

Itai Hernandez interviews Tigida Fadiga

October 22nd, 2020

Hello, my name is Itai Hernandez and I am interviewing Tigida Fadiga remote virtually. Do you give me permission to record this oral history?

Tigida Fadiga: Yes, I do. IH: What is your name?

TF: My name is Tigida Fadiga. IH: How old are you?

TF: I am 20 years old.

IH: What is your occupation? TF: I am a student.

IH: What is your racial identity? TF: I am African.

IH: What is your gender identity? TF: I am a female.

IH: What is your sexual orientation? TF: I am straight.

IH: Where are you from?

TF: I am from West Africa Senegal.

IH: Why did you leave your country of origin?

TF: I left my country of origin because I wanted to do more and do better in life. I grew up in a village called Madialy where education is every girl's dream. However, due to economic difficulties, not everyone is able to attend school. Therefore, I came here to better my life and be able to provide for those I left-back. With resources available to me here, I know that I can achieve the goals that I have set for myself.

IH: So, are you saying that you were not able to have a basic education in your country?

TF: It was hard to obtain a good education because the government barely pays for school. Most of the time, the money would have to come from your parents' pocket and if your parents can not afford it then, you don't get to go to school.

IH: Okay, I understand. What do you miss about your country of origin?

TF: What I miss about my country of origin is the fact that I am not able to see my mother. I talk to her but, it's different as if it was to be in person because we have a very strong bond. I also miss the good times I had with my friends and family. Of course, I miss the free environment where I never got judged for who I am. I miss everything about where I came from.

IH: What don't you miss about your country of origin?

TF: I would say that one thing I don't miss is the education system which is very different from the way the school is set up, the entire school is just different especially the way that teachers treat you. All these factors just make it hard to learn in that type of environment. The school system needs to be an environment where students feel empowered and thrive in their learning. Having that kind of school system doesn't give courage to students to keep learning. Therefore, that is one thing I don't miss about my country.

IH: What did your friends and family say when you told them you were leaving?

TF: I remember a week before I came here my mom threw a party where she invited families and close friends. We killed a goat and had big cooking for everyone to eat and enjoy. We also had a photographer and we took lots of pictures for souvenirs. It was a memorable event that I will never forget, having those people around me and knowing that I am leaving having their supports felt great and made me excited to come here.

However, leaving them behind was really hard. But, at the end of the day, life just goes on.

IH: So, it was a bitter-sweet moment.

TF: Yes, it was a very memorable moment with them before I came here. IH: What were your expectations of the United States?

TF: I had some expectations. I expected the U.S to accept me for who I am. I didn't have those kinds of expectations where most people think about the tall buildings, everything free. No, I did not have that expectation. I just wanted to be received for who I am, do not judge because I am a black female and Muslim. I know that having all those personalities in this country can be a lot because racism is something that will always occur in America. Therefore, it did not meet the expectation.

IH: Yes, I understand. Tell me about your journey to New York City entail? Did everything go according to plan?

TF: Coming here I did not have a plan. I came here by myself and it was my first time being on an airplane (laughs). Since I am a civilized person well I consider myself as one, if you see me on that plane you wouldn't be able to notice that oh this must be her first time on a plane. I wasn't acting weird or any of that sort. Once the plane landed, I went to the station where you have to drop off your passport so that your green card can be sent to you which I obtained a few months later. At first, I thought that traveling to America all by myself will be stressful but, it wasn't. I think what helped me was the fact that I am multilingual and I have good communication skills. Therefore, I was able to navigate my way all the way to the waiting area to meet my father and American siblings. So, it wasn't that hard.

IH: Okay, but it was still nerve-racking basically. TF: Yes, it was but, I didn't show it tho (laughs).

IH: How did New York City meet and fail to meet your expectations?

TF: New York City met my expectations education-wise because I was able to get an education that I will not be able to obtain from my country of origin and that is something that I am and forever really grateful for. New York City had provided me job opportunities which is another thing that I will again forever be grateful for because without a job I would not be able to make money or even think about sending money back home.

IH: Yes, I understand. And how did it fail to meet your expectations like something that was new to you or did not expect?

TF: I can't think of anything and because I did not really have expectations as I mentioned earlier.

IH: Moving on, how were you received upon your arrival to your neighborhood specifically and Unites States more generally?

TF: I did not receive any welcome in my neighborhood. Other than my family and people who are close to my dad, nothing else. In my neighborhood, people do not really care about each other. For instance, there is no greeting between neighbors which is completely different from where I grew up. The village that I grew up in is very peaceful. Let me give you an example, me and I might not know each other well but, the fact that we both live in the same neighborhood it's like we're family now. Whenever we see

each other, we check on each other. That is what I am used to not in the neighborhood in which I am living today where everybody is just in their own corner, minding their own business. It's hard for me because I am that person that likes to greet people, admiring

people, and acknowledging them around me. So, it was hard for me to adjust to the neighborhood.

IH: I see. Now we are moving on to when you were adjusting to New York City. How did you adjust to a new language and culture, how did you do that?

TF: For me personally the language was not too challenging because I pick up really fast and plus at home my siblings do not speak our native language. So, what we did was that I teach them our native language while they teach me English. In few months, I was able to express myself and take care of my needs in English. Comparatively to the culture, it's very complex because I was born and raised in a whole different culture.

Therefore, adjusting to a completely new culture was very sophisticated. For instance, when we are greeting our elders we have to show respect by lowering our gaze meaning we do not make eye contact with them. This is the opposite of what is expected in America. I remember when I started school when the teachers talk to me, I would look down and they always say "when I am talking to you I want you to look at me in the eyes" but, that was hard for me because it's not my culture and I am not used to it. Until now I am still not good at making good eye contact but I try my best. Another distinction is the way we speak and how we carry ourselves. Food is another major variation. Basically, the only food I eat outside is chicken tenders I always order them when I go out because as a Muslim, we have restrictions meaning there are certain foods that we can not consume. The food we eat has to be halal which is the Arabic term for permissible. In our food especially the animals, they have to be killed in an Islamic way. Therefore, the food we eat has to be permissible according to Islamic law. This is one of the major reasons why I always go to African restaurants because I know the food is halal over there. This is one thing I can never change in my diet because can not eat foods that are not halal and I can't just eat whatever I want since the food has to be blessed Islamically.

IH: Oh so, you're saying that it is hard to adjust to places that would not have that religious rule apply to you.

TF: Yes, exactly.

IH: Oh okay I understand. What new opportunities were available to you upon your arrival in New York City?

TF: The opportunity that was available to me upon my arrival I will continuously say that it's education because I was able to get into a lot of programs in New York City and the adequate to work. The education here is ten times better than the school I used to attend in my country. So, coming here and having the ability to attend school learning things, learning them in a different way, and visualizing things differently was very beneficial to me. Another opportunity I had was that America offered a Green Card, Social Security to work, and of course health insurance. I would say it was a blessing because not all of us immigrants are lucky to have those documents in this country. The most compelling was education because a proper education is what helps us,

immigrants to settle in a new country and environment. Therefore, for me personally, education just includes everything.

IH: Okay I see. Were you denied any opportunities because you were an immigrant?

TF: When I first got here, I was desperate to work and I did a lot of job hunting. I remember after school, I would take the bus and go different places to look for a job. Most places I went to were retail stores and I wasn't very fluent in English so, the answers were always a no to me, we are not hiring at this moment, or come back.

These answers didn't stop me from moving forward to my job hunting because I've come too far to stop there. Most of the time they would just look at my body language and guess that oh she must be new to the country. If you don't speak a certain language like Spanish it would be really hard to find a minimum wage job here in New York for people like myself. Although I am certified to work in America, job opportunities were denied to me I would say it was because of who I am. In many of the places I went to, the managers would just look at me and say "I am sorry but we are not hiring right now" even though that's not always the case. There is nothing I can do about it and you can not force anybody to hire you.

IH: Yes I definitely understand. So, they would basically tell you that they are not hiring even though you had the feeling that they were just telling you no.

TF: Yes, that's right.

IH: How did that make you feel?

TF: It hurt to not get something just because of who you are. It's not right at all. I would rather you just tell me that there is nothing available but, do not look at me in the eye and say no because it makes me feel like you used my appearance to whether I should get the job or not. Do you understand?

IH: Yes, I do. What did the assimilation project look like for you?

TF: I think that is and will be something that would be hard for me to adjust to because living in countries like America, most of the time people want you to be just like them. That is something that I will not be able to do. Can't be you because I am simply not you. I try my best to adjust and be part of both cultures and be able to live with that but, it is hard. People do not understand that it is okay to be different even though you're living in the same community. They expect you to act just like them. I can't do that.

IH: Yes, I completely agree with you. What in your life keeps you connected to your nation of origin?

TF: I would say being me and not forgetting where I came from. The adequate of maintaining tradition, culture, and values. Being on a different continent does not give

me a reason to forget who I am as a whole. These are the values that I always remind myself to make me feel connected to my nation of origin.

IH: How do you navigate a bilingual life?

TF: I would say multilingual because I speak six languages. IH: Oh wow I did not know that wow (laughs).

TF: I speak Diakhanko which is my native language, French, Bambara, Wolof, Mandinka, and of course English. I am also a little be fluent in Spanish. I took a Spanish class when I was back home. In addition, when I came here I went to an international school and almost everyone there speaks Spanish. Moreover, where I used to work, all the employees were Latinos. So, I took that opportunity to talk to them in Spanish and they thought me a lot and because I am really interested in the language. Being multilingual is extremely significant and is a valuable asset to individuals, families, and also the entire society because it helps you understand and communicate with others from biased cultures and backgrounds. It also helped me personally because having the ability to speak more than one language helps you to see the world in different ways. It sometimes feels like you have different personalities. For example, today I can be speaking English and feel a little like an American or something like that but, when I am speaking my native language, I feel like I am in another world. There are a lot of advantages of being bilingual or multilingual. Some of the advantages are the fact that it gives you great flexibility to move around to different positions, more job opportunities, and networking opportunities, etc. One important advantage is that it gives you the ability to understand the associated cultural practices, attitudes, and values of that particular language that you might speak. By learning another language just opened doors to greater comprehension and a full appreciation of cultures and traditions. I was able to

navigate my way throughout New York City I would say it's because those skills which opened a lot of door to me.

IH: Oh my God that is actually so amazing. I really did not know that about you and it gives you the chance to connect with other people.

TF: Yes, it gives you a lot of opportunities because also a lot of companies look for people that speak more than one language so that you will be able to create connections with whichever company or country they are working with.

IH: What was the hardest part about your move to New York City?

TF: The hardest part about my move to New York City is the fact that I had to leave everything behind me in my country. I had to leave my family and friends behind to be on this journey. Basically, when I think about it, at the end of the day it's what's best for me because today I am able to provide for them which is something I am really proud of. I have a soft spot for humanity and so doing that makes me feel good and I still try my best to do more.

IH: yes, that's completely understandable. What was your favorite part about living in New York?

TF: My favorite part about living in New York is the convenience of traveling and of course the diversity. These are some of the things that I appreciate the most because diversity makes me feel included in the city. Seeing people from diverse backgrounds settling in New York I am so amazed. There are so many ways that people can connect to one another. For me, that is what makes New York unique because wherever I go I am able to someone who looks like me and it feels good to see someone like, understand you, and New York City has that diversity.

IH: Yes, they really do. How has your neighborhood changed since your arrival?

TF: My neighborhood hasn't really changed since everything looks the same. One thing that did change is that there has been a lot of violence and crime lately. For instance, I remember last year a man was shot in my building. That event led to insecurity whenever I am outside or inside the building. After that, everything else is pretty much the same.

IH: I am so sorry you experienced that.

TF: I live in the Bronx and things are very different here.

IH: Is there anything you fear because you're an immigrant in the United States?

TF: Personally I do not fear anything because I know that I am here legally and I can not be deported. However, I do fear for my fellow immigrants who are undocumented God forbid the worse can happen to them. I don't really worry about anything for myself because I have every legal document I need to be here.

IH: Did you ever feel you needed to hide who you are being an immigrant in the United States?

TF: No, I never felt I had to hide who I am. If I had to hide who I am then there is no identity of me. There is no point in me hiding because I am a proud immigrant living in the United States of America which could never be without us immigrants. If you think about the immigrants are the ones who built this country and we continue to do so.

Therefore, I don't see any reason for anyone to hide because of their status in America. That should not be a reason.

IH: I honestly agree with you completely. What would you change about the current U.S immigration system?

TF: I always have this question in mind. If I have the power today, it would be a pleasure for me to change the separation of families that's happening. I remember reading an

article about the policy called the Administration of Zero tolerance policy announced in April 2018 where over two thousand children were separated from their families. I couldn't believe that I was reading and I was speechless. That's the least they could've done, separating innocent kids from their families. I couldn't believe this has occurred in America. Therefore, changing that will be a blessing for me I believe that no children deserve this. The least they could've done is put them together and then make whatever decision they have to make. At least let the families be together because when I child is separated from there it can traumatize them. Those people in charge of separating these families would

not take it if someone was to take their kids away from them. Then, what makes you think that it is okay for you to do that to someone's family. That is not acceptable. You don't just do things because you have the power to do so.

These families are human beings just like everyone else and they want to be in America just to better their lives, provide for their families and just have an opportunity like everyone else.

IH: Yes, I understand and I can sense your frustration from the tone of your voice and the urgency. I completely agree with you.

IH: If you become, are a citizen, or on your path to citizenship please tell me about that process. How did it happen, the requirement to go through that.

TF: As for right now I am a citizen yet, however, on the 18th of this month will be my five years living in America. Therefore, I will soon be eligible to apply for citizenship. I have been researching about it and the required documentation to complete the process. I know the process can be overwhelming because it includes a test with different categories. Now that I speak English I don't think it would be that hard anymore. I am definitely in the process of applying.

IH: Are you saying that you need to be living here for a period of time before you can apply for citizenship?

TF: Yes, as an immigrant you'll have to be living here for five years. The fastest way is if you're married to a U.S citizen for three years then you can just apply for your citizenship.

IH: Oh okay I see. So, how has the politics of the last decades impacted your experience as an immigrant in the United States?

TF: Well, I can not recall the last decades however, what I do know that is today's politics has impacted my experience as an immigrant in the U.S. For instance, President Trump took a strong stand on immigration, the constitution of building the wall, and he placed a restriction on seven Muslim countries Iran, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Lybia, and Yemen. Although I am not a citizen from these countries it still affected me because I am also an immigrant and we fall for each other because we all know what it means to be told that you can't enter America. I have a lot of friends who are citizens of those countries and many of their families were stuck since they can't make it here. Only if I

had the power but, there is nothing I can do but to encourage friends whose families are affected due to this act.

IH: Yes, I understand what you are saying. Is there anything ask that I should've to ask? TF: I think you've asked everything.

IH: Just looking back on what you have told me, I did think of additional questions that I would like to ask after your responses if that's okay with you.

TF: Yes, sure.

IH: Okay. I have asked you about what you would change for the immigration policies. So, you're basically stating that you have felt move, and you felt like if someone was to basically come to you and say that well, but they are not from this country and they come here illegally. How would you respond to that?

TF: Even though they came here illegally, people should understand that there are laws that we need to follow. I know that being here illegally is not allowed however, even though those families came here illegally that should not give a reason to anyone to separate families. There are other ways and options to manage things rather than separating families.

IH: So, you are saying that yes, they have broken the law but, there could be other precautions to what they have done by not taking it to the extreme.

TF: Yes, exactly.

IH: Okay. You have stated that President Trump with his airline band with the seven Muslim countries you've mentioned, how do you feel about this upcoming election and if Trump was to be elected for another session how would that be for you?? What would your reaction be, and concerns?

TF: I guess it wouldn't be a shock to me because he won't in the first place against Hilary Clinton and now he's going against Joe Biden. It would not be a surprise to me if he wins because he has a lot of people who support him and who are also against immigrants. I guess supporting President Trump was their opportunity to see what they've always desired.

IH: yes I understand. You have also mentioned that you speak multiple languages not just two, I congratulate you because I can't even learn another language. I wanted to ask when people have heard you speaking these many different languages even though they see that you've explained that you're from Africa, and you are Muslim, how do you react to you being so knowledgeable and having that hidden talent?

TF: They just feel surprised and amazed. For example, the first job I had was at a retail store and we get a lot of customers and it's very diverse. Every employee at the store is Spanish and most of them only speak Spanish. When we have Muslim customers, African or someone who just looks like me, the manager would call me and ask "Tigida do you speak this language" and then, I am the person who is in charge of helping that person. My customer service is great I make sure I get what the customer need and everything else. When I had to leave the store, the manager wanted me to stay and she even offered me a higher position to become a key holder rather than doing customer service. Being multilingual has led me to great programs in New York City that I benefited from and job opportunities. It's amazing because you can include it in your applications and resume and when people read it, it surprises them and they become even become more interested in you.

IH: A follow-up question to that as you said you like to learn about different cultures and baseball just expand what you already know. When most people think about immigrants, they think oh they are coming to another country, they will have difficulties adapting to the United States. However, you are not only meeting but you are exceeding the expectations with all these opportunities. How do you feel if people would say that you didn't deserve it, didn't work hard for that, or you just got lucky? What would you say to those people?

TF: It is definitely not luck because it takes time to learn. Obtaining that knowledge took a lot of hard work and determination. I always have an interest in language and I grew up in a diverse place. It is not like I lived with the people that speak those languages. I went out there and learn new languages.

IH: Yes, I know and I am basically asking because as you know we live in a country where `physical appearance such as race and the color of your skin can be argumental. I just wanted to know your view on that. How do you feel about what's going on right based on race and how do you react to that?

TF: I have faced a lot of racism at work due to my appearance. There were a lot of us working on the floor and some customers come and they look at me and then looks around if they can find another employee working on the floor so that person can assist them. I mean come on I work here whatever that other employee knows I am well aware of that as well. So, you should not use my skin color to differentiate me from my coworker. Most of the time they would pick the Spanish workers over me just because I don't speak Spanish. I would like to share a story that occurred once at my work site. As I said earlier I used to work after school and so, I would go straight from school to work. One day, a Spanish

lady walked into the store picking clothes and stuff. Then, she stood in the line for checkout where there was nobody in front of her. I said miss are you ready? She looked at me and then looked around and decided to wait for the other register because there were two of us as cashiers that day. My coworker is speaking Spanish and English. So, the customer waited until the other register was clear then she walked toward my coworker's register. I stood over there quilty while she was being checked out. A few moments later while she was still there, I was checking out another

customer and she heard me speaking Spanish to that person. Then, the lady who refused to come to me said " oh hablas español" and I told her si, jo Habla español and then she said, " oh wow". I said to her you can't judge me based on my appearance because it doesn't tell you everything about me and took that opportunity to confront her and let her know that next time try to see what's under that melanin. Just because I am from Africa doesn't mean that I don't speak your language.

IH: Oh wow, oh my gosh. I applaud you for stand up for yourself.

IH: I believe I don't have any more questions. This was a great conversation and I love your responses. I really appreciate you doing this. Thank you.

TF: Of course and it was a pleasure for me.