

Revising the Narrative of Failure:
Reconsidering State Failure
in Nuruddin Farah’s *Knots*
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Abstract: This article connects recent research on failed states with Nuruddin Farah’s novel *Knots* to argue that literature can model alternative forms of state organization as well as point to the limitations of the conceptual term “failed state.” Farah’s novel draws attention to the problematically gendered nature of failed state theories and mobilizes storytelling as a medium to present imaginative alternatives to the traditional nation-state model that the United Nations has tried to install in Somalia. Both the recovery of Cambara’s family home and the play performed within its walls are made possible by the Women’s Network for Peace, a grassroots collective of women whose members are based primarily in Mogadiscio but also extend transnationally. I offer a reading of *Knots* that not only concurs with critiques of the “failed state” concept but also suggests the Women’s Network as an alternative model for governance in the absence of centralized government. *Knots* revises the narrative of failure by portraying a metric of “success” within the much-maligned Somalia that prevailing considerations of state failure dismiss.

Keywords: Somalia, failed states, Nuruddin Farah, *Knots*

Set in contemporary Mogadiscio, Somalia, Nuruddin Farah’s 2007 novel *Knots* follows protagonist Cambara’s return from Canada and efforts to reclaim her family’s home in the war-torn capital. The novel’s depiction of the country resonates, at least at first, with popular perceptions of Somalia, which topped *Foreign Policy* magazine’s 2013 Failed States

Index for the ninth consecutive time. In *Knots*, there is no centralized government, warlords control sections of the city, and private parties and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) provide tentative structure, safety, and resources in the absence of state-level law and order. Yet Cambara manages to wrest her family home from its occupying warlord with the help of the Women's Network for Peace, a grassroots NGO started by local women and funded by the European Union. *Knots* also culminates in the performance of a play within the home's walls, which is attended by newfound friends in the city as well as family and friends from the diasporic Somali community. Although Somalia has been described as "the archetypal failed state" (Zeid and Cochran 4), the play that concludes the novel "is universally described as a success" (Farah, *Knots* 419) and registers a tentative note of hope for characters invested in the country's future.

Given the novel's setting, *Knots* might be classified as "failed-state fiction," a phrase coined by John Marx in a 2008 article in *Contemporary Literature* and later incorporated into his 2012 book *Geopolitics and the Anglophone Novel*. Failed-state fiction, as he frames it, "treat[s] civil war as a setting for literary experimentation" and demonstrates that failure is "more or less a normative condition in much of the world" (Marx, "Failed" 597). The scope of Marx's argument is limited to the question of expertise and the way that fiction diverges from political science research in positing alternative experts who can reimagine the structures of global administration ("Failed" 599). Marx offers Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* as case studies of the genre, for which the sole criterion of membership seems to be an exploration of the state in crisis. Indeed, the parameters of what might be counted as failed-state fiction are not fully explored in either Marx's article or his book; while he is critical of the way that the concept of the "failed state" is mobilized in foreign policy to identify areas for intervention, where intervention tends to take a hierarchical approach, he neglects to consider the ways that novels might critique the assumptions of "failed state" as a politically charged term. I suggest that *Knots*, as a novel set during civil war and state crisis, reconsiders the conceptual category of "failed state." The novel accomplishes

this through the successful reclamation of Cambara's property and the performance of a play, both of which are made possible by the Women's Network for Peace, a grassroots collective of women whose members are based primarily in Mogadiscio but also extend transnationally. Somalia's state failure is implicitly contrasted with the Network's success, and a reading of the two together reveals the limitations of state failure as a conceptual term, especially given state power's investment in territorial sovereignty and monopoly on violence.

In what follows, I first summarize Somalia's position as the paradigmatic failed state in social science research and popular parlance, provide context for Somalia's present political landscape, and register the growing discontent in recent scholarship with the term "failed state" as well as its application to Somalia. I then discuss the implicit assumptions made in state failure scholarship by examining the way that standards of "success" depend on a gendered understanding of state power. Finally, I offer a reading of *Knots* that not only concurs with critiques of the "failed state" concept but also suggests the Women's Network as an alternative model for governance in the absence of centralized government. *Knots* begins to revise the narrative of failure by portraying a metric of "success" within the much-maligned Somalia that prevailing considerations of state failure dismiss.

I. The Failures of "Failed State"

"Somalia," Peter Hitchcock writes, "is a failed state" and "[t]he weight of obviousness in the statement appears to crush denial as well as all sense of counterintuition" (729). Indeed, Somalia either tops or is prominently featured on all major indices of state failure, from the State Failure Task Force to the Failed States Index and the Worldwide Governance Indicators produced by the World Bank (Taylor 35–52). Popular portrayals of Somalia in the media, including films such as *Black Hawk Down* (2001) and *Captain Phillips* (2013), capitalize on the image of Somalia as a bastion of lawlessness, a fitting backdrop against which to foreground American heroism. The implicit contrasts between America and Somalia can be traced further back to 1991, the onset of civil war in Somalia, and the United Nations Security Council's decision

to support American intervention in Somalia on humanitarian grounds. In a televised address to the American public, then-President George H. W. Bush declared:

There is no government in Somalia. Law and order have broken down. Anarchy prevails. . . . It's now clear that military support is necessary to ensure the safe delivery of the food Somalis need to survive. . . . And so, to every sailor, soldier, airman, and Marine who is involved in this mission, let me say you're doing God's work. We will not fail. Thank you, and may God bless the United States of America. (qtd. in Gewald 98)

Bush's speech contrasts American law and order with Somali anarchy and justifies American intervention based on implied notions of success and failure. Whereas the Somali state has failed entirely, the successful American state will intervene in its absence and, of course, will not fail in its stated mission.

It is instructive to place the popularization of the term "failed state" within this historical context. The term "failed state" derives from Gerald Helman and Steven Ratner's 1992 article in *Foreign Policy* magazine, which surveys states as diverse as Haiti, Yugoslavia, Somalia, and Cambodia. Helman and Ratner famously identify a failed state as one that is "utterly incapable of sustaining itself as a member of the international community" (3). In the first paragraph, they polemically declare that these states are "descend[ing] into violence and anarchy" and "it is becoming clear that something must be done," especially now that "their problems tend to spread" (3). From the beginning, then, Somalia has figured prominently in "failed state" rhetoric, which has been used to identify those states whose "problems" must be solved by the UN before they affect the stable states in the international community.

Helman and Ratner's characterization of Somalia as a failed state occurred one year after General Siyad Barre's government was expelled by a cooperative effort between Somali clans (which were, in turn, backed by various foreign powers, including neighboring Ethiopia). By the end of 1992, the UN began peacekeeping operations in Somalia that soon evolved into a United States-backed Unified Task Force with the objec-

tive of restoring order and providing humanitarian aid and relief. Both United Nations Operation in Somalia I (in 1992) and United Nations Operation in Somalia II (in 1993) proved unable to halt an escalating civil war. The final bid to restore order, Operation United Shield, ended in 1995. The years since have seen a Transitional Federal Government, the Islamic Courts Union, coalition governments, and several international coalition troops and peacekeeping missions all attempt to consolidate power and rule of law. In 2012, the National Assembly passed a new constitution and the first Federal Government of Somalia was formed—a sign that the Somali nation may soon be able to identify a corresponding Somali state.

The above history encompasses the two decades, from 1991–2011, when Somalia entered the global political conscious as a “failure.” The timeline makes clear that Helman and Ratner labeled Somalia a failed state just one year after General Barre’s government was toppled; though it is impossible to say whether their declaration was premature or a self-fulfilling prophecy, it is nevertheless certain that Somalia’s ostensible state failure provided ample justification for the international community to intervene. Somalia’s designation as a failed state also gained traction in the years that include US and UN-backed intervention. I want to emphasize that the international community’s own failure to restore order both frames and compounds the popular conception of Somalia as a failed state. Some narratives of Somalia’s state failure regard the 1991 coup as “a repudiation of the modern state,” but development and economic anthropologist Peter D. Little reminds us “that the coup of 1991 was more of an attack on a regime’s inequitable policies” and that “[a]s long as government does not overly constrain local livelihoods . . . and trading systems . . . it does not make a great deal of difference to many communities what kind of political configuration (democratic, socialist, religious, or other) exists at the top” (168). Not only should we hesitate before equating an absence of traditional state government with the absolute failure of *any* political configuration to emerge, but Little also asks: “[C]an we really speak of a failed state, if it is questionable whether a meaningful state ever existed?” (14). The term “failed state” carries with it a tacit concession to a narrative of state development,

consolidation, and subsequent failure to which Somalia's history does not easily conform.

Helman and Ratner's sweeping characterization of countries in the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia as "failed" disregards local and historical specificities and belies the ostensible stability and easy delineation of the concept of the "failed state." A closer look at Helman and Ratner's original formulation makes clear the difficulty of consolidating diverse countries into discrete categories. Somalia, in their view, is part of a group of states "whose governmental structures have been overwhelmed by circumstances" (Helman and Ratner 5). Aside from the vagueness of the words "overwhelmed" and "circumstances," the phrase "governmental structures" suggests an institutional uniformity across state lines that disregards specific histories of colonial, postcolonial, and traditional or indigenous configurations of government that inform contemporary government structures. For Somalia specifically, the political (and geographical) landscape in the Horn of Africa reflects the partition of ethnically Somali lands across Ethiopia, Djibouti, Kenya, and Somalia—territories variously under French, Italian, British, Ethiopian, and Kenyan control. The histories of power, struggle, control, and order are layered in a way that the language of failure and a focus at the state level can obfuscate. As Alice Hills notes in her assessment of Somalia's police force in *African Affairs*, "the social fabric [in Somalia] did not collapse after 1991 and Somalis look first to customary justice and local or traditional non-state actors such as elders or Shari'a, rather than to police" (95). Even the police buildings, symbols of state-sanctioned or state-controlled law and order, tend to occupy the same spots used for policing by former colonial authorities (Hills 98). Helman and Ratner's grouping of Somalia with other equally diverse states elides the complexity of Somalia's "governmental structures."

Since 1992, the myriad trajectories of the original "failed states"—Haiti, Yugoslavia, Somalia, and Cambodia—have problematized the term "failed state" and its descriptive utility. Policy articles clinging to the usefulness of the "failed state" concept nevertheless acknowledge that there is no widely accepted definition of state failure and resort to the general or the "almost always" in order to make descriptive

claims (Kimenyi, Mbaku, and Moyo 1344). Mwangi S. Kimenyi, John Mukum Mbaku, and Nelipher Moyo, for example, write that “states *generally* fail when they are unable to perform these basic functions [territorial control, rule of law, social services, supply of economic goods, and political services] for long periods of time over a substantial portion of their territory” and “state failure is *almost always* characterized by the inability of the state to protect its citizens from internal or external aggression” (1344; emphasis added). The language of “generally” or “almost always” suggests the term’s limitations even as theorists attempt to generalize the characteristics of failed states. In any case, their overview reveals that a single set of conditions, by which we might locate failed states, does not exist.

Other objections to the term arise from its politically motivated use to identify territories in which the UN or Western states strategically intervene. In their recent article “‘Failed States’ and ‘State Failure’: Threats or Opportunities?” Morten Boas and Kathleen M. Jennings argue “that the use of the failed state label is inherently political, and based primarily on Western perceptions of Western security and interests. . . . Crucially, labeling states as failed (or not) operates as a means of delineating the range of acceptable policy responses to those states” (476). Instead of focusing on whether or not a state has “failed,” they argue, analysts ought to ask, “For whom is the state failing, and how?” (476). Taken together, these critiques of the “failed state” concept identify important elisions that social science and foreign policy research make in an attempt to generalize disparate cases of state crises into a class of failures.

When the concept of the “failed state” has been employed to justify strategic intervention into other states or territories, the subsequent intervention has often taken a military form. Neyire Akpinarli’s *The Fragility of the ‘Failed State’ Paradigm* (2010) argues that concepts including those of the failed state, rogue state, and war on terror “originated in the values, interests, and perspectives of the powerful states of the [global] North and were imposed on the [global] South for their own ends” (2). Furthermore, the term “failed state” “emerged as an ad hoc conceptual response” to perceived “new sorts of armed conflicts and problems in the wake of the Cold War” (Call 305). Given the term’s

origin in the global North as well as its employment to describe the post-Cold War geopolitical landscape, Andrew Taylor concludes that “[t]he concept of state failure tells us more about the post-Cold War climate of the 1990s . . . [and] says more about us [the Global North and West] than it does about those directly affected by failure’s consequences” (228). He observes that there is “an inherent but understandable bias in state failure indices towards promoting security,” but the security that is protected and advanced “is that of the West rather than the security of those who suffer most directly from the consequences of failure” (56). In summary, the concept of the “failed state” is far from neutral, and the history of its deployment in foreign policy and international law indicates both its instability as well as its inadequacy to capture the complexity of the political and social environments in countries without functioning centralized governments.

II. (En)Gendering the “Failed State”

The problem of state failure as a conceptual term, in my view, concerns more than its application in foreign policy. The word failure carries complementary ideas of success that draw on centuries of masculinist, Eurocentric understandings of statecraft and achievement. In his consideration of postcolonial failure, the politics of nation, and Farah’s novel *Maps*, Hitchcock observes that the term “state failure” often implies “that independence guaranteed a statehood that has since disintegrated, rather than signaling that the concept of the state itself is in doubt and that its measure includes its absence, not just the destruction of its codified presence” (732–33). In the dominant view of state failure, states progress linearly from a state of sovereignty at the moment of independence or decolonization to a state of failure, but this narrative does not consider the possibility that the concept of “state” and, in my view, the concept of “failure,” fall short in their descriptive and conceptual utilities. In their history of the state, Kimenyi, Mbaku, and Moyo trace a familiar lineage of theorizing through Max Weber, who famously defined the state as having a monopoly on “legitimate physical violence” (Kimenyi, Mbaku, and Moyo 1344). Both the State Failure Task Force and the Failed States Index rely on Weberian conceptualizations of the

state in their studies of state failure (Taylor 35, 45). The problem with applying a Weberian definition of the state is that Weber's concept is "highly historically and context specific" and a "distillation of the state-building experience of Western Europe" (Taylor 21). Sovereignty is contingent on violence and the maintenance of territorial boundaries, and state failure assumes a history in which both violence and boundaries were once consolidated and have since deteriorated.

Additionally, then, state failure as a concept depends on notions of success, sovereignty, and power already defined in Europe's image, where the state's presence (successful maintenance of sovereignty) and the state's absence (failure) traffic in the language of traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics. In their review of mainstream international relations theories, Joyce P. Kaufman and Kristen P. Williams note that realism, liberalism, and constructivism "have not adequately addressed gender in the construction of states and nations, citizenship and political identity, if it is addressed at all" (7). Quoting gender and international relations scholar Jacqui True, Kaufman and Williams conclude that overlooking the masculinist and patriarchal assumptions that undergird the foundational conceptualizations of the nation is troubling, given that "[c]oncepts such as anarchy, power, security, and sovereignty cannot be disconnected 'from the gender division of public and private spheres institutionalized within and across states. These concepts are identified specifically with masculinity and men's experiences and knowledge derived from an exclusive, male-dominated public sphere'" (9). Western legal frameworks not only share the traditionally masculine characteristics of active achievement and the protection of territorial boundaries but also gender the nation and state masculine through the division of the masculine public and feminine private spheres.

This ingrained gendered division in the Western tradition is apparent in Giorgio Agamben's more recent description of the modern state: "Every attempt to rethink the political space of the West must begin with the clear awareness that we no longer know anything of the classical distinction between *zoe* and *bios*, between private life and political existence, between man as a simple living being at home in the house

and man's political existence in the city" (187). Modern biopolitics, Agamben argues, differentiates itself by "its constant need to redefine the threshold of life that distinguishes and separates what is inside from what is outside. Once it crosses over the walls of the *oikos* [home] and penetrates more and more deeply into the city, the foundation of sovereignty—nonpolitical life—is immediately transformed into a line that must be constantly redrawn" (131). Agamben uses the suggestive and gendered language of penetration to render the nonpolitical, private life unthinkable outside of its dynamic relationship with political life. Modern politics' decisive characteristic "is that . . . the realm of bare life—which is originally situated at the margins of the political order—gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoe*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction" (Agamben 9). Feminized failed states falter in this process, unable to redraw and redefine lines and thresholds, and the norm of exception and exclusion appears abnormal.

The discourse of modern statecraft as an active, masculine, and public domain is expanded and complicated by colonial discourse in which colonized "others" were often feminized in comparison with their European colonizers. The language of both female sexuality and colonial spaces as "dark continents" underscores the way that both discourses could work in tandem to produce the historical subjugation of indigenous populations (Khanna 52). Seminal texts in postcolonial studies, including Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather*, Ann Stoler's *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, and Jasbir Puar's more recent *Terrorist Assemblages* document the imbrication of gender and sexuality in the configuration of colonial power. The rhetoric of state failure is indebted to this construction of power and reproduces this dynamic; the failed state is feminized, neither able to exert authority over its territory nor protect its people. In *The Law on the Use of Force: A Feminist Analysis* (2013), Gina Heathcote argues that "the subject status of the state as the primary legal subject relies on a perception of the state imbued with male characteristics to qualify as 'normal'" (10), or to use the operative words in this article, successful. Citing Somalia specifically, Heathcote notes the "entrenchment of a sexed dichotomy in the failed state dis-

course” that results in the failed state being “feminized and racialised” as “an unruly ‘Other’” (10).

The above studies of state power and its attendant gendered notion of success make gender central to discussions about state formation and power as well as “failure” itself. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam considers genres as diverse as children’s television shows and queer art in order to push back against “conventional understandings of success,” which “in a heteronormative, capitalist society equat[e] too easily to specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation” (2). In pursuit of her critique, Halberstam draws on theorists such as James C. Scott, whose *Seeing Like a State* suggests that ostensible “failures” can also be read as strategies of resistance or non-compliance. For my purposes, Halberstam usefully argues that “traditions of political action that, while not necessarily successful in the sense of becoming dominant, do offer models of contestation, rupture, and discontinuity for the political present” (15). Just as “failure” may signify differently, there are other ways of noting or identifying “success” that do not necessarily conform to heteronormative, hegemonic models. Halberstam asks, “How else might we imagine failure, and in terms of what kinds of desired political outcomes? How has failure been wielded for different political projects?” (92). We in turn can ask how else we might imagine both success and failure in terms of state power. How has “failure” been wielded for different political projects by various invested geopolitical actors?

In order to undo some of the damage caused by the rhetoric of failure in foreign policy and practice, new and imaginative ways of conceptualizing political organization are necessary. Many theorists have called for imaginative countermodels and concepts to adequately describe and address states without centralized governments. In “The African Nation State: An Elusive Challenge,” Anders Närman contends that, although it is not easy to envision Africa without referring to a nation-state model, “it may be possible that new kinds of state structures, co-operation, networks, and so on will follow, systems better suited to another tradition and culture” (87). Furthermore, the absence of formal state structures, as Simon Chesterman argues, does not lead “to a vacuum of political

power” (128). The organizations, networks, and configurations of power that exist in lieu of the centralized state can be revealing as alternatives or correctives to the instantiation of Anglo-European state models.

In pursuit of imaginative countermodels to statecraft and state failure, I turn to literary texts that, as John Marx notes, present unique opportunities through which to reconsider the mechanisms of the state. In his view, failed-state fiction demonstrates that refugees and child soldiers, once considered “mere symptoms of state failure” following Agamben’s theorizing, are instead integral “participants in state organization” (“Failed” 597). Marx argues that fiction can produce a counter-discourse to social-scientific practice by democratizing expertise. He cites Adichie’s *Half a Yellow Sun*, in which a young refugee named Ugwu writes the definitive history of Biafra, as such an example (599). What this accomplishes, Marx concludes, is a reconsideration of “whether the normative study of state crisis must yield a stringently hierarchical approach to policy implementation, wherein global experts solve problems caused by local agents by mentoring them” (“Failed” 611). The story of the Biafran state is “written” by a survivor, disseminating authority from global policy experts to local actors.

While Marx emphasizes fiction’s counter-discourse to political science research in order to prove literature’s utility, there is evidence *within* political science research that suggests a dire need for the imaginative possibilities literary studies provides. In a 2010 article in *The Washington Quarterly*, Seth Kaplan uses Somalia as an example of a “failed state” for which the international community needs alternative state-building models to the traditional strong central government of European nation-states. The damage that these state-building practices have caused extends beyond the continued failure of centralized government; Kaplan writes that these “ill-judged efforts met with inevitable failure, but they have also endangered the traditional social structures that have historically kept order” (82). Kaplan recommends that policymakers in the international community look to traditional, local institutions to “build a government from the bottom up” (82). Rather than simply shift the locus of failure to the imposition of Western forms of government, Kaplan points to a particular kind of failure—the failure of the

imagination. The language he uses is especially suggestive for literary studies: “Much of the blame for this deepening nightmare [in Somalia] can be placed on the international community. Its unimaginative approach to state-building seriously misreads the Somali sociopolitical context, showing little understanding for how a top-down strategy impacts the state’s fluid, fragmented, and decentralized clan structures” (89). Kaplan’s call for reading more carefully and thinking more imaginatively invites literary scholarship to work with political science and foreign policy to suggest alternative possibilities for state structure and government. Even more provocatively, Hitchcock calls the very designation of “failed state” a “failure of imagination that issues from those who fear the collapse of a specific international order (in this sense it is a failure of Western ontology)” (749). The very designation “failed state” circumscribes the possibilities for state structure that the West is prepared to recognize and support and stymies efforts to think over, beyond, under, and within the normative nation-state structure.

The call for literary engagement and discussion of statecraft, however, is neither a new endeavor nor new terrain for literary studies, but rather is already part of its purview. With regard to the relationship between literary scholarship and political investment, Marx argues that “literary critical business as usual actually already engages in imaginative reformulations and reinventions of the art of government, even if literary critics have been reluctant to understand their work in this way” (“Literature” 66). Following Foucault, Marx argues that if we understand governmentality both in terms of administrative institutions’ relationship to their populations and the way that those populations conceive of governing themselves, then literature—and especially novels—has always been part of the governmentality dialogue. To read literature and conduct literary criticism with an eye toward literature’s modeling of governmental organization and power is, in other words, to acknowledge and extend the text’s already existing literary and political investments.

Clearly, literature and political science are not mutually exclusive, but I argue that novels like Farah’s *Knots* show that literature does not merely reflect what political science describes; literature engages in counter-discourse, points to the multiple realities of organization that

are subsumed under the Western designation of state failure, and critiques existing structures. In using the term “critique,” I borrow from John Marx (and indirectly from Judith Butler), who views critique not as a sole act of negation but as a way toward imagining new possibilities (Marx, “Literature” 68). Literature “contemplates and inspires . . . social reorganization,” according to Marx, and it is in this reinvigorated sense of critique, rather than in the spirit of opposition, that literary criticism critiques governmentality (75).

In my reading of *Knots*, I consider the gendered dimension of state failure through Cambara’s return to Somalia and her utilization of the Women’s Network to help her reclaim her family’s home. The Women’s Network offers an alternative construction of power and order that not only does not assume the Weberian functions of the state—monopoly on violence, contiguous territory, centralization—but also implicitly points to the shortcomings of the concept of “state failure.” I do not reject Somalia’s designation as a failed state, though the above discussion of the concept and its history of deployment suggests my skepticism about its utility and accuracy. Rather, I suggest that *Knots* exposes what is missed in the persistent narrative of state failure in Somalia: alternative and imaginative countermodels of political and social organization, a critique of gendered and Western notions of success and failure, and the power of storytelling to foreground them both.

III. Literary Revisions of State Failure

Several parallels exist between Cambara’s journey and Farah’s own brief return to Somalia in 1996, which point first to *Knots*’ autobiographical links and then to the significance of Farah’s alteration of the main character’s gender in his fictional representation. In “The Family House,” a short essay recounting his experience, Farah writes that he intended his return as “one-man peace mission,” but when he arrived in Mogadiscio and located his family’s home, a woman who had looked after the property during the civil war demanded that he pay her fifty dollars for every month she had looked after the property since 1991 (6). Like Cambara in *Knots*, Farah acquired a security detail, got in touch with the local warlord, and obtained the assistance of the manager at the hotel where

he was staying. But whereas Cambara successfully secures control of her family home—to say own here is a vexed statement, prompting further considerations of the divisions between private ownership and public property to which I will return shortly—Farah was unable to reclaim his family home. Instead, the warlord who controlled the area offered to rent the house and forward the money to Farah, a proposition that Farah promised to “think . . . over” (“Family” 14). “The Family House” ends on this ambivalent note, with both Farah’s and the warlord’s claims to the property contested and unresolved.

In *Knots*, Farah returns to questions about women in Somalia that he has explored since the publication of his first novel, *From a Crooked Rib*. Indeed, like Ebla in Farah’s first novel, Cambara relies on a network of women to orient, protect, and guide her in Somalia. The two most influential women for Cambara’s mission are Raxma, her friend in Canada, and Kiin, Raxma’s friend and a hotel manager. Kiin is loosely based on the hotel manager from Farah’s own trip back to Somalia, and like the real-life manager, Kiin is well connected in Mogadiscio and involved in an alternative, though influential, network of “politicians”: the Women for Peace Network.

If we recall the gendered language of Agamben’s reading of the modern state’s penetration of *bios* into *zoe*, of the political life subsuming the nonpolitical life, Kiin’s Women’s Network can serve as an important counter-discourse to Agamben’s lament that private and public life can no longer be distinguished from one another. Rather than bemoan this development in state sovereignty and biopolitics, the Women’s Network capitalizes on the lack of distinction by appropriating ostensibly “private” spaces for grassroots political movements. From the novel’s first page, Farah suggests that it will not be helpful to depend on visible, public structures and landmarks for orientation. Cambara, who may have recognized architectural markers despite her long absence from Somalia, realizes early that “the city’s landmarks hav[e] been savagely destroyed in the ongoing civil war to the extent where, based on what she has seen of the city so far, she doubts if she will recognize it” (Farah, *Knots* 1). Her cousin Zaak is quick to point out that Mogadiscio is a metropolis without the visible signs to denote its status as such—no

cinema, theater, nightclubs, places of entertainment, bars, or liquor (8). The buildings that still stand, such as the government's administrative buildings, have been repurposed for uses such as showing locally produced kung fu films (9). By emphasizing what cannot be discerned from the public, visible structures that once organized the city, Farah suggests that both Cambara and we as readers must look elsewhere for orientation.

The family home that Cambara recovers exemplifies the way that the indistinguishable private and public can nevertheless be redeployed in service of political reform. Once privately held, her father's home was appropriated by various forces during the civil war and is now in the hands of Gudcur, a warlord with control over part of Mogadiscio. Gudcur is one of many acting with an eye to filling in the gaps of the collapsed state by monopolizing violent force and consolidating territory, and his seizure of the property similarly blurs the lines between private and "public" ownership. Gudcur uses the home as a base from which to launch activities aimed at accumulating an increasing amount of control over parts of the city in the void left by the dissolution of an organized state. His wife, Jiijo, lives in the home, and it is also a haven for other clansmen who fight under him. Though the home is arguably held "privately" by Gudcur, his use of the residence as a base for the consolidation of his own power in order to control more of Mogadiscio merges the private and the public. The Network is able to reclaim the home partially because of Gudcur's gendering of space, as Jiijo, heavily pregnant, is left behind to manage the household. Cambara nurtures a friendship with Jiijo and works with the Women's Network to take her to the hospital to give birth. Just as the state of exception reveals the inclusionary and exclusionary mechanisms at the heart of state power for Agamben, the complicated and contradictory deployments of masculine and feminine in discourses of state politics—the assertion of separation between the public and private even as the two are imbricated in the family home—open up avenues of intervention that pave the way for the Women's Network to exploit grassroots networks of female camaraderie that operate secretly and quietly to reclaim territory *without* a Weberian monopoly on physical violence.

The Women's Network functions in ways both similar and dissimilar to the Somali state prior to the civil war and invites further speculation on how state power may be reconfigured in ways at odds with Weberian and Agambenian notions of the modern state. Cambara hears about the Women's Network from Raxma in Canada. Knowledge of the Network's existence is passed from woman to woman and extends transnationally and transcontinentally, far beyond the boundaries of the Somali state. The very word "network" denotes a different configuration of power by stressing interrelatedness and interconnection. Networks are decentralized and linked by transmissions that may follow various avenues and paths. The Women's Network is neither hierarchical nor imposed from abroad; it is a grassroots organization that instills order at a local level and whose effects reverberate beyond isolated instances of intervention. Cambara sees evidence of the influence of the Women's Network as she observes two preteen boys fighting in the street. An imposing woman silently walks past the gathered onlookers, grabs each boy by his hair, and throws them apart. The shopkeeper explains to Cambara: "Here is further evidence if you need it. . . . In former days . . . two boys of their age from different clans would have settled a small dispute by shooting at each other; not now. And they would not have allowed a woman to stop their fight; they would have killed her, point-blank. Now you can see them going their different ways, licking their wounds in humiliation and silence" (127). The shopkeeper suggests that the woman's intercession represents organization and mediation that can diffuse clan disputes while avoiding violent intervention. The shopkeeper clarifies that it is not through the woman's direct relationship to the boys that she has power—she is not their mother, aunt, or distant relative—but rather through her membership in the Women's Network. The Network was formed in response to escalating gun violence in the capital, which subsequently led to high frequencies of rape and death. The shopkeeper explains that "[t]he failure of the country's political class to end the civil war has prompted the women to set up an NGO—Women for Peace—funded by the EU" (128).

The shopkeeper situates the Women's Network as both an alternative to and replacement of the Somali state. The women have mobilized

and acted in those instances in which the state is supposed to exercise governance and organization, but the Network's structure and function is substantially different from that of the failed state. Its methods are not exclusively or predominantly violent, and its support extends beyond the Somali women who comprise the Network. In an article that contrasts the main character in Farah's *Links* with Cambara from *Knots*, Brian Worsfold argues that Cambara succeeds because of "the support the Somali woman receives from other Somali women, initially from Raxma in Canada and subsequently, and crucially, from Kiin in Mogadiscio" (165). If Cambara's success in reclaiming her family's home is magnified and extended to a model for foreign policy, Farah seems to suggest that financial support from elsewhere (in this case, the EU) is best utilized directly by local women and not defunct state structures (such as the impotent Transitional Federal Government) or male warlords. The shopkeeper provides the sense that these local changes and dynamics will reverberate to achieve and signify larger changes in the way that Somalis can relate to one another. The woman's intervention between the two youths is a concrete example of change and a promise of potential change to come. As Kiin's help in securing the family home suggests, the Network is a model of quiet efficiency and an important counterpoint to the former Somali state as it does not assume contiguous territory or centralized authority. In fact, its strengths derive from its resistance to the traditional attributes of state power.

Importantly, although the Women's Network is an NGO funded in part by the EU, Kiin explicitly clarifies that it is not a puppet or prop for foreign interests. As the Network prepares to remove Jiijo from the family home, Kiin comforts Cambara: "We are discussing plans that rely wholly on the members of the network for success. . . . No one else will get to know or hear about the plans until executed. We've done similar jobs before for women in trouble. We've perfected our methods" (Farah, *Knots* 250). When necessary, the Women's Network asks for the assistance of sympathetic men to achieve its goals. Kiin and Cambara both consult Bile, Seamus, and Daajal at various points during the course of the reclamation. Yet these are calculated and careful invitations, not

coercive co-opts. While Kiin's allusions to poisoning "nuisance" men may seem a harsh form of justice, it is clear that the Network's priority is to protect those whom both "failed states" and traditional states have failed. In response to Boas and Jennings's question, "For whom is that state failing?" the novel suggests that "Somalia"—the former state, the failed state, and the warlord ridden capital—is predominantly failing women and the children who will inherit it. To mitigate or reverse these failings, *Knots* suggests that it is essential to begin with the women and children already part of organizing structures and networks in the absence of a centralized state rather than resort to previously tried (and failed) methods of direct foreign military intervention.

Cambara's recurring reflections on women, politics, and protests in Somali history further substantiate the integral significance of women as agents in governance. Her ruminations suggest that women in Somalia have always had active roles in politics, even if those roles have been at odds with the way that "political action" is traditionally identified. During a conversation with Daajal, Cambara's thoughts digress to a memory that "for generations, women in Africa have employed the baring of breasts not so much as art, as the Guinean Ballet is known to have done, but as a political forum, used in opposition to the male order of society, which is corrupt, inefficient, retrograde" (310). Farah wrote about the baring of breasts as political protest in an earlier 1996 *Times Literary Supplement* article. There, he describes "the radical role of women," particularly in the coastal city of Kismayo where women bared their breasts, shouted "Rise!" and, in Farah's view, "challenge[d] the men to action, [and] reproach[ed] them for their failure to confront the excess of the dictatorship" ("The Women" 18). *Knots* certainly identifies male political economy with corruption, inefficiency, and conservatism; Cambara's cousin Zaak, for example, epitomizes the ineptitude of the Somali male who is sedated by *qaat* and whose bad breath signifies the rotten roots of bad teeth as well as the tangled roots of clan identification. Although Bile is an important counterpoint to what otherwise seems like the ubiquitously corrupt male figures in the novel's Somalia, he is significantly weak and at times dependent on Cambara's help with the most basic of bodily functions.

By allowing Bile to stand in for the ailing Somali state, the novel endorses symbiotic gender relationships for which masculinist conceptions of state power cannot provide a model. Seamus recounts that Bile was imprisoned during Siyad Barre's regime and freed from prison when the dictator fled. He tells Cambara, "Anyhow, the tyrant's fall happened to coincide with Bile gaining his freedom, the birth of Raasta, his niece, and the collapse of the state" (329). Cambara's arrival in Somalia has caused Bile's mental and physical health to vacillate wildly between highs and lows, though the couple's intimacy at the novel's close suggests that their union might be vital to a sort of equilibrium. The gender dynamic that exists between Bile and Cambara, however, is not normatively gendered in its conception; Bile is childlike and vulnerable while Cambara is imposing and strong. Perhaps most importantly, the novel does not allow Bile to take the place of the support that the Women's Network provides. Instead, Bile is integrated into Cambara's aid network. Though Cambara is the novel's protagonist and the reclamation of the family home her mission, the mission's success is completed almost entirely by others in a diffused and diverse support network.

The novel's revision of "success" takes place primarily on the level of state organization and power by demonstrating an alternative structure that is local, female-driven, and networked rather than centralized. The novel does not simply end with the recovery of the home but rather extends to the successful performance of Cambara's play based on an oral parable from Ghana. The parable concerns an eagle that is raised among chickens and, believing himself to be a chicken, chooses to stick close to the ground. Once the eagle is removed from that context, taken to a mountain, and made to look at the sun, he expands his wings and flies. The parable can be extended to comment on the power of conceptual terms to shape perceptions of the possible: like the eagle who is raised to see himself as a chicken, Somalia has been caught in a narrative of failure since 1991. Without the tyranny of the "failed state" narrative to inform perceptions locally and abroad, new ideas about what Somalia's government is or could be may then "take flight."

The parable is central to *Knots*, bringing together the themes of gender, performance, and storytelling that are essential for the novel's

culminating production. It is fitting that a novel that probes what Somalia is and can be ends with its characters on the theatrical stage, united and connected through the assumption of complementary roles. *Knots* presents a performative concept of “Somaliness” that is more inclusive and flexible than emphases on blood and clan membership allow. Seamus, an Irish national who has made Somalia his home, most obviously demonstrates successful performance as belonging. Cambara observes, “Something about the way he is sitting tells her that Seamus has grown into his Somaliness in the same way alien vegetation adapts to take root eventually in the soil in which it has been planted” (223). Several of these details are noteworthy. First, Seamus’ posture and body language denote ease, comfort, and familiarity and place him “at home” in Somalia. Second, the language of roots is used in a positive, healthy sense in contrast to the roots of Zaak’s teeth, which are decaying and noisome. Thus the novel does not entirely dispense with the utility of roots, but Seamus exemplifies a rootedness that is not tied to the same clan-based roots that Zaak represents. Whereas Cambara stays with her cousin Zaak when she first arrives in Somalia to satisfy her mother’s request that she stay with “her blood” (2), she quickly finds herself growing roots with others who are not connected to her biologically. Finally, the passive voice in the phrasing “in the soil in which it has been planted” suggests that situations such as exile and forced displacement, unanticipated or unchosen by an individual, do not necessarily entail homelessness. This is not to say that Seamus’ roots in Ireland or Europe are cut entirely, but rather that roots can develop and adapt.

The primary way that roots and connections are forged in *Knots* is through storytelling, a mode of transmission that, in the novel, is connected to performance. Storytelling as connective performance is seen most clearly in the production of *The Eagle and the Chickens*, which brings together the threads of Cambara’s private, professional, and public lives. The performance is a mixture of the private and public; it is staged in her family’s home to an audience that is “public” but limited to invited guests and is funded through the Women’s Network, whose own funding sources extend far beyond their local setting. The guests in attendance travel from locations around the globe in order to witness this

successful performance and, by being in attendance, are simultaneously part of its success. The play depends on the kind of cooperation and organization that is missing at the state level in Somalia but is present in other forms.

The staged production of *The Eagle and the Chickens* exemplifies the power of storytelling, as those who participate in it are connected to Cambara first through the stories they relate to her. Cambara's primary mode of connection is storytelling: to Jiijo, she commands, "Let's hear your story" (177); to Kiin she says, "Tell me your story, how you come to remain in a city many others have fled, and how you come to run a hotel" (191); and to Gacal, the child soldier she reunites with his mother, she gives a skeleton of her own story to encourage him to tell his. *Knots*, which at first glance may seem to be Cambara's story, is really comprised of many other interpolated stories. The act of telling stories, which moves the plot forward and forges personal connections between characters, is also enacted in the structure of the novel itself. Cambara's story depends on the architectural support of other stories for context and connection. Storytelling is a fitting mechanism for plot structure and character development in *Knots* because, as Sheri Stone-Mediagore argues with reference to Hannah Arendt, it "constitutes an ideal medium in which to present noncoercive, community-situated beliefs about political phenomena" (Stone-Mediagore 62). This kind of storytelling is decentered, communal, locally situated and integrates stories from a diversity of characters. The storytelling modeled in *Knots* confronts the dominant story of Somalia as an irretrievably failed state and arena of anarchy in need of saving from the outside, and engages narrative in order to tell an alternative story of contemporary Somalia in a different way.

Both the power of storytelling and the success of the Women's Network suggest alternative formations to organization on the local level that contest the West's designation of Somalia as a "failure." Despite the West's label, Cambara notes that "Civil wars or not, there are people like Kiin who are by nature generous to a fault, well meaning, and excessively munificent" (Farah, *Knots* 187). She reasons that "this goes to prove that not every Somali is obsessed with the idea of clan affiliation

and that many people behave normally even if the conditions in which they operate are themselves abnormal” (188). Though from some perspectives Somalia exists in a state of exception, emergency, and failure, Farah’s depiction of the country demonstrates an organizational logic and empathetic community that can be seen if our conceptual categories allow for it. Moreover, these networks of connection can provide alternatives to the kind of centralized state government that the Somali people have resisted.

IV. Revising the Narrative of Failure

Through this consideration of *Knots* in tandem with the current problematic theorizing of state failure, we can see what the term “failed state” can obfuscate. A “failed state” is not one that lacks order, but rather one whose ordering principles, structures, and logic may not be immediately legible if we read successful states in the tradition of Weber and others, where we would look for a state that “successfully” exerts territorial control, monopolizes the use of legitimate violence, maintains the rule of law, and provides social services, economic goods, and political services. Farah and Cambara’s Somalia is at times chaotic and disorienting, but by the novel’s end both author and protagonist have detected a guiding order that, if not immediately perceptible, is nevertheless present and able to be manipulated to reclaim a family home. Regarding the perception of Somalia as void of the semblance of order, Anna Simons and David Tucker assert that “[t]o anyone on the outside[,] life [in such places] may have appeared chaotic, but the fact that local residents in Beirut, Mogadishu, Sarajevo, and Kabul knew exactly where they could safely venture, whose militia would protect them, and who would gun them down points to latent order within the chaos” (qtd. in Marx, “Failed” 604). *Knots* suggests that a kind of logic, if not conventional order, exists for residents of Mogadiscio, and that these moments of crisis and chaos are rich moments in which other forms of organization, not identical to traditional state structures, can be imagined.

The novel’s position is not inconsistent with recent trends in international affairs research that view Western models of state-building in Somali as “ill-judged efforts” that exist “in defiance of local sociopoliti-

cal dynamics and regional history” (Kaplan 82). The novel’s Women’s Network mirrors work being done by the Save Somali Women and Children (SSWC) organization, which brings together women from diverse clan, political, and socioeconomic orientations in a shared vision of peace, protection of women’s rights, and the nation that might transcend clan politics (Hagi 18). Achievements at the state-level listed on the SSWC’s website include taking women to the High Negotiation Table at the Somalia Peace and National Reconciliation Conference in 2000 as well as garnering a constitutional quota of twenty-five seats (thirty percent) in the national parliament and representation in the Somali Council of Ministers (“Accomplishments”). The SSWC continues its work at the local level as well, listing first among its achievements the “gender capacity building and awareness programs in women [sic] human rights, leadership, and peace building and conflict management and resolution” (“Accomplishments”). Other initiatives in Somali territories that contrast with masculinist Anglo-American statecraft include the Borama and Sanaag elders’ conferences, comprised of hundreds of elders and advisers, which achieved “a consensus on how to govern Somaliland and resolve interclan conflicts, laid down a national constitutional structure, and enabled a peaceful change in government” (Bush 106). This initiative draws from traditional forms of conflict management and governance in Somalia that, Bush notes, are founded on “the social *network*, rather than the individual” and construct a “social reality that must orient international responses in Somalia and in other regions with similar kinds of social structures” (85; emphasis added). Even as these projects aspire to national levels, their practices and structures—networks, consultation with elders—differ significantly from the centralized, “successful” Weberian state.

In this way, *Knots* asks us to reconsider what we mean by both success and failure. Through the success of the Women’s Network in aiding Cambara in her goal, we can see that success need not be tied to the public, or to a particular (Western) metric. Both success and failure are not stable ontological categories, but are contingent, conditional, and determined by perspective and rubric. We might start to think of both conditions as processes, and success as flexibility. In his reading of

Sudan's state failure, Marx suggests that we might understand state failure as "the inverse of state flexibility. The most stable state," he argues, "is the one most capable of adapting new and changing populations, and increasing the detail of its census" ("Failed" 609). Clearly, traditional conceptions of state structure are operative in Marx's argument; presumably the functions that the state ought to perform according to the Failed States Index would still be met. But what *Knots* adds to this suggestion of flexibility is that we ought to be more flexible, and more imaginative, in our willingness to consider other ways of organizing and protecting populations that do not resort to a centralized system that controls the rule of law.

"Failure" entails something or someone falling short—suggesting a lack—and the concept lends itself to asking for someone to blame. Who or what is responsible for the state of failure? *Knots* poses this question in Zaak's opening query to Cambara: "Who do you blame?" Importantly, the novel never answers the question of blame and a fixation of blame is not pursued. Instead, the novel's energy is directed toward the value of considering forms of organization like the Women's Network that are decentralized, transnational networks or EU grassroots collaborations. In revising the narrative of failure that has dominated Somali politics and foreign policy, *Knots* illuminates the way that concepts like that of the "failed state" reify dominant theories about statecraft and governance designed in the West's image and models alternative political organization in a globalized, postcolonial world.

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