

# Racial Formation and Anti-Somali Ideologies in Central Ohio

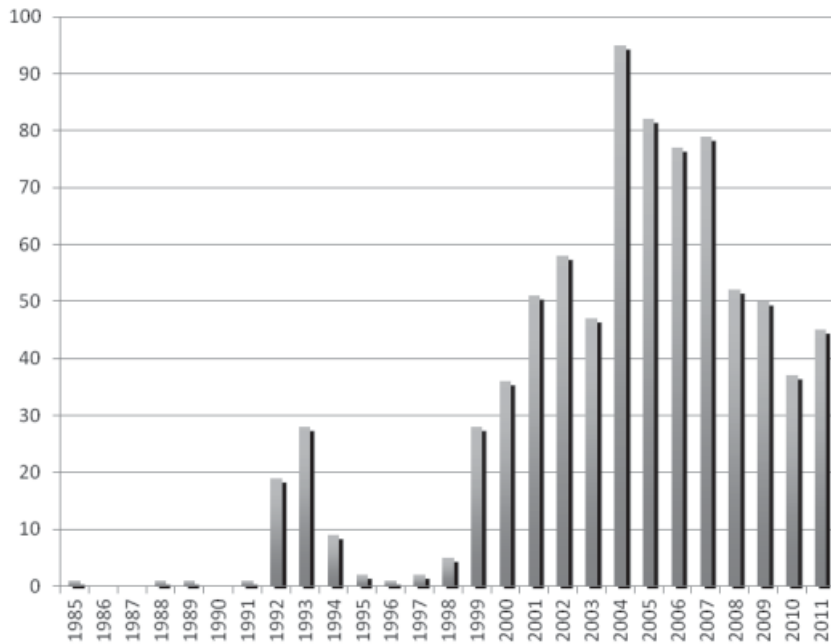
---

Anita M. Waters

## I. Introduction

The central Ohio region, including the city of Columbus and its environs, is home to the second largest population of Somali-born residents in the United States. In the decade after civil war broke out in the East African nation of Somalia, about 30,000 of the million-plus displaced Somalis were resettled in the United States by the Office of Refugee Resettlement, a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.<sup>1</sup> Once resettled in various cities around the country, many then chose to relocate to central Ohio, where a small number of earlier, pre-war immigrants had settled, and where earlier arrivals welcomed newly arrived extended family members.<sup>2</sup> A few “pull” factors prevailed in Columbus until 2008: inexpensive housing was abundant and unskilled labor was in demand. These secondary migrations complicate population estimates, but the foreign-born population of Franklin County went from 32,235 in 1990 to 84,854 in 2003.<sup>3</sup> Community groups estimate that the number of Somalis in the central Ohio area, including foreign-born immigrants and their children born here, is circa 45,000 people.<sup>4</sup> Others suggest that a more accurate count, based on extrapolation from the number of Somali youngsters enrolled in schools in the Columbus area, is closer to 15,000.<sup>5</sup> No one disputes that the Somali-American community in Columbus is second in size only to that of Minneapolis. Its growth can be traced by the number of times the word “Somali” was mentioned in *The Columbus Dispatch*, the city’s only daily newspaper. The words “Somalia” or “Somali” were hardly

Table 1: Number of Articles in *The Columbus Dispatch* that Mention “Somali” from 1985–2011.



mentioned until the late 1990s, from three times in 1998 to 23 in 1999, and up to a high of 95 times in 2004 (see Table 1).

The reception of Somalis by Columbus residents and institutions has been mixed. Some governmental and nongovernmental organizations have been welcoming and supportive, but vitriolic letters to the editor and graffiti on mosque walls demanding that the Somalis return to Africa attest to an underlying anti-Somali current in Columbus.<sup>6</sup> A survey of letters to the editor revealed that some Columbus residents are vocal in their anti-Somali sentiments, which range from concern that Somalis will not assimilate to a specific fear and hatred of all Muslims.<sup>7</sup> Relations have been further set back by a series of high profile arrests. In 2003, Nuradin Abdi, a Somali man, was arrested and ultimately pleaded guilty for plotting to plant explosives in a Columbus shopping mall.<sup>8</sup> In 2010, some Somalis were arrested for running a prostitution ring and in 2011 for food stamp fraud.

It is clear that the Somali community is experiencing actual discrimination, not just verbal abuse, from both public and private institutions in central Ohio. For example, the Department of Homeland Security is

alleged to deliberately delay Somali background checks for years at a time, conduct unduly hostile and aggressive interviews, and use trick questions at interviews, like asking applicants to remember minute details from documents that are ten to fifteen years old.<sup>9</sup>

Private corporations also exercise discriminatory practices. A staff attorney for the Council on American-Islamic Relations said that 90 percent of complaints about workplace anti-Muslim discrimination in Columbus come from Somali residents. He attributed this to the high number of Somali residents as well as their relatively low socio-economic status, which causes Somalis to disproportionately work in jobs that require permission from employers to observe prayer times, for example. In another study, the authors found that Somali prisoners at the Franklin County Correctional Facility face ridicule and harassment when they ask to follow Islamic practices, while all inmates are encouraged to attend Christian services organized by the prison.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, certain events have shaken Somali trust in local law enforcement. In December 2005, for example, Franklin County sheriff's deputies responded to a call for help from the family of Nasir Abdi, a mentally ill man, and shot the unarmed man to death within sixty seconds of entering the family's apartment.<sup>11</sup>

This essay explores anti-Somali ideologies and practices as they are shaped by the social structures involving both immigrants and host country residents. The existing racial landscape of the host society, including racial ideologies espoused by the dominant social groups, has a profound impact on the educational and occupational success of refugees and immigrants in general. While my purpose here is not to measure the effect of racist structures and representations on Somalis themselves, the literature does indicate that the way a group is received affects its members' economic and social well-being.<sup>12</sup> The purpose of this essay instead is to analyze the kinds of arguments, analogies, representations, and claims that emerge when the host society, in this case central Ohioans, try to make sense of newcomers in their city.

## II. The Sociology of Somalis in Columbus

Four features of the Somali community are especially important to sociologists and have an impact on the way Somalis are represented in the racial/ethnic ideologies of segments of the host community and thus incorporated into the institutions of the central Ohio area.

First, central Ohio is one of the “new gateways” that characterize contemporary immigration patterns, as described by Mary Waters and Tomás R. Jiménez.<sup>13</sup> Since German immigrants settled it in the late 1800s, the central Ohio region had been relatively unaccustomed to immigration of any kind. Beginning in the 1990s, growing numbers of Asians, Latinos, and Africans arrived in the area. Unlike cities like San Francisco and New York, where new immigrants have the advantage of established institutional networks of assistance, immigrant organizations are being invented anew by the grassroots in Columbus and Minneapolis. The relative newness of the gateway may have an influence on the receptivity of natives to newcomers.

Second, the Somali community exemplifies the trend toward *transnationalism*.<sup>14</sup> Instead of following past models of cultural assimilation, many transnational migrants retain ties to their homeland through political participation, remittances, and communication. This results in “simultaneous embeddedness”<sup>15</sup> in the host country and the home country, and sometimes in other sites as well, such as countries where relatives are located. The Somali community participates in many transnational practices. In 2009, a U.N. Development Program study estimated that the one-million-strong Somali diaspora sends up to one billion dollars to their relatives in Somalia annually.<sup>16</sup> Continuing political turmoil in Somalia disrupts expectations and hopes of return migration,<sup>17</sup> but does not dispel them completely. In fact, well-known members of the central Ohio community have returned to Somalia for months and years at a time. This transnational character may affect the reception of Somalis by casting doubts on their commitment to remain in the United States or their ability to fulfill their duties as citizens.

Third, the community exhibits very high rates of small business ownership; there are an estimated 350 Somali-owned businesses in Columbus.<sup>18</sup> While entrepreneurship in migrant communities may provide new paths to social mobility, it may also reinforce enclave boundaries that hinder structural assimilation.<sup>19</sup> In addition, the proliferation of small businesses among the immigrant generation may open up opportunities for the next generation to pursue higher education. This is similar to what Steinberg discovered occurring among Jewish immigrants to New York in the early 1900s.<sup>20</sup> Although entrepreneurship is a valued quality in American culture, the high rates of business ownership may arouse feelings of envy among native-born residents and fuel rumors that Somalis are receiving benefits from the government that others are entitled to but not receiving.

Finally, the Somali community in Columbus has continually been replenished with newly arrived refugees. High immigrant “replacement rates” sometimes mask the amount of assimilation that is actually taking place, affecting the way that the native-born residents perceive the immigrants in their area.<sup>21</sup>

### III. Racial Formation and Anti-Somali “Projects”

One of the most fruitful conceptual frameworks with which to analyze the response of a “new gateway” to its growing immigrant community is *racial formation*, as developed by Omi and Winant.<sup>22</sup> They define racial formation as “the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed.”<sup>23</sup> This viewpoint permits attention to both symbolic and structural aspects of race and is particularly appropriate when making sense of the dynamic nature of racial meanings and ideas.

Racial formations are composed of “racial projects,” deliberate actions taken by various actors, from individuals through major social institutions. These actions have consequences (intended and unintended) both on the way racial and ethnic groups are represented (the symbolic aspects) and on the way resources are distributed among racial and ethnic groups (the structural aspects).<sup>24</sup> Racial projects that attempt to reinforce systems of domination and entrenched racial hierarchies can be labeled “racist.”<sup>25</sup> Racial projects can be discursive in nature; racist ideas communicated through social networks constitute racial projects, just as making a decision about the distribution of resources.<sup>26</sup> Social actors can also undertake anti-racist projects. These aim to undermine racial hierarchies and challenge structures of domination. In this research, I pay particular attention to *anti-Somali* ideology as a racial formation with both symbolic and structural consequences. Analysis of the social actors who espouse and enact racist anti-Somali projects can inform efforts to reduce their influence in society.

This research addresses two sets of questions. First, what kinds of racial projects do members of the new gateway undertake *vis-à-vis* their newly arrived neighbors in their city? Specifically, how do anti-Somali actors attempt to shape the meanings that Somali refugees have for the greater community, and how do they attempt to influence the availability and distribution of social resources to them? What efforts

are made to counter anti-Somali racial projects? Do Somalis themselves make those efforts?

A second set of questions revolves around the ways that anti-Somali projects are similar to or different from other kinds of macro-level racial formations in the United States. Somalis are a distinctive ethnic group in that they belong simultaneously to three distinct social groups, each of which is a target of social opprobrium in itself: people of African descent, immigrants, and Muslims. Consequently, they find themselves in what Patricia Hill Collins sees as interlocking systems of oppression.<sup>27</sup> I will turn here to a discussion of the racial formations around these three groups.

### **A. Somalis and other Racial Formations**

Because Somalis are people that many white Ohioans would simply identify as “black,” anti-Somali rhetoric may draw on well-known ideologies against African-Americans, including both extreme white supremacist ideas and “color-blind” racism as described below. White supremacist discourse has a long history in the United States,<sup>28</sup> and is rooted in eighteenth-century beliefs about profound biological differences between “racial” groups. Although biologists and anthropologists debunked these ideas long ago, they persist among about ten percent of white Americans, according to sociologist Jesse Daniels in her book *White Lies*.<sup>29</sup> She argues that the existence of extreme white supremacist groups leads other Americans to believe that racism is contained only in the fringes of society. Furthermore, she found that extreme views creep into mainstream media and into the political discourse of governmental institutions at the highest levels.

Another prevalent discourse embraced by contemporary European-Americans is “color-blind racism,” as described by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva in *Racism Without Racists*.<sup>30</sup> In contrast to the vituperative racial hatred that Daniels studied, Bonilla-Silva refers to “‘smiling face’ discrimination,” as exemplified by the person in charge who politely tells minority applicants that there are no jobs open or apartments available. European-Americans who were interviewed in Bonilla-Silva’s studies justify their hostile attitudes and discriminatory behaviors to themselves and others by referencing ideological frames that he calls “meaning in the service of power.”<sup>31</sup> These frames give European-Americans ways to express ideas against others couched in terms and qualifications that make their ideas more palatable. For instance, one

frame is “abstract liberalism,” in which Euro-Americans embrace meritocracy, individualism, and universalism. While congratulating themselves on their fairness and egalitarianism, they manage to maintain and reproduce the privileges that their own racial group enjoys.<sup>32</sup>

Those who embrace color-blind racial ideologies are sensitive to being called out as racists. They also deny the impact of racism on the lives of nonwhite people. Euro-Americans may tell themselves that the life chances for minority groups are so much better now than in the past. In a frame called “minimization of racism,” minority group members who evoke race are deemed “hypersensitive.”<sup>33</sup> In addition, despite embracing anti-black ideas, individuals deny their own participation in “racism,” instead reserving that term to refer only to extreme white supremacists. In what Bonilla-Silva calls “cultural racism,” color-blind racial ideologies also portray the *Others’* cultural practices as fixed and abhorrent to members of the dominant culture.<sup>34</sup>

Another contemporary racial formation that affects Somali refugees in Columbus is the nativist or anti-immigration movement, embodied in personalities like Lou Dobbs (formerly of Cable News Network), Larry Pratt (“English First” and other anti-immigrant efforts), Ann Corcoran (Refugee Resettlement Watch), and neo-nativists linked with anti-immigrant efforts in Arizona.<sup>35</sup> Their opposition is often cast in economic terms (i.e., immigrants take our jobs and drain public resources),<sup>36</sup> but there may also be undercurrents of cultural racism. Misinformation about immigrants pervades American political discourse, according to Aviva Chomsky, from the idea that immigrants drain local resources and take jobs away from native-born Americans to a myth that is particularly relevant in the case of Somalis in Columbus—that the United States’ refugee policy is very generous.<sup>37</sup> Extreme anti-immigrant groups are known to be active in the Ohio area.<sup>38</sup>

A final development in contemporary U.S. and European discourse is the latest iteration of Islamophobia.<sup>39</sup> This ideology sees membership in the vast Judeo-Christian tradition of North America as the norm, and Islam as the *Other*. Since September 11, 2001, law enforcement agencies, media conglomerates, and religious organizations have targeted Muslims.<sup>40</sup> Anti-Islamic ideas are expressed freely in public and private institutions. The vitriolic rhetoric escalated alarmingly in the decade after 9/11.<sup>41</sup> The new wave of Islamophobia claims that Islam is essentially embodied by Al-Qaeda and its 2001 attack on the World Trade Center.<sup>42</sup> State legislative efforts outlawing Sharia Law, well-financed activist bloggers like Pam Geller, and various Tea Party activi-



ties<sup>43</sup> represent contemporary macro-level racial projects that attempt to advance this agenda. It is an ideology that is often spread on the Internet<sup>44</sup> and has links with international anti-Islamists in Europe, like Geert Wilders' Freedom Party in the Netherlands, who reject multiculturalism. Since Somalis are overwhelmingly Muslim, anti-Somali rhetoric could tap into the racial projects of the larger wave of anti-Islamic ideologies in addition to anti-African and anti-immigrant sentiments.

## B. Methods

This study is informed by three years of experience working with the Somali community in a variety of ways, including affiliation with a community-based social service organization run by Somalis for Somalis as well as an interview-based research project on Somali youth. A set of systematically gathered data was needed, however, to tap into the full range and depth of candid and uncensored ideas about Somalis in Columbus. For this, I turned to Internet forums, which serve as what Markham calls a "discursive milieu that facilitates the researcher's ability to witness and analyze the structure of talk, the negotiation of meaning and identity, the development of relationships and communities, and the construction of social structures as these occur discursively."<sup>45</sup> Paul St. John Frisoli sees the Internet as "a medium for communication, a venue to connect across physical borders, and a socially constructed space...Therefore, this medium is seen as both a tool and a site for qualitative research" in what he calls virtual ethnography.<sup>46</sup> The advantages of this method include the fact that anonymity makes people more likely to disclose information about themselves than they would in a face-to-face situation.

The data used here were gathered in a systematic review of a set of Internet posts appearing in two Columbus-based online forums, the Columbus City Data Forum and Topix. City Data is an Internet company that specializes in providing information about cities for people who are relocating.<sup>47</sup> Topix is a privately owned company with investment from Gannett Co., Inc.<sup>48</sup> It links opinion forums with news sources like *The Columbus Dispatch*, which is owned and controlled by the conservative and wealthy Wolfe family.<sup>49</sup> Many, but not all, Topix discussions are based on articles that appeared in the *Dispatch*.

Because of the nature of the blogosphere, these data must be interpreted with care. One cannot be certain how many individuals are represented as authors of posts, nor can this group be treated as in any



way representative of the population in general. The evidence only reveals the existence of a small number of people holding extremely anti-Somali views, while most Columbus residents may be oblivious, appreciative, or benignly neglectful of the Somali community. Anonymous sites seem to bring out the most extreme sentiments. This, however, makes such a data source especially appropriate given the purpose of this research; that is, to gather and analyze anti-Somali sentiments.

City Data's and Topix's Columbus forums were searched for mentions of the word "Somali" through June 2012. City-Data.com's Columbus forum is a site that is concerned with those relocating to central Ohio, with a focus on real estate, information on housing and jobs, and restaurant recommendations. A search through May 2012 revealed eighteen threads in which the word "Somali" is mentioned in one of the posts. Most of these threads are about other topics and Somalis are only mentioned tangentially. About 150 posts from City Data were reviewed for this research.

The search of Topix through June 2012 revealed fifty threads with the word "Somali" in the title, with a total of 1885 separate posts. For this analysis, I searched all the posts for the twenty threads that had been updated in the year prior to June 2012. The posts that I examined for this analysis from Topix totaled 876 and were posted from October 2009 through June 2012.

First, I will describe the range of valence represented in the posts as a whole. Second, I look carefully at anti-Somali rhetoric in the context of other racial formations, in particular white supremacy, color-blind racism, nativism, and Islamophobia. Third, I explore the Somali response to anti-Somali posts. Finally, I take up the question of anti-Somali rhetoric in mainstream institutions.

### **C. The Range of the Central Ohio Blogosphere**

Posts about Somalis on public Internet blogs represent racial projects undertaken by members of the new gateway *vis-à-vis* their newly arrived immigrant community. The valence of the posts ranges considerably, from extremely virulent anti-Somali posts, through color-blind racism and benign obliviousness, to ideas that are disruptive of established racial hierarchies.

The range of sentiments about Somalis expressed in City Data can be seen in the 56 responses to the only thread in which "Somali" is

mentioned in the thread topic “Why are there so many Somalians?”<sup>50</sup> Between August 2008, when the thread began, and January 2012, when the last post was made, this thread had a total of 56 replies. Of these, 26 percent were negative, either about Somalis or immigrants in general; 32 percent were positive; and 41 percent were neutral. The neutral posts simply stated demographic facts without judgment or they expressed opinions about tangential topics.

Compared to City Data, the Topix Columbus forum proved to be a much richer lode of anti-Somali rhetoric. While it varies by thread, anti-Somali posts far outweigh pro-Somali, neutral, or anti-racist posts. On the longest-running discussion about an article entitled, “Somali President to Appeal to the Local Community,” 54 percent were negative, 25 percent were positive, and 21 percent were neutral. The positive responses to that thread included a lot of participation from Somalis themselves. Other threads on Topix had even higher proportions of negative comments. When the article that began a discussion cast Somalis in a negative light, the comments were much more negative. In June 2011, the *Dispatch* published an article entitled, “Somali Man Arrested in Columbus on Terrorist-Related Charges.” Of the 79 comments on that article, 86 percent were negative, 10 percent were positive, and 4 percent were neutral.

Positive posts fall into several categories. First, bloggers see the Somali community as contributing positively to the diversity of Columbus:

I love the diversity in all of Ohio’s cities, and Columbus really shows how great it is too. A large asian population, and rapidly growing hispanic population, and a great community for african americans and whites. I really like the fact that Columbus is a hot spot for Somali Immigrants, they have some great restaurants in the area.<sup>51</sup> (City-data 04-08-2009)

One calls Somalis “very nice people,” and another sees them as

very calm, polite and intelligent individuals who try to build a better future for themselves and their children here in the states. I know few of them in my area (columbus) and their inviding people. In the years i have lived in columbus i have never witnessed or heard of any trouble caused by the somalis. they are refugees fleeing from a war torn country and they have every right to settle in a peaceful country. they are residing legally, complying by the immigration laws so i dont have a problem with them at all. (City-data 08-29-2009)

*Anita M. Waters*

The last person to post in this thread (as of this writing) ends it on a very positive note:

Somalis are great! They bring the same hard work ethic and appreciation of freedom and opportunity that immigrants of other nationalities bring. African immigrants are an extremely successful and well educated demographic. (City-data 01-09-2012)

One person who presents himself or herself as Somali on the City Data forum replied to the original thread's question with a cultural explanation and a poetic metaphor:

Somalis are moving in to Columbus, Ohio because mainly because of the safety, good education and the conservative atmosphere which is very similar to what we have in Somalia. The same is true in Minnesota and else where. Somalis are by nature very nomadic people. They wander through the deserts of East Africa in search of water and grassing land for their livestock. Answering a very similar question on why Somalis were moving in large numbers to Maine, a Somali expert at the University of Maine said, 'Somalis are nomadic and go to where-ever it is raining. Right now, it is raining in Maine.' (City-data 09-01-2008)

These aside, most of the posts that are coded as positive are simply criticisms of other posts that expressed virulent anti-Somali rhetoric. In response to anti-Somali posts, "Retired Social Worker" analyzed Somalis as one more immigrant group with social needs, comparable to the Europeans who immigrated to Ohio in the 1800s, and reminded fellow bloggers of the advantages enjoyed by early immigrants:

A number of early social work organizations were formed specifically to assist immigrants...School districts made various accommodations...In Columbus, prior to World War I, German students received a bilingual education...This does not mean that such immigrants were greeted with open arms—as they were often thought of as being smelly, dishonest, lazy, had too many children—you know the drill. (Topix 08-21-2011).

Another defensive response to anti-Somali rhetoric that seemed especially heartfelt was from "Teacher/Coach":

As a coach/teacher at a local high school, I have interaction with Somali students on a daily basis. Thankfully they have not been branded with nor scarred by your ridiculous and ignorant comments. Look in your

own mirror and then judge the only person you should be judging. I, for one, am thankful they have a place where they can seek refuge, and they have concerned American people working with them to help them assimilate. Of course they want to maintain their religion and their customs. Who wouldn't? If you are not in alignment with their beliefs, religion, and customs, that is fine. But share some respect. Another thing that is beautiful about our country is that we have choices. Why don't all of YOU choose to be positive for once and get lives of your own rather than pointing fingers elsewhere? (Topix 10-05-2009)

While some posts expressed compassion for the Somali refugees' plight and appreciation of the diversity that they lend to the city, few posts truly challenged established hierarchies or extolled the positive features of Somali culture. Instead, by far the vast majority of the posts expressed anti-Somali sentiments. These are analyzed next.

#### **D. Anti-Somali Rhetoric in the Blogosphere**

Many bloggers engage without apology in anti-Somali hate speech in the style of the virulent anti-African-American discourse that Jesse Daniels studied. Racism against African-Americans may have gone underground as "racism without racists," but in Columbus, Ohio, people are inventing new racist epithets like "Skinnies" and "Lollipops," imploring Somalis to "go back to your slimy hellhole of a country," and deploring Somalis' "filthy dirty life styles" in which they "get so wired" that they have sex with livestock (Topix 11-09-2010). A blogger named "Sidekick" touches on all the hallmarks of unbridled racism, including its irrationality:

Who wants some floor kisser processing their meat? Stinkin bucktooth's fronting prayers to obscure American work place's not old news. It's making news we haven't heard about yet. They're all illegal in my book. Somalians just have it easy to plea 'Political Refugee's' rather with Mexicans can't go that route...I went into a Tim Horton's yesterday and there were about 8 bowling pins in there with their feet on the table's babbling over bomb plots for all i know, with Ewok mexican's in the back making my 'ENGLISH muffin'... . go figure?? I have no point to this story. I just hate them. (Topix 11-23-2011)

This kind of extreme language is found even in the more subdued City Data forum. There, a thread about race relations in Columbus

moved off into several directions. One tangent involved bloggers posting virulent anti-Somali tirades, including one from a blogger who tellingly goes by the name "Arrogant":

I used to live in Columbus for around 10 years but reside in michigan now. I can say the poster who talks about no one in Columbus liking Somalis is correct. No one white, black, or latino in Columbus, like somalis. That is just how it is in the streets. I don't care if you are on the northside on agler or on morse, southeast in lincoln park projects, or in hilliard behind the meijer, or out far east, NO ONE LIKES SOMALIS. I am a white male, but I have never met a single american black who gets along wit them. Everyone in columbus refers to them as 'lollipop heads,' or skinnies. You can say there is some racism against other african groups as well, (nigerians and ethiopians) but most people can get along with them. Somalis and ethiopians fight all the time out east for obvious reasons. Nobody, and I mean no one gets along with somalis in Columbus. (City-data 11-13-2008)

Countless posts urge that Somalis be expelled en masse back to Somalia or Africa in general, but the most extreme are death threats against Somalis. "The Marvelous Shawntell" posted about the Somali arrested on terrorism charges: "Would anybody notice if he just slipped into Alum Creek Reservoir with concrete shoes on?" (Topix 06-09-2011). Others applaud this idea in subsequent posts. Some posts express desires for nothing short of genocide. "Spooktackular" writes with special viciousness: "A good skinny is a dead skinny. Just shoot her and toss the pile of shit on a big pile of tires and light it. The tire fire will attract more skinnies, since in their country black smoke from fires signals something to celebrate. Then repeat the process" (Topix 10-03-11).

"Sidekick," a regular who consistently posts extreme comments, does not limit his calls for death to arrestees alone. He writes, "I can't stand the sight of them Bucktooth Avitars. If them Caspers look at an American, you can see the disgusted feeling they think of us. I would really have fun Bowling them down with a machine gun" (Topix 10-27-2011).

### **E. Anti-Somali Ideologies in the Frames of Color-Blind Racism**

Alongside the extreme white supremacist style rhetoric, the discursive frames of color-blind racism (as described by Bonilla-Silva), includ-

ing abstract liberalism, the minimization of racism, and cultural racism, are also found. Abstract liberalism calls for equity before the law and uses the language of fairness and equality to couch the idea that Somalis receive exorbitant and unfair benefits from the government. For example, a contributor from Columbus displays this bias: "Restore EQUAL rights in this country. No more preferences for every protected species of minority" (Topix 07-11-2010).

The many posts that focus on, and grossly overstate, the benefits that the Somalis receive illustrate one of Omi and Winant's main points about racial projects. These projects not only try to influence the meanings that the ethnic group has in the wider society, but also attempt to influence the actual structural position of that group. Bloggers posted specific government websites that detail benefits, such as those of the Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services and the Columbus Community Relations Council (e.g., "Amberdru" in Topix 07-23-11). "Columbus native" makes a specific suggestion aimed at discouraging businesses from hiring or serving Somalis:

Here is an idea: Stop in a local business that caters to this bunch either by hiring them or having their language options available (think ATMs) with a copy of that infamous magazine cover that shows the body of a dead soldier being dragged through the streets being cheered by the savages.

Show it to the business owner and inform them that you will no longer do business with them until they hire REAL QUALIFIED AMERICANS who will be paying taxes out of their pay checks. And also get rid of the language option" (Topix 06-09-11).

Another frame of color-blind ideology consists of the minimization of racism. It is the practice of denying that racism still has an impact today, and of accusing others of "hypersensitivity" when the subject of racism is raised. A blogger who writes under the name "Somalis Suck," having been accused of racism by another blogger, indignantly replies, "We just hate them because they are leeches on our society, not because of their race. People like you just cry racism whenever anyone says anything you don't like. Its racist for you to call me a racist" (Topix 06-09-2011). "Queenie," accused of racism for an anti-Islamic post, responds, "Excuse me...but when did Islam become a race?" (Topix 06-09-11).

Cultural racism is the frame in which people assert that they are not against a particular race, only against a culture. More than once Somali

*Anita M. Waters*

culture is said to be a fusion of African animism and Islam (e.g., Bjorn from Sweden 12-03-11). Somali culture is described as inherently violent and dysfunctional. Whenever Somalis are seen holding onto their culture of origin, discrimination is viewed as acceptable. Bloggers on Topix often portrayed Somalis as unwilling and unable to assimilate and their cultural differences as profound and unbridgeable.

These new immigrants are nothing like the decent, assimilating, hard-working European immigrants of yesteryear. The new immigrants contribute nothing. They are here to steal and cash welfare checks. (Topix 11/24/11)

The perception that Somalis are unwilling to assimilate is tied to their transnational practices. For example, “Boneyard” is angry because many Somalis plan to return to their homeland when possible:

WHY are the citizens of this community being FORCED to pay to clothe, house, feed, transport, educate, and coddle these squatters who have said, without any disguise, that their plan is to RETURN to the country they purportedly sought refuge from when they came here????? They should have every penny of social support revoked—NO welfare, NO food stamps, NO free education, NO free healthcare. (Topix 07-11-10)

Another blogger was angry that Somalis were taking their earnings from jobs in Ohio and sending the money to their relatives in Africa. “Super Girl” responds to an article about the visit from the Somali president:

...it appears that Somalis see America as only a temporary safe-haven... they are only here because their country is currently too dangerous to survive...almost as to say they don't even want to be here, just sticking around because it was easiest to get into this country...they are using our country and its resources and even advocating Somalis to send OUR resources back to their country and its people. (Topix 10-05-09)

## **F. The Social Location of Anti-Somali Racial Projects**

Patricia Hill Collins argues that different systems of domination—in this case, people of European descent over those of African descent, the native-born over immigrants, and Christians over Muslims—are interdependent and interconnecting. The data under study here demon-



strate that anti-Somali rhetoric coexists in the world of Internet forums with anti-black, anti-immigrant, and anti-Muslim ideas.

Anti-Somali sentiments and behaviors in central Ohio can be seen as fitting the agenda for several distinct but intersecting constituencies. First is the mid-twentieth century, pre-color-blind, Jim Crow style anti-black sentiments promulgated by white supremacist groups that still motivate a segment of European-Americans in Ohio, as demonstrated in research by the Southern Poverty Law Center and other organizations. This group may disparage and undermine Somali-Americans simply because they are "black." I examined the forum posts for convergence between racism against descendants of Africans, including Somalis and African-Americans.

Anti-Somali rhetoric is indeed sometimes found side by side with anti-African-American ideas. It is not surprising that white supremacists in Ohio find it an easy transition to include Somali immigrants in their angry tirades. "Veteran" excoriates Somalis, saying that they are "actually very similar to aother large minority in this country and coincidentally they both come from same place!!!!" (Topix 06-09-11). However, these racists distinguish between Somalis and African-Americans. "Faith" asks readers, "Why is the USA allowing these negroes to be imported into our country when we already have a major problem with our own homegrown coloreds?" (Topix 12-03-11). A December 2010 incident elicited an interesting response from more than one blogger. A veiled black woman identified as a Somali immigrant but speaking with an American accent complained about being the victim of an anti-Muslim attack in the parking lot of a local mosque, and surveillance video corroborated her story. Several bloggers doubted that the woman was a "real Muslim," but instead a "fake black American convert." One writes that the woman is probably "just a fake American black who is now able to play the religion card since the race card has lost some of its impact." "Collins44" responds to an accusation of racism from "liberal viewer." He writes, "Evidently your affirmative action based degree didn't teach you anything useful. Black people have a right to use the race card, not Somalis who have been given everything and then more in terms of food stamps, WIC, section 8 housing, college vouchers, vehicle vouchers, interest free loans and free health care" (Topix 11-28-11).

Another similarity with white supremacist ideas is the feeling of victimhood on the part of the anti-Somali contributors. Their tax dollars are being misspent, they aver, on programs to help settle refugees.

Anita M. Waters

“Queenie” from Cincinnati writes about Somalis’ participation in conspiracies against European Americans:

These Mohammadens are NOT in the U.S. to be equal with Americans. They are here to DOMINATE! It’s their agenda but they will not do it with guns or bombs or bullets. They will do it with sheer population growth spitting out baby after baby with WE THE TAXPAYERS footing the bill. How they must laugh at our ignorance and stupidity believing what they say that Islam ‘is a religion of peace.’ It is anything BUT!! (Topix 06-09-11)

A second macro-level racial formation that inspires anti-Somali racial projects in central Ohio is the national anti-immigrant movement. This group views Somalis as yet another variety of non-Americans, and vilifies them along with Latinos and others. It is not easy to argue that Somalis are illegal immigrants given the fact that the U.S. Department of State is responsible for their being settled here, but that does not stop many bloggers from assuming their illegality. A good example is the blogger responding to a story about the Somali graduation celebration in July 2010, at which Columbus Mayor Mike Coleman spoke:

WHY do we give illegals free housing, money, food, healthcare and education. We do not give this to our Veterans.

Illegals deserve nothing. Wherever they come from send them back. Mayor Slimeball and his cohorts in Council are funneling millions of dollars to support illegals. What will Columbus get from it...NOTHING  
Get rid of the joke of a mayor. (Topix 07-11-20)

Another racial formation undergirding anti-Somali representations and actions is the new form of Islamophobia, especially its post-9/11 iteration. Some part of the new Islamophobia is rooted in evangelical Christianity, of which there are many adherents in central Ohio. Some of these individuals are literally on a mission—or a crusade—to demonize non-Christian faiths and the people who practice them. Similar sentiments are found in the forum posts. One concludes, “Islam is the anti-Christ movement which will plague society in the end times” (Topix 06-09-11). Other Islamophobic posts brand Islam as a cult, and the prophet Mohammed as a child-molesting and murderous agent of Satan himself. Agreeing with another who said Islam is “based on the ramblings of a mad man,” “Paul” from Columbus added:

Yes, and that madman was also a demon possessed pedophile. islam is a CULT which should be destroyed. I get so mad when I see those towel-headed bastards at walmart using food stamps and then they pull out a wad of cash to buy other things. Welfare my ass. Depart them all. Muslims have no place in the US given what they did on 9/11. Their mosques should all be burned too. I hope they are. (Topix 06-09-11)

Another common theme is the idea that Muslims intend to control the United States and the world. "Collins44" claims, "Their goal is to have a 100% pure Muslim Nation" (Topix 10-3-11). "Groundhog" writes:

America does not need Somalian Muslim immigrants. As a matter of fact, European countries have extreme problems with them. Even their courts are bending backwards to please them. Muslim control has begun in America already. Employers have to allow them to pray during working hours. The Cosco stores are now selling chicken, which has been prepared especially for Muslims. They are very subtle in the complete takeover of Christian nations. Hope and pray America will not be overthrown by them. (Topix 10-27-11)

Muslims are accused of wanting to murder any convert to Christianity. The prolific "Collins 44" links this with the 1992 Blackhawk incident:

Your people are the ones that dragged the bodies of the dead American Soldiers through the streets of Mogadishu. Your people have killed anyone who converts to Christianity in your country, killed famous Christian missionaries, destroyed churches and even dug up the graves of Christians and scattered their bones saying that no Christian will even be buried in Somalia. (Topix 11-26-11)

The idea of converts' lives being in danger resonates with Columbus residents familiar with the story of Fathima Rifqa Bary, a 16-year-old Muslim of Sri Lankan origin who ran away from her suburban Columbus home in 2009 with the assistance of a Florida Christian minister she met on Facebook. She claimed that her parents would kill her for her conversion to Christianity, although an investigation concluded that she was not in any danger. She turned 18 and left child protective custody apparently without reconciling with her parents.<sup>52</sup>

A subset of posts uses the opportunity to remind readers about the so-called “Blackhawk Down” incident. “FYI” writes, “I remember vividly the reports on the news channels showing our soldiers dragged and beaten corpses in the streets of Mogadishu. I remember that everytime I see a Somali speaking in such a way I know they don’t respect the priviledges given them” (Topix 06-09-11).

There is evidence that local anti-Somali projects are linked to national and international anti-Islamic movements. Contributors to the forum offer links to national groups like Refugee Resettlement Watch.<sup>53</sup> One frequent participant calls himself “Bjorn from Sweden” and posts from Plain City, just west of Columbus. He expresses extreme cultural racism, for example: “Somalis have a very hard time going from the African Bush to a modern Space Age Culture. Some are sure to turn violent when the pace of modern life overwhelms them and they become feral and yearn to return home to the jungle where such brutish and savage behavior is normal” (Topix 12-10-11). He also posts links to YouTube videos that show incidents in Sweden, and frequently asserts that the rise in crime in Europe is linked directly to Somalis.

A post by another frequent contributor, “Collins44,” shows that local anti-Somali discourse draws on European anti-immigrant rhetoric when he repeats the idea that Somalis are responsible for rapes in Norway: “In countries like Oslo, Norway, the Somalis are much worse, not only as terrorists but raping women in savage attacks that have 82% of women afraid to go out after dark in their own country. Somalis leave hell but always bring hell with them to whatever country they infest” (Topix 11/22/11).

Here, “Collins44” retells a myth that was found on the website of the British National Party (BNP)<sup>54</sup> just three weeks before Islamophobe Anders Behring Breivik murdered seventy-seven people in a rampage in Norway. Supposedly based on a Norwegian police report, the BNP’s headline reads, “All Rapes in Oslo Committed by Immigrants.” In the days following, “Collins44” reiterates the Oslo story again in more detail (Topix 11-26-11), copying verbatim a blog post from the previous spring on the national conservative blog Free Republic.<sup>55</sup> Democracy Forum, in the U.K., another Internet site, tracked down and independently translated the police report and quotes it as actually saying exactly the *opposite*: that “generalizations that have given the impression that the rapists are only foreigners—and mainly Muslims” had been proven “inadequate and erroneous.”<sup>56</sup> That does not seem to

have stopped people from citing the story and its appearance in Topix's Columbus Forum demonstrates its local dissemination.

There is another unexpected finding about the social location of the anti-Somali projects evident in the data; that is, its political connections. Michael Coleman, Mayor of Columbus since 1999 and an African-American, has a reputation for welcoming immigrants to the city. He established a "New Americans Initiative" as part of the Community Relations Commission, which addresses housing, health, and education issues. I have seen Mayor Coleman speak at several Somali events and he is well received there. The venom aimed at Mayor Coleman on the Topix forum has been substantial and frequent. He is accused specifically of bringing in Somalis who are naturalized citizens so that they can vote for him in the next election. "Common Sense" wrote that Coleman "laid out the red carpet" for Somalis with "free housing, free food, free healthcare, free education including personal private tutors paid with taxpayer money and more" (Topix 07-23-11). Someone who calls himself "OsamaBinColeman" was the most offensive:

My Fellow Citizens,

As your Mayor of dis fine city, I can assure you that the population of Skinnies in our city is quite justified. You see my old pal, Billy Clinton made over 250,000 of these underfed cousins of mine, Naturalized U.S. Citizens. I needed to diversify the Hilltop and Northeast sides a bit, so I invited thesefolks to our fine city.

Sure, they clog up the Social Security lines, and at the WIC/Welfare office. But they can VOTE! And I need all the votes I can get! Nevermind that their money goes to fund Al-Shabab or their pirate buddies...it don't affect you directly! (Topix 06-10-11)

Coleman is not the only politician who draws the ire of the anti-Somali contributors. They are also angry at Presidents Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter, Senator Sherrod Brown, and above all, President Barack Obama. The prolific "Collins44" sees a broad conspiracy with Obama at the center:

The U.S. Government allows the corrupt evil United Nations to select which refugees the US allows in our country. Of course, the U.N. selects the Somalis because they want to change the demographic makeup of America from White Western Europeans to Muslim Non-Whites. This is in volition of our Constitution but don't look for this to change under pro Muslim Obama. (Topix 12-08-11)

Anita M. Waters

“Sharia Rising” agrees: “Somali=terrorist. Islam is a lie. It is called Tay-igga where Muslims are to lie to Non-Muslims then attack them when they do not expect it like Hasad did at the Fort Hood Massacre. When we get a real president we will send you back to Africa where you belong” (Topix 11/07/11).

Others promulgate a conspiracy on the part of the Democratic Party. After suggesting that Somalis should be “airdrop[ed] over Mogadishu (hopefully without a parachute),” “Living in Moronica” writes: “Please keep in mind that these people are guided through the citizenship process and then handed Democratic Party ballots and instructed on exactly how to cast their vote. I have witnessed it myself and filed a complaint with the Board of Elections only to see it go nowhere” (Topix 04-06-11). “Coleman loves em” agrees:

Yes, this is the new democratic party.

Likewise, the democrats were step by step with ACORN last presidential election. I saw first hand the vans dropping off transients, students and questionable local residents to early vote at Vets Memorial in October 2008.

This changed the political landscape in Columbus. We the people need to have an election watch group to record and report these things in the 2012 election. Election fraud has to stop, and the party that benefits is the democrats. (Topix 04-06-11)

Several people raise the issue of Obama’s aunt (his father’s half-sister), a Kenyan who overstayed her visa to the U.S. (for example, “reform social security” in Topix 07-23-11), to argue that Obama is in favor of letting illegal immigrants stay. The congruence between anti-Somali sentiment and anti-Democratic Party sentiment was unbroken except for one contributor, “btown,” who blamed “George Bush II” for the influx of refugees and elaborated that the “Lutheran Refugee Services head told me that” (Topix 01-07-11) and another who blames Les Wexner, the local Limited Brands CEO (Topix 06-09-11).

A last characteristic worth exploring about those launching anti-Somali racial projects is class. There is some evidence that some of the bloggers are struggling financially and resent the idea that refugees receive government assistance. For example, “Need for SERIOUS CHANGES” writes:

Call me racist or whatever you want but the fact remains we need to close our borders completely. We have true Americans starving and los-

ing their homes daily; not to mention out of work while all the illegals and immigrants take our jobs...In college my husband lost his health insurance so we went to see if he could qualify for medicaid. He only made 600–800 a month at the time as did I and...he couldn't qualify for medicaid. But yet these people can come in and receive medicaid, welfare, food stamps, wic, section 8, y years tax free on any business they start, title XX day care and continue to pop out kids our tax dollars are paying for. (Topix 06-11-11)

“Living in Moronica” makes a claim to working class status with a reference to an icon of working class Republicanism:

The blue blood upper crust that put Obama in the White House and continue to sing his progressive praises would no sooner let Mohammed Mohammed the Somali and his 15 family members move into their Bexley or New Albany neighborhood as they would let Ahmed Ahmed the Palestinian move next to their Tel Aviv summer home. But to them it is a different matter as us ‘Joe the Plumbers’ have to deal with it and clean up the mess. (Topix 04-06-11)

Yet as James Loewen points out, the working class may contribute disproportionately to expressions of racial prejudice, but it does not have the power to influence the lives of minority groups as much as the “polite,” color-blind racists of the upper classes.<sup>57</sup>

#### **IV. Somali Response**

Like many transnational communities, Somalis in central Ohio are enthusiastic users of the Internet to stay in touch with news from Somalia and family all over the world.<sup>58</sup> Because so many of the forum posts that I read are accessible to anyone reading articles—positive or negative—about the Somali community, it is very probable that they have been noticed by Somalis in the Columbus area.

Because of the anonymity of the posts on Internet forums, it is impossible to be certain whether or not contributors are presenting themselves honestly. Yet by any measure, the number of posts from Somalis is very small. Only one, a contributor who calls himself “Somali-guy,” is fairly prolific, with 23 posts of the total 876 Topix posts that I reviewed, all posted over nine days in November 2011. He writes at one point that he had visited the forum originally to write a research paper on racism (Topix 11-28-11), and it seems to have engaged his interest for



*Anita M. Waters*

a little more than a week. He began on Topix by commenting on two articles that concerned the arrest of Somalis, and both had many negative comments about Somalis before he posted his response:

I only wish this christmas that you rednecks would take advantage of the oppertunities that i have. If the actions of one person are representative of an entire people than i think you should ask the decendents of slaves and the remnants of native americans on reservations their views on white people. As someone who holds a bachelors in psychology i dont like throwing around the word insane. But let me remind you of the definition of insanity. Its doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. I have seen your rants on topix. What result or outcome do you think is going to happen that hasn't happened already. Grow up. (Topix 11-21-11)

His posts provoked rage on the part of the anti-Somali contributors, who heaped scorn on him and his culture. He responded to them multiple times, with less serious jibes, as if he is laughing at them. He also inserted some analytical points, such as:

Surely you can feel important doing other things rather than pretending to fight for the white cause. Did you know that rednecks(racists) actually are racists because they are the lowest people in white society. They pick on minorities so they can get the approval of the dominant tolerant white class by pretending to portray themselves as protectors of white people by coming online and attacking immigrants. True. My white proffessor told me this. What a shame to be damn on earth and the hereafter. My friend the standards of any religion you are going to hell. (Topix 11-27-11)

"Somali-guy" also calls for action on the part of those posting anti-Somali comments. He started his own thread with this post:

Tell you what. I will make you an offer...because so far i dont really take the racist comments on topix seriously. prove to me that you guy are true rednects...go downtown columbus. get yourself posters and signs and hold an anti somali demonstration...tell you what i will even pay for your permit to protest...i will even call a few friends of mine in the media...i mean the tea party will be there too. you know they got your back..." (Topix 11/27/11)

There were few responses to this, and none from the regular anti-Somali contributors. Shortly thereafter, "Somali-guy" dropped out of sight on these forums.

Earlier, a small flurry of responses that seem to be Somali voices appeared amongst the comments on the two threads that had the most responses. In the thread based on the Somali president's visit to Columbus, after many hateful and violent comments, people with names such as "yusuf," "Mohamud," "Dini," "Jaama Baardheere," "zamiyA," "Somalis R USA," and "Somalis R US" weigh in suddenly with pro-Somali sentiments, discussing the damage that had been done by Italian colonialism in Somalia, praising Somali refugees' achievements, and chiding the "ignorant fools" who post anti-Somali rants on Topix ("zamiyA" on Topix 10-05-09). It seemed to be a coordinated response. The most consistent theme in the Somali responses was the appeal to a nation of immigrants to accept one more immigrant group. For example, "MsSomali" writes:

America=Land of Immigrants we are all refugees there is no difference between Somali residents and the Irish, Italian, and English resident living in New York, or the Mormons living in Utah at the end of the day we are all immigrants living in a country that belongs to the Native Americans...If you arent a Native American then you are a European immigrant whose forefathers arrived in America a few years ago so you have no business in telling anyone how to live their life because at the end of the day THIS COUNTRY DOESN'T BELONG TO U IT BELONGS TO ALL OF US :). (Topix 10-08-09)

In tone, some responses that appear to be from Somalis sink into the depths of venom-spewing that is exemplified by the vitriolic anti-Somali voices. "Samira S" writes:

Excuse i work and i pay for my peoples walfare. SO Shut big \*\*\*\* up. U \*\*\*\*\* B\*\*\*\*\*. All you dumb ass Americans are all F\*\*\* dama mean. Listen yall are just made cause my people gets help from the government. But soon you will all see Somalias working for the government. SO all yall haters out there just keep hating. yahhhhhhhhhhhhh lol. (Topix 10-06-09)

At virtually the same moment, another post illustrates the other extreme in tone. "Warka" writes:

Anita M. Waters

As a somali, I would like to thank the US government and especially the citizens of the great state of Ohio. I think it's wrong to paint a whole community with the same trash. Like other communities, we have a few 'blacksheep' but that doesn't mean the whole community are evil. Look back at the history of this great nation. We had newcomers like Irish, Italians, jews, blacks and the rest faced similar stereotypes like somalis are facing. Sooner or later we will find new comers to take our place. My fellow Ohioans let us not take this opportunity to divide ourselves instead of uniting toward a common goal: moving forward. (Topix 10-06-09)

Most recently, some posts from occasional authors purporting to be Somali taunt the anti-Somali contributors by confirming their worst fears. "Hate this country" writes:

What about you? claiming that America is your country? no America belongs to the native Indians so I suggest you go and find more about where the hell you're from and keep them racist comments to yourself. By the way we're not going anywhere whether you like it or not and sooner or later we gonna take over this shitty country. (Topix 01-07-12)

In short, the handful of responses from Somalis indicated some willingness to engage in debates with the anti-Somali contributors, sometimes at their level of rhetoric. There was also evidence of the occasional coordination of responses.

## V. Infiltration of the Mainstream

Has intense Islamophobia and anti-Somali rhetoric infiltrated the discourse and structures of the mainstream? This question is rooted in Jessie Daniels' work on white supremacy. In her book *White Lies*, published in 1997, she argues that extremist ideology has crept ineluctably into mainstream discourse, such that ordinary politicians and national media commentators subtly reflect the kind of anti-black rhetoric that most ordinary people would reject. Through the posts in Topix and the City Data Forum, it can be seen that the same seems to be true now about virulent anti-Islamic hate speech.

People in powerful positions in mainstream media seem increasingly comfortable expressing anti-Islamic ideas. In 2008, the campaign of U.S. Senator John McCain distributed an anti-Islamic DVD called "Obsession: Radical Islam's War against the West."<sup>59</sup> Former presidential candidate Mike Huckabee appeared on Fox News and described

one local incident in which people evidently did *not* espouse anti-Islamic ideology and he chides them sternly for it. Two Protestant churches in Memphis had allowed a local group of Muslims to use their facilities for worship once a week until their mosque was completed. Mike Huckabee responded:

...what are they thinking? If the purpose of a church is to put forth the gospel of Jesus Christ and then you have a Muslim group that says that Jesus Christ and all the people who follow him are a bunch of infidels who should essentially be obliterated I guess I have a hard time understanding that. If a church is nothing more than a meeting place regardless of what people believe...then should the church be rented out to show adult movies on weekends?<sup>60</sup>

Many local anti-Somali contributors echo sentiments from the national media about Somalis' purported "unassimilability." One representative example was expressed by nationally syndicated columnist Georgie Anne Geyer in her article "Some cultures are too different for their people to live together," which was printed in *The Columbus Dispatch* in August, 2009:

No people is more different from Americans than Somalis. They live in ethnic enclaves, they are anti-individualist, they fear the outside...It is the truth, unpalatable to many good-willed Americans, that we cannot and should not attempt to engage and assimilate people from non-ame-nable cultures, particularly in an age of radical Islam.

Extreme Islamophobia is also found in mainstream American religious life. One of the most vocal anti-Islamists with a national audience is a pastor named Rod Parsley, who is based in Columbus. Parsley controls the World Harvest Church and Breakthrough television ministry (two mega-churches in the Columbus area along with syndicated media products including a twice-daily television show broadcast nationally). During his 2008 presidential bid, Senator John McCain propelled Parsley into the national spotlight despite Parsley's openness as an Islamophobe. A public video shows Parsley's tirade against the religion of Islam.<sup>61</sup> "Islam is an anti-Christ religion," Parsley says, "that intends through violence to conquer the world...The fact is that America was founded—I'm gonna stagger you right now—because America was founded in part with the intention of seeing this false religion destroyed."<sup>62</sup>

Anita M. Waters

Is there a local equivalent of mainstreamed anti-Islamic ideas? I would argue that *The Columbus Dispatch* selects headlines that fan the flames of Islamophobia. One such headline, for example, reads “Anti-Terror Laws Hinder Somali Immigrants.” The article concerned the fact that area banks were closing accounts held by remittance agencies, making it difficult or impossible for Somalis to send money back home, no matter who the recipient was. The headline seems calculated to evoke exactly the vitriol that it did: Of fifty-eight posts about the article, fifty-five were unambiguously hostile. One blogger said:

The headline says it all...GOOD! If you do not like our policies, go elsewhere. I am sorry, but you come from a terrorist country, so we must be cautious. Maybe we should stop allowing people from known terrorist countries to enter the US and to stop giving them welfare, free health-care, and cheap loans that encourage them to come! (Topix 10-26-09)

The *Dispatch* was credited by another blogger for the (false) idea that many young Somalis from Columbus are fighting for Al-Shabaab: “We read in this paper that once their young men are strong and healthy from living here that many of them join terrorist organizations” (Topix 11-09-10). Again and again, the *Dispatch* uses the word “terror” in headlines involving Somalis. For the most part, the “terror charges” amount to remitting money to a kinsman who is suspected of working for Al-Shabaab. At least one European-American reader pleaded with the *Dispatch* for fairer coverage of the Somali community. In 2008, New Albany resident Ruby VanMeter asked for:

...more positive articles concerning the everyday lives of the large Muslim population in Franklin County who support our American way of life. I know that we have approximately 40,000 Somali Muslims living here, and many more Muslims from various cultures. We need to hear their voice...the vast majority of Muslims uphold the same peace-loving values and have the same desires for freedom and prosperity that all Americans do...I would encourage all of us to reach out to our neighbors, the Muslim community, and vice-versa, so that we can free ourselves of unwarranted fear.

Although a systematic examination of local media is beyond the scope of this essay, there are unmistakable indications that anti-Islamic and anti-Somali ideas are infiltrating mainstream media and political discourse.

## VI. Conclusion

Internet forums offer a window into private anti-Somali thoughts and ideas that are held by at least a small number of local residents. This group, however small, engages in elaborate genocidal ideation, shares information and observations that seem to support its position, disseminates material from national and international racist groups, and reinforces each other's racist ideas. It shares many features with other white supremacist groups, color-blind racists, nativist groups, and Islamophobes.

In closing, I want to revisit the structural features with which I began this essay. The data indicate that Columbus' status as a "new gateway" has an impact on the reception of Somali refugees. The social memory of the immigration of Europeans to Ohio in the latter half of the nineteenth century is dim at best, and some residents find it impossible to empathize with the plight of refugees driven from their homeland.

The transnational practices of Somalis in central Ohio shed doubt in some residents' minds about the Somalis' commitment to remaining in the United States. At the same time, the residents who complain that Somalis refuse to assimilate simultaneously want them expelled and sent back to Africa. Furthermore, the fact that new refugees are constantly settling in the area may mask the degree of assimilation that some refugees have attained.

Finally, there is the often-noted propensity for entrepreneurship among Somalis in the area. It is beyond the scope of this essay to say what effect immigrant entrepreneurship will have on the success of the next generation. It is clear, though, that entrepreneurship *per se*, while a valued quality in the culture at large, is seen with distrust and resentment when it comes to the blogosphere's evaluations of the Somali community. Somali businesses are interpreted not as the product of hard work and sacrifice, but as further evidence of handouts from the government (e.g., "Collins44" in Topix 07-23-11).

The Somali community in central Ohio truly finds itself, in the words of Patricia Hill Collins, in a matrix of domination. It is the target of anti-black, anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, and specifically anti-Somali forces, a probably small but (at least anonymously) vocal group who blame Somalis for all manner of social ills. Besides this, Somalis are also targeted by those veterans, military aficionados, and moviegoers who keep the memory of "Blackhawk Down" in the forefront. This 1992 incident is remembered simplistically as Somalis savagely killing

innocent Americans and horribly abusing their corpses. In the rhetoric of this source of racial projects, Somalis are collectively culpable for these offenses, even Somalis who had not yet been born at the time.

One Somali contributor to the forums suggests that in two decades the world will have changed considerably and the comments of the anti-Somali contributors will be long forgotten. It remains to be seen whether or not this current racial formation between the host society and the immigrant community will shift significantly as the second generation blends more seamlessly into the society around it.

### Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Fareeda Griffith, Nahla al-Huraibi, Jibril Mohammed, and Denison University's Office of the Provost for their feedback, assistance and support in preparing this essay.

---

### Notes

1. U.S. Census 2009.
2. Roble and Rutledge 2008, p. viii.
3. Community Research Partners 2005, p. 29.
4. e.g., Roble and Rutledge 2008, p. 95.
5. Ferenchik 2009.
6. Slavicek 2009, pp. 38–43.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
8. *Columbus Dispatch* (17 July 2005).
9. Muchniki 2009.
10. Broh and Waters 2011.
11. Roble and Rutledge 2008, p. 98; *Columbus Dispatch* (29 December 2005).
12. See, for example, Boyle and Ali 2010; De Jong and Steinmetz 2002; Landolt 2008; Reitz 2002; and Wijers 2011.
13. Mary Waters and Tomás R. Jiménez 2005.
14. Appadurai 1996; Bloemraad, Korteweg, and Yurdakul 2008; Itzigsohn and Saucedo 2002; and Levitt and Jaworsky 2007.
15. Levitt and Jaworsky 2007, p. 131.
16. Saltmarsh 2009.
17. Abdi 2009.
18. Roble and Rutledge 2008, p. 95.
19. Sanders 2002, p. 330.
20. Steinberg 2001.
21. Waters and Jiménez 2005.



22. Although "Somali" is foremost a national category rather than a racial one, the way "Somali" is used here meets Omi and Winant's definition of race: "a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies" (Omi and Winant 1994, p. 55). See also Kusow's (2006) use of the same framework with reference to Somalis in North America.
23. Omi and Winant 1994, p. 55.
24. Ibid., p. 56.
25. Ibid., p. 71.
26. See Chiang (2010) for a review of recent studies of racist discourse.
27. Collins 2010, p. 541.
28. See Lieberman and Reynolds 1996.
29. Daniels, *White Lies*, 1997.
30. Bonilla-Silva in *Racism Without Racists* (2006).
31. Ibid., 24 ff.
32. See also Kundnani 2012.
33. Bonilla-Silva 2006, p. 29.
34. Ibid., p. 40.
35. Nguyen 2006, p. 184.
36. Chomsky 2007.
37. Ibid., 64 ff.
38. For example, Grassfire Nation ([grassfire.com](http://grassfire.com)) and the Patriot Action Network ([patriotactionnetwork.com/](http://patriotactionnetwork.com/)).
39. For recent treatments about Islamophobia, see Sayyid and Vakil 2011; Kumar 2012; and Morgan and Poynting 2011.
40. For a comprehensive review of the targeting of Muslims in the first four years post-9/11, see Tram Nguyen 2005.
41. For example, an anti-Muslim demonstration in Yorba Linda, California, in February 2011, at the site of a fundraising event for women's shelters and hunger relief, demonstrates both the degree of expressed hatred *and* the levels of civil society and government at which it can be expressed with impunity. A crowd of flag-waving European-Americans, organized by the Tea Party, shouted epithets and jeers at Muslim families as they arrived at the event. See the video at [youtube.com/watch?v=NutFkykjmbM](http://youtube.com/watch?v=NutFkykjmbM). The participation of two U.S. congressmen and an elected councilwoman from a nearby town who wished death upon those engaged in the fundraiser shows a new acceptability of openly anti-Islamic sentiments.
42. Anti-Islamic groups often employ symbolism to keep the memory of 9/11 alive. The Tea Party group that organized the anti-Muslim demonstration in Yorba Linda, California, mentioned above went by the name "We surround them OC 912." Its website claims that it allies itself with "Glenn Beck's 9-12 Project" ([meetup.com/WeSurroundThemOC/](http://meetup.com/WeSurroundThemOC/)). That website's article ("We surround them in Orange County. We are not racists... We are just no longer silent") is an excellent example of Bonilla-Silva's "minimization" frame.
43. e.g., see Ingersoll 2011.
44. Larsson 2007.

45. Markham, quoted in Frisoli 2011, p. 25.
46. Paul St. John Frisoli 2011, pp. 24–25.
47. [city-data.com/forum/columbus/](http://city-data.com/forum/columbus/).
48. [topix.com/forum/columbus](http://topix.com/forum/columbus).
49. Wicklein 2000.
50. One unequivocal marker of a lack of familiarity with Somalis and Somali culture is the misuse of suffix “-ians,” as in Somalians.
51. I have taken scrupulous care that all blogposts are quoted *exactly* as they read in the original. I did not change capitalizations, spelling, grammar, spacing, or typographical errors. Also, I refrained from adding “[sic]” to every error.
52. For a thoughtful analysis, see Arman 2009.
53. [refugeeresettlementwatch.wordpress.com](http://refugeeresettlementwatch.wordpress.com).
54. [bnp.org.uk/news/all-rapes-oslo-committed-immigrants](http://bnp.org.uk/news/all-rapes-oslo-committed-immigrants).
55. [freerepublic.com/focus/f-bloggers/2726786/posts](http://freerepublic.com/focus/f-bloggers/2726786/posts). It is, of course, possible that “Collins44” was “plagiarizing” himself.
56. [democracyforum.co.uk/bnp/97627-racist-islamophobic-news-manipulation-bnp.html](http://democracyforum.co.uk/bnp/97627-racist-islamophobic-news-manipulation-bnp.html).
57. James Loewen 1988.
58. See, for example, Issa-Salwe and Olden 2008.
59. For more on mainstreaming, see Islamophobia in the Tea Party detailed online at [religiondispatches.org/archive/politics/4371/islamophobia\\_by\\_powerpoint/](http://religiondispatches.org/archive/politics/4371/islamophobia_by_powerpoint/).
60. [youtube.com/watch?v=viTgXt1ZICI](http://youtube.com/watch?v=viTgXt1ZICI).
61. [motherjones.com/politics/2008/05/mccains-pastor-problem-video](http://motherjones.com/politics/2008/05/mccains-pastor-problem-video).
62. Corn 2008.

## Bibliography

- Abdi, Cawa. “Transnational Migration and Gendered Realities: Remittances and Dreams of Return.” Presentation at Denison University, 28 September 2009.
- Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Arman, Abukar. “Institutional Islamophobia and the Politics of a Minor’s Choice.” *Huffington Post*. 10 September 2009.
- Bloemraad, Irene, Anna Korteweg, and Gokci Yurdakul. “Citizenship and Immigration: Multiculturalism, Assimilation, and Challenges to the Nation-State.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 34 (2008): 153–79.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006.
- Broh, Beckett, and Anita M. Waters. “Refugee Journeys: Experiences and Perceptions of Young Somalis in Columbus Ohio.” Paper presented at the 2011 Meetings of the American Sociological Association.
- Boyle, Elizabeth Heger, and Ahmed Ali. “Culture, Structure, and the Refugee Experience in Somali Immigrant Family Transformation.” *International Migration* 48, no. 1 (2010): 47–79.

- Chiang, Shiaq-Yun. "'Well, I'm a Lot of Things, but I'm sure Not a Bigot': Positive Self-Presentation in Confrontational Discourse on Racism." *Discourse & Society* 21, no. 3 (May 2010): 273–294.
- Chomsky, Aviva. *"They Take Our Jobs!" and 20 Other Myths about Immigration*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2007.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. "Black Feminist Thought in the Matrix of Domination." In *Social Theory*, edited by Charles Lemert, 541–551. Philadelphia: Westview Press, 2010.
- Community Research Partners. "Immigrants and Refugees: A Profile of the Population, Resources and Services." Franklin County. 2005. Online at [communityresearchpartners.org/uploads/publications/Immigrants-Report-Final-12-05.pdf](http://communityresearchpartners.org/uploads/publications/Immigrants-Report-Final-12-05.pdf).
- Corn, David. "McCain's Pastor Problem: The Video." *Mother Jones*. Online at [motherjones.com/politics/2008/05/mccains-pastor-problem-video](http://motherjones.com/politics/2008/05/mccains-pastor-problem-video).
- Daniels, Jesse. *White Lies: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality in White Supremacist Discourse*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- De Jong, Gordon F., and Michele Steinmetz. "Receptivity Attitudes and the Occupational Attainment of Male and Female Immigrant Workers." *Population Research and Policy Review* 23 (2004): 91–116.
- Ferenchik, Mark. "Numbers Count when Estimating Somalis." *Columbus Dispatch*. 21 May 2009.
- Frisoli, Paul St. John. "Internet/Virtual Ethnography." In *Designing Qualitative Research* 5 ed., edited by Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman, 24–26. Los Angeles: Sage, 2011.
- Geyer, Georgie Ann. "Some Cultures are Too Different for their People to Live Together." *Columbus Dispatch*, 14 August 2009.
- Ingersoll, Julie. "Islamophobia by Powerpoint." *Religion Dispatches*. 14 March 2011. Online at [religiondispatches.org/archive/politics/4371/islamophobia\\_by\\_powerpoint/](http://religiondispatches.org/archive/politics/4371/islamophobia_by_powerpoint/).
- Issa-Salwe, A. M., and A. Olden. "Somali Web Sites, History and Politics." *Aslib Proceedings: New Information Perspectives* 60, no. 6 (2008): 570–582.
- Itzigsohn, José, and Silvia Giorguli Saucedo. "Immigrant Incorporation and Sociocultural Transnationalism." *International Migration Review* 36, no. 3 (September 2002): 766–798.
- Kumar, Deepa. *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012.
- Kundnani, Arun. "Multiculturalism and its Discontents: Left, Right and Liberal." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 15, no. 2 (April 2012): 155–166.
- Kusow, Abdi. "Migration and Racial Formation among Somali Immigrants in North America." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 32, no. 3 (April 2006): 533–551.
- Landolt, Patricia. "The Transnational Geographies of Immigrant Politics: Insights from a Comparative Study of Migrant Grassroots Organizing." *Sociological Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (January 2008): 53–77.
- Larsson Göran. "Cyber-Islamophobia? The Case of WikiIslam." *Contemporary Islam* 1 (2007): 53–67.
- Levitt, Peggy, and B. Nadya Jaworsky. "Transnational Migration Studies: Past Developments and Future Trends." *Annual Review of Sociology* 33 (2007): 129–156.

Anita M. Waters

- Lieberman, Leonard, and Larry T. Reynolds. "Race: The Deconstruction of a Scientific Concept." In *Race and Other Misadventures*, edited by Reynolds and Lieberman. Dix Hills: General Hall, 1996.
- Loewen, James. *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White*. Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1988.
- Morgan, George, and Scott Poynting. *Global Islamophobia: Muslims and Moral Panic in the West*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011.
- Muchniki, Dennis. "Danger for the Somali Community: New Anti-Somali Attitudes at The Department of Homeland Security." 2009. Online at somalilink.com/.
- Nguyen, Tram. *"We Are All Suspects Now": Untold Stories from Immigrant Communities after 9/11*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2005.
- Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1990s*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Reitz, Jeffrey G. "Host Societies and the Reception of Immigrants: Research Themes, Emerging Theories and Methodological Issues." *International Migration Review* 36, no. 4 (December 2002): 1005–1009.
- Roble, Abdi, and Doug Rutledge. *The Somali Diaspora: A Journey Away*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.
- Saltmarsh, Matthew. "Somalis' Money is Lifeline for Homeland." *New York Times* (12 November 2009): A13.
- Sanders, Jimmy M. "Ethnic Boundaries and Identity in Plural Societies." *Annual Review of Sociology* 28 (2002): 327–357.
- Sayyid, S., and Vakil AbdoolKarim. *Thinking Through Islamophobia*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.
- Slavicek, K. "The Degree of Acceptance of the Somali Immigrant Community in Columbus, Ohio, and the Unique Challenges It Faces." Denison University Summer Research Project. Granville, Ohio, 2009.
- Steinberg, Stephen. *The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity and Class in America*. Boston: Beacon, 2001.
- U.S. Census. "Table FBP-1. Profile of Selected Demographic and Social Characteristics: 2000 Population Universe: People Born in Somalia." 2009. Online at census.gov/population/cen2000/stp-159/STP-159-somalia.pdf.
- VanMeter, Ruby. "Cover Peace-Loving Muslims Among Us." Letter to the editor. *The Columbus Dispatch*. 14 October 2008.
- Waters, Mary C., and Tomás R. Jiménez. "Assessing Immigrant Assimilation: New Empirical and Theoretical Challenges." *Annual Review of Sociology* 31 (2005): 105–125.
- Wicklein, John. "Hello Columbus." *American Journalism Review*. June 2000. Accessed online in July 2012 at [ajr.org/article.asp?id=902](http://ajr.org/article.asp?id=902).
- Wijers, G. D. M. "The Reception of Cambodian Refugees in France." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 24, no. 2 (June 2011): 239–255.

**Blogs and Forums**

City Data, online at [city-data.com/](http://city-data.com/)

Fiery Spirited Zionist, online at [fieryspiritedzionist.blogspot.com/](http://fieryspiritedzionist.blogspot.com/)

Free Republic, online at [freerepublic.com/home.htm](http://freerepublic.com/home.htm)

Refugee Resettlement Watch, online at [refugeeresettlementwatch.wordpress.com/](http://refugeeresettlementwatch.wordpress.com/)

Topix, online at [topix.com/](http://topix.com/)