

**Diversity, Citizenship, and Resiliency in Small Cities:  
Southern Sudanese and Sioux Falls, South Dakota<sup>1</sup>**

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*Abstract:* What can refugees in small cities teach us about diversity, citizenship, and resiliency?

This paper addresses 1) the history and economy of Sioux Falls, South Dakota, 2) the reception of refugees to the small city, and 3) the political subjectivity – resiliency – of Southern Sudanese refugees living in Sioux Falls. Unlike many other small cities, particularly postindustrial small cities, Sioux Falls has a booming economy and a labor shortage. Members of the majority population in Sioux Falls viewed refugee resettlement as one of the city’s primary change agents in terms of diversity. What constituted diversity? Who framed the discourse on diversity and what did it mean in the context of Sioux Falls? In answering these questions, the paper highlights citizenship practices of Southern Sudanese (former) refugees – New Americans – one of the more politically active minority populations in Sioux Falls, but also one of the most vulnerable. The paper shows some of the ways in which refugee resettlement transformed the small city and how the city sustained Southern Sudanese citizenship practices. In conclusion, I provide policy recommendations on managing diversity in small cities.

*Key words:* refugees, citizenship, small cities, diversity, Southern Sudanese

[Sudanese] have a pretty strong...voice in a state like [this]...[T]hey have incredible access to elected officials...The way which they are doing it has been interesting (laughs) because... [there were] 150 people outside with signs and chanting...It's a little different type of thing to deal with than we're used to dealing with here, but...I think that's a positive thing. And I don't think there's that organization in some of the other [New American] communities.

-Chris,<sup>2</sup> staff member at a US Senator’s office in Sioux Falls (2005)

## **Introduction**

On August 2, 2005, 150 Southern Sudanese gathered in downtown Sioux Falls, South Dakota, for a prayer service, then walked to the offices of elected officials. Men and women marched with signs in Arabic and English reading, “Sudanese People Express Their Feeling For Loss [sic]” and “He was assassinated [sic]” with photos of the newly appointed President of South Sudan/Vice President of Sudan, Doctor John Garang de Mabior, who was killed in a helicopter crash three weeks after his historic inauguration. Protesters called on elected officials to support the political agenda that Garang had been trying to establish in his first weeks in office, especially the process of seceding from the North, strengthening the global position of South Sudan, and healing the region after decades of war, crippling poverty, and underdevelopment. It was front-page newsworthy in Sioux Falls (Peters 2005). The actions of Southern Sudanese in the wake of Garang’s death sent a message to the city of Sioux Falls that New Americans should be recognized as political subjects. It was an indicative of the political organizing that Southern Sudanese had been doing for years, both in South Sudan and the diaspora.

Following political and urban theorist Engin Isin, this paper maintains that, “The city is neither a background to these struggles against which groups wage, nor is it a foreground for which groups struggle for domination. The city is the battleground through which groups define their identities, stake their claims, wage their battles, and articulate citizenship rights and obligations” (2002, 50). The job of an anthropologist is to attend to the particular assemblages of a given city or space while also looking for patterns among them. We pay attention to actors in the dominant population and to migrants, to structures of power and those trying to reinforce and to change those structures.

People are migrating around the globe to new and different places than in previous decades (Massey 2008). By and large, they are moving to cities, but there is diversity among and within

cities that must be analyzed. In 2015, more than half of the world's population lived in cities, and by 2050, this will rise to two thirds (UN 2014). The number of cities with more than 10 million residents will grow from 28 to 41 by 2030, but only one eighth of the population live in them. Half of city dwellers live in cities with less than 500,000 people (UN 2014). Small cities are quantitatively and qualitatively different than larger cities, and they present “a different story of urban life” (Norman 2013, 2, see also Bell and Jayne 2009; Robinson 2006).

This paper has two main aims. The first is to challenge narrow stereotypic images of Midwesterners as homogenous and simple. The Midwest United States is often viewed as a “flyover zone,” a reflection of our country's most conservative values, where anthropologist Faye Ginsburg wrote, “the media imagine our most authentic controversies are deeply rooted” (1998, xviii). This paper, instead, provides information about progressive, inclusive practices among members of the dominant white, Christian population towards diversity, highlighting the different ways in which people and institutions have responded to New Americans. The second aim of this paper is to challenge stereotypic depictions of refugees as mere victims or recipients of aid (Malkki 1995) and instead show how refugees – New Americans – are change agents. New American's political subjectivity and resiliency influences small cities in ways that are more noticeable and impactful than in larger cities. In what follows, I provide a brief history of Sioux Falls and then explain what diversity meant in the context of Sioux Falls and how refugee resettlement impacted it. Next, I chronicle the ways in which Southern Sudanese – one of the largest groups of New Americans in the city – practiced political subjectivity. Finally, I offer concluding thoughts on the relevance of small cities, diversity, and citizenship in an age of globalization and migration.

## **Sioux Falls**

The area we know today as South Dakota has been home to Nations and Tribes of indigenous Americans for millennia, including Cheyenne, Lakota Sioux, Arikara, Pona, and Dakota and Yankton Sioux. The US Army began building forts in the region in 1819. Northern European settlers moved into the region in the 1860s, although some had been present since the early 1800s. The Dakota Territory was formed in 1861, and in 1862, after decades of forced migration, broken treaties, disease, and promises of things that never came, Dakota in Renville County, which is today near the Canadian border, attacked white settlers. Known as the Dakota War of 1862 or alternatively as the “Shakopee Sioux Rebellion” or “Great Sioux Uprising,” fighting between Dakota and whites lasted until the Battle of Wood Lake on September 23, 1862. More than 500 settlers died as did unreliable, but certainly high numbers of Dakota. Settlers came primarily from northern Europe, fleeing famine, poverty, high unemployment, and overpopulation in Germany and Scandinavia, and settled in the upper Midwest and Great Plains (Hansen 2013). They were farmers and fishermen, accustomed to a harsh northern climate, and the Homestead Act of 1862 provided tremendous economic incentive for European settlers to move to the region. Through the Homestead Act, the US government gave land to settlers for “free” so long as they developed the land for at least five years. The cost to Native Americans was immeasurable.

There are eight federally recognized tribes in South Dakota today: Cheyenne River Sioux Tribal Council, Crow Creek Sioux Tribe, Flandreau Santee Sioux Tribe, Lower Brule Sioux Tribe, Oglala Sioux Tribe, Rosebud Sioux Tribe, Sisseton-Wahpeton Sioux Tribe, and Yankton Sioux. A ninth nation, the Standing Rock Sioux is headquartered in North Dakota but also has tribal land in South Dakota. In Sioux Falls, “Native Americans” refers to the indigenous people of the United States; “New Americans” emerged as a term in the late 1990s and early 2000s to refer mostly to the thousands of refugees resettled to the small city but also to immigrants from

Latin America, China, and India; African-Americans are the descendants of Africans forcibly brought as slaves to the United States; and “American” referred to the dominant white population, descendants of European settlers. The lack of descriptors before Americans for whites demonstrates who had the most power in the city as they were seen – and not uncritically – as the “mythical norm” (Lorde 1984).

Sioux Falls was named after the Sioux Tribe and the waterfalls of the Big Sioux River, located a few blocks from today’s downtown district and near to Morrell’s meatpacking plant. European settlers first claimed land on the Big Sioux River in 1856. By 1880, more than 2,000 settlers occupied it, and Sioux Falls became the largest city in the Dakota Territories. The village of Sioux Falls was incorporated in 1876 and it became a city in 1889. By the turn of the century, the prairie settlement had a population of more than 10,000. One hundred years later, the largest group of citizens were the descendants of those European settlers, and Native Americans were the largest minority in the state (between eight and nine percent), but most of them lived on reservations. By the 1990s, thousands of refugees from around the world had been resettled to the small city at the same time that Latinx migrants migrated at greater numbers than ever before. At the turn of twenty-first century, Sioux Falls was experiencing noticeable demographic changes for the first time since Euro-Americans colonized the region.

By 2018, the Sioux Falls metro region was a thriving and rapidly growing small city, the largest in the state and within a 185-mile radius, with a population of nearly 175,000 residents in 2018. Over the last 50 years, it has transformed from a city centered on quarrying and agriculture to a diversified economy that includes manufacturing, healthcare, education, service-based industries, and finance. In the 1990s, it emerged as a regional healthcare center with two hospitals that employed 17,625 workers (USHUD 2014). The healthcare and social assistance industries provide more than 18 percent of jobs in the city. Favorable tax laws, including a lack of

state income tax, personal-property tax, inventory tax, inheritance tax, or corporate income tax lure businesses to the city and state. While many US cities lost one in four manufacturing jobs, in the last few decades, Sioux Falls maintained its industrial sector. John Morrell & Company (or simply “Morrell’s”), a meat processing plant, employs 3,000 workers, over half of who are New Americans. Dozens of other small factories and banks provide more jobs. The manufacturing industry provides about 10 percent of employment in the city. Citigroup and Wells Fargo together employ 6,000 people in their banking industry (USHUD 2014), about 10 percent of jobs. Sioux Falls is also a retail center, which provides another 13 per cent of the labor force. Compared to other small cities, Sioux Falls has an unusually high number of finance and insurance, healthcare and social assistance, and wholesale trade industries (Data USA 2015).

In the mid-1990s, Sioux Falls’ long-abandoned downtown was revitalized into an urban destination with historic architecture, art galleries, restaurants, stores, breweries, and parks, while the Empire Mall and southwest area of the city attracted national chain stores and restaurants, apartment complexes, and new home owners. Since the early 2000s, it has had one of the lowest rates of unemployment in the US (under four per cent), but rates vary across industries with higher rates of unemployment among New Americans. The city’s poverty rate consistently averages less than state and national averages, but underemployment is higher among New Americans, African-Americans, and Native Americans than whites. In 2015, the city initiated a grant program earmarking \$170,000 worth of taxpayer dollars to help organizations train New Americans to fill more than 2,000 job vacancies in the city, mostly in manufacturing and transportation (Sneve 2015).

Before 1990, the population of Sioux Falls was 99 per cent white. Twenty-five years later, in 2015, 83 per cent of citizens were white alone; five percent was “Hispanic,”; 4.6 percent was black; 2.6 percent identified as American Indian; 2.3 as multiracial; and 2.0 per cent as Asian

(Data USA). About five percent of Sioux Falls' population was foreign-born. When compared to other US cities, Sioux Falls has a lower number of non-English speakers: less than ten percent compared to 21 percent nationally but compared to the 1990s, linguistic diversity has increased exponentially. According to Lutheran Social Services, since the mid-1990s, Sioux Falls has resettled 400-500 refugees per year, in addition to about 300 secondary migrants annually. The largest groups are Karen(ni) from Burma, Iraqis, Somalis, Bhutanese, Eritreans, Congolese, Afghans, Southern Sudanese, Ethiopians, Somalis, former Yugoslavs, and Liberians. As New Americans challenged previous conceptualizations of ethno-racial, religious, and linguistic categories, city institutions were forced to respond to them and they did so in different ways.

## **Methods**

From 2001-2002, I worked as a case manager for Lutheran Social Services Refugee and Immigration Program (hereafter LSS) in Sioux Falls. I primarily worked with single mothers, families who experienced difficulties achieving self-sufficiency in the allotted eight-month period or longer, and secondary migrants, refugees who were resettled to another city but migrated to Sioux Falls. Mostly, I worked with Bosnians and Southern Sudanese, but also Iraqis, Ethiopians, and Liberians. I assisted refugees in navigating the educational, welfare, healthcare, and housing sectors, and finding childcare. Some of the biggest challenges facing New Americans in Sioux Falls were finding jobs that matched their skills, learning English, and managing transportation, childcare, and psychological and physical health problems. In 2002, I decided to attend graduate school in cultural anthropology and have devoted my academic career to studying the relationship between small cities and New Americans in order to better understand how cities manage diversity and what this means for institutions (Erickson 2010).

In the summer of 2005, I conducted hundreds of hours of participant observation to better understand the relationship between New Americans and Sioux Falls. I conducted 45 semi-

structured interviews with people who worked with refugees, including staff at human service agencies, healthcare clinics, and non-profit organizations, employers, teachers, volunteers, housing managers, a school principal, a police officer, an elected city official, and staff of a US Senator. The data presented here was not from my previous employment or clients, though my analysis has been shaped by the experience.

In addition to city institutions, I worked with Southern Sudanese, many of whom have become citizens and prefer the term “New American” to refugee because it presumes more inclusivity and belonging. I focused on Southern Sudanese in particular because – as the quote at the beginning of this article suggests – they were among the most politically engaged New Americans in the city. I spent time with Southern Sudanese in their homes, attended social, political, and religious meetings and services, and recorded my participant observations in field notes that serve as a basis of my research. My field notes include descriptions of people, spaces, dialogues, speeches, and social patterns. I also analyzed newspaper articles from the local paper about Southern Sudanese, refugees, and diversity. In order to confirm the patterns that I was seeing in my field notes, I conducted in-depth, open-ended interviews with four Southern Sudanese women and five men, all of whom were born in (South) Sudan and came to the US as refugees. They ranged in age from their early 20s to their late 50s. All of them had completed some college, were employed, and spoke English.

In 2012, I returned to Sioux Falls for one month in order to study what had changed since my study in 2005. In 2012, I interviewed two of the same Southern Sudanese women who I interviewed in 2005, as well as another young woman in her 20s, and six male leaders. I also attended an Independence Day celebration on July 9, visited Southern Sudanese churches to better understand the role that they played in shaping Southern Sudanese citizenship practices, and informally visited with current and former resettlement agency staff, people I had worked

with in 2001-2002, about the changes they had seen since 2005, and continued to monitor and analyze local newspapers and online platforms.

### **Managing New Forms of Diversity**

Diversity became a key theme to frame the impact of thousands of refugees on the small, mostly white city. Diversity has become a keyword in migration and urban studies and scholars stress the need to understand how it “plays out differently in different conditions, at different scales, in particular places” (Berg and Sigona 2013, 7). Vertovec (2007) coined “super-diversity” to explain the contradictory ways in which new migration patterns in new sites of settlement have expanded previous understandings of multiculturalism and pose challenges to policy and research. Faist (2009) argues that diversity differs from its conceptual predecessors of assimilation, integration, and multiculturalism in that it holds the majority society as responsible for accommodating diversity as migrants, though in disproportionate ways. Diversity is thus better adept at using “the skills and experiences of migrants as the starting point,” interpreting them as competences, not detriments, to be used by the organization or city (Faist 2009, 175). This serves the interests of migrant and other minority groups, not only the state or dominant population, because diversity does not presume equality, but rather plurality and difference (Harzig and Juteau 2003). We must ask, though, who frames discourse or policy in terms of diversity and what does it mean?

In 1970, minority students in the Sioux Falls school district were one per cent of the student body; in 2000, they were nine per cent; in 2005, they were 18 per cent; and in 2014, they were 32 per cent. These numbers do not include thousands of “white” immigrants, primarily from Ukraine and the former Yugoslavia. Students spoke more than 50 different languages. In 2000, the school district opened a school devoted to teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) classes and to train teachers who were not certified in ESL to work with ESL students. The

opening of the school signaled a need for more and different approaches to education in a multiethnic city. Teachers, along with police officers, healthcare workers and social service staff were on the frontlines of incorporating new forms of diversity into the city.

In 2003, several incidents of violence between New American, especially Southern Sudanese, and US-born students occurred on and off school grounds. In addition, 30 white students brought knives and crowbars to an apartment building where Southern Sudanese lived and committed more violence, like painting “KKK” on the side of an apartment building that was mostly occupied by Southern Sudanese. A representative of the school district, Bill Morgan, told me the fighting was about class, nationality, and racialized differences. The poor, mostly rural white kids stressed their citizenship status and rights as “born in the U.S.A.” and claimed that Southern Sudanese believed “they were all that, MTV look-a-likes, the way they dress, et cetera” because they dressed like urban black teens with big jerseys, baggy jeans worn low, and jewelry. In other words, they looked, dressed, and sounded different than white kids. In response to the fighting, Morgan organized a “diversity dinner” with 40 students and told parents and students that the school would “not tolerate intolerance.”

In 2005, the school district initiated a “Race Concerns Task Force.” After further consideration, they changed the name to “Diversity Task Force,” connoting a more expansive understanding of human differences that goes beyond race. Viewing race as a primary form of human difference privileges whiteness as the norm, while at the same time discounting other forms of diversity, such as religion, language, kinship, sexualities, political differences, and cultural practices. The Task Force became a coalition of public and private organizations, the city, employers, churches, and students, to address the increase of cultural and racial diversity to the city. They created a program to talk about diversity that aired on local radio and television stations. They also designed a billboard campaign with signs that read “Respect Yourself,

Respect Me. Diversity: It's What We Have in Common" featuring photographs of students of color. The goal was to "promote a safe and respectful Sioux Falls for all citizens" (Keloland Media Group 2005). Southern Sudanese student Thomas Madut wanted people to think beyond race: "You need to judge them by what they say and what they do," he said.



*Photographs by Jennifer Erickson, 2005.*

The billboards were meant to educate and call attention to social inequities, violence, and prejudice that result from human differences, but they arguably entrenched racial differences by conflating “diversity” with “people of color.” Whiteness, too, must be viewed as a race if the goal is to dismantle white supremacy, and if diversity is understood to be more than skin deep. There were people in Sioux Falls who recognized this. When I asked Bill Morgen to speak more about race in Sioux Falls, he stressed the need for a broader, anti-essentialist understandings of diversity that included race but also class, rural/urban differences, (dis)abilities, and sexualities. However, these other forms of diversity did not raise the same concerns – or garner as much media attention – as refugees and race.

Thus, as LSS continued to resettle refugees and institutions felt overwhelmed, critiques mounted. In July 2005, Beatrice, an elected city official, called for a moratorium on resettlement because she believed refugees were not receiving enough support. A wealthy, upper class, Christian white woman in her 60s, Beatrice had been volunteering with refugees for more than 20 years and spent countless hours and capital supporting them. She believed refugees should have a 12-member team, for at least a year, to help them adjust to life in the US, “preferably for a lifetime” and felt it was “*extremely* irresponsible” to bring refugees to Sioux Falls without this level of support. She aimed her critiques at LSS, arguing they “dumped” more refugees in Sioux Falls than the city could manage. For Beatrice, the solution was to spread refugees throughout the state of South Dakota so that other communities could “have the opportunity to help” refugees. For her, mentoring refugees assured their basic needs were met, but also helped refugee children “to be the next stars in their class” and “to make better personal choices.” Volunteers like Beatrice serve as foot soldiers for forms of citizenship that prefaced individualism and economic self-sufficiency, not the more communal ideals that many refugees brought. On an everyday level, such volunteers nurtured ideas about domesticity, religion, capitalism, and the

state by molding refugees into “proper” citizens, through language, dress, housing, and approaches to education (Erickson 2012).

“Thirty years ago, when I started this job,” Police Officer Dan said, “you would stop in the street if you saw a black man.” He noticed Sioux Falls was changing at a routine traffic stop when the people in the car didn’t speak English, leading him to think, “It’s not just white America anymore...You’ve got people from all over the world now that are making Sioux Falls home.” Before the influx of refugees in the 1990s, Dan said, a routine traffic accident required about 20 minutes, but the need for interpreters increased this exponentially. He told me that New Americans were most often cited for breaking driving laws (lack of license or insurance, or drunk driving), domestic violence and occasionally rape, but members of the majority population broke these laws as well. Despite myths to the contrary, New Americans have not been found to commit more crimes than other populations, though from this police officer’s standpoint, it is important to acknowledge this adjustment period that linguistic diversity brought to the job and which required more time and resources than with more homogenous populations. They did, however, adjust and they are recruiting a more diverse police force, for example on career days in the schools. In 2018, of the department’s 261 personnel, 28 are minorities, about 10 percent, though it is not clear which positions they serve in. In any case, the department is more diverse than previously.

In the mid-1990s, to help institutions grapple with new forms of diversity and work more effectively with New Americans, the city established the Multicultural Centre (MCC), which offered diversity trainings to businesses, multicultural celebrations, interpreter services, and an affordable space to gather. Former director, Kawa, told me that building a diverse society meant addressing multiple forms of diversity, including religion, language, race, ethnicity, nation, class and disability, and a history of colonialism. As such, MCC staff modified their trainings to

accommodate diverse subject positions in the city. Along with LSS, MCC provided another space where diversity was respected, even promoted.

Ben Nielson, a retired social worker who worked with refugees more than any other person in his office and became known as an advocate, told me that some welfare workers were “afraid of [refugees].” When they had refugee clients, they sometimes closed the case as soon as possible to avoid confronting new languages, parenting strategies, and different understandings about the role of the welfare state. Staff members at human service agencies told me they had a difficult time reading refugees’ nonverbal clues. For example, workers commented on how infrequently some refugees smiled or made eye contact, whereas Southern Sudanese told me they grew tired of unfamiliar white people smiling at them for no apparent reason. These new forms of labor for members of the dominant population must be acknowledged (Hardt 1999). In order to address these concerns, the agency hired a Southern Sudanese caseworker, Oscar, who told me that while he loved his job, he became something of a token, the staff member that white caseworkers could send their New American clients. If diversity is to be accepted, hiring diverse staff is important, but so too is training all staff in best practices for inclusion.

I also documented instances of poor treatment of refugees by medical institutions, for example, ignoring patients, acting ruder to refugees than US-born patients, or cancelling appointments because patients arrived late. Healthcare workers, like social workers, acted as gatekeepers to the institution and saw themselves as establishing strict rules in order to gain access to services. Others adapted creatively to new populations. Janie, the director of a community health center, wrote a grant with LSS to create a community health outreach team. The facility has grown considerably over the last 20 years, offering dental services, team-based primary care, well-child care, immunizations, HIV/AIDS early intervention, case management,

and family planning services. The center was designed to meet the needs of New Americans but also includes services for low-income families such as those on Medicaid.

For the most part, businesses in Sioux Falls welcomed New Americans because they provided a steady stream of low-wage workers. However, New Americans also caused more work for some, for example, in the service sector industry. Cindy, an enthusiastic Walmart worker, told me that she “liked people of other races a lot more before she worked at [Wal-Mart].” Elaborating, she explained that “foreign” –especially “foreign black people” – were “rude,” let their children run around unsupervised, and ripped open packages before purchasing them. “Everyone complains,” Cindy said, “and [my co-workers] might be a little more racist than I am.” She noted that “Americans” (coded as white) could also be “rude, selfish, snotty, but they don’t rip open packages.” Put simply, she said, “foreign people equals big mess.”

New forms of diversity required new forms of labor and new ways of seeing the city. Maybe Cindy and her co-workers were racist, to use her words, but I think race-ing or racializing practices would better describe the relations between different people in Sioux Falls, particularly those who were unaccustomed to interacting with people from other countries and backgrounds and who had different phenotypic features. If more people like Cindy were willing to engage in discussion about her discomfort with New American customers, attend diversity trainings through the Multicultural Center, then more equity and inclusion could take root in the city.

There are benefits, economic incentives, for promoting diversity in cities. In July 2017, the Trump administration suppressed a report by the Department of Health and Human Services that showed refugees bring in more government revenue than they cost in social services over time (*New York Times* 2017). This contradicts local narratives that refugee resettlement is too expensive and echoes other studies in regards the economic contributions of refugees. For example, in a June 2017 report, *From Struggle to Resilience: The Economic Impact of Refugees in America*,

researchers point out that debates about resettlement policy are often framed as a humanitarian issue, but “it is often the economic impact of refugees that leave the most enduring impression”

(*New American Economy* 2017, 2). Their six key findings are as follows:

1. Refugees contribute meaningfully to the economy as earners and taxpayers earning a collective \$77.2 billion in household income, contributing \$20.9 billion in taxes, and leaving them with \$56.3 billion in disposable income, or spending power.
2. While refugees receive initial assistance upon arriving in the US, they see sharp income increases in subsequent years. In their first year in the US, refugees earn roughly \$22,000 but after 25 years, their median household income reaches \$67,000, more than \$14,000 more than the median income of US households overall.
3. Refugees have an entrepreneurship rate that outshines even that of other immigrants. They start new businesses and generate billions of dollars in doing so.
4. Refugees make particularly meaningful contributions to the economies of several large states, like Minnesota, Michigan, Georgia, and California.
5. Even more so than other immigrants, refugees take steps to lay down roots and build lives in America. More than 84 percent of refugees become US citizens compared to roughly half of immigrants, and more than half of all refugees are likely to own their own home.
6. In an era when the country faces unprecedented demographic challenges, refugees are uniquely positioned to help, bringing much-needed young workers to places like Fargo.

These findings are important for increasing acceptance of refugees, but there must be social and political— not just economic integration – to create more equitable and inclusive societies (see also Nyers 2006). Not mentioned in the above studies were how refugees contribute to schools, neighborhoods, social circles, faith communities, and political causes, the ways in which they forge new identities with others in the city, and strengthen the fabric of civil society.

## **Southern Sudanese in Sioux Falls**

The 1983-2005 wars between North and South Sudan, along with interethnic and regional wars, poverty, and disease, resulted in more than two million deaths and four million displaced people. On January 9, 2005, Doctor John Garang de Mabior, Commander-in-Chief of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and Chairman of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) with the Government of Sudan. Southern Sudanese around the world rejoiced, ecstatic that after a brutal 22-year war, peace was finally in sight. One of the CPA's stipulations was that Garang would become Vice President of Sudan, a position the Northern ruling elite had never before granted to a Southerner. Another crucial part of the CPA was a 2011 referendum on Southern Sudanese independence from Sudan. In 2011, nearly four million Southern Sudanese voted and 99 per cent chose secession. On July 9, 2011, the Republic of South Sudan became the world's newest country. Since 2013, it has been racked with civil war. Military forces led by President Kiir and opposition fighters led by Riak Machar, Commander of the SPLM/A In Opposition (SPLM-IO) clashed killing thousands of civilians. More than a half million civilians have fled the country since 2013 and it remains politically, economically, and socially fragile.

The US government began resettling Sudanese refugees in the 1980s. By the early 2000s, 60 per cent of all African refugees resettled to the US were Southern Sudanese, but numbered fewer than 25,000 total (USCIS 2004). They have been resettled to at least 36 states (Shandy 2007, 143). According to Data USA, there were 638 people from Sudan living in South Dakota in 2015, most of them in Sioux Falls, which is 30 times higher than would be expected based on national averages. Local agencies estimated thousands of Southern Sudanese in South Dakota. It's difficult to measure the number of migrants living in a city because not all of them have contact with data-gathering institutions, like schools and human services.

Southern Sudanese worked in retail, day-care centers, factories, restaurants, hotels, medical clinics, mailrooms, hospitals, in state agencies, and the non-profit sector. Some became economically self-sufficient quickly while others relied on the state for services for longer periods of time (Holtzman 2000, Shandy 2007). They were ethnically diverse, representing Kuku, Anjuak, Zande, Acholi, Didinga, Bari, Dinka, Nuer, and dozens of “Lost Boys.”<sup>3</sup> In addition to their ethnic or tribal languages, some Southern Sudanese came to the US speaking English while others learned it after their arrival. Many spoke Arabic, the lingua franca of Sudan, and/or Juba Arabic, a pidgin form of Arabic mostly spoken by those from the Equatoria region of South Sudan. In addition to ethno-linguistic differences among Southern Sudanese, there were age- and gender-based hierarchies and variations in education and experiences with wartime violence and migration (rape, conscription into the Sudanese army or the SPLA, forced migration, loss of family, and time spent in refugee camps or in cities). Most practiced Christianity, which Shandy (2002) argues has provided a link among Southern Sudanese in the diaspora and between them and other Christians, serving as a cross-ethnic and interracial means of alliance. By 2012, there were seven Southern Sudanese congregations, which corresponded with ethno-linguistic group organization (e.g. Nuer, Dinka, and Equatorian), region in South Sudan, and missionization in refugee camps (Lutheran, Episcopal, Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, Evangelical).

There were also Sudanese ethnic, social, political, and regional associations, for example, the Equatorian Sudanese Community Association, the Dinka Bor Community, Western Equatorian Association, the Nassir Community, the “Lost Boys,” and women’s organizations. The largest of these was the local chapter of the SPLM, one of more than a dozen such chapters in the US. The SPLM/A formed in 1983 to fight the military domination and political interests of the ruling Northern Sudanese elite. Since its founding, it has been a fractured political organization and social movement (Jok and Hutchinson 1999) but was the largest public and

international expression of Southern Sudanese identity until 2013 when civil war broke out. The SPLM/A sent high-ranking delegates to Sioux Falls to recruit members and increase capital for the liberation struggle.

Southern Sudanese told me they liked Sioux Falls because it was a small, safe, affordable city with good jobs, schools, and churches, and it became, arguably, one of the best politically organized Southern Sudanese communities in the US. At a mourning gathering for Garang in Sioux Falls in 2005, a young man told me that he moved from Florida to Sioux Falls because he heard that there were good jobs (he worked at Morrell's until he lost a finger on the job and could no longer work there) and because of the political organizing that was happening there, that he hoped to become a part of. But it took time and a lot of work and recruitment to develop this political subjectivity.

David Jal was one of the first Sudanese resettled to Sioux Falls, in 1995. Because there were so few people of color in the city at the time – especially tall, dark-skinned people, like David, who also bore horizontal lines of scarification across his forehead, marks of his Nuerness – he spent little time in public outside of work: “Racism was a new thing to us. Back home, people looked at status, not at skin color, and that was difficult to get used to.” He met kind people, but also he felt a palpable fear of him by many whites: “We looked different. We felt different. The community wasn't welcoming,” he said, “It seemed like we were back in the refugee camp again. We didn't want to depend on anybody. We just wanted to live on our own.” To avoid discomfort, he and other young Southern Sudanese men spent most of their time in their apartment, leaving only to work, or eat at the nearby Burger King. Some left Sioux Falls for better educational opportunities, welfare, or more community support (Holtzman 2000, Shandy 2007), but David stayed. He went on to earn social work degrees, and has worked for non-profits and the state, married a (white) woman with whom he has four children. David has accrued

respect and capital from a variety of sources, driven by his self-motivation and charismatic personality, and by relationships forged in university, with employers, his family, and Southern Sudanese and American friends and colleagues. He has also written a children's book about his life, started a non-profit organization and raised money to build a school along the Khor Wakow River near his native village of Dunyal, South Sudan. David is not alone – other Southern Sudanese have also founded organizations and built wells and schools in the native villages. At the same time, these men and women are raising children in Sioux Falls, speaking publically about South Sudan, and even marrying people from the region. I knew at least seven interracial couples in Sioux Falls, mostly Southern Sudanese men marrying white women, as men were four times more likely to be resettled to the US than women (Shandy 2007).

Southern Sudanese have been resettled to at least 36 states (Shandy 2007, 143), and frequently move and travel between them in search of better educational opportunities, welfare, and more community support (Holtzman 2000). They also traveled to attend political meetings, religious gatherings, weddings, and funerals. Additionally, they had a sophisticated online community (see also Faria 2009). Southern Sudanese used the Internet to engage one another in political conversations and to organize political, economic, and social meetings around the US. My work with Southern Sudanese in Sioux Falls led me to become part of a transnational women's organization that began in 2005 as a list serve and represented women in South Sudan and the diaspora, including Sioux Falls. It emerged as driving force in women's transnational activism by promoting peace and women's rights following the CPA. Between 2005-2008, I participated in South Sudan Women's Empowerment Network conferences and leadership trainings in South Dakota, Arizona, and Maryland, and culminated with a women's empowerment conference in South Sudan in 2008 (Erickson and Faria 2011).

In 2002, I attended a presentation by James Wani Igga, a visiting SPLM recruiter, who told the audience of primarily Southern Sudanese that their duty in the diaspora was to get an education, earn degrees, “make a lot of money,” and then return to South Sudan to strengthen the country and the party, the SPLM. In 2013, President of South Sudan Salva Kiir appointed Mr. Igga as Vice President of the Republic of South Sudan. Other visiting political officers and religious leaders also stopped in Sioux Falls on their tours of the United States. Sioux Falls was a site for the cultivation of Southern Sudanese long-distance nationalism and diasporic citizenship.

Long-distance nationalism is a set of claims and practices that connect diasporic populations to an ancestral home and can be a potent personal and political identity (Glick Schiller and Fouron 2001) and that need not be mutually exclusive from personal and political identities or commitments to their host countries. Igga skillfully cultivated long-distance nationalism by using what Malkki (1995) calls “mythico-history,” a romanticized, heroic past as part of the justification for violence and persecution against them. In 2002, Wani told the Sioux Falls crowd that South Sudan was the “oldest place known in history,” known since 25000 B.C. and it was the “second Christian country in Africa,” after Ethiopia. In his sweeping, but brief history of South Sudan, he spoke of invasions and attacks by outsiders, and then deftly brought history into the present by including the Southern Sudanese diaspora as part of this mythico-history and ended by saying that Southerners would together overcome Northern Sudan to once again become great. To succeed, he explained, they needed courage, vision, commitment, selflessness, intelligence, and patriotism.

Southern Sudanese mythico-history was strategically linked to Christianity, at a local and global level. As I mentioned, there were seven Southern Sudanese congregations in Sioux Falls,<sup>4</sup> all of them located within “white” churches and which worshipped both separately and together with their white hosts. Most had monthly unity services with their hosts and they also with one

another, especially on special occasions, like Garang's death. Achol, the Chairperson of the Sioux Falls SPLM Chapter (2004-2008) and of the Midwest SPLM Chapter (2012-?), told me that the US was the only country that really supported the Republic of South Sudan because they are both Christian countries (see Pitya 1996 and Wheeler 2002 for more on the relationship between Christian missionaries and South Sudan). Achol is a legal US citizen and identifies as a Republican because he felt Republicans did more to help South Sudan than Democrats. Just as Southern Sudanese held different positions about the SPLM and SPLM-IO (see Young 2014 for a newspaper article about the conflicts between the SPLA and SPLA-IO), they also held different views and practices in regards to US citizenship, politics, and political parties. I knew three Southern Sudanese men who joined the US military after 9/11 (another form of US citizenship) and, like many others, were staunch Republicans due to their conservative social values and pro-military stances. Others were proud members of the Democratic party. I attended a Democratic rally in Grand Forks, North Dakota, in 2008 with David Jal, who was also a friend and former co-worker of mine at LSS, and two other Southern Sudanese, where we saw Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton speak. They were staunch Democrats due to their beliefs in social justice and principles of inclusion.

Part of long-distance nationalism, according to Caroline Faria, is "parental nationalism" (2014, 1058), which has to do with parenting practices that nurture a sense of belonging to South Sudan among their children. Take, for example, Nyariek and Nyakai, who came to Sioux Falls with their families, in 2000 and 2001, respectively. Both fled war in South Sudan, and lived in other African countries before coming to the US. One morning when Nyariek and I arrived at her home, Nyakai was barely awake, drinking tea, watching an Evangelical Christian program on television, and braiding her hair with extensions. She worked the nightshift at a factory while her husband took a dayshift. She slept from seven to nine in the morning then woke to watch

their children while her husband worked. As Nyakai braided, Nyariet crotched, and they told me about the challenges of managing full-time jobs, marriage, parenting, household duties, and transnational financial and social obligations. They lamented divorce, teen pregnancy, skin bleaching, and alcoholism in the US, as well as a focus on the individual rather than the “whole community” in Sudan. Nyakai said, “Coming to the United States from the Third World is like being born again as a baby, knowing nothing. You have to start over. It’s like asking you to jump from the top of a tree without breaking your legs!” Both women worked hard to ensure that their children succeeded in school and went on to college. Nyakai successfully lobbied Morrell’s for a better shift that suited her family responsibilities but eventually quit to open her own business. Nyariet worked in a daycare facility and later as an office administrator. Between 2005-2013, both women had visited South Sudan at least twice, but neither planned to return permanently. Sioux Falls was their home.

In addition to long-distance nationalism, Southern Sudanese also cultivated what Victoria Bernal calls “diasporic citizenship,” which speaks to new forms of citizenship and sovereignty that are emerging around the world “as a result of the rising global significance of diasporas as economic, cultural, and political actors across national borders” (2014, 7). Diasporic citizenship attends to citizenship as more than legal status; rather, it should be viewed as a dynamic bundle of practices, including online practices. What defined Southern Sudanese membership in both the US and South Sudan was not only legal identity but also a subjectivity and the practices of political participation and commitment to a nationalist movement. According to the Sioux Falls Argus Leader, Southern Sudanese have send more than one million dollars in remittances to South Sudan (Young 2014). They showed their commitment to South Sudan through their Christian faith and practices, remittance, and social and political organizing.

Missing, however, from Bernal's analysis of political subjectivities of the Eritrean diaspora was the actually existing, everyday lives of Eritreans. Her focus, her field site if you will, was cyberspace. Like Eritreans, Southern Sudanese cultivated diasporic citizenship via the Internet and phone thereby shaping the emergence of South Sudan as an independent Republic in 2011, but they also, at the same time, cultivated citizenship in in the US. Their citizenship practices shaped and were shaped by the city.

I began this paper by describing reactions to the death of John Garang in Sioux Falls. In addition to organizing the rally to raise awareness about their leader's death, hundreds of Southern Sudanese missed work in order to mourn, but none permanently lost their jobs. Morrell's, the meat-packing plant, employed more than 400 Sudanese. In the days following Garang's death, it was forced to shut down a processing line losing a purported \$100,000. Many lost their jobs in those two days, but leaders negotiated with employers, and they ultimately got their jobs back. The director of human resources, Guy, told me in an exasperated voice over the phone that he was "disappointed" by the situation. Colleen, a manager at a different factory, told me that a man approached her and "demanded" that they allow 75 Sudanese employees to miss work to mourn Garang, but she forbade it.

Greg, another human resource manager, told me that because many of his employees were refugees, he began to follow world news more closely. When 32 staff missed work after Garang's death, he said the absences were "hard on the business side of things, but on the people side of things, they [employers] have to understand the situation." Some workers received warning slips, but no one was fired. Greg said he could understand that, "what's going on in Sudan's a lot more important than some slip of paper." He understood that Southern Sudanese were engaging in long-distance nationalism. Like Glick Schiller and Fouron's (2001) description of Haiti, South Sudan has long functioned as an "apparent state," a state that, for a variety of

reasons that I cannot address in this paper, develop economic structures or activities that provide needs for its people (2001, 205). Remittances and humanitarian aid sustain apparent states and long-distance nationalism keeps them alive.

Southern Sudanese actions in the wake of Garang's death were "acts of citizenship," which Isin defines as "those deeds by which actors constitute themselves (and others) as subjects of rights" (2009, 371) – and I would add respect. While acts of citizenship are important, sometimes even disruptive, human geographer Jonathan Darling argues, "they are not the revolutionary interruptions that many post-political theorists seek as the catalysts for alternative democratic futures" (2013, 83). Instead, he argues, we must go beyond episodic acts, which are "indeed rare" to consider "an incremental politics of small happenings, acts and events which come to cohere and sustain a radical intent" (84). I do not have space here to adequately describe all of the incremental politics of small happenings that I have documented over the last 15 years, but below I share a few examples surrounding Garang's death that point to the ways in which Southern Sudanese acts of citizenship were able to take shape through small happenings, like eating food together, gathering together and with non-Sudanese, and raising children. Clarke *et al.* (2014) argue that we should expand our understanding of what constitutes politics: "If we consider that political projects orient political action and that citizenship aspirations reflect or translate specific political projects, this converts sites where action towards citizenship takes place into sites of politics, whether or not they are conventionally understood as such" (22).

The day after Garang's death, I entered a split-level house and walked upstairs where a large television was turned to Al Jazeera's Arabic coverage of the death. Women sat in the kitchen, dining room, and on large sofas in the living room; men sat in the garage and basement; children roamed in between. As people arrived, they diligently shook the hands of everyone in each room before taking a place among the gendered spaces. Women brought them soda or

bottled water. August temperatures and heat from the stove, where women had been cooking for hours, made the air stiflingly hot and humid. Smells of sweat and food permeated the space. Everyone looked exhausted and somber. Some cried. Many feared a return to war.

After everyone had eaten, two men came into the women's space to report on their discussions, their progress on negotiating with employers and the best times for political rallies and prayer services. Women asked questions, gave feedback, and after the discussion, the men left. I asked a six-year-old girl who lived in the house if she knew why people were there, and she said, "Because the President died...my mom has been crying *a lot*." The following Sunday, hundreds gathered in a large Lutheran church to mourn Garang, where they prayed and sang, and leaders pleaded with them not to give up hope, but instead to "do their part" to support the movement, in other words, to participate in long-distance nationalism and diasporic citizenship.

These acts and scenes convey just a few examples how various practices (cooking, parenting, talking, eating, praying, following news) and spaces (homes, factories, city streets, offices of elected officials, churches) cultivated political subjectivity among Southern Sudanese. They are part of a broad assemblage of citizenship practices, which connects local space to other geographic territories and a range of local and global networks. Assemblages are bundles of practices – religious, economic, political, technological, and social – that shape everyday life, political subjectivity, and citizenship. Assemblages are "relations of patterns" that are given meaning in their connections with other patterns (Puar 2012, 57). Some of the patterns at work here is people migrating from the Global South to the Global North, from war-torn, poor countries to stable, wealthy ones, from post-colonial countries to the countries that once colonized them (or to settler colonies), and from rural to urban areas. In doing so, Southern Sudanese disrupted the social and economic order of the dominant white, Christian population in the particular small city of Sioux Falls while calling attention to themselves as political subjects.

They did so as citizens of the United States and South Sudan. It's unlikely that this strategy of organizing would have been as effective in a larger city, where there are more centers of power, more workers, and there are more minority populations competing for access to citizenship rights and respect. As Chris, a staffer for Senator Tim Johnson said, "[Sudanese] have a pretty strong...voice in a state like [this]...[T]hey have incredible access to elected officials...And I don't think there's that organization in some of the other [New American] communities."

### **Conclusion**

Cities shape how citizenship is practiced. Sioux Falls is home to thousands of Southern Sudanese New Americans, many of who have become legal citizens and permanent residents of the city. They told me that they liked Sioux Falls for the opportunity to work and raise a family, for safety, education, and for the socio-political networks that Southern Sudanese had established there. Southern Sudanese are political active across the United States, but due to the size, approachability, and demographics of Sioux Falls and the assemblages of people that live in the small city, Southern Sudanese have a louder voice, more visibility, than they do in bigger cities.

Though some members of the dominant population in Sioux Falls ignored or even rejected refugees and were resistant to the new forms of diversity that refugees brought, others welcomed and supported New Americans in a variety of ways, as outlined in this paper. Relations between New Americans and members of the dominant, white population influenced Southern Sudanese political subjectivities and everyday practices. The people involved in these relations (teachers, police officers, social workers, retail staff, pastors) – wittingly or not – became part of Southern Sudanese citizenship practices and assemblages, influencing one another in a variety ways, from the development of new labor practices to intercultural marriages, diversity trainings to a city-wide diversity-awareness initiative. Stuart Hall (2000) argued that “the multicultural question” was the most important question facing the globalized world, though

today “diversity” is a more apt term than multiculturalism for reasons I outlined above. As more people around the globe migrate to cities, it is important to document the range of practices and cities that exist and to provide situated, local histories of migration and diversity in order to better understand historic and contemporary solidarities and antagonisms that underlie perceptions of “otherness” and ever changing implications for cities and their residents (see also Ehrkamp 2011).

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The Center on Diversity and Community at the University of Oregon funded my fieldwork in 2005 and an ASPIRE junior faculty grant from Ball State University supported my fieldwork in the summer of 2012.

<sup>2</sup> All names are pseudonyms, except for David Jal, who asked me to use his real name.

<sup>3</sup> The “Lost Boys” refers to thousands of mostly Dinka and Nuer boys, who fled war in South Sudan in the 1980s. In their harrowing journey to Ethiopia, they faced disease, starvation, wild animals, and SPLA conscription. Girls were more often incorporated into families in South Sudan or refugee camps, or kidnapped. In 1991, war in Ethiopia forced the youth back into Sudan and eventually to the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya. By their arrival, about half of the estimated 20,000 youth had died. In 2001, the US agreed to resettle 3,800 of the remaining 12,000 boys and about 100 “Lost Girls.”

<sup>4</sup> In 2012, they were: Falls Community Church, United Sudanese Church, Episcopal, Zion Lutheran, East Side Presbyterian, Evangelical Church, and Catholic. The congregants were often aligned with a particular region and tribe in South Sudan.

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