

“Becoming and American”
TRANSCRIPT FROM AUDIO RECORDING

Roundtable conversation about immigration and becoming an American citizen,
Wednesday, June 28

PARTICIPANTS

Pierre Comizzoli (France)
Marie Dieng (Mauritius)
Jelena Fay-Lukic (Serbia)
Tracey Fraser (Scotland)
Sidiki Gassama (Sierra Leone)
Magdalena Mieri (Argentina)
Zeynep Simavi (Turkey)
David Skorton
Hans Sues (Germany)
Ed Tang (China-Taiwan)
Ching-Hsien Wang (China-Taiwan)

The 10 participants were gathered in the Secretary’s Parlor in the Castle. Claire Brown, who coordinated the conversation, was also seated at the table. This transcript has been lightly edited for clarity.

(CUT 0:00 to 11:00, begin with, “As the son . . .)

David Skorton: As the son of an immigrant, I know how valuable it can be to retain connections to one’s native country and culture. How has becoming an American played a role in the ideas and ideals that are important to you?

The Smithsonian plays a major role in American life, and is recognized globally. From your perspective, how might we strengthen our position both here, and in other countries?

Tracey Fraser: Becoming an American. At first, it wasn’t such a big deal—I was much more interested in holding onto Scotland. What really changed me was

when I had my first kid, and then I had three kids. When you see your children growing up and they're very much focused on America as our country. I always thought of myself as a Scottish-American and they think of themselves as American-Scottish. And it became much more important to me to understand the country they're in, and make the connections to my kids, but also making sure they understood where they truly came from.

Skorton: That's terrific, thank you so much. Sidiki . . .

Sidiki Gassama: Mine is quite the opposite, being here at a young age. I've assimilated well into American culture and now that I'm a little bit older, I've learned that I want to hold onto my heritage and culture because America is a nation of immigrants and definitely different cultures are celebrated. Whenever I go anywhere, I try to pronounce my full name. I don't give anyone my short name. Everyone calls me "Sid" because it's easier to say. So I always try to say, hey, my name is Sidiki. They say, what does that mean? This is an Arabic name, this is an African name. So it is definitely holding on to my heritage and culture. Anywhere I go, I try to promote it as much as possible. Being an American has shown me that, hey, you can be American but also bring your heritage in any way; you can talk about your heritage and your culture. I've learned a lot over the years, after college, any environment helps because it helps the conversation.

Skorton: It's so true. You know, there's this book by Scott Page, faculty member at University of Michigan, *The Difference*, of how groups that are made up of different backgrounds, whatever the diversity, dimension, racial, international background, whatever, those groups do better, make better decisions, than a group that (INAUDIBLE). One thing you said that I've got to take issue with—you said that you're older. So, check me out, man—this is what older is. So you're a lot younger, so don't be saying older yet!

Zeynep Simavi: When I came to the U.S., I was already in my late twenties, so maybe my identity was already formed and shaped but identity is something that is constantly changing. But when you're out of your own country and definitely in a different environment it's definitely, you know, like I don't want to use the word "other," but it puts a mirror into you and with your new experiences you become more enriched, But the way that you see yourself and your own culture, but the

way you see the U.S. When you're growing up and seeing it in movies, but then coming here, and becoming part of it and this culture, it's like a two-way street that definitely feeds into each other. You start to have a different perspective of your own culture but you also bring that perspective into where you live now and that's why I think it's great to have all of these diverse voices and of where we are coming from, where we are now.

Skorton: That's just great. You guys are pros. Ed?

Ed Tang: Becoming a U.S. citizen, I don't know whether I adopted the country or it adopted me, but the cultures are very complementary, what I learned from this country versus my roots. But if you ask me, I'm an American first. (INAUDIBLE) But on the second question, we have a tremendous opportunity—just look at this table here. One example, at one museum, [is of someone saying] “all these guys from China want to see is Nixon's airplane”—but that is an opportunity. If you have intersections in artifacts to other countries, that are important to them, that is a bridge. That's important to them, maybe not to us, but to them. So, with the collections, if you emphasize the connections. Now, we have more people that speak other languages. I speak other languages and am giving tours. Only two [of us] do Chinese language [tours] but if we had more languages and [docents] who specialized in artifacts specific to those areas of the world, and working with the museums in those countries—that's our leverage.

Skorton: You guys are doing a really great job. I don't want you to feel pressure, the rest of you. The first four speakers did, like, perfect. So we don't want you to think you can only go down...Okay, no pressure, Jelena...

Jelena Fay-Lukic: When I arrived in the United States, I was already educated and a grown person. I did not speak English so, for me, the primary task was learning English. I never, ever felt, even today, that I was not accepted as a member of society. I was always feeling equal like everyone else and for me, the proudest moment was when I received citizenship of the United States. On the second question, where I work, at the National Air and Space Museum in the Archives, I see how many people come from all over the world, to look in our collections. It is just amazing to me, that they all know so much about the museum. The information is spreading everywhere. I think the museum and the

Smithsonian itself is actually a shining example in the United States, and in the world, how that (INAUDIBLE) scope is actually reflecting on others, and in my opinion, I am happy to work here.

Skorton: We're so happy to have you. You know, it's interesting, Jack Dailey, director of the [Air and Space] museum and I one day worked behind the information desk for a while, to see what it's like, and all of the volunteers and professionals were behind us, hoping we didn't mess everything up, and send people the wrong way. Behind the desk there's some places where they have different brochures and I forget the number, I'm going to get this wrong, maybe seven, eight languages, and I thought, we're not going to really use them, and we used about half of them in the short time I was there, which was really impressive. Ching-Hsien...

Ching-Hsien Wang: When I first came, it was in 1979 and China was completely closed during that time. When I first came, I felt I was a bird that came out of a cage and, finally, I have freedom. At that moment, in my mind was that I wanted to completely assimilate into the country—I want to embrace my brand new country. I didn't speak English. When I went to do a placement or test for English class, I failed, I couldn't even take the lowest level. So I went to American University and spent one semester and studied like crazy and was able to come back, after one semester, and start taking regular classes—that's just an indication of how driven I was, to say I want to assimilate into this country. This country had loved me and I wanted to love it back. So, as time progressed and I was more successful—I love where I worked—I realized that this country has a culture that a lot of people don't know about, especially in Asian countries. Western and Eastern countries have quite different cultural values and there's a lot of misunderstanding. I feel that the Smithsonian has a tremendous position, to help educate people on both sides. We need to understand them, they need to better understand us. And this is where I come to the second question. I feel that if we could really accomplish this, the world will be a much better place. When I go back to China, and visit folks, and explain to people what the Smithsonian does, they are so thirsty, wanting to know more. Many information systems that I support at the Smithsonian, including Archives systems, people want to know: how do I search it? How do I get that information out? And I think, in this country, folks need to know the latest developments that are happening over there,

because the way they are looking at that country is, through a very old standpoint. This puts the U.S. at a disadvantage. If we are going to be a competitor in the world market, we need to understand what we're competing with. Right now, we have a lot of help from folks who can move this forward.

Skorton: You are really making very profound points and it is daunting to me how great your English skills are. I had a very close friend, a Palestinian man, who actually taught Arabic at Cornell. At some point, he had to learn English, and told me “think about ‘ough’—it could be ‘tough,’ INAUDIBLE or ‘through’—that’s crazy!” like it was my fault, like Sidiki, getting older. I wasn’t there when they invented the language. Well, somebody’s got to be responsible. Just perfect answers (CUT 22:48 TO 22:59, aside to Claire) Hans, your turn...

Hans Sues: My wife, who has deep American roots, always says that I was pre-adapted. She thinks that my views as to individualism versus more social constraints, are certainly in line with what the founding fathers were thinking about. I never had any sort of cultural crisis. I still maintain deep ties with Germany so that’s not an issue. At the same time, it was an easy transition. I came over as an adventurous young graduate student and I have never looked back with any regret. We think about the Smithsonian as the giant in the United States, but the fact is, as a dedicated museum man, who goes to many countries, not just for research but I am very interested in museum operations, museum history, and so on...I have done administrative work myself, so when I talk to colleagues in places like Russia, France, Germany and so on, time after time, I find that people know about components of the Smithsonian, but in their specialized niche. So they may know about the zoo, about pandas, the preservation research...people know about American History, the Air and Space Museum, Natural History. Overall, I think the Smithsonian has a lot of opportunity to do more in the major countries around the world. We just spoke about China, and how to learn more about China, and vice-versa, and even in the European countries there’s a lot of need for deeper understanding. I think the Smithsonian is uniquely suited because of the diversity of what we do, the diversity of our people, and I think that, we have a unique role in that we can mediate diversity in an international context. So I was very pleased when I saw we had started this initiative in the United Kingdom, to establish a Smithsonian presence in London, and I would encourage similar exercises maybe in Berlin, Paris and places like

that rather than having a museum-to-museums context, we can have a much greater institutional role. It's difficult in some countries we are in some ways, the national museum of the United States. Some other countries have something like that, too, but then, in other countries like France and Germany, it's much more divided—there's a national natural history museum, a national art museum, and so on, so there we have to think about a different way of going about this. Or perhaps a digital presence—make more of an effort to have websites in other languages. So many of us are fluent in our native languages, and sometimes additional languages as well, so as to reach out. I for instance have done programs on German television, in the Netherlands and Britain, about our collections, about our research in my department—it really helps. Earlier this year for a German program, Galileo, about science around the world, which is a big hit, and when I went back to Germany, people asked me about it, in universities, saying I saw you on television. Speaking German made it much easier. Most Germans are fluent in English, but it's establishing connections.

Skorton: These are really good ideas. (CUT 26:28 to 27:14 aside to Claire) By the way, since you're a big TV star, maybe we should get your autograph or something, it may be worth a lot of money someday.

Sues: I don't think so...

Skorton: Magdalena...

Magdalena Mieri: I came to do an internship in my late twenties, just to do a professional experience at the Smithsonian, thinking to go back to my country. And the opportunities kept presenting themselves, to the extent that the Smithsonian offered me a Visa so they could pay me to do the fellowship work. So things in my country – I came from Argentina – changed and this country really embraced me. What I love about living here is really embracing the diversity. I learned to use chopsticks in this country. I learned to listen to Zimbabwe music in this country. All sorts of religions, and different backgrounds and listening to different languages. It's just beautiful and it made me feel very comfortable with my accent, with the ways I am and raising my family, embracing my family. So I am very, very proud. Also, I grew up during a dictatorship in Argentina and I came here and became a citizen to really exercise my civic

rights, and that's why I am so passionate about citizenship ceremonies here and in the museum, opening doors to new immigrants, and helping them learn about American history and how this country has really been diverse from the very beginning, and how that's the thesis of the exhibition we opened today. In regard to the second question, we have a great responsibility in the global society, to also be more out in other countries as we are, but also bring the world to the Smithsonian. And I feel (INAUDIBLE), through exhibitions, programs, we can be more in touch with other countries, what they are doing in terms of technology and culture and scientific research. So I would like to see more countries come here, not only to the Smithsonian, but out to the world.

Skorton: Thank you, that was great. You know, one of the points you were making about how you came from somewhere where you could not exercise your democratic right to vote—Claire was helping me prepare some remarks, talking about voting and so on—I remember my father, who was from Belarus, now part of Russia, he was very, very strict about telling me “I never want to hear you might miss a chance to vote, you better be very ill, or have some excuse, or you'll have to answer to me,” and he never could understand why the voting rates were so low in America. It's embarrassing, how low they are and if you look at the midterm elections, the rates are, it's unbelievable, it's so low. It's wonderful to hear that...

Mieri: I am adding to the naturalization ceremony, to register to vote, I'm on it . . .

Skorton: Those ceremonies are fantastic. Pierre...

Pierre Comizzoli: It's true that it's a little bit difficult to talk after all of those because I could pick some of the different pieces of what you say to talk about my own experience, but I came also to this country for the job, not necessarily because I wanted to live in the United States. Before I came to the United States I had the opportunity to live in Africa and South America so I felt that I was already used to living in really different cultures. So to me, coming to the United States and Washington, D.C., I thought it would be easy because I had the impression that I knew already everything about the United States because I grew up in France and we were already highly exposed to movies, music from the United States but actually, when I got here I realized, Oh my God, this is a

complicated, different society. There is a real local culture. It's not only something you see in the movies. I found myself in some situations where I didn't know what to do or how to react. Like if you're invited to a traditional wedding ceremony in Africa, but I had the same impression sometimes—going to parties in the United States and I realized, oh my God, I completely missed something about the United States that I didn't know because I was not curious enough and actually my ideas about really trying to know each other much better really increased a lot and I think that's why I am always trying to promote—problems we have, like conflicts we have about issues with other communities and countries we don't know really know each other and this is really sad. And it's not difficult to know each other—it requires a little more curiosity than anything else. And so actually I became a U.S. citizen because I wanted to vote. I was paying taxes and I want to vote. And the citizenship ceremony was extremely...I thought it was like a process and paperwork but, no, it was extremely well organized and I didn't do the one at the Smithsonian, but it was really moving because at that point you listen to a recording of the president of the United States who is welcoming you to the family. Oh . . . that's something I really liked. It's the first time in my life I felt like wow! I'm really part (INAUDIBLE). I grew up in an immigrant family so I always felt like an outsider but at least in the United States and working at the Smithsonian I think it is also a fantastic opportunity. From the outside, the Smithsonian is seen as a single institution of museums and collections and research and expertise, but also the work force which is also very diverse in terms of background and so I think it's a huge advantage that you have, as Secretary, to have us working here.

Skorton: There's no question. You're saying it half serious, half joking, but no question, it's absolutely true, and even though this is a specially chosen group. Claire looked carefully into your backgrounds. She got the FBI involved, but, regardless of that, I think it's fair to say, we've got to put together many groups like this, for the Smithsonian, that we could put together, it's really very impressive. [to Marie] So now, the pressures on you. The first time you led off, this is enormous, pressure . . .

Marie Dieng: (CUT 34:22 to 35:02, Marie's story about staff picnic) I left Mauritius in 1980. I was 17 years old. It was very hard to leave my family but I knew I had to do it for the improvement of my family. I had no job but I had a goal

in my head of what I wanted to do because I wanted to help my family back home. So I came here. It was very hard. I was lost. From a tiny island so small you don't even see it on a map—come to this big country—and go to school, in a high school here, with all kinds of nationalities, but I was able to adapt to it. It was difficult because I was like this but some people were like that. So they would think I was weird because I was going this way, and not like that. I did not want to lose my culture. Even though I have been in this country since 1980, when I married one day and have children, I want my kids to speak my mother tongue. It was not easy, when my kids were born in America, from that first day, I started speaking my language. When they started growing up—now they have three languages. They speak French, the French patois and English. So when they go home, they are not lost because even in Mauritius, English is our universal language French and French patois, a lot of them speak that. People don't want to speak English, because that is hard. They want to speak French and French patois, so for them there, they are able to mingle with everybody. Even with their accents, they understand and they speak, and I really want to keep my culture like that. And I am so glad that my kids have accepted that but it wasn't easy from the beginning.

Skorton: You guys are a dream group, right Claire? This is unbelievable. Could not be better. We're so in your debt.

(CUT here, at 37:12)