Joan Kjaer: Hello, and welcome to WorldCanvass from International Programs at the University of Iowa. I'm Joan Kjaer, and we're coming to you from MERGE in downtown Iowa City. The topic tonight is journalism and a free press in the age of fake news. The focus of this segment is writing about war and radical social change. Joining us are two writers from the 2017 International Writing Program's fall residency. Next to me is Ubah Cristina Ali Farah, who's a fiction writer, a poet, a playwright, and a translator originally from Somalia and now living in Italy, so, nice to have you here.

Ubah Cristina: Thank you, again.

Joan Kjaer: Thank you.

Ubah Cristina: Thank you.

Joan Kjaer: Yes. Next to her is Hajar Bali, a playwright, a fiction writer, a poet, and from Algeria. Thank you, Hajar.

Hajar Bali: Thank you.

Joan Kjaer: Mm-hmm (affirmative). So, Ubah, if I may, I'd like to start with you, and I hope you've enjoyed your time in Iowa City this fall.

Ubah Cristina: Yes.

Joan Kjaer: Yes.

Ubah Cristina: I am. I am enjoying this [inaudible 00:00:55].

Joan Kjaer: Good. You shared some of your writing with me, some of your thoughts about writing in a country at war, and then leaving a country you grew up in, and we also talked about language, and language of violence, language that defines our times, and our times also defining the language we use, the words we choose to use, the words we don't use, and the layers of meaning that could reside in any one word. I wonder if you could take us inside your journey from war torn Somalia to Italy, and help us understand what leaving has meant to you, and particularly a phrase you explained to me “to leave in the afternoon.”

Ubah Cristina: Yeah. Yes, thank you, Joan. A few years ago I was, now I live in Brussels, but a few years ago I was living, I lived in Rome, and I worked for the group of Somali young refugees, and this school was, it was in a school of Italian languages for refugees. I was working with these young people, and since we were often discussing about the difficulty of translating words in Italian into Somali, they proposed me. I was working at the time to, with a radio program, and they ask me to just to talk every day about a word translated that was impossible to translate, and I decided to do this program with this young people.
One of the word that they wanted to talk about was the word “partire” in Italian, that means leaving, and since Somali has a nomadic culture, nomadic tradition, that there are many words to say leaving, and so one of the people who were in the workshop talked about this word that was in a Somali lullaby, that is “carrabay,” that means leaving in afternoon, but it doesn't mean only leaving in the afternoon, but because you leave in the afternoon only when something terrible happens. Because usually, nomadic people, either they leave in the morning, or they leave in the evening. At the beginning or the end of the day, so leaving in afternoon means, it has this meaning in itself, and it was very beautiful because everyone was talking about the moment he decided to leave, and yeah.

We shared these memories with each other. It's very difficult to talk about these kind of things, because on the one hand you like to ... I remember when I arrived in Italy, the first years it was very difficult for me to tell my story, because it's so complicated that I was always all so afraid that people wouldn't understand, or I didn't want also to look as a victim, because that is, this kind of idea of shame when something very violent happens to you, as if you are responsible somehow, and yeah.

Joan Kjaer: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Another thing you mentioned in this piece of writing was that some who have fled the violence in Somalia, don't use the words, "Civil War," but instead use the term “burbur” meaning, "the shattering."

Ubah Cristina: Yeah, it was amazing for me, because they were always talking about it. Particular, there was one of the person was attending the workshop. His name was Isfarhan, and he had such a beautiful way to tell his stories, and he would live, he left Somalia. Often he went to South Africa, then he went back, and then he went to Kenya, and then he came back, and then he went to Yemen, as if his desire to go was always contained by ... No, this desire of going back home, so that there was this kind of idea of going back, and yeah. They didn't say [foreign language 00:05:12], which means civil war, but if you translate it literally, in Somali it means, to war against an intimate.

So, there is this kind of idea of intimacy into the word [foreign language 00:05:32], and so this is perhaps, I thought perhaps this is why they are not using this word, and instead they say burbur, that means the scattering, the things that you, you thought that you were there, stable, that they wouldn't change. Suddenly they become scattered everywhere, yeah. It is particularly important for me to talk about it today, because as you have seen from the news, yeah, I'm pretty sure there was this, yeah, this, yeah there was this bomb that killed 300 people a couple of days ago, and how to talk about it, because in Italy there is a journalist, a Somali journ- Italian Somali journalist, that she was saying, "Oh, nobody talks about Somalia."

In particular, in Italy, this is something very sensitive, because Somalia used to be, was an Italian colony, so the idea that Italians don't care anymore about Somalia, even though they have responsibility in what happened. She was very
angry, but at the same time, I think that it's very difficult to talk about these kind of things without being, talking about the victims. It is important to humanize them, but at the same time, it's also, you don't want to.... this kind of ....this pornography of the violence is always something that is very delicate, I think, and yeah, difficult to deal with.

Joan Kjaer: Mm-hmm (affirmative). In the writing you do, sometimes you, you yourself are a sort of, part of, the diaspora. You no longer live in Somalia, even though your family memories are from there, but some of the writing you do involves that first generation of refugees, who have themselves left, and then other stories you write are about that next generation that doesn't even know what the land actually looks like. They have no personal experience there, but they lived that experience through their parents. Why is this such an intriguing topic for you?

Ubah Cristina: Yeah. So, in part it has to do with my own life, because when, okay when I left Somalia, it was the January 1991. I was 17, I was very young, but the civil war, for me, corresponded, was I had a child when I was very young at 17, so the civil war started when my first son was born. If I have to remember how long, yeah, that war is the age of my first son, so 26 years, and because yeah, I mean, somehow, my idea, he didn't live anything about the war. He didn't see the war. He didn't see anything, and while he was growing up, because he was interrogating himself all the time. What happened? And so I started to think about his generation, of these young people who didn't have a, I mean, a personal memory of the war, but at the same time, they inherit it.

It is not because you tell them stories about the war, but because there is something that we transmit through our body, and scattered memories somehow, like the burbur, because I realized in the books that I write, memories are not, how can I say, linear. Because you don't remember in a linear way, yes, see, it's just, you combine things and so I thought that it was very important to think about this generation, this post-memory generation, because they are the ones who have the responsibility tomorrow. Not only them, but they have the responsibility to dialogue with each other, and mean, if we don't discuss that ...

The other day I met a group of very young Somali girls, and they told me, what, but we didn't know, we were talking about Mogadishu, how it used to be the city, this cosmopolitan city, but it was not out of nostalgia that we were talking about it, but just to know how the city used to be before them. This is very important, because after the civil war, what the civil war does, is that it divides people in the diaspora so people don't talk each other. They want to discuss because there is still something going on in the country, and it's very important that this generation talk to each other, and they are able to discuss and to deal with it, and not take the part of the victims of the persecutors.

They are the ones who can, I mean, yeah, not ignore, but somehow they are not responsible of it, and yeah, so I thought that it was important because of that.
Joan Kjaer: Yeah. Thank you so much. I want to move now just down the line here and talk to Hajar just a little bit. So nice to have you with us. You’re from Algeria, and you experienced the changes in your country some years ago when there was an Islamic uprising, Islamist uprising, and you have written a great deal about this. I wonder if you can take us back to those years when you were aware that things were changing.

Hajar Bali: Yes. Until the '80's, the Algerian state was the socialist with us, only one political party, the FNL, which was a heritage of the national independence war. At that times, the other parties, like the communist parties or others, they were all clandestine, so the monopoly of the state, on information was total. In '88 happened is what we called the October Revolution. On 5 October, thousands of young people demonstrated in the streets of several cities, denouncing the single party, demanding more freedom, and things like that.

Joan Kjaer: Yeah.

Hajar Bali: They said to, 150 deaths officially, arbitrary arrest, especially from the communists who were suspected to being behind the movement. At that time, I was teaching in the university. We organized some strikes to free our comrades. We drafted the Black Book of October, in which we received the testimonies of tortures, et cetera. It lasted a few months, then the government was forced to opt for a democratic opening, the creation of parties. There were about 60 parties then.

We, on our side at the university, founded the first autonomous union of university teachers. Magazines, publishing houses, associations, radios, and even the TV, which was still national, opened debates. There were programs where finally one had a right to a free speech. One must imagine this effervescence, since it was like something we didn't even dream of before.

There was also a movement coming from Cabili, from another state, another city, which was fighting against the monopoly of Arabic language, because, asking for recognition of our native language. So, everything was open, the press, too, so some independent and partisan newspapers were born, rejecting the language of ....that was used until then. Some newspapers that wrote in Algerian, and the language, the Algerian language is a sort of creole combination of Arabic, French, Barbarian, and all this.

So, all this was tolerated. The debates took place everywhere; radio, press, cinema, university, et cetera. When, how did it change? In January '92, there was the Islamic party, who was behind all parties, who was very popular, and who won the first tour of the elections, and it was certain that it was going to win the elections at the second tour, and so between these two tours, the military took the power, and they break the democratic...

Joan Kjaer: Military coup?
Hajar Bali: ... democratic, and since there, I can say that maybe some months after that began the civil war with the Islamic movements in the mountains [inaudible 00:15:44], and against the power. This began, we can say, approximately at ‘93, ‘94.

Joan Kjaer: Mm-hmm (affirmative) Yeah, and you spoke with me beforehand about ...the government did everything it could to convince the people that the Islamists were outsiders, were not really Algerian, that they were THEM, and we are Algerians, and the government needs to fight against them.

Hajar Bali: Yeah, we all, we all thought that. We could not imagine that people from our family, I want to say, our nation, could kill brothers. That we were having this idea of our unity against the colonialism, and these French colonies, it was still there that strong idea that we are all united. So, for people, and so the government was pushing this idea that these people are not from our country. They come from Afghanistan. They were trained there, almost, and I must say that what happened in France, I have a friend, that when that ... the cinema...

Joan Kjaer: The recent bombing?

Hajar Bali: Yeah, the recent events, I have a French friend who called me and told me, "How can you tell me how it began in Algeria with this Islamic war," and I said, "Maybe what I can tell you is that at that moment we thought that people are not from our people, and you must maybe think that these young killers are our people." It's what, I thought first. It was easy for the government to say that and to say that they are external ...

Joan Kjaer: Forces.

Hajar Bali: Forces, and almost always, like always French, and the West is trying to invade us, and things like that, to justify, on the other hand the violence of the power also against people.

Joan Kjaer: Mm-hmm (affirmative), and how did the press respond to all of this? Did the press basically take the same position that the government ...

Hajar Bali: The press was between two fires, and I don't know how to say this, yeah, so there was the government, the military government, with that new law, which doesn't allow you to speak about security things, and so before this law, there were many, many excesses of power from this part, and in the other hand there were the Islamic groups who were, who were very, who killed so many journalists, especially at the first years of the war.

There were some independent journalists who tried to give, to give, to give another way of saying, without following the government, and it was not accepted, even by some, we told them, democratic people, because they were not Islamists, you know?
Hajar Bali: I can give the example of the famous agreement signed in Saint'Egidio in 1995. The main opposition parties, including the Islamic party, who was at that time stopped. They decided to meet at a colloquium in Rome, under the auspices of the Catholic Community of Saint'Egidio, opening up a prospect of reconciliation, participants affirmed by a national contract written in six pages, it stipulates the commitment to respect the democracy, the political and... nation, the individual freedoms, including freedom of confession. All the ..., as a means of achieving and maintaining power.

For the first time the Islamic party is committed to entering the mold of a peaceful political solution, and to apply the rules of the democratic games, but the military high command categorically rejects the initiative, by refusing any dialogue with the fundamentalists, and a possible reinstatement of the dissolved party, in the politic arena. Journalists at that time, there were very, very few journalists who were following this possible idea of reconciliation.

Joan Kjaer: Yeah. What is the state of Algeria's press freedom now? Do you, as a journalist in Algeria fear for what you write?

Hajar Bali: So, for the press, it's a bad period. Many are forced to resort to unsavory practices to round off the end of the month. Some are approached by local authorities, or by provincial potentates, in various ways. Those who continue to fulfill their mission without censorship, are not seen by their own employers, since they continue to fail to respect the tacit obligation of reserve. Not being able to avoid dangerous subjects, what we call dangerous subjects. They are obliged not to cross a red line, which only the initiates know the outlines. They must continue to feed their newspapers with revelations about provincial mafias and local institutions, but they must be careful not to disturb the traffic from which the strings are pulled in high places, like the trafficking of kief to Europe, for example, or the fraudulent export of foreign currency.

The hand of informer trade by the [foreign language 00:23:44]. The quasi monopoly of the [foreign language 00:23:48] with the foreign all companies in the Sahara. So there are some subjects were we sensible that they have no right to, so their articles are often reviewed, or even simply put in the baskets. In general, all journalists know that the information that may involve the barons of the regime, is not publishable, so today the private written press in Algeria is at the end of resource.

In addition to being let loose by those who have used it, it has lost the confidence of its readership, despite the several sanctions against journalists and calls for mobilization in their favor, Algerian society remains totally indifferent to their fate. The average reader, disillusioned, and who bought during the 90s, at least two newspaper a day, no longer reads, because also of the internet. He prefers the foreign television channels, captured by satellite, especially French and Middle Eastern. Selling has reached the lowest threshold.
since the creation of the private press, and despite the disappearance of many titles, at the point where most newspapers no longer display the number of prints in their ......

Joan Kjaer: Wow.

Hajar Bali: Yeah.

Joan Kjaer: Wow. Well, it's a real treat for us to be able to hear personal stories, and you know, your own, your own, what you've dealt with in your own countries, and your own writing, and I thank you both for being here with us this afternoon, so just next to me is Ubah Cristina Ali Farah, and Hajar Bali has just been speaking with us about Algeria. And I hope you stay with us for the third part of this program, where we'll be joined by a freelance journalist from Belgium, and an editor from Kazakhstan. And again, this is WorldCanvass from International Programs at the University of Iowa. I'm Joan Kjaer, and thank you for being with us this evening.