

# Local Lives, Transitional Ties, and the Meaning of Citizenship: Somali Histories and Herstories from Small Town America<sup>1</sup>

---

Helga Leitner

## I. Introduction

United States immigration policy is based on the assumption that every legal immigrant to this country is on the road to becoming a U.S. citizen. In order to become a citizen, immigrants are explicitly or tacitly expected to assimilate into the U.S. sociocultural and economic system, to shed their attachment and allegiance to their home country, and to devote their loyalty to just one country, the United States. The first line of the citizenship oath makes this clear: "I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign...state...of...which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen."<sup>2</sup> Viewing loyalty in such zero-sum terms has blinded American policymakers to migrants' transnational practices, ties, and multiple allegiances.

Academics, on the other hand, are fully aware of migrant transnationalism, and have worked to characterize the multiple allegiances and identities held by many contemporary migrants.<sup>3</sup> During the past decade, the concept of transnationalism has been on the ascendency, resulting in heated debates about the effects of migrant transnationalism on various aspects of national citizenship and immigrant incorporation. The term *transnationalism*, as developed in the work of anthropologist Nina Glick Schiller and her colleagues,<sup>4</sup> suggests that immigrants forge and sustain familial, economic, cultural, and political ties and identities that span borders. For example, migrants might be living in Minnesota, but at the same time maintain strong relations

to, involvements in, and attachments to their societies, places, and polities of origin. Immigrants' activities, identities, and allegiances are no longer seen as tied to a single nation-state, and identities and allegiances to other communities, such as ethnic and religious communities, become more important.<sup>5</sup> This has led some scholars to argue that contemporary immigrant transnationalism has been undermining the dominant model of national citizenship that locates the citizen in a single nation-state and presumes an undivided sense of commitment, identification, and loyalty to one national polity.<sup>6</sup>

The goal of this article is to examine the value and meaning of U.S. citizenship for contemporary migrants. Rather than generalizing about "immigrant attitudes" toward citizenship, the main concern is to probe for contextual factors and intersecting effects of immigrants' positionality and identity that construct and mediate their varied dispositions toward the U.S. and U.S. citizenship. The analysis focuses on a case study of first-generation adult Somali immigrants in a small town in rural Minnesota. (The qualifier "first-generation adult" is important because previous research suggests significant differences in dispositions between the first and second generations, and between adult and immigrant youth.) The essay is organized into four main sections. The first section highlights debates about the effects of transnationalism on immigrant incorporation and citizenship, identifying gaps in these contestations. The second section describes the research design and local context of the study area. The third section discusses Somali immigrants' settlement experiences and transnational ties. The final segment analyzes respondents' narratives about attitudes toward the acquisition of U.S. citizenship, linking these to their positionalities and identities, and to their local and transnational lives.

## **II. Transnationalism, Immigrant Incorporation, and Citizenship**

During the past decade, transnationalism has become the dominant concept for interpreting contemporary immigration. It emerged in part as a response to scholars' dissatisfaction with previously dominant concepts, such as assimilation, which presume that over time immigrants break off all relations, identification, and ties to the homeland, thereby exclusively locating themselves in the economic, sociocultural, and political system of the receiving societies. According to a number of scholars of transnationalism, assimilation no longer applies to contemporary immigrants.<sup>7</sup> Contemporary migrants are said to nei-

ther stay in place nor assimilate with the majority population, and are sometimes depicted as rejecting cultural and social assimilation. In addition, they no longer break ties with their home country and must be thought of as “transmigrants,” developing and maintaining multiple economic, social, and political relations in both home and host societies. The shift toward these circumstances, these theorists suggest, is rooted in a global system of capitalism that “produces economic dislocations making immigrants more vulnerable. The result is a new and different phenomenon...a new type of migrant experience.”<sup>8</sup> Arguments about the novelty of migrant transnationalism have been challenged by a number of scholars.<sup>9</sup> Foner’s historical analysis of migrant transnationalism in turn-of-the-century and contemporary New York shows that transnationalism is not new, although there are qualitative differences in contemporary migrant transnationalism.<sup>10</sup> Recently some scholars have cautioned against seeing immigrant assimilation and transnationalism as mutually exclusive, suggesting that we examine how transnationalism might facilitate or impede the assimilation of new immigrants.<sup>11</sup>

The impact of transnationalism on citizenship, and the changing nature of citizenship in the contemporary world more generally, have been the topics of numerous scholarly debates in recent years. The most hotly debated are claims that migrant transnationalism and multiculturalism are undermining national citizenship, which is being replaced by transnational and post-national forms of citizenship that are no longer bounded by the territories of contemporary nation-states.<sup>12</sup> This debate has focused on three major themes: decoupling of rights from formal membership, recasting of rights as universal human rights, and deterritorialization of identities.

First, based on an analysis of guest worker rights in postwar Europe, Yasemina Soysal argues that immigration has led to a progressive decoupling of rights from membership in the national polity, i.e., formal citizenship.<sup>13</sup> Nation-states have been extending civil, social, and in some cases political rights to non-citizen immigrants in the national territory in which they reside. This allows immigrants not only to have access to welfare and education without having formal citizenship, but also to practice citizenship by becoming engaged in civic organizations and actions. This decoupling of rights from citizenship also allows migrants to enjoy citizenship rights in more than one nation-state, thus undermining the notion that citizenship rights should be tied to only one nation-state.

Second, immigrants' claims in terms of rights are increasingly focused beyond the nation-state. Transnational NGOs and immigrant organizations are recasting citizenship rights as universal human rights.<sup>14</sup> For example, immigrant organizations appeal to universal principles of human rights to justify claims for increased rights within receiving societies as well as minority rights within their home country.<sup>15</sup> Recasting citizenship rights as universal human rights has been interpreted by some scholars as a de-nationalization or deterritorialization of citizenship.<sup>16</sup> Such an interpretation is problematic, however, because the framing of claims making in terms of universal human rights does not necessarily imply a de-nationalization of citizenship. As Koopmans and Statham point out, claims making framed within a universal human rights discourse often continues to be directed towards the nation-state.<sup>17</sup>

Third, post-national theorists argue that migrant transnationalism implies that immigrants' identities and loyalties no longer correspond to the nation-state.<sup>18</sup> Rather, contemporary migrants hold multiple allegiances to nations and ethnic and religious communities. Most significantly, they suggest that these other communal identities are becoming more important than national identities, which they also interpret as a deterritorialization of identities and loyalties. While agreeing with the existence of multiple identities and allegiances, I question that this amounts to a deterritorialization of identities and loyalties. Even though contemporary migrants' practices and identities are multiple and do cross territorial and communal boundaries, this does not imply that identifications with territorially defined national polities and locales are disappearing. Indeed, as Guarnizo and Smith have argued, "transnationalism, far from erasing the local identifications and meaning systems, actually relies on them to sustain transnational ties."<sup>19</sup>

The notion of deterritorialization also figures prominently in the transnationalism literature, which often creates the myth of highly mobile migrants, deterritorialized people located abstractly in transnational social space.<sup>20</sup> This is problematic, as a number of scholars have pointed out, since transnational migrants are not free from the constraints that national and local contexts impose.<sup>21</sup> The nature of their local and transnational lives is grounded in *place*, and bounded by the policies and practices of territorially based sending and receiving locales and nation-states as well as their other communities.

National and local contexts of exit and settlement bear on both migrants' engagement with the host society and their transnational ties

and practices, and deserve greater attention in the study of transnationalism. In terms of the context of reception/settlement, for example, Ehrkamp and Leitner have shown how immigrants' various experiences with discrimination and other forms of exclusion and inferiorization in the new place of settlement work against identification with the receiving country.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, it has been noted that migrant transnationalism is often a compensatory mechanism for such negative experiences as structural and "everyday" discrimination.<sup>23</sup>

Migrant experiences, transnational practices and ties, and identities are not homogenous. The scholarship has shown that migrants are a heterogeneous group of people, inhabiting multiple intersecting subject positions and identities (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, religion, education, age/generation); they have migrated under disparate circumstances (refugees, documented and undocumented economic migrants); and they have had varying lengths of stay in the country of residence. Differences in migrants' positionalities<sup>24</sup> and identities help shape not only their transnational practices and ties, but also their integration into the host society and the meaning and value they assign to citizenship. For example, it has been widely documented that length of stay in the place of settlement affects transnationalism and attitudes toward acquiring citizenship.<sup>25</sup> Among recent immigrants, orientation toward and desire for their homeland is often stronger, and is associated with closer transnational ties and more ambivalence about acquiring citizenship in the country of residence. Recent studies also find that migrants' political transnationalism is strongly gendered. Jones-Correa suggests that Latin American immigrant men in the United States tend to have a stronger political orientation and are more likely to be involved in transnational political activities.<sup>26</sup> However, reducing the differences in immigrant practices and attitudes to a single axis of difference ignores the reality that individual migrants inhabit multiple intersecting subject positions and identities, as we shall see below.

Finally, it is important not to lose sight of the emotional aspects influencing transnational practices and dispositions toward naturalization in the country of settlement: "Even those refugees who have decided to remain in the country of settlement often retain strong emotional attachments to and identifications with the places, communities, and cultural environments they were forced to flee from."<sup>27</sup> Emotion figures prominently in some migrants' concerns about giving up citizenship in the country of their birth, which for many represents their origins, roots, and identity.

### **III. Research Design and Local Context**

The study site, which I will call Deveraux, is a town previously composed almost exclusively of white residents of European ancestry in rural Minnesota. We<sup>28</sup> chose Deveraux because, like many other small towns in the upper Midwest, it experienced rapid population growth and historic changes in the composition of its population as a result of an influx of new immigrants during the past ten to fifteen years. Immigrants are transforming these places. The town's population grew from about 17,000 in 1990 to 20,000 in 2000. Unlike previous immigrants, the "new" immigrants are almost exclusively non-white. In Deveraux, they are principally comprised of refugees from Africa (Somalia and Sudan) and Asia (Vietnam and Cambodia) as well as both documented and undocumented immigrants from Mexico and Central America. The majority of these new immigrants have arrived during the past fifteen years. They are attracted by job opportunities, largely in the food processing industry, and actively recruited by employers.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the majority of workers employed on the disassembly lines in the food processing industry are now the new immigrants.<sup>30</sup> In a larger context, the immigrant presence in Deveraux is an important element in processes of globalization involving flows of capital, labor, and refugee migration. It also figures in newly complicated configurations of racial/ethnic identity, national origin, class, and immigration status. The arrival of these immigrants has been welcomed by employers and by some local government officials and residents. Yet, other long-term white residents have displayed racism and discrimination toward them.

In the summer of 2001, we traveled to Deveraux and conducted ten focus groups with adult first-generation immigrants from Somalia, Sudan, Vietnam, Cambodia, Mexico, and Central America, together with three focus groups with white residents of European ancestry, in order to get a better understanding of both the reactions of white residents toward immigrants and the immigrants' settlement experience. Focus groups were complemented by an intake questionnaire to gather background information on demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, and migration history. Participants in the focus groups were selected to include different age groups (20 and older). Focus groups were conducted by native speakers and lasted approximately two hours. The two Somali focus groups consisted of eleven female and five male participants between the ages of 20 and 52.<sup>31</sup>

Given the small number of Somali immigrants in this research, it is not appropriate to generalize the findings to the wider Somali immigrant population in the United States. Nevertheless, the discussions with Somali immigrants in Deveraux provide insights into commonalities and differences in their settlement experience as well as the meaning and values they assign to U.S. citizenship. These can also be used to explore the role of salient contextual factors, immigrants' positionalities, and emotions in explaining the varied and complex responses among the Somali immigrants in Deveraux.

#### IV. Settlement Experiences and Transnational Ties

The majority (11 of 16) of the Somali focus group participants were born in Mogadishu and all except one arrived in the U.S. after 1996. Some of them came directly to Deveraux, while others resettled there after a brief sojourn in other cities and towns in Minnesota, or in other states such as Missouri, Arizona, Washington, and Florida.<sup>32</sup> When asked about their first impressions of how Deveraux (the U.S.) differs from home, many of them responded that *everything* is different—the people (of different skin color), religion, culture, work, pace of life, climate, and peace. One person explained that Deveraux "...is a quiet city. Here there is peace whereas in Somalia there is fighting." Older immigrants and those with children particularly appreciated the small town environment. It not only provided a safe location, but also allowed them to go about their daily work and private lives without needing a car, which is important given their financial constraints.

Most of the focus group participants, irrespective of educational background, were unskilled workers in the local meat processing plant (six females and two males). They received an average wage of \$9.00 per hour.<sup>33</sup> All of the participants commented on how managers and supervisors in the plant have been accommodating to the special needs of Somali men and women, in contrast to most other employers. The company does not enforce a dress code, which is extremely important to Somali women; does not require them to have English language skills (by providing an interpreter); and, last but not least, allows time and a space for prayer.

While they appreciated having access to a secure job that does not require English language skills, they also commented on the physically demanding and exhausting nature of the job and the health dangers associated with the evisceration line.

Sahra: I work here [poultry processing plant] because English language is not required and the job site is located within walking distance. Though it is a very hard job to do and requires long time of standing. Due to the nature of the job, back pain starts when you get home. (52-year-old female)

Women talked about and longed for the greater freedom they had in their everyday lives in Somalia. Many of them were working outside the home for the first time and commented on the grueling eight-hour shift. Combined with family responsibilities, this left them little time for socializing and community life. They deplored that life in America revolves around work and money, and that people just take care of themselves, resulting in less time and concern for the community. Fawzia, a 56-year-old female, put it as follows:

This morning, we left home, and went to work, and we just got out. We don't look either way; we just return to our hole (small apartment), you can't plan anything else. It's only work and the hole, no other options.

Younger and better-educated participants expressed a strong desire to overcome personal and institutional obstacles to social mobility. They felt that the small town did not provide sufficient opportunities for skilled and better paying jobs or educational opportunities. They saw their work in Deveraux as a steppingstone to better jobs in a larger city.

For many, daily life in Deveraux has been fraught with negative experiences. These include various forms of racism, from name-calling to harassment, racial profiling by the police, and housing discrimination. While a concern for all immigrant groups in Deveraux, difficulty in finding decent and affordable housing was discussed as a particular problem among the Somali immigrants. The majority lived in rental housing in the central part of Deveraux, within walking distance to their place of employment. Discrimination in the housing market has different faces. Somali migrants attributed their rejection to being black, as the following quotes from Alaso (33-year-old female) and Khalid (26-year-old male) suggest:

Alaso: Personally I do have problems finding housing. I put down an application with several places. It is possible that they don't allow you to rent if you are black or they let whites to rent it.

Moderator: Do they clearly say that to you?

Alaso: No, they say wait and it is possible they give to a white person.

Khalid: It is our perception only that they discriminate us because of color. Nothing has been said or shown to us.

Alaso and Khalid thus shared a strong perception of racial discrimination in their efforts to rent, although they cannot prove that racism indeed played a role.

Somalis also commented on absentee landlords who tried to take advantage of them, neglecting requests for necessary repairs while hiking rents. This does not mean, however, that they passively accepted discriminatory practices. Rather, they challenged these by resorting to self-help in accessing housing and devising strategies to force landlords to provide decent housing, as the following excerpt from one of the Somali focus groups demonstrates:

Maka: Once I held the money (rent) for four months, and then he (the landlord) came knocking on my door, not fixing anything, but knocking on the door with some plastic bucket saying 'now,' move out immediately, and rather than help me, he sticks a paper on my door telling me to move right away. I held the money for three consecutive months, and everyone was surprised, and would say, give him the money you crazy girl, you don't know this man, he will have you arrested. I refused, saying that he couldn't touch me, and that there were police, and I would let them know that there was no one to help me with the language... . In October, it even reached a point where the water in the kitchen would not work, let alone the washroom. After I did all that, the lady who was teaching me English spoke to him (the landlord), and he came right away, but why not for me? I never was late with the rent, I never moved from his house without paying the rent, I never moved out when he told me to, I never messed up his house. I am obligated, but why doesn't he respect me like he did the white lady? (25-year-old female)

Gutaale: Because you are Somali. (Male in his twenties)

Not all Somalis were willing to fight landlords as openly as Maka, however, because they were afraid that such behavior would make it even more difficult to get housing in the future, or that it would have negative repercussions for their credit rating, or because they feared being arrested and deported. It is worth noting, however, that these

fears were less pronounced among Somali immigrants than the other immigrant groups.

Somali immigrants not only deplored the unwillingness of landlords to rent to immigrants and/or repair their homes, but also the ignorance and disrespect shown to Somali culture and country. Gutale, a Somali man who had lived in Deveraux for one and a half years, chronicled his experience with a manager who asked him if they had washrooms, water, or electricity in his home country, implying that Somalia is primitive. He felt that such stereotypes about the underdevelopment of Somalia are used to assert the superiority of America and imply that Somalis are in need of "development."

A sense of cultural difference, specifically religious difference, figured prominently, particularly in women's narratives of their experiences. They felt isolated from the rest of the town. They did not go to a Christian church like the majority of people in Deveraux and they wore different clothing, which they felt "terrifies and startles people in these small towns" (26-year old female). For some Somali women, the cultural differences were simply too great to bridge. They felt they had nothing in common with American women and thus had no desire to befriend non-Somalis. Their only interactions with non-Somalis were at work.

In contrast, some of the younger women and men in their twenties seemed more inclined to interact with non-Somali residents beyond the workplace, and expressed fewer feelings of isolation. These differences are associated with English language skills, with younger and better-educated women and men in the group having a better grasp of English than older participants. Lack of English language skills (seven of the focus group participants said they speak no English, seven some English, and two said they have good English) is indeed identified as a major obstacle to communication, resulting in a distancing from other groups in Deveraux, as the following exchange between Fawzia (56-year-old woman) and Hodan (26-year-old woman) shows:

Fawzia: What is there to speak about if we don't understand each other (clamor arises).

Hodan: You'll see people speaking their own language in the workplace, and some even communicating through body language. And some understand one another. The people who understand one another become friends because of this, since they share the same language. It

is difficult for those who do not speak the same language to become friends, because they don't understand one another.

Lack of English language skills not only makes communication with non-Somali residents difficult, it negatively affects the livelihoods of immigrants in these towns more generally. They talked about how their lack of proficiency in English limits their employment options, and how those that speak English were able to improve their positions in the plant because they could mediate between English-speaking managers and Somali-speaking laborers. Lack of English language skills makes it hard to resolve problems confronted in their everyday lives, such as health issues, schooling problems of their children, and racial profiling by the police. The absence of interpreter services in hospitals, schools, government offices, and police stations in Deveraux was seen as a big disadvantage of living in a small town rather than a major city, where such services are more readily available.

Somali women and men also commented on the difficulties of sustaining their Muslim religion and "being and acting Muslim" in their daily lives in Deveraux. While the city provided rental space for celebrating major religious holidays, at the time of the research the Somalis did not have a communal place where they could gather for worship, nor did they have a place to send their children to be instructed in the Quran. This again was seen as a disadvantage of living in a small town.

Transnational ties and longing for the home they were forced or decided to flee are prominent aspects of Somali immigrant life. Throughout the focus group discussions, female participants talked at length about their desire to return to their home country when peace is restored, although none had visited it since arriving in the U.S. They spoke of children and family left behind.<sup>34</sup> In particular, Fawzia, who has nine children living in Somalia, was adamant about her eventual return:

I am positive I will return...most of my family is still back home, even though there are a few here with me, I still have some children left behind. Even though this place is fine now, deep in my spirit, I want to go home badly.

For all focus group participants, transnational ties are primarily based on kinship rather than economic and political activities. Their

intensity, however, varies depending on whether or not immigrants have family members who live either in Somalia or in refugee camps in Kenya. By far the most common practices are telephoning and sending letters and remittances. All focus group participants said that they regularly kept in touch with family by phone. Some phoned every week, others at least once a month. Writing letters did not seem a popular choice, but upon closer examination, this seemed to reflect the lack of postal service in Somalia and the immigrants' educational level. Of the four participants who said they wrote letters, three had a high school diploma.<sup>35</sup>

All the participants who were working regularly sent a portion of their earnings to support family and friends in Somalia and/or in refugee camps. Assisting family and friends financially or with needed goods was often perceived as a responsibility, albeit not easy to fulfill. They commented that they sent as much as they could, but felt that they did not earn enough money to support the family here and abroad. The issue of remittances was sensitive, since shortly before our interviews a newspaper article in the Minneapolis *Star and Tribune* alleged that Somali remittances were used to support warlords back home. The participants insisted that this was a misrepresentation. Social obligations based on kinship were the principal motivation for sending home remittances.

## V. Views and Meaning of U.S. Citizenship

### A. Facilitating Transnational Mobility

As with most other immigrants interviewed, the Somalis (with the exception of two older women) were generally favorable toward U.S. citizenship, voicing a number of reasons. A principal consideration for both Somali women and men was the benefit of freedom to travel. The literature on migrant transnationalism has tended to focus on well-off professional migrants, creating a myth of highly mobile migrants moving with ease across national borders.<sup>36</sup> Transnational mobility is not equally available to all immigrants, however.<sup>37</sup> For less well-off undocumented migrants and refugees in particular, transnational mobility is fraught with difficulty, danger, and bureaucratic obstacles. As mentioned above, none of the Somali focus group participants had visited Somalia since arriving in the U.S. This is related to the continued political volatility in Somalia and limited financial resources, but

also to structural constraints by the U.S. refugee resettlement process. Returning to Somalia without permission in advance would be viewed as voluntary repatriation, and the traveler would be denied readmission to the United States regardless of refugee status. Thus, it is not surprising that Somali refugees regard possession of a U.S. passport as a means for securing travel abroad, especially to visit their home country. As Fathia, a 31-year old Somali woman, put it: "since we no longer have a country, and our passports are invalid, we can go and visit our people with a U.S. passport, which is very valuable."

Foregrounded in Fathia's comments is a strong sense of loss brought about by the destruction of the Somali state<sup>38</sup> and the perceived worthlessness of Somali citizenship. This notion of Somali citizenship as worthless is also documented in Nuruddin Farah's book *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora*. Fathia's emphasis on visiting "our" people signals the significance of family and lineage in Somali identity, which is reinforced by the experience of political turmoil and civil strife over a Somali state.

## **B. Equal Rights: The Putative Equality of Citizenship**

In his classic essay "Citizenship and Social Class," political theorist T. H. Marshall argues that citizenship in Western liberal democracies theoretically entails equal civil, social, and political rights.<sup>39</sup> Marshall describes civil rights as including freedom of opinion and expression as well as equal protection under the law. Social and political rights encompass access to welfare state services and the right to vote, respectively. Somali immigrants' understanding of U.S. citizenship conforms in significant ways to this definition of the conferral of civil, social, and political rights. All Somali focus group participants lacked formal U.S. citizenship. Access to civil, social, and political rights were important reasons for wanting to acquire it.

Holding U.S. citizenship meant that that they would enjoy equal rights as Americans, enabling them to work and live here indefinitely, obtain easier access to housing, and actively participate in the formal political process. This must be seen within the context of their experiences with discrimination, which, as discussed above, figured prominently in their settlement experience.

Some expressed hope that becoming an American citizen would be associated not only with more rights, but also with more respect and equal treatment. At the same time, they questioned whether becom-

ing/being a U.S. citizen would necessarily mean that they would receive equal treatment and “belong,” as evidenced in the following statement from Abdullah, a 34-year-old Somali male:

I would like to be a citizen because once I become a citizen that would allow me to enjoy the same rights as other Americans, though I know we are not going to be the same.

Abdullah clearly showed an awareness of the paradox, also pointed out by Marshall, between the putative equality of formal citizenship and the daily, lived realities of social inequality and racism. His and others’ experience of racism and discrimination indicates that treatment and participation depends on more than whether one is a formal citizen.

Yet this knowledge did not discourage Abdullah from aspiring to the rights associated with citizenship. When asked which rights he was referring to, he responded that citizenship would allow him to run for political office, which he planned to do as soon as he is an American citizen. For him, U.S. citizenship had value beyond individual benefits like travel opportunities, enabling him to actively participate in the host polity. This is important to note, since public discourse tends to portray contemporary immigrants as having little to no interest in engaging with the U.S. polity, and as wanting to become citizens primarily for the personal benefits.

### **C. Cultural Identity, Belonging, and Citizenship**

U.S. citizenship law and naturalization policies assume that immigrants shed their attachment and allegiance to their home country and assimilate, to some extent, into the dominant sociocultural system. Giving up allegiance to the country of origin and one’s cultural identity is not easy, however, and also not desirable for many immigrants. For some of the other immigrant groups in Deveraux, acquisition of U.S. citizenship was not desirable because of their strong identification with their home country. For example, less educated Mexican men saw giving up their Mexican citizenship as a breach of loyalty, tantamount to being a traitor to one’s country. No such feelings were expressed by Somali immigrants. Yet, both Somali women and men expressed a strong desire to maintain their Somali identity which, in the absence of

a Somali nation-state, they primarily associated with being and acting as a Muslim.

There were differences, though, among Somali focus group participants in interpreting the implications of U.S. citizenship for their ability to maintain their Somali identity. Many of the younger women and men in the focus group stated that they wish to hold on to their Somaliness, but saw no problem in acquiring U.S. citizenship to meet their own needs. Haweeya, a 26-year-old female, put it the following way:

Well, I don't see it as anything wrong with taking it [U.S. citizenship], but I would not like to lose my ethnicity, to lose my Somaliness, but I would also like to get the American passport.

Haweeya and many others made a distinction between their cultural identity and formal membership in a political community. Indeed, formal membership in the political community where they live was not seen as lessening or threatening the sense of "being Somali."

In contrast, others feared that remaining in the U.S. and acquiring citizenship would lead them to lose their Somaliness. This resulted in an ambivalent disposition toward or even rejection of U.S. society and citizenship. Maka, a 26-year-old female, said that she was not against obtaining citizenship, but would much rather return to Somalia. She stated:

I would go back, Allah willing... . Whatever my family wants to do is their own business, but I, personally, for myself, want to return to my country. Because here even the older people have changed, so if Allah wills it, if Allah gives me children, I want to leave this country before my children assimilate to this country. I would like even more, to leave by myself.

This quote illustrates Maka's strong desire to return to Somalia for her own benefit and for her unborn children. Her strong sense of cultural difference between the U.S. and Somalia, and her fear that her unborn children will succumb to assimilation pressures in the U.S. and thus not retain their Somaliness, makes staying in the U.S. and U.S. citizenship less desirable. It is worth noting, however, that Maka also experienced repeated discrimination by her landlord; did not speak English; lived with Fawzia, who wanted to return to Somalia; spoke out "against those who want to assimilate with these people"; and wanted nothing to do with U.S. citizenship.

As previously mentioned, the majority of Somali participants in the focus groups wanted to become U.S. citizens, while maintaining their Somaliness. U.S. citizenship was valued for instrumental reasons, but not seen as lessening identification with and attachments to Somali culture.

## **VI. Conclusions**

Acquisition of U.S. citizenship, thereby becoming a member of the host polity and society, is a complex question that is grappled with by all immigrants. The majority of Somali immigrants interviewed were favorably disposed towards acquiring U.S. citizenship. To varying degrees, they struggled to negotiate advantages associated with citizenship (e.g., freedom of travel and access to citizenship rights) with the emotional attachments and identifications with their home country, community, and culture. This suggests that immigrants' emotional attachments to their home country and culture—often marginalized in the literature on transnationalism and citizenship—do indeed matter.

This has important policy implications, since emotional attachments cannot simply be legislated away through citizenship laws. The salient desire among all focus group participants to maintain their Somaliness challenges expectations and norms embedded in U.S. immigration policy, and in the minds of the majority of white American citizens, that immigrants should adapt to the U.S. sociocultural and economic system, shed their attachment and allegiance to their home country, and take up loyalty solely to the United States. The immigrant narratives show that, for many, engagement in and allegiance to multiple polities and communities is a normal feature of their lives, as many scholars of immigration have documented—not just for contemporary immigrants but also for their early 20th-century counterparts. This has led some scholars to suggest a reform of citizenship policies to allow for dual citizenship in order to accommodate multiple attachments and engagements.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, dual citizenship seems a desirable option for immigrants because they would not have to renounce citizenship in their home country in order to secure citizenship in their country of residence. However, while immigrants do not perceive any conflict of loyalty in simultaneously being members of two national communities, conservative politicians and journalists in the U.S. object to dual citizenship on the grounds that it would undermine the host country's national identity and impede the integration of immigrants.<sup>41</sup>

The analysis of the Somali narratives has shown that even within this small group of immigrants there exists a great range, depth, and diversity in their engagement with and disposition toward the U.S. and U.S. citizenship. Multiple subject positions and identities intersect with one another in complex ways, producing varied tendencies. For example, as shown above, less educated, older migrants, with family left behind, revealed greater fears about losing their Somali/Muslim identity and more ambivalence toward the U.S. and U.S. citizenship, as compared with younger, single, and better educated migrants. This suggests that it is difficult and even dangerous to make generalizations about *the* immigrant transnationalism, or about engagement with and commitment to the U.S. More research is needed to better understand how immigrants' positionalities and identities shape their dispositions toward the U.S. and U.S. citizenship.

This research also indicates that the context of reception matters, not only the context of 2001<sup>42</sup> small-town white America, but also the national context. In contrast to the Twin Cities, Deveraux and many other towns in rural Minnesota remained almost exclusively the territory of white immigrants of European ancestry until the early 1990s. Their Christian white culture is idealized in the fictional town of Lake Wobegon, "where all the women are strong, the men are good looking, and the children are above average...and where everybody knows each other's name." This fictional Minnesota town, re-created every weekend in a popular radio program hosted by Garrison Keilor, no longer exists, if it ever did. The residents of small-town Minnesota are not just white Lutherans living in harmony with one another. And they don't know each other's names. Focus groups with white residents in Deveraux show that some white residents resent immigrants, think that race and racism are natural, and expect immigrants to assimilate into white American culture. Although some factors specific to Deveraux evoke white hostility, local expressions of anti-immigrant sentiment also drew on national discourses of assimilation and discourses that conflate American identity with whiteness.<sup>43</sup> The immigrant voices presented here offer insights into how white residents' attitudes are deployed "on the ground" and impact immigrants' lived experiences in profound and debilitating ways, in turn influencing immigrant disposition toward the U.S. and U.S. citizenship.

The expectation by the mainstream American public and in policy discourse that immigrants will assimilate into white American culture puts onto the immigrants all of the responsibility for their incorpora-

tion, and for peaceful coexistence between immigrants and long-term residents. This is problematic. As discussed above, commitment to the host society depends not only on immigrants' willingness, but also is shaped by specific national and local contextual factors, over which they have little control and that mark their experiences once they arrive here. It should not be surprising that experiences of structural and everyday discrimination and racism result in more ambivalent attitudes toward the U.S. and U.S. citizenship. This implies that the U.S. polity and society must also take responsibility for creating an environment that encourages rather than discourages engagement with and commitment to the United States. ●

---

## Notes

1. This research was supported by grants from the Russell Sage Foundation and the Graduate School of the University of Minnesota. I would like to thank Eric Sheppard and Abdi Samatar for their constructive comments on an earlier version of this article. Furthermore, my thanks go to the students in my migration class, who have brought their reading of the immigrant experience to the discussion.
2. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service, 2004.
3. Basch et al. 1994; Portes 1996; Smith and Guarnizo 1998; Chea and Robbins 1998; Ong 1999; Foner 2000.
4. Glick Schiller et al. 1992.
5. Soysal 2000.
6. Soysal 1994, 1997, 2000; Bauböck 1994.
7. Glick Schiller et al. 1992; Basch et al. 1994.
8. Glick Schiller et al. 1992, pp. 8–9.
9. Foner 1997; Kivisto 2003.
10. Foner 2000.
11. Kivisto 2001; Portes 2003.
12. Tambini 2001.
13. Soysal 1994, 2000.
14. Soysal 2000.
15. Koopmans and Statham 1999.
16. Soysal 1994, 2000.
17. Koopmans and Statham 1999.
18. Soysal 1994, 2000.
19. Guarnizo and Smith 1998, p. 15.
20. Ong 1999.
21. Guarnizo and Smith 1998.
22. Ehrkamp and Leitner 2004.
23. Guarnizo and Smith 1998.

24. Positionality refers to the placement of individuals who are subject to similar conditions of existence and are endowed with similar dispositions by virtue of the fact that they occupy similar positions in social and material space. Yang 1994.
25. Jones-Correa 1998.
26. Al-Ali et al. 2001, p. 591.
27. The information was collected as part of a two-year collaborative project with Professor Kathy Fennelly (Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota), funded by the Russell Sage Foundation and the University of Minnesota.
28. Benson 1999; Cantu 1995.
29. Fennelly and Leitner 2002.
31. For reasons of confidentiality we use pseudonyms for focus group participants.
32. The length of stay in Deveraux at the time of the research was between one and four years.
33. Four females work only inside the home and two males were unemployed.
34. In terms of family status, five were separated, six were married, and four single. Of the eight respondents who had children, only five had some or all of their children living with them in Deveraux.
35. Of all focus group participants, two of the female and four of the male participants received a high school diploma.
36. Ong 1999; Lessinger 1992.
37. Bailey et al. 2002; Mahler 1998.
38. Samatar 1992.
39. T. H. Marshal 1963.
40. Bauböck 1994.
41. Renshon 2000.
42. Please note that the focus groups were conducted before September 11, in the summer of 2001. Unfortunately, we were not able to conduct another round of focus groups after 9/11 to assess its impact on immigrant-host society relations, the immigrant experience in the town, and immigrant attitudes toward citizenship.
43. Leitner 2003.

## Bibliography

- Al-Ali, N., R. Black, and K. Koser. "The Limits to 'Transnationalism': Bosnian and Eritrean Refugees in Europe as Emerging Transnational Communities." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24, no. 4 (2001): 578–600.
- Bauböck, R. *Transnational Citizenship: Membership and Rights in International Migration*. Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1994.
- Bailey, A. J. "(Re)producing Salvadoran Transnational Geographies." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 92, no. 1 (2002): 125–144.
- Benson, J. E. "Undocumented Immigrants and the Meatpacking Industry in the Midwest." In *Illegal Immigration in America: A Reference Handbook*, edited by David Griffith. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999, pp. 172–192.

- Cantu, L. "The Peripheralization of Rural America: A Case Study of Latino Migrants in America's Heartland." *Sociological Perspectives* 38 (1995): pp. 399–414.
- Chea, P., and B. Robbins, eds. *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.
- Basch, L., N. Glick Schiller, and C. Szanton Blanc. *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments and Deterritorialized Nation-States*. New York: Gordon and Breach, 1994.
- Bauböck, R. *Transnational Citizenship: Membership and Rights in International Migration*. Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1994.
- Glick Schiller, N., L. Basch, and C. Szanton Blanc. "Transnationalism: A New Analytic Framework for Understanding Migration." In *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration: Race, Class, Ethnicity, and Nationalism*. New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1992, pp. 1–34.
- Farah, N. *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora*. Cassell, 2000.
- Fennelly, K., and H. Leitner. "How the Food Processing Industry is Diversifying Rural Minnesota." *JSRI Working Paper*, no. 59. The Julian Samora Research Institute, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, 2002.
- Foner, N. "What's New about Transnationalism? New York Immigrants Today and at the Turn of the Century." *Diaspora* 6 (1997): 355–76.
- Foner, N. *From Ellis Island to JFK: New York's Two Great Waves of Immigration*. New Haven and New York: Yale University Press and Russell Sage Foundation, 2000.
- Guarnizo, L. E., and M. P. Smith. "The Location of Transnationalism." In *Transnationalism from Below*, edited by Michael Peter Smith and Luis E. Guarnizo. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1998, pp. 3–34.
- Jones-Correa, M. *Between Two Nations: The Political Predicament of Latinos in New York*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998.
- Kivisto, P. "Theorizing Transnational Immigration: A Critical Review of Current Efforts." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24, no. 4 (2001): 549–577.
- . "Social Spaces, Transnational Immigrant Communities, and the Politics of Incorporation." *Ethnicities* 3, no. 1 (2003): 5–28.
- Koopmans, R., and P. Statham. "Challenging the Liberal Nation-State? Postnationalism, Multiculturalism and the Collective Claims Making of Migrants and Ethnic Minorities in Britain and Germany." *American Journal of Sociology* 105, no. 3 (1999): 652–696.
- Leitner, H. "Inscriptions and Contestations of the Color Line in Small Town America." Paper presented at the Color Lines Conference. Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, August 29–September, 2003.
- Marshall, T. H. "Citizenship and Social Class." In *The Citizenship Debates*, edited by Gershon Shafir. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963, pp. 93–111.
- Ong, A. *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.
- Portes, A. "Transnational Communities: Their Emergence and Significance in the Contemporary World-System. In *Latin America in the World-Economy*, edited by Patricia Korzeniewicz and W. C. Smith. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996.

- . "Assimilation and Transnationalism: Determinants of Transnational Political Action among Contemporary Migrants." *American Journal of Sociology* 108, no. 6 (2003): 1211–48.
- Renshon, S. A. "Dual Citizens in America: An Issue of Vast Proportions and Broad Significance." *Center for Immigration Studies Background*. July 2000.
- Samatar, A. I. "Destruction of State and Society in Somalia: Beyond the Tribal Convention." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 30, no. 4 (1992): 625–641.
- Smith, M. P., and L. E. Guarnizo, eds. *Transnationalism from Below*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1998.
- Soysal, Y. *Limits of Citizenship: Migrants and Postnational Membership in Europe*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- . "Citizenship and Identity: Living in Diasporas in Post-War Europe?" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23, no. 1 (2000): 1–15.
- Tambini, D. "Post-National Citizenship." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24, no. 2 (2001): 195–217.
- U.S. Immigration and Citizenship Service 1994. <http://uscis.gov/graphics/aboutus/history/teacher/oath.htm>.
- Yang, P. Q. "Explaining Immigrant Naturalization." *International Migration Review* 28, no. 3 (1994): 449–477.