

**Minnesota Nice**

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

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**מיניסוטה הנחמד**

הצעת מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת

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הופמן: אילנה בלומברג

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## Minnesota Nice: An Immigrant Journey

### Introduction:

This work is a memoir, told through my own memories and the stories of other immigrants to and from Minneapolis and St. Paul. I will showcase my childhood surroundings and upbringing through personal essays related to growing up in Minnesota, my childhood home, as well as interview based narrative essays of other immigrants and their experiences coming to or leaving from the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota. This piece will develop towards my own immigration and immigrant story through the lens of my formative experiences surrounded by Minnesotans and immigrants to and from my hometown.

## Aims and General Description:

This work, a blended genre of a collection of interview based narratives and personal essays, is intended to explore my personal relationship with the experience of immigration, first and secondhand, and how that relationship developed in correlation with the experiences of other Minnesotan immigrants. Minnesota was, in my childhood, a very White Christian place known for cold winters and hot-dish casseroles. Families went to church on Sunday, had cabins 'up north' and people drove to the Wisconsin Dells for a quality family vacation full of excitement and cheddar cheese. I intend to delve into my memories of the homogeneity and warmth that Minnesota is known for and the immigrant experience it is less known for. I will focus on how I experienced that environment, what it means for who I am today, and how it developed my interest in exploration of a larger and less homogenous worldview.

This piece incorporates the interviews I have conducted and continue to conduct of immigrants to the Twin Cities and native Minnesotans who emigrated away. Both groups have a broad and fluid definition of home, and I intend to focus on the qualities that we share and how they've developed my sense of self. The subjects of my interviews have varied backgrounds and origins, including Vietnam, Russia, Japan, Germany, Mexico, Somalia and Israel, yet they are connected geographically to the Twin Cities, and by the immigrant experiences of starting over somewhere foreign. Through my interviewees' stories and my own, this piece will explore glimpses in religion, language, race and pan-national identity, developing into a picture of where I come from and who I am today.

## Conceptual Background:

In the modern globalized world, nationalism and national pride are deeply entrenched identities, shaping personality, lifestyle and economy. At the same time, partly due to the ease and lowered costs of travel, as well as internet capabilities enabling instant intercontinental communication and business, citizens of one nation are traveling, working, immigrating and settling elsewhere. Today's Western philosophical ideal of a comfortable life and working towards a better material existence encourages this movement. As a global community, we are faced with the question: to what identity do these people belong? Does their nationality shift? Are they eternally citizens of their original hometown or nation-state? Are their children also? Are they now a new kind of American, or a new kind of German, or Japanese? How much does birth have to do with it? How much does language? Skin color?

## Residence?

These questions are explored at length by social scientists and novelists rooted in a wide variety of places. They are a valuable part of the modern dialogue about identity, race, and nationalism. Upon first contact, the immigrants that I've interviewed unanimously connected to feelings of being in-between cultures; they are no longer American, but yet will never become Japanese. They are not really Vietnamese, or Mexican, because they have grown and changed and collected experiences that are so different from the typical citizen of their hometowns, but they are still treated as foreign by natives of their new home, still feel foreign in their core selves. Immigrants by choice or by circumstance, it doesn't matter. My subjects, and I venture to say broadly that immigrants as a group, feel both proud and connected to their roots, and proud and connected to their chosen home. They feel this conflict deeply and live with it constantly.

In Yossi Klein Halevi's *Like Dreamers*, the story of the unification of Jerusalem in 1967 and the history of the State of Israel's divergent ideologies is told through the individual and diverse men of the 55<sup>th</sup> Paratroopers' Brigade. Halevi links these men and their families to Israel's history as a whole. In my

telling Minnesotan immigrant stories, I hope to accomplish the same; I will share the story of Minnesota through my lenses, through immigrant lenses. Just as Halevi portrays the diversity of his subjects while showing the spine of Israel's history through the character, perspective and voice of each man, I aim to expose the Minnesotans that are not from Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegone, "little town that time forgot, and the decades cannot improve" yet are still the collective story of the Twin Cities and their real-life improvements.

Like the immigrant children in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, my interviewees whose parents relocated and raised them in Minnesota are near-fluent in two cultures. Like Smith's characters Irie Jones, and Millat and Magid Iqbal, my subjects appear to as one culture and then open their mouths and sound like another, and can navigate between the two. They oscillate in a struggle to identify who they are and how they fit into each role. Neither role is a perfect fit, creating a conflict, as with Adichie's character Dike who becomes deeply dissatisfied. I aim, as these authors did, to craft moments of this tension and internal conflict through my interviewees' stories. Unlike these books though, where the local Americans or English locals largely stay stagnant, I will express my own story and that of other emigrants, exploring the influences of conflicted immigrant identity on the local culture.

I grew up as the Minnesotan child of two Jewish inner city New Yorkers. My parents were American, like my friends' parents, but they somehow formed a Minneapolis community of other 'transplants' from the East Coast of the United States; their friends were all Jewish and almost all had a thick Brooklyn, Bronx or New Jersey accent. My parents didn't understand what a "cabin up north" was and it never occurred to them to take their kids skiing, but their friends back home "went to the mountains" in the Catskills to escape the summer heat.

Aside from those differences, and the fact that we didn't go to church or eat pig or have local grandparents to celebrate Grandparents Day in school, my upbringing was very typical of a Twin Cities

child. We visited Kelly Farm in school, with its old-time costumes and opportunities to shell peas; we gave out boxed perforated Valentines with The Little Mermaid themes and ate pastel sugar inscribed with “Fax me” and “Be Mine.” I took ballet, gymnastics, karate and later on, voice lessons. I went to all my high school football games, as part of the plumed marching band, and I sang in the Minnesota Orchestra Hall with my school choir. When we partied, it was with popcorn and pop (soda) and spaghetti-o’s. If I would walk up and down my parents’ silent street, with each house on a neat quarter acre with a concrete driveway, chimney and vinyl siding, I could walk down the middle of the road and likely not see one car. Certainly, there would be no traffic. Almost as certainly, the homeowners on that street would be white, many of them blond-haired.

This “Wonderbread” upbringing was sprinkled, though not saturated, with diversity. My school’s English as a Second Language program was thriving, our LGBTQ support group was cool, and I grew up with the privilege of ‘not seeing’ color. When my second-grade friend Uean wore tights under her pants in the winter and I asked my mother why, it surprised me to be told that Uean was from Vietnam and it’s warmer in Vietnam than here. In *Green Card Youth Voices*, and *A Good Time for Truth*, collections of essays on immigration and race, I read those authors’ perspectives on Minnesota diversity and its limits from the eyes of the outsider, the immigrant. I intend to share my interviewees’ perspectives and experiences with those limitations while focusing on the advantages of this unique brand of diversity for the insider, the native Minnesotan.

We sheltered Twin Cities children considered ourselves liberal and cultured, and I believe that to some extent we were, in an exceptional way. The interviewees who immigrated to the Twin Cities offered us that sprinkling of diversity, while they continued to integrate and respect the traditional Minnesotan way, a throwback to the melting pot of yore. This melting pot not only integrated the immigrants, it transformed regular Minnesota kids into people with interest in and ability to start over somewhere

new, full of the comfort and security of growing up somewhere so 'nice.' A new kind of melting pot—not where immigrants lose their identity, but where locals gain an identity beyond their local parameters.

The United States, where I grew up, and Israel, where I live now, are both immigrant societies. My husband and I moved in Israel in 2013 from New York, where we'd finished university. My grandparents were born in the United States, the children of immigrants. I only spoke one language at home: English. A classic American Jew, if not a classic Minnesotan. My husband's family is more spread out—they are immigrants in every generation; he has three passports, and has used them all. Their family identity is a conglomeration. For him, the 'why' of immigration is obvious: why not? For me, so desperately in love with my hometown, it's less clear. What is it within the pristine clean of fresh snowfall, canoes, and late nights at Perkins ordering waffles and apple pie? Where did I find the resilience and sense of adventure to start fresh somewhere new? I believe it's the immigrant experience of my peers, the hidden diversity of Minnesota, behind Minnesota Nice.



## Shape of Project:

This work will begin with an introduction, identifying my outlook and relationship with the immigrant experience. It will place the story, introduce myself as the main narrator and protagonist. The introduction will explore who my interview subjects are briefly, where they are from, where they live and how I found them, as well as why I believe this is an important story to tell. The remainder of the work will be broken into alternating chapters based around themes of my experience, sharing narrative stories from my interview subjects relating to that theme, for example, religion, education, romance, language, food. Each chapter will focus on a theme from my personal history in relation to how that aspect of my life developed and grew, and the same theme from one of my interviewees. Each chapter will consist of two essays, one personal and first person, the second a third person narrative of an experience that my interviewees had.

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