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"Transnationalism and the Norwegian-American Experience"

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Localizing Transnational Norwegians: Exploring Nationalism, Language, and Labor Markets in Early Twentieth Century North Dakota

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In recent years, transnationalism has become an influential and contested concept within the field of international migration. In general, transnationalism can be defined as immigrants' incorporation of activities, routines, and institutions from their country of origin to shape their perception, desires and practices in their new country. Transnationalism involves the migrants' tangible cross-border activities that maintain affective and cultural connections with their homeland. As scholars of immigrant transnationalism maintain, the practices and identities of migrant populations cannot be understood accurately without considering these cross-border connections.

Yet at the same time, other migration scholars contend that the use of transnationalism in the immigration literature is problematic and tends to view anything international as transnational. Roger Waldinger and David Fitzgerald note that discovering “connections between villages or communities here and there hardly qualifies as transnational, as the same relationship reoccurs within almost any domestic or international migration.” Instead, they suggest that the concept of “bi-localism” can better capture “the interaction between the immigrants and their connections still at home.”

We approach the case of Norwegian immigrants to North Dakota with the question of whether the concept of transnationalism or bi-localism provides the most useful analytical lens. Because this question requires parsing levels of attach-
ment, we examine how the interplay of local and national factors sustained material and cultural trans-border ties. At the same time, by analyzing Norwegian immigrants, who generally are taken as a prototypically successful white European immigrant group, we want to challenge assumptions not just about the ease of assimilation to U.S. culture, but its desirability from their perspective.

Shifting the Focus to Cross-Border Connections
Migration scholars have long debated how migrants' relationships to home and their host society might change over time. In the debates about how immigrants adapt to institutions and communities in the U.S., some migration scholars predict that assimilation is the unintended consequence of immigrants' attempts to gain an economic foothold (e.g., by getting a good job or an advanced education). Some intentionally stand apart, maintaining segregated communities and separate cultures. Yet other groups set out to assimilate; and still others become American by integrating into the underclass and experiencing downward mobility.

More recently, scholars have attended to the ways that immigrants have simultaneously become part of the U.S. and yet continue to be active members in their home societies. They argue that the development of communication, information, transportation and globalized capitalism to a great extent improve and facilitate the processes of connection. As a result, the possibility that immigrants live "lives that incorporate daily activities, routines, and institutions located both in a destination country and transnationally" becomes central to an analysis of immigrants' identities and practices.

To this point, the growing body of literature on transnationalism attends to the exchange of ideas, information, goods, money, and people through migrants' cross-border ties. Many immigrants seek to reestablish and reaffirm their sense of self and resist the racialized, gendered and class-biased discrimination against them by remaining connected to the communities in their home society. For example, Peggy Levitt vividly demonstrates how Dominican migrants face racial discrimination in the United States, which reinforces attachments to their homeland. There, because they are members of
a dominant group, they can easily reclaim their racial superiority.\textsuperscript{17} Hung Thai similarly underscores that given economic disparities; many low-wage Vietnamese men convert their meager U.S. income into generous economic remittances and enhance their masculinity and marriageability in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{18} In effect, these transnational linkages are not supplementary but central to immigrants’ subjectivities in the U.S.

Others emphasize how various beliefs, feelings, and practices can “travel” from a sending country to a receiving country.\textsuperscript{19} In this vein, Diane Wolf argues that immigrants’ “homes” in different locations “exist not only geographically but also ideologically and emotionally, in addition to a plurality of cultural codes and symbols that go beyond the nation-state.”\textsuperscript{20} By illuminating how immigrants selectively bring memories, social categories and cultural codes to new communities, these scholars astutely demonstrate that transnationalism takes place “not only at the literal but also at the symbolic level—at the level of imagination, shared memory, and ‘inventions of traditions.’”\textsuperscript{21}

Transnational connections are not new. Turn-of-the-twentieth century Norwegian immigrants experienced significant
changes and exhibited many characteristics that in the early twenty-first century would be called transnational. In comparison with the generations before them, they engaged in enhanced modes of communication—cheap mail, the telegraph, and the telephone. The development of technology, particularly extended train routes and enhanced trans-Atlantic ship travel, made migration across national borders and continents easier than for their parents and grandparents. And importantly, their livelihoods were profoundly shaped by global political and economic developments—evident in the world market for commodities (such as grain), labor demands that resulted in massive flows of people across borders, international political conflict (the Great War), and a global health pandemic (Spanish Flu of 1918).

Here we investigate the everyday practices of primarily foreign-born first- and American-born second-generation Norwegian immigrants through their celebration of the Norwegian Constitution, their embrace of the Norwegian language on U.S. soil, and their activation of transnational labor pools. We seek to refine the notion of transnationalism by demonstrating that a rural local context can facilitate the formation of a transnational social field in which migrants live. Moreover, our case reveals the ways in which Norwegians rejected some aspects of American culture and the use of English, maintained strong ties to Norway, and still strove to become naturalized U.S. citizens and participate in American political processes. Understanding them as transnational emphasizes the variation in Norwegian immigrant experiences.

To understand their everyday practices, we have sought primary sources that illuminate the conditions of their lives and their perspectives on American culture, work, and life. We have scrutinized plat maps of land ownership; read newspaper articles, town histories, and memoirs; scoured archives for letters; and dug through manuscript censuses. The scarcity of written first-person narratives from this period has prompted us to turn to oral histories. Drawing on Karen V. Hansen’s larger project on coexistence between Scandinavian settlers and Dakota Sioux in the region, this article focuses on a subset of oral histories that constitute the centerpiece of her book. Over the last decade, Hansen has conducted thirty-five oral
Norwegian immigrants with their Native American neighbors, Kathryn, North Dakota, 1909-10.

histories, sixteen of which were with first-, second-, and third-generation Norwegian immigrants. In addition, our analysis draws from forty-six oral histories with Norwegian-Americans based in Benson, Eddy, and Nelson counties of North Dakota, conducted by the North Dakota Oral History Project in 1975-1976. The majority of these were second-generation Norwegian-Americans who had at least one parent born in Norway and identified as Norwegian, although four interview subjects were born in Norway. Slightly more interviews were conducted with men than with women. The corpus of oral histories is an invaluable resource representing several generations of narrators, with subjects born as early as 1878, and speaks to change over time.

Everyday Practices
The landscape of the "prairie mosaic" put ethnicity and ancestry on the top of people's minds in daily exchanges. Since its territorial days, North Dakota was a land of people in transition. By 1910, the vast majority of the North Dakota population (71.7%) was of foreign birth or parentage. Foreign-born whites (27.1%) combined with whites of foreign or mixed (for-
eign and native-born) parentage (43.5%) significantly outnumbered native-born whites (28.2%). Native American Indians constituted only 1.1 percent of the whole population and lived primarily on reservations. Of those foreign-born whites, 29 percent were born in Norway and another 8 percent in Sweden and 3 percent in Denmark. Twenty percent of the foreign born were from Russia, although most of those were ethnically German (Germans from Russia), and another 10 percent were from Germany.

In this land of displaced people where many spoke languages other than English, the question of national ancestry represented a primary concern. Ancestry was invariably part of the conversation in the oral histories, in ways both prompted and unsolicited. In his booming auctioneer's voice, Gust A. Berg, a second-generation Swedish American, bluntly asked his interviewer: "What are you?"27 This question assumed the ethnic geography of the state where visible markers of culture carried forward for generations. In the process, however, national heritage located people. It provided a point of reference, a mooring, placing people in history as well as on the globe. Similarly, in Dhooleka Raj's contemporary study of the South Asian Diaspora, people regularly queried, "Where are you from?"28 They asked with the intention of marking difference or foreignness. In other words, immigrants attributed the observed and imagined differences to foreign national cultures and developed a "nostalgia for culture" to explain these differences. Like migrants of other ethno-national origins, Norwegian immigrants attempted and desired to identify their co-ethnics in North Dakota.

Ethnicity, fluid and variously constructed, had social consequences because it was socially recognized. Studies of North Dakota consistently find the enduring imprint of ethnicity over several generations—in shaping concentrations of land holdings, political mobilization, religious observance, and the gendered division of labor.29 Moreover, studies of North Dakota have demonstrated that preference for ethnic communities is visually evident in patterns of settlement and landowning.30 In exploring the emigration of communities of people from Norway, Jon Gjerde finds that "Norwegian settlements—like those of other ethnocultural groups in the rural Upper Mid-
west—were often tightly knit communities which practiced many customs from the Old Country. The transplantation of custom, moreover, was enhanced, especially in those many settlements composed of people who came largely from one particular locale in Europe. As he demonstrates, the formation and endurance of Norwegian immigrant communities has been linked to a preference for people inheriting the same ancestral and cultural traditions, such as shared language and religion.

The Formation of Bi-National Identities: Allegiance to Norway and the U.S.
The question of national allegiance presses upon migrants as they leave one country and move to another. In exploring the “transatlantic linkages” between Norway and Norwegians on U.S. soil, Gjerde finds that “Rather than competing, the dual loyalties to nation and subgroup, invented under the auspices of an American creed, could be complementary.” In effect, immigrants and their children “maintain allegiances to the United States and to their former identities outside its borders.” This idea of dual affiliation, Øyvind Gulliksen refers to as “twoness.” With a “twofold identity,” immigrants could embrace their new country, while simultaneously believing that “the old world was not to be discarded but would remain an inspiration and source of pride in the new.” The resulting culture of affiliation Gjerde described as a “Norwegian ‘nation’ in the United States.” In contrast, Gulliksen calls the dual attachments postnational, claiming that the “successful adoption of two cultures” rather than two countries reframes the meaning of nation-state. They both astutely observed the reconstitution of migrants’ national identities in the process of international migration and relocation. As they point out, Norwegian immigrants’ deep ties to history, land, and kinship in the homeland profoundly shaped their outlooks, frames of reference, ways of thinking, and ancestral attachments. Further, our study highlights that while Norwegian immigrants simultaneously sought to maintain affective and cultural connections with their homeland, they also fostered new identification with the U.S in the specific social-economic contexts of North Dakota. In other words, Norwegian immigrants’ loyal-
ties to their ancestral and destination countries did not necessarily contradict each other. Nor were immigrants’ attachments to sending or receiving contexts less important in their everyday lives. Rather, immigrants’ relationships to their home and host societies were transformed and gained differential significance in the process of dislocation and resettlement.

The historical backdrop to these loyalties importantly explains part of the immigrants’ fervent feelings about the emergent nation they were leaving. As a colonial power, Denmark had long expropriated natural resources from Norway and defined high culture and proper language as Danish. In 1814, when Denmark lost Norway to Sweden, Norwegians wrote their own constitution. However, it was not until 1905 that Norway actually gained independence from Sweden.

As historian Anne-Lise Seip demonstrates, the signs of nationalism—such as the attempts to establish an independent political system, the quest for national identity based on a common past and common culture, the invention of traditions and symbols to serve the purpose of strengthening the nation-building—can be traced and identified throughout the course of nineteenth-century Norway. During that time, many writers, artists, and activists sought to establish and reaffirm Norwegians’ sense of national identity by claiming that Norwegian, Danish and Swedish people were of distinctive racial origins and did not share an ancestral history. Moreover, the romantic nationalist movement embraced the centrality of the rural peasantry in Norwegian culture.

The political events that led Norway to become a nation-state fostered a sense of national pride and unity, which inspired those emigrating as well as those who remained. The waves of immigration, cresting in the early twentieth century, launched a flow of people who carried these sentiments to the U.S. As historian Odd Lovoll puts it, “The struggle for national recognition, against stronger Scandinavian neighbors, made Norwegians fiercely patriotic.”

A debate raged within the Norwegian-American community as a whole about how to express that patriotism, what role it had in the U.S. context, and the merits versus the dangers of blending into American society. Many rejected the dominant American ethos of abandoning their culture of origin and dis-
appearing into the cultural mainstream. They argued that the multiplicity of people who brought the best of their culture with them enriched U.S. civic life. Echoing the cultural pluralist positions of influential Norwegian-American writers, Ole Rolvaag and Waldemar Ager, a first-generation immigrant farmer, Rasmus Yri, forcefully justified his affinity with two countries in his unpublished memoir: “We hear so much about being 100 percent American. My contentions are that if one is ashamed or belittles his Fatherland, then he is not to be trusted in his adopted country.” From his perspective, his loyalty to Norway enhanced his ability to contribute to the U.S. polity.

Unlike the immigrants themselves, the second generation had to visualize Norway through stories; Norwegian culture was not something they could taste and feel. The children of immigrants were born into America, where, shaped by their parents’ attachment to ancestral history and culture, they learned English in schools but had to discover Norway through attending church, reading literature, and listening to their family lore. Second-generation Norwegian American, Dagny Skurdell Bilden, who grew up in Nelson County, recalled that after school, the girls in her family would come home to do mending with her mother. “Just as it was getting dusk, she’d say, ‘It’s ‘skreddertime’ now girls, put away the work.’ This meant it was ‘tailor’s hour’, or the time before they lit the lamps. Then, she would tell stories of their life in Norway and the early years on the farm.” Norway the country loomed large, and yet most would never visit—they were poor people and lacked sufficient economic resources to travel back to their homeland. So they had to imagine and interpret, in light of what they observed in their families and communities and through the lens of their American education.

Immigrants brought observances of Constitution Day, Syttende Mai, to the U.S. with them. In her biography of her Norwegian immigrant mother, writer Carrie Young observed the contradictory gaps in local cultural practices in North Dakota. Unlike the Fourth of July, which was a family holiday, Syttende Mai was a male celebration because it involved drinking, and “the women looked the other way and tried to ignore it.” Nonetheless, the men would go to town and toast Gamle Norge,
and as the day wore on, emotionally swearing deathless allegiance to the beautiful Old Country, on which most of them—the sons of immigrants—had never laid eyes."44

In her own account, American-born daughter of Norwegian immigrant farmers, Ruth Dahlen, wrongly equated the 17th of May with U.S. Independence Day. The Fourth of July was widely observed with picnics, competitive athletic events, and often Indian dancing, to celebrate the forging of a new nation. Relying on her child's eye view of 1914, Ruth described the events of her school in the town of Michigan, North Dakota: "That was a big year for Norway. She was celebrating her 100th year of independence from Sweden." Actually, it was the centennial of the Norwegian Constitution. Nonetheless, Ruth Dahlen’s memory was marked by the event staged by her Bible school. “The teacher then, trained us in some songs. And we had a flag drill. And half of us carried the American flag and other half the Norwegian flag. Good sized flags, real nice. We marched from the school house to the church.”45 Here, in her memory of the march, the flags symbolized the “twoness” of national affinity, bringing recent immigrants, long-time residents, and children of the foreign born to celebrate the accomplishments of Norway while in the United States.

Ethnic communities in the U.S. often clustered neighbors and kin from the same valleys and even farms in Norway. Knowing the power of place, Norwegians organized the bygdelag, one of the most popular and active types of Norwegian-American associations in the U.S. The bygdelag was a "society of immigrants from a particular settlement, group of settlements, some general district, fjord, or valley in Norway, and of their descendants in this country."46 The local context mattered, as immigrants celebrated the places of their past, not strictly the nation state.47 They provided a forum for exchanging gifts and visits back and forth across the Atlantic. These organizations, affecting up to 75,000 people and amounting to a social movement from 1905 through 1925, according to Lovoll, intended to connect old friends and neighbors. Collectively they held meetings, published newsletters, magazines and yearbooks, cultivated cooperation between immigrants and their home districts, and created an institutional structure that could endure over time. Importantly, in addition to
their social purpose, bygdelaags were intended to “preserve and enrich” shared values in “language, history, literature, and art; promote a knowledge of an interest in the history of our people . . . strengthen . . . contact and fellow feeling with the land and people of our forebears.” The maintenance of ancestral ties and education of the next generation tied a geographically-rooted organization to a national project.

At the same time, the strong sense of affinity for Norway co-existed with high rates of Norwegian naturalization in North Dakota. By 1920, the year the federal Woman’s Suffrage Constitutional Amendment was ratified, 83 percent of Norwegian immigrant women in North Dakota had already become naturalized citizens. This figure compares to 52 percent of foreign-born women nationally. Similarly, Norwegian men also became citizens at a rate much higher than other immigrant men, although at a rate lower than women: 76 percent of Norwegian men in comparison to 47% of foreign-born men nationally. Clearly, while Norwegian immigrants held fast to their ancestry and mother tongue, they took seriously their membership in the polity. They recognized the importance of the franchise and of an electoral voice.

The social-economic context of North Dakota is key to analyzing the fact that its immigrants had high rates of naturalization, even in comparison to other states in the Midwest. North Dakota fits the pattern sociologist Irene Bloemraad describes as welcoming to immigrants. In effect, Bloemraad claims that even after federal naturalization legislation, state culture and implementation of the law had an impact. “Local context did matter, and it mattered greatly.” We explain the even higher rates of Norwegian naturalization in North Dakota as the result of two related processes, both rooted in the land. First, the landtaking opportunity that drew Scandinavians to the Midwest, namely homesteading, required that the foreign-born claiming land formally register their intention to become naturalized citizens. Although homesteaders were not legally required to follow the process through to citizenship, many did. Homesteading acted as a major avenue to land ownership in North Dakota.

Second, local political mobilization prompted Norwegians above other national groups to become citizens. Bloemraad finds that political activity “engaged many would-be citizens,
spurring them to naturalize." Clare Hammonds and Karen V. Hansen explain the links between homesteading and citizenship by exploring the importance of the Nonpartisan League (NPL) in mobilizing farmers across the state to vote for agrarian reform. In promoting the small farmer and promising to eliminate middle-men profiteering in the agricultural economy, farmers exercised their political voice, something that was possible only as citizens of their chosen country. Norwegians were disproportionately farmers in the state, and they posit, disproportionately active in the NPL. By bringing their attachment to land and cultivating it, Norwegians gained access to the political process in the U.S. And because of the local activism that disproportionately fixated on agricultural issues, Norwegians were drawn into electoral politics in their new country. In effect, however ironic, land provided the impetus as well as the avenue for not only migrating but for switching citizenship.

Symbolic Connections to Norway: Language as a Cultural Arena

Linguist Einar Haugen argues that language is central to the development of Norwegian national and cultural identity. As Haugen maintains, "As citizens of a young nation, Norwegians began searching for the cultural roots that had been cut over in the Middle Ages." Further, he emphasizes that "among the several symbols of national individuality and independence, language was hit upon as one of the most important." Likewise, language became an important cultural symbol that Norwegian immigrants utilized to differentiate "us" from "them" in the process of displacement and relocation.

Fiercely insistent that language reflects culture, even those Norwegians who reported speaking English to census takers continued to speak Norwegian in their homes, churches, and communities. In fact, many Norwegians at the beginning of the twentieth century used language to bond with their co-ethnics, differentiate themselves from other racial and ethnic groups in the U.S., and reinforce their cultural connections to Norway. Barbara Handy-Marchello writes, "Fear of losing one's culture to English-language and American customs or to other European immigrants motivated settlers to build com-
munities with cultural boundaries." Duane Lindberg finds that while Lutheran churches varied in when they switched from Norwegian to English in their public services and their congregational minutes, the tipping point tended to occur in the 1930s. If most immigrants in North Dakota looked “white” or similar to Yankees in terms of their racial phenotypical features, language might have been even more important in identifying who belonged and who did not. In this sense, language became a “migrating” identity marker that served the function of delineating the boundaries of Norwegian communities, illuminating their ties to the homeland.

Most notably, the importance of bilingualism in the rural settings of North Dakota is not emphasized as much as that in urban Norwegian immigrant communities. John Jenswold chronicles how, in the 1920s, Norwegian immigrant leaders and newspapers in metropolitan U.S. cities such as New York City urged their co-ethnics, especially the younger generation, to simultaneously master the Norwegian language and English. As Jenswold demonstrates, many opinion leaders in the urban settings worried that not knowing English would lead Norwegian immigrants to dead end jobs at the lowest level of the American economy. However, Norwegian immigrants in North Dakota sought to support themselves in the context of the rural agricultural economy. That is, most of these immigrants lived in isolated rural ethnic enclaves and did not have the incentives or opportunities to enter the industrialized workplaces like their counterparts in urban settings. Against this backdrop, Norwegian immigrants in North Dakota rarely regarded English fluency as essential to their survival or success in the United States. Instead, many of them viewed the continued use of their native language as central to transplanting Norwegian traditions onto American soil.

Furthermore, their use of native language can be understood in the context of a cultural alienation that they experienced in the process of relocating. Third-generation writer Barbara Levorsen told of the joy some settlers found in speaking with someone from the same valley in Norway, who spoke the same dialect and might have news of the folks back home. Simultaneously, the frustration that accompanied their lack of English skills reinforced Norwegian immigrants’ emotional
attachment to their native language. The sting of not being able to speak the dominant language was powerfully told in an interview by first-generation immigrant farmer Ingemund Peterson. In 1915, Ingemund left Norway to join his brother who was employed as a farm laborer in Warwick, North Dakota. That winter they sought employment in the lumber industry in Montana. Ingemund spoke virtually no English, although his brother, Anton, who had arrived before him, spoke enough to get by.

"I couldn't understand anything," but Anton, he been at it for many years, so he was quite a English. He could talk. But the boss, one day [they] come and took Anton someplace, gonna do something else, and the boss come over to me and started to [talk]. I was just standing there. I had nothing to say or nothing. I was just like a dead horse, standing there."64

Eighty-five years later, the burn of humiliation borne of not understanding English remained etched in Ingemund's memory. Language was not only a means of communication, but also a cultural object that conveyed his non-native status and cultural subordination.

In addition, the discrimination that Norwegian immigrants encountered in the U.S. further motivated them to insist on using their mother tongue. By doing so, they used their native language to distance themselves from the ethnic hierarchy and reaffirm their cultural connection to their homeland.65
second-generation Norwegian, Gurine Moe, who grew up on a farm in Nelson County where few children went beyond the fourth grade commented: "If we stayed home, no questions were asked."\textsuperscript{66} She started school in 1896 at the age of six. "We didn’t get very far, you know. Three months in the fall and three in the spring. And we couldn’t read an English word. When we come home our folks didn’t speak English. We spoke Norske. So by the time it started, we’d forgotten everything. And you know those old timers from Norway, they didn’t care for this English stuff. ‘This Jankee stuff,’ they said. [Laugh]."\textsuperscript{67} In this sense, immigrant parents sought to use language as a vehicle to establish and reinforce their children’s ancestral identity. As many informants acknowledged during the interviews, English-speaking, native-born whites topped the ethnic/racial hierarchy. This group ran national government, held most elected offices, supervised public schools, and understood political and social systems. As the dominant group they were, presumably, to be emulated as well as feared. And yet, in her history of her Norwegian community, Levorsen described her mother’s antipathy to Yankees and speaking English:

Mama had suffered some experience when she first came to America that had embittered her. I think it happened when she worked for an Irish section boss’ family. She disliked my speaking American, discouraged it in any way she could, and instilled in me a feeling of inferiority toward “Yankees” that has been a battle to overcome.\textsuperscript{68}

Furthermore, the emphasis on the importance of using Norwegian shaped emotional and symbolic ties to Norway for the subsequent generations. A third-generation Norwegian American, Levorsen wrote, “To me English seemed like an anemic and ineffectual language compared to the robust Norwegian. Stories told in Norwegian were funnier or sadder or grimmer.”\textsuperscript{69} Because of the vitality and isolation of the language communities, second- and third-generation Norwegian Americans grew up speaking Norwegian. Levorsen observed, “Though my parents were born in this country, and even my great-grandparents are buried here, I had become in thought and speech an immigrant.”\textsuperscript{70} In effect, the cultural frame for Lev-
orsen's parents and hence Levorsen herself was rooted in Norway, at least the Norway that her grandparents had left and remembered.

Local Economic Needs and Transnational Social Networks
Finally, the agricultural economy of North Dakota is central to understanding why Norwegian immigrants sought to maintain their cross-border connections with family members and friends in the homeland. Owning land occurred within a context of social and economic relationships, constraints and opportunities. In an agricultural economy, Norwegian immigrants had to determine how to keep their land over generations—their farms and their children's future livelihood depended on it. Land choices were rooted in the kin-based, labor-intensive form of agriculture that Norwegians practiced, and oral histories attest to the importance of relatives in land choice. Geographic clusters of kin-owned land gave advantage to people who shared labor and farm equipment, which was too cumbersome to transport on bad dirt roads. Because of the acute labor needs, a premium was placed on the ability to muster workers, making kin a valuable resource in farm production. Living in the midst of a network of extended kin meant that farmers could share not only equipment and labor but also information and support. John C. Hudson notes the importance of “well-used information networks specific to ethnic groups which formed a bond between the widely scattered enclaves, and the usefulness of these informal networks in spreading information about economic opportunities when and where they arose.”

Given this context, many Norwegians in North Dakota sought to recruit their overseas kin to meet their labor needs. The labor shortage in North America meant that farmers scrambled to hire people whom they knew to be reliable workers. This process directly connected a farm in North Dakota to a village or district in rural Norway. Virtual open doors to entry facilitated the transnational movement of workers, as did steam-powered ocean liners. As historian Ingrid Semmingsen observed, “The individual Norwegian-American farmer received his younger siblings or nephews and nieces gladly, at any rate in good times. They could perform valuable services
on the farm as long as they had the patience to stay. As the case with first-generation immigrant Johanna Tvedt, this arrangement often took the form of an agreement whereby a ticket for passage to the U.S. was exchanged for a year's labor. Johanna Tvedt was seventeen when she seized the opportunity to go to the U.S. Her eldest sister had already migrated to Nebraska and along with her new husband and sent a ticket for another sister to come. In Norway, their mother, a widow with nine children, did not have an easy time of it. Johanna had been working as a domestic servant. The sister who had been invited to the U.S. did not want to go, so Johanna stepped into her shoes. In 1905, she went straight to Kerney, Nebraska. However, only when she arrived in the U.S. did she realize that America was not the land of opportunity she had imagined but a place lacking resources and full of challenges.

America had appealed to Johanna because she thought that in a few short years she would become wealthy. Life in Norway had been constant work, but she found that it had been nothing compared to what was expected of her in America. Obligated to her sister and brother-in-law for the
price of the passage, they put her to work. The hired man
was released so that Johanna would not suffer from idle-
ness and besides her house work she cultivated corn and
did other farm work generally required of a hired man. In
only a matter of days Johanna found that America was not
going to be such a paradise. In fact the lack of money made
it impossible for her to even pay the postage for letters
home, let alone return herself. 76

Once she worked off her passage, Johanna found a job as maid
and eventually made her way to North Dakota. Often the
employer who loaned the passage money was related to the
worker. The kin relationship did not lessen the contractual
obligation but rather strengthened it.

Understanding the need for labor power in sparsely popu-
lated rural communities, kin folks in Norway would sometimes
actively encourage people to migrate to North Dakota to help
their overseas relatives who homesteaded land and farmed. As
a Norwegian boy of sixteen in 1904, Nels Knudson deliberated
about his employment prospects. He had a pivotal conversa-
tion with his mother: “I wanted to be a sailor. But she says ‘No!’
my mama did. ‘I’m not going to sit up every night and wonder
where my boy is. But you can go to North Dakota. You got two
uncles over there.” 77 His job prospects were facilitated by his
uncles—that special kin relationship—who sought workers in
the U.S. context and found nieces and nephews back in Nor-
way a ready source of reliable labor. 78 His mother, who appar-
ently had veto power over his occupational choice, was willing
to send him abroad to someone whom she knew. So Nels left
for North Dakota and eventually became a farmer.

Similarly, a migrant Norwegian worker in North Dakota
might help recruit a brother, sister, or cousin in Norway to
their place of employment. After Anton Peterson had started
working for H.C. Hanson in 1914, at Hanson’s behest, he
recruited his younger brother, Ingemund, and sister, Anna, to
come from Norway. Hanson was what Ingemund Peterson
called a “big man”: he owned an impressive 320 acres and had
a perpetual labor shortage on his farm. He consistently needed
more farm workers and domestic help. International transpor-
tation and active kin networks extended his reach to the pool
of surplus labor in the Norwegian countryside. Ingemund and Anna joined Anton on the Hanson farm. The rest of their family—including the mother, father, and eight brothers and sisters—followed the next year, working as tenant farmers and day laborers in Benson and Eddy Counties. In these ways, familial networks extended across the ocean, acting as a motivator, facilitator, and placement agency for international migrants, and linked specific farms in Norway to particular farms in North Dakota.

In the early twentieth century, letters played a central role in facilitating communication and the transnational exchange of people, goods and information and in maintaining immigrants’ material and affective connections with their relatives and friends in the homeland.79 Literary scholar Orm Øverland has chronicled how “letters from the United States were a crucial factor in the growth of Norwegian immigration to the United States from its modest beginnings in the 1820s to its peak in the years before World War I.”80 According to Øverland, the decision about whether and when to migrate is often discussed in the letter exchanges between immigrants in the United States and their family members in Norway. Thus, Øverland argues that the letters simultaneously kept migrant and non-migrant populations informed about each others’ situations and revealed the possibilities of starting a new life in another country. Using the example of Polish peasants in the United States, sociologist Roger Waldinger similarly argues that before the rise of new information and communication technologies, letters “did a remarkably effective job of knitting together trans-oceanic migration networks.”81 In this sense, these letters not only provided vehicles through which family and friends dispersed in different corners of the world expressed concerns and emotional attachment to each other but also played an important role in influencing people’s decisions about migration and relocation and their perception of and aspiration for lives across worlds.

Transnationalism versus Bi-localism

In this article, we have examined three ways Norwegian immigrants and Norwegian Americans maintained their connections to Norway—celebration of the nation-state, use of the
Norwegian language, and mobilization of networks to recruit migrant labor. Further, we highlighted how these transnational connections did not prevent Norwegian immigrants from becoming naturalized Americans. As we have shown, they have higher naturalization rates than other racial and ethnic groups, including other Scandinavians. Here, we return to the debate about whether transnationalism or bi-localism can better capture the cross-border connections in which migrants engage. Instead of making sweeping claims, this study underscores how the specificity of a local context is central to understanding the formation of a transnational community.

Local contexts are indispensable for understanding the everyday practices of Norwegian immigrants in early twentieth-century North Dakota. One cannot understand Norwegians or Norwegian Americans without recognizing the power of place and the connections between the particular locations that people left and those that they came to inhabit. Their language and dialects were fundamentally shaped by geography in Norway; and even people's names were marked with the stamp of the farm on which they lived.

At the same time, the concept of bi-localism is limited by the parochialism it suggests. Even with the continuities in rural environments, profound differences transformed migrants' lives. Norwegians in the U.S. were shaped by the American economy, the political landscape, and the opportunities as well as dangers of large-scale, industrializing agriculture. Further, the bi-local lens runs the risk of drawing "no distinction between international migrants and internal migrants."82 International labor markets connected the local communities, but did so across national borders. The local was important, but within the context of nation-states and a global economy.

The alternative, transnational, emphasizes the national over the local dimension. To correct for this, rather than rejecting transnationalism, we can disaggregate the levels and processes of migrants' cross-border linkages. We argue that transnational best captures early twentieth century Norwegian immigrants and their descendents, as long as we root our analysis in the local and particular as well. At the turn of twentieth century they integrated themselves into U.S. society.
and economy while sustaining ties to Norway. They maintained their language into the next generation; they celebrated their ancestry and marked the emergence of an autonomous nation-state. At the same time, they engaged in the electoral system of their new home. While they held fast to their ancestral identity, at an astonishing rate they became naturalized citizens. During the 1910s, they become politically active, successfully shaped the state legislative agenda, and challenged the industrial reorganization of agricultural production and distribution. In effect, they drew on their values and practices to mobilize and collectively negotiate improved terms for local farmers on the world market. In effect, these actions were locally rooted transnational processes.

Using a transnational perspective to understand the complexities of Norwegian immigration to North Dakota in the early twentieth century informs an analysis of contemporary immigration. By highlighting the bi-national connections of a group of earlier white European immigrants, we reveal ways they did not sever their ties to their homeland and were not seamlessly assimilated into American society. Much like contemporary calls for the acceptance of bilingual communities and multi-cultural practices, this study suggests that maintaining tangible or affective cross-border ties—such as the use of a language other than English and holding onto an allegiance to another nation—does not necessarily preclude immigrants' constructive engagement with American society. Rather, immigrants are prompted to sustain various cross-border connections to their hometowns and homelands in order to survive in the contexts that receive them. Comparative historical research enables us to examine and compare the mechanisms that cause the similarities and differences between migrants' transnational connections in the past and those in the present. In this way, we not only have the opportunity to understand history with greater nuance, but also gain significant reference points to rethink assumptions about immigrants within contemporary theoretical and policy debates.

Notes
1Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick-Schiller, “Conceptualizing Simultaneity: A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society,” Interna-


6Waldinger and Fitzgerald, “Transnationalism in Question.”

7Ibid.


11 Alba and Lee, Remaking the American Mainstream.


15Levitt and Glick-Schiller, “Conceptualizing Simultaneity: A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society,” 1003.


18Thai, For Better or for Worse.


21Espiritu, Homebound: Filipino American Lives across Cultures, Communities, and Countries, 214. Also see Orm Overland, Immigrant Minds, Immigrant Identities: Making the United States Home, 1870-


Ibid., 25.


Ibid., 3.

Seip, “Nation-Building within the Union: Politics, Class and Culture in the Norwegian Nation-State in the Nineteenth Century.” To be sure, historians might have different perspectives on how to theorize the rise of nationalism in 19th century Norway. See Szelagowska, Krystyna, “Contemporary Norwegian Historian on Norwegian National Consciousness in the Early Modern Era,” *Acta Poloniae Historica* no. 98 (2008): 171-86. Here, rather than engaging with the debate on the formation of national identities in 19th century Norway, we intend to highlight how immigrants’ perceptions of belonging to a national group can illuminate understanding their (re)construction of identities in the receiving contexts.

Olson, “Norwegian-American Historians and the Creation of an Ethnic Identity.”


43 Carrie Young, Nothing to Do but Stay (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991), 125.
44 Ibid., 125-126.
45 Helmer Dahlen and Ruth Dahlen, Interview, Audio recording, 677B and 678A&B (Bismarck: State Historical Society of North Dakota, 1976). Ruth was 72 years old when she gave an interview in 1976, so she would have been twelve in 1914.
46 Lovoll, “The Bygdelag Movement.”
49 U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1920 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1921). Norwegian women in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa, other states of dense Norwegian settlement, also had high naturalization rates (77.3%; 74.5%; and 74% respectively), but not as high as those in North Dakota. The men follow the same pattern, at slightly lower rates.
50 Bloemraad, “Citizenship Lessons from the Past,” 947. Also, prior to 1924, states varied in their requirements for voting.
51 Ibid., 947. Also, prior to 1924, states varied in their requirements for voting.
52 39% of the land in North Dakota was “successfully homesteaded,” according to the Homestead National Monument of America, run by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. http://www.nps.gov/home/historyculture/upload/Percentage%20graph.pdf.
Robert L. Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League, 1915-1922* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1985). Using a sample of counties across North Dakota, Olson argues that the primary motivation for voting NPL was economic and geographic, not ethnic. Further, he maintains that the western counties in North Dakota, where there were higher concentrations of mono-crop (wheat) agriculture, poorer farms were more likely to vote socialist in 1912 and NPL in 1916. Daron W. Olson, “Norwegians, Socialism and the Nonpartisan League in North Dakota, 1904-1920: How Red Was Their Protest?” (M.A., University of North Dakota, 1993). The data that would definitively settle this dispute about ethnicity, membership in the League, and voting patterns across the state unfortunately does not exist. Nonetheless, we are convinced that because Norwegians were disproportionately farmers and mobilized behind a political party whose economic platform focused on agricultural reform and improving the viability of small family farms, Norwegian immigrants were motivated to participate in the electoral process. For extensive analysis of voting patterns on these issues, see Michael Paul Rogin, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967). If Olson is right that Norwegians were equally active in the Independent Voters Association, established in reaction to the NPL, this only adds fuel to our argument.


Haugen, “Planning for a Standard Language in Modern Norway,” 110.


Ibid.

Barbara Levorsen, *The Quiet Conquest: A History of the Lives and
Times of the First Settlers of Central North Dakota (Hawley, MN: Hawley Herald, 1974).

63Gjerde, “Chain Migrations from the West Coast of Norway.”

64Ingemund Peterson, Interview by Author, Audio recording, (New Rockford, ND: Karen V. Hansen, 1999).

65In particular, during World War I, Norwegian immigrants were in an even more vulnerable position, since their language, culture and region were seen by patriots as too similar to those of the enemy camp of German. Carl H. Chrislock, Ethnicity Challenged: The Upper Midwest Norwegian-American Experience in World War I (Northfield, MN: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1981).


67Ibid.

68Levorsen, The Quiet Conquest, 105-06.

69Ibid., 140-41.

70Ibid., 141.

71Hansen and Duffy, “Mapping the Dispossession.”

72Hansen, Encounter on the Great Plains.


74Ingrid Semmingsen, Norway to America: A History of the Migration, translated by Einar Haugen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978), 105.

75We have not found evidence of formal contracts; however anecdotally this arrangement seemed fairly common and bound the emigrant to the employer for a year, the amount of labor equivalent to the price of a ticket. The arrangement is reminiscent of redemption-exchange of colonial labor contracts. Sharon V. Salinger, “To Serve Well and Faithfully”: Labor and Indentured Servants in Pennsylvania, 1682-1800 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

76Johanna Tvedt, Interview by Mark Olson, typed summary of interview, North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies (Fargo, 1971), 3.

77Mr. and Mrs. Nels Knudson, Interview, Audio recording, 685A (Bismarck: State Historical Society of North Dakota, 1976).

78Semmingsen, Norway to America, 105.


80See Øverland, “Recovering Memories of Migration,” 189.
82Nina Glick-Schiller and Peggy Levitt, “Haven’t We Heard This Somewhere Before? A Substantive View of Transnational Migration Studies by Way of a Reply to Waldinger and Fitzgerald.” In Working Paper Series #06-01 (The Center for Migration and Development, 2006), 5-6.

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