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The Somali Diaspora: A Journey Away

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Roble, Abdi, and Doug Rutledge. *The Somali Diaspora: A Journey Away*. Duluth: U of Minnesota P, 2008.

When Somalia declared its independence from England and Italy in 1960, its national flag reflected the mission of unifying Somalia *irredenta*. The five-pointed white star on a sky-blue background represented the quintet of territories with ethnic Somalis that, in the newborn country's logic, should be part of the national fold: the former British north and Italian-dominated south, which comprised the modern state; the disputed Ogaden region of Ethiopia; Kenya's Northern Frontier District; and the French colony Djibouti.

These early nationalists likely did not fathom that a five-pointed star would be insufficient to include locations such as Columbus, Ohio, and Minneapolis, Minnesota. But it is to these cities and others that many Somali refugees have come since the 1990s to flee the famine and civil war for which their home country has become infamous. *The Somali Diaspora*, by essayist Doug Rutledge and Somali photographer Abdi Roble, documents a compelling sliver of Somali life by following one family—Abdisalam, wife Ijabo, and their children—from a Kenyan refugee camp to their first bewildering steps onto American terrain in 2006. Tales of the family's journey are complemented by chapters dealing with more mature Somali communities around the country, such as in Columbus and Minneapolis, the latter home to an estimated 50,000 Somalis.

Despite increasing numbers of Somalis in the United States, images of Somalis in the American imagination are limited to violent conflicts abroad—especially the braying mob dragging American servicemen's corpses through Mogadishu during the 1993 intervention. As law professor Patricia Williams has noted, media portrayals from that time often conflated Somaliness with criminality, and one NBC producer even referred to one of the country's then-warlords as “an educated jungle bunny” (202). The West's recent encounters with Somali piracy and Somalia's role as a fertile staging ground for terrorist activity have further fueled the representation of Somalis as threats to global stability. Such representations highlight the need for a more nuanced counter-understanding of this understudied population. While Somali refugees have been the subject of international research from the nongovernmental sector and some social scientists, the circle of Somali studies is small; few book-length studies about Somali resettlement have been published, and far fewer have taken the careful documentary-based approach of *The Somali Diaspora*.

To be a Somali means to be a person in search of a state, to paraphrase the title of David Laitin and Said Samatar's monograph on the apparent Somali paradox: a seemingly monoethnic nation, Somalia is in a cycle of perpetual conflict. With more than ninety-five percent of Somalis practicing Islam and speaking a common tongue, Somalia appeared a most novel rarity in polyglot, multi-faith Africa: a country whose very demographic should have prohibited devolution. Yet Somalia the state has been a relic since the government's collapse in the early 1990s. At that time, millions became internally displaced persons or asylum-seekers in neighboring countries, Scandinavia, and the Arab world.

While *The Somali Diaspora* presents a useful migration microhistory, it does not span the full geography of the diaspora, mostly neglecting Somali contact with Europe and the Middle East. While the authors make clear that there have been multiple waves of Somali migration to the United States, an entire “prehistory” of non-American Somali migration receives short shrift in this United States-centric account. Commerce led proto-Somal

across the Red Sea well before their American arrivals. According to Roxana Eleni Magriti, at least one claim suggests that Somalis were shipping water to the arid medieval city of Aden (in present-day Yemen) in the fourteenth century (50). By 1921, the peregrinations of Somalis sparked this remark by a colonial officer in British Somaliland: “You will find [the Somali] working as deck hand, fireman, or steward, on all the great liners trading to the East. I know of a Somali tobacconist in Cardiff [Wales], a Somali mechanic in New York, and a Somali trader in Bombay, the latter of whom speaks French, English, and Italian fluently” (Rayne 21).”

In politics and in mobility, Somalis have long turned eastward to the Arab and Indian Ocean world. Somalia was a member of the Arab League, and in the absence of a Somali state and safety nets, Somalis continue to venture across dangerous seas as undocumented laborers destined for Yemen and Saudi Arabia. The story of contemporary Somalis in the Arab world and particularly of those unable to qualify for a political refugee’s ticket abroad would have provided an important though quite different accent to the story of Abdisalam and his family, who luckily won admission to the pitifully small trickle of Somali refugees allowed into the United States.

Yet Roble and Rutledge’s goal was not to write a comprehensive academic history, but to create an informed primer about a group distinguished from “mainstream Americans” by blackness and Africanness, language, experience of conflict, and Islam. Rutledge’s sensitive essays alert the lay reader to the difficulties of migration and cross-cultural communication, though they speak as much to the general travails of involuntary migration as to the specificity of the Somali hegira. A gifted cultural translator and enthusiastic boundary crosser, Rutledge displays a gift for the inspired yet accessible analogy; describing the symbolism of a Somali stuffed pastry similar to Indian samosas, he writes “the distance between *sambusa* and hot dogs is the space we now travel with the word ‘assimilation’” (8).

Roble’s black-and-white photography accompanies sections corresponding with three stages of resettlement described by a Somali advocate: dependence, preparation, and participation (14). Seen through Roble’s lens, the bodies of the family effectively narrate their own compelling stories of trauma and transition. The gaunt face of the malnourished and pregnant Ijabo fills out after her arrival stateside. Another photograph depicts the rangy frame of Abdisalam, who had not eaten a banana in eight years, standing before the fluorescent abundance of an American supermarket. Roble captures the universal exuberance and resilience of youth—in a shot of daughter Hofsa swinging on a banister while decked out in a flouncy dress.

Explaining a little-known immigrant population, Roble and Rutledge vacillate between asserting sameness and difference between United States citizens and their new Somali neighbors. Rutledge’s introductory essay emphasizes commonalities, albeit rosy ones, between Americans and Somalis—deep faith, industriousness, and the drives to survive, create, and prosper. At the same time, he acknowledges different religions, cultural practices, and the often-crippling dislocation that is the malaise of many immigrants and refugees worldwide.

The impulse to portray Somalis as “people just like you, but different” to a fictional and undefined mainstream American readership limits exploration of how Somalis view difference, and also obscures variation among Somalis themselves. While Somalis may not share American understandings of race, they may nevertheless form their own

distinctions, whether they are based on religion (an issue well covered by *The Somali Diaspora*), skin color, clan membership, or other signifiers. As Roble's photographs show upon close inspection, there is no unitary Somali phenotype. Dark-skinned, "hard haired" southern Somali farmers share cultural and linguistic ties with Bantu peoples. Some urban merchants commingled with Arabs and Persians, yielding lighter-skinned communities that, like the Somali Bantus, were targeted during the civil war because of their distinct, racialized identities and location outside clan networks. Yet Rutledge sidesteps the issue of race by saying that Somalis typically don't "process information about other people through racial paradigms" (ix). This follows a general trend in racial formations literature, which often downplays the existence of multiple, overlapping pre-migration identities, particularly with regard to African immigrants. *The Somali Diaspora* does little to explain Somalis' pre-existing regional and racialized identities, and how these identities mesh or clash with American racial hierarchies.

If the omission of intragroup diversity points to the simplifying tendency inherent in a book intended as a documentary introduction of a minority group, the photographs in the Minneapolis "participation" section usefully complicate dominant ideas about a conservative Muslim culture by juxtaposing them with conventional notions of civic participation in a liberal democracy: voting, partaking of public education, wage work, engaging freely in consumer culture. Throughout this section, Somali women and girls—most wearing the veil, a lighting-rod to many Westerners—study in advanced classrooms; carry picket signs for a union while shouting slogans in their own tongue; shop at the Mall of America; and drive public buses or work as dentists. To an American eye that places Islam and the United States at different ends of the women's liberation spectrum, these photographs express progress on the gender front. Yet, we do not learn enough about Somali women's status before and during resettlement to make persuasive, broad claims about relative freedom, restriction, or the differential, gendered impact of migration. In the case of the family whose resettlement threads through *The Somali Diaspora*, Rutledge writes that Abdisalam suffered from a loss of male authority, while wife Ijabo was happier than she had ever been. The reasons for her happiness—perhaps the obvious benefits of a safe home, ample food, opportunities for her children—go unexplained.

If Roble and Rutledge don't fully acknowledge Somali racial/ethnic diversity or provide a deep historical perspective, they deploy their cultural competence to educate a general audience about an insufficiently documented and sometimes-maligned group. Fixing their gaze on Abdisalam and Ijabo and also zooming out to Somali communities, they point to a multiplicity of Somali immigrant experience in the United States. This one family and this "journey away" suggest many journeys, and Roble and Rutledge demonstrate that diasporas always produce dynamic stories, if only we have ears committed to hearing them.

—Cynthia Greenlee-Donnell

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Media theory, from Benjamin to McLuhan to Kittler, in one way or another rests on the assumption that media technologies work in the way they are supposed to. Function, so to speak, follows form: radios always transmit signals and reproduce sound; motion picture cameras always capture light and reproduce the illusion of life. In Brian Larkin's provocative *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria*, the case is more complicated. On the surface, Larkin's study examines the ways in which the development of technologies like radio and cinema worked to produce the "skeleton of urban life" in modern Nigeria (5). At the same time, the book offers up a theory of media that begins from the perspective of the developing world, where radio and film first emerged out of colonial efforts to strengthen city infrastructures. Here, media technologies do not always work in the way that they are supposed to: they develop in fits and starts; they break down; their uses are ultimately defined by the aims, and the limits, of empire.

According to Larkin, nowhere in Nigeria was this more the case than in Kano, a Hausa city in the predominantly Muslim northern region of the country. It was in Kano that British colonial authorities began experimenting with radio broadcast networks and mobile cinema units during the late 1930s and early 1940s. From the outset, radio and film were part of an official state program of "indirect rule" in place throughout Nigeria's northern states. On one hand, media technologies—like the railroads and highways that were built throughout the country around the same time—promised to serve as a "connective tissue" (8) linking together the Nigerian territory and facilitating centralized colonial governance. On the other hand, technologies like radio and cinema had utility in and of themselves. As "sublime" spectacles of technological achievement (9), broadcasts and films seemed to reinforce the superiority of Western civilization and its wider mastery over the natural world. However, as Larkin emphasizes throughout the book's excellent opening chapters, on-the-ground experiences of Nigeria's media infrastructure often contradicted the colonial agenda.

Radio, for instance, emerged in cities like Kano around the time of the second World War. Although the British initially intended broadcasting technology to help disseminate state propaganda, Nigerian radio's overall "signal" (to adopt one of Larkin's controlling metaphors) was never clear. Prone to power failures and unstable frequency transmissions, the colonial broadcasting network was fragile at best. More importantly, the programming that did end up "working" gave urban Nigerians new opportunities to experience culture beyond the local. In stark contrast to Europe and the United States, where radio sets had been entrenched in the space of the middle-class home for almost two decades, broadcasting in Kano was a public affair. Colonial authorities installed radio loudspeakers throughout