration from VR and Essay Films

In recent years, there has been renewed enthusiasm for virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR) and mixed reality (MR) experiences. In 2016, corporations and venture capitalists invested two billion dollars in VR and related technologies - in 2018 this rose to five billion and by 2020, that figure is expected to grow to thirty billion dollars<sup>17</sup>. As new AR, VR and MR technologies continues to enter the market, more artists and filmmakers are taking advantage of the potential for artistic exploration and expression.

I find that VR and 360-degree experiences can be exciting but the technology feels very removed from my immediate environment – I have to seek it out or use it at home. I find the tools both VR and 360-degree experiences offers to be extremely effective in immersing users. I am excited by the technologies ability to loosen the boundaries of self during an experience and in doing so, the potential to enable makers to better translate unspeakable experiences through new physical impossibilities. Walter Benjamin’s term “optical unconscious” is the idea that a new opportunity to see and perceive the world is born with the creation of each apparatus<sup>18</sup>. I believe that VR is a medium that affords new ways for us to see the world but at the same time, I see a great deal of limitations in its current use – chiefly, it has not been adopted by the masses yet and especially, it is not readily available in places like Somalia. In this chapter, I describe a related research

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<sup>17</sup> “Record \$2 billion AR/VR investment in last 12 months,” Digi-Capital, accessed May 10, 2019, <https://www.digi-capital.com/news/2016/07/record-2-billion-arvr-investment-in-last-12-months/>.

<sup>18</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media” (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard UP, 2008).

project in VR and in the next chapter, I translate some of these VR lessons back into the current project.

In 2015, I traveled to Berlin to collaborate with members of the BeAnotherLab collective on their project known as The Machine To Be Another (TMBA). The TMBA team was working alongside researchers at the Max Planck Institute to measure the effectiveness of the TMBA setup in reducing discrimination and xenophobia within German society. The experiments put users in the body of another race to test whether or not there was a decrease in one's implicit racial bias, thus building upon previous research by Mel Slater<sup>19</sup>.

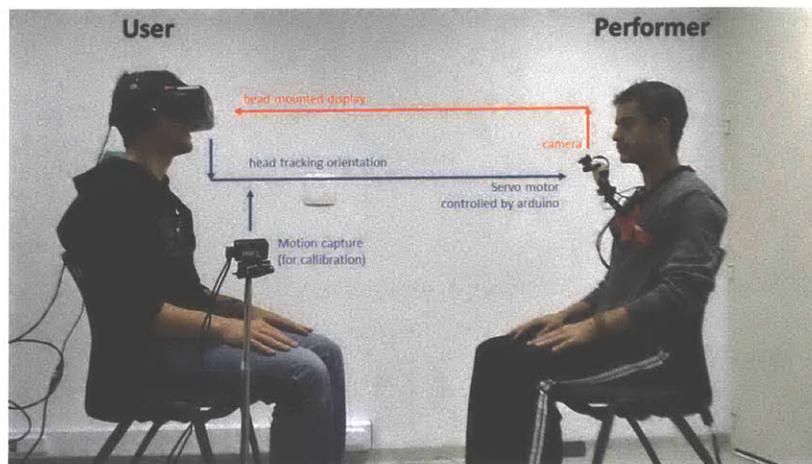


Figure 24 - The Machine to Be Another (TMBA) base set-up

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<sup>19</sup> Banakou, Domna, Parasuram D. Hanumanthu, and Mel Slater, "Virtual Embodiment of White People in a Black Virtual Body Leads to a Sustained Reduction in Their Implicit Racial Bias." *Frontier Human Neuroscience* 10 (2016): 601. (Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version* 2008)

In Figure 24, the TMBA setup is depicted: a user can inhabit the body of a person across from them by wearing a VR headset with head-tracking capabilities. The headset connects to the person they are “inhabiting” through a chest-mounted camera that can pan and tilt (based on the head-tracking of the VR headset) using a servo motor. When I experienced and worked with TMBA, I felt an overwhelming sense of *embodiment* as the other person: during the brief demonstration, I was no longer me.



Figure 25 - The first time I tried The Machine To Be Another in October 2015

I was transported into a female body - please note that in Figure 25, the reverse situation is shown where she is inhabiting my body. I felt completely immersed in my new skin. My arms looked different and I had the agency to control the person I inhabited because that person would simply mimic my actions, while they were the chest-mounted camera and I wore the VR headset. I could walk around the room and my new body moved, just as my old one, only every detail about it, including my gender, was different.

There was a degree of repulsion from the uncanny sensation of near-perfect visual feedback in a body that was not my own, but I did not suffer any sort of motion sickness. The most impressive aspect was that I was not a digital avatar, but a person I had just met. When I took off the headset, I felt a strange familiarity to my human avatar, although

she was somewhat still a stranger. Afterwards, we switched roles and I became the human vessel she inhabited, by wearing the chest-mounted camera and enabling her to experience my body through the headset, as depicted in Figure 25.

### *Using TMBA to Put Audiences in Somaliland*

At the ZKM Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, I collaborated again with the BeAnotherLab collective to use their TMBA set-up to transport audiences into my shoes and into Somaliland. In the experimental VR set-up we tried, we integrated audio storytelling and objects from my life that act as an interface for the experience. First, when the user puts on the TMBA headset, they become me while I am still in the ZKM beside them. At that point, they are handed a photograph of me as a child (depicted in Figure 26) and learn that their new body is Somali. Next, they are handed a plane ticket and learn that they will travel to Somaliland for the first time. Each object we hand the user triggers a specific memory (audio) or a flashback (visual) in Somaliland. For example, in the most intense point in the experience, the user is handed a plastic skull that is in a black bag (the same black bags the forensic anthropologists use). They hold the skull and as their hands touch it, they are transported to the mass grave I filmed at in Somaliland, while it is being exhumed.

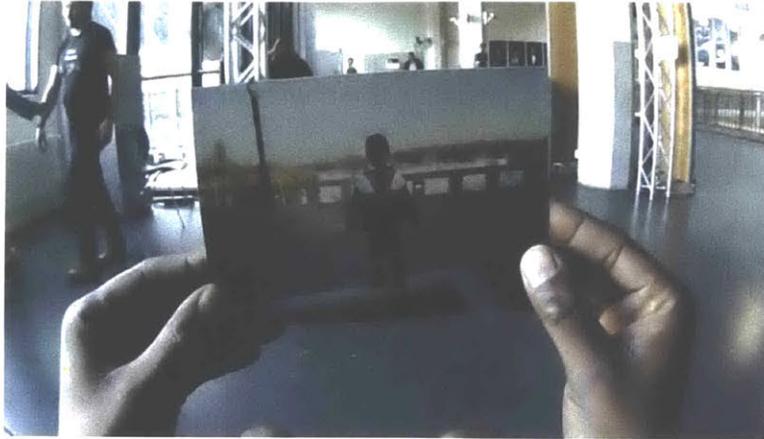


Figure 26 - Somaliland set-up of TMBA at ZKM on October 2015

Looking back at the Somaliland experience we made for the The Machine to Be Another (TMBA) set-up, I see a lot of potential and wish I continued experimenting more with those blurred lines of self. At the root, the idea is essentially that none of us choose who we are. The fact that a technological setup (like TMBA) can reach a level of immersion that successfully tricks one's mirror neurons into believing you're someone else, is a story tool that should be leveraged by more artists and filmmakers.

## *Limitations in VR and the Need for a More Essayistic Form*

My experimentation with Virtual reality (VR) helped to change my ideas around storytelling by pushing me to experiment with experiences that blur the lines of self. While viewers can experience the sensation of being in my shoes, the TMBA project works best when what you see is self-explanatory. Moreover, I was using regular 1080p video for the Somaliland flashbacks and ideally this would all be POV 360-degree videos – a technical setup that I experimented with while at MIT and in collaboration BeAnotherLab as well. The reality is that audio narratives and visual flashbacks work best to give you the sensation of being there, describing what you feel and witness. This lends itself easiest to a type of VR tourism and does not necessarily mix easily with topics of trauma. If anything, this thesis until this point, has been about how to properly layer trauma so that it is both accessible for an audience and dignified for the victims sharing their stories. Filmmakers like Chris Marker, Jean-Luc Godard and Trinh T. Minh-ha created films that act as windows to the memory of trauma through their use of essay.

In Nora Alter and Timothy Corrigan's seminal anthology on the essay film, entitled *Essays on the Essay Film* they describe some of the key features that early essay films contained: "the blending of fact and fiction, the mixing of art- and documentary-film styles, the foregrounding of a personal or subjective point of view, a focus on public life, a dramatic tension between audial and visual discourses, and a dialogic encounter with audiences and viewers."<sup>20</sup> Looking back at the VR project, I feel that if I took a more

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<sup>20</sup> Nora Altar and Timothy Corrigan, *Essays on the Essay Film*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 2.

essayistic approach, as opposed to enabling the *being there* sensation, the project could be more complete. The limitation of not having filmed the mass graves in 360-degrees is key. I am only left with the footage that I shot in 2015 using a DSLR camera. The approach of taking a more essayistic form in the treatment of this material is promising.

The “blending of fact and fiction” is something that tends to be outside the boundaries of the documentary films I made in the past - especially because they are inspired by the traditions of *cinéma vérité*. In other words, the documentary filmmaker attempts to rely solely on facts and the filmed reality in order to deliver its message. This does not mean documentary films are free from lies or even severe manipulation, but rather that these matters become ethical, are you are breaking the fact-based understanding in which audiences turn to documentaries? How much of a lie is too much? For example, there are cases where the omission of information is considered a lie to the audience (like if a character is dead and yet still spoke of in the present), but would this take the lack of facts into the realm of fiction? The filmmaker must decide whether or not the misrepresentation of reality will better serve the purpose of the film and if so, how much misrepresentation is too much. There are no rules on where the line is and this is often debated at film festivals: is it a documentary film or not?

“I think that life is memory, everything is memory. There is no present time and everything in life is remembering. I think memory encompasses all life, and all the mind. I’m not simply me—I’m my father and all that came before me, who are millions. Nostalgia for the Light sprung from this concept. It involves body and soul but also matter, the earth, the cosmos, all combined.”

Patricio Guzmán, *Nostalgia for the Light* (2010)

## 8. Not an Ending but a Start: more Questions, less Answers

This is a thesis with more questions than answers; it is the start of a journey, not an end. Much like what it is like to be someone with a background that is interrupted by war or tragedy, to have an ancestral land that remains in limbo and to have your hopes forever suspended in the air until you grow tired of waiting. This description could be about Somalis, but it also could be about Palestinians, Yemenis, Syrians, Yazidis, Iraqis, Libyans, Rohingya, Bosnians, and so many people in this world.

I have delved into a critical inquiry of self, questioned my identity as a Somali and a filmmaker in order to start a new film in iterations. *Xasuuqi means Massacre* does not tell my father’s story, it does not tell the story of Hargeisa’s bombardment and the mass graves, the film tells my story and brings the viewer into my world while speaking around ideas I do not and cannot understand. Is one more Somali for experiencing the trauma of war directly? Am I less Somali for not having experienced the Somali Civil War directly but rather mediated through forensics and the filming process? I no longer believe anyone has the authority to answer this.

In Walter Benjamin’s *The Storyteller*, he links a decline in the art of storytelling with a decrease in the general consciousness about death: “in the course of modern times dying has been pushed further and further out of the perceptual world of the living.

There used to be no house, hardly a room, in which someone had not once died.”<sup>21</sup> This description of death being part of everyday life is similar to how José Pablo Baraybar described Hargeisa in 2015, “a giant cemetery”. Walter Benjamin goes on to say, “death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death.”<sup>22</sup> Am I better storyteller for having documented death and does death give me the authority to tell this story in my thesis and through the accompanying film?

I certainly feel that filming death in 2015 is the reason I gained a television commission in 2016. The issue is that I misused the authority I was given and I created a one directional television film that mirrored the popular media I grew up watching: it used the pretense of objectivity to tell one version of the story. It was as direct as possible, represented through narration, the treatment of victims’ testimonies and in particular, the selectivity of those interviews. The film did not ask questions, it answered them: “this is Somaliland”, it claimed. I no longer believe the 100% claim as non-fiction to be an appropriate way to represent reality.

Now with *Xasuuqi means Massacre*, I am returning to the material, using editing techniques that often involve looking away, not directly. By only digitally returning and not physically returning to Somaliland, I allow many of my unknowns to linger. I feel I am developing a 2019 representation of my current understanding of what the 2015 trip meant; ultimately this is cut-up, temporally fragmented, rewinding of reality is an

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<sup>21</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov’ [1936], in *Illuminations* (NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1968).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

extrapolation of what the 2015 footage represented, a type of fiction. This approach of developing a film is more essayistic than documentary, although it is inspired by my grievances with the 2016 documentary.

I want the film to be pluralistic in directionality, to leave room for contradictions and to operate on multiple levels: *Xasuuqi means Massacre* should be able to offer someone with no previous knowledge of Somalia something to engage with and at the same time, offer someone from Somalia (irrespective of which tribe they belong to) something else to engage with. In order to use the footage for multiple purposes I must look at it in unexpected ways. I must detach myself from my original intentions while filming and seeing the same thing in many ways. This is a process that has only just begun.

In the documentary process, proposals are written in order to acquire funding. In the written treatment section of a documentary film proposal, the filmmaker speculates on the story's possible ending. In the way, I am now developing and editing the current film, I do not know where it will lead and what types of turns, I will take. I cannot speculate an ending because like this thesis, the accompanying film may not have one.

During my 2015 trip, I was asked to help with the facial reconstruction of the remains that the forensic anthropologists exhumed. My cousins from Denmark also happened to be in Somaliland and were visiting both me and the forensic team. I asked them if I could photograph their faces (see Figure 23) because we did not have access to enough Somali men around the lab to photograph and then reconstruct the faces using software – the facial reconstruction software works best when it has hundreds of photos of men with a similar ethnic background to the skulls. The facial reconstruction process uses data points on the skull to create a map of facial features from 80 distinctive points. Inspired by this idea, I would like to enlist my relatives to help me recover best guesses

at the answers my father may have given but in my case, I will not claim the reconstruction of answers about Dad to be an accurate representation of him.



Figure 27 - a skull with some data points for facial reconstruction

Even if my Father was present, it is likely he would not directly answer any of these questions – he was a master in speaking around any topic. He could bring up long histories that at times engaged one’s imagination and at other times, felt entirely irrelevant. I am sure my Father would have kept his secrets from the past and these questions are not intended to lead to “the truth” but are the voice of a film that speaks around it. In other words, the closest thing that is nearby asking my father questions is calling my relatives and it is important to ask them while I still can.

For now, I have identified five questions that I would like answered about my father. I will start by asking these five questions to five members of my family. For my initial sample of family members, I would like to select one brother, one sister, one mother, one cousin, and one uncle. I plan to conduct these questions over the phone, as opposed to in an in-person interview, like the television format. The phone call was my

primary mode of communicating with Dad and the echoes on the line provide a sound quality that I consider appropriate for the film. Here are the five questions:

- Do you think Xasuuqii is an important story to tell?
- Is it better for Somalis to forgive and forget? Does this mean ignoring the past?
- When did Dad quit working for the Somali government and Siad Barrre?
- Does dad believe in Somaliland recognition?
- Is there something you'd like to add?

The first family member I will call to start asking these questions is my mother. Once I have asked the sample questions to enough family members (not sure how many, this process may even start and end with my mother), the next step is to build an assembly and a rough cut. The voice recording of these phone calls will be put onto the assembly and when I find an appropriate placement for the phone-call questions and answers, I will have a first rough cut of the third iteration. This is currently scheduled to be completed for May 20, 2019.

It is likely that the questions I have will yield more questions, perhaps about the bigger picture and not necessarily about my Dad. I will continue the editing process for as long as I can and I am not sure what exactly I intend to do this personal essay film in the end; I do not feel it is suitable for broadcast and I am not sure the degree to which festivals and galleries will be receptive to it, but for now I am only at the start.

I soon discovered that I would have to be on my guard against authority and that I needed to develop some mechanism or drive not to be discouraged by what I took to be efforts to silence or deflect me from being who I was, rather than becoming who they wanted me to be.<sup>23</sup>

Edward Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir*

## 9. Conclusion

Through this thesis and critical inquiry, I feel I have developed a cinematic approach that affords greater sensitivity and appreciation of topics involving trauma. By putting the focus on my personal storytelling, I relate much more now with the vulnerability contributors in nonfiction films feel; I emphasize more now with the challenges involved in sharing difficult details from one's personal life.

As an outsider to Somalia, raised in Canada, all of my communication channels regarding Somali topics have been one-way. I would watch portrayals of Somalia in popular media sources (like CNN or Hollywood films like *Black Hawk Dawn*) and these sources felt like propaganda. I was unable to engage in discussions with Somali elders or my parents because I felt I knew so little about where we were from (not even enough to ask meaningful questions) and my feelings of muteness created an even greater barrier to active participation.

When I gained my own experiences in 2015, it led to the production of a 2016 film – these experiences are outlined in the chapter entitled, “An Earnest First Attempt” – that

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<sup>23</sup> Edward Said, 1999. *Out of Place: A Memoir*, (New York: Knopf, 1999), 230.

paralleled the one-way communications of popular media and stories told by elders, in which I could only listen and not question (partially due to muteness and partially because of not knowing enough about Somalia to question). The television documentary film *Kill All but the Crows* (2016) implored a pretense of objectivity and authority: take this as truth and if not, that means you deny the trauma the film presents.

This authoritative approach denies other competing truths and in the Somali context, it means Somalis with different tribal backgrounds either have to completely deny their tribal narratives or deny the evidence in the film. I believe that in order for Somalis to peacefully coexist and avoid repeating the past, we must develop a language that is pluralistic because the truth does not belong to one side.

I believe it is possible to speak about reality in a more nuanced fashion that allows viewers to take from it what they can, without preaching to them. I intend to continue to develop approaches in my cinematic language that enable me to speak around the topic and not directly on behalf of something I cannot understand. My aim is to make a film that operates on multiple levels, depending on the perspective of the audience, one can engage with it on an appropriate level. This thesis is a start and not an end.

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