Unsettling Resettlement: Problematizing “Lost Boys of Sudan” Resettlement and Identity
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In this critical qualitative examination of the “Lost Boys of Sudan” refugee resettlement, I explicate the ways that the “Lost Boys” negotiate discursive positioning by the U.S. state and nation in forging a sense of identity and belonging in resettlement. Specifically, I examine the ways that the men are recognized as subjects through the “Lost Boys” label and interpellated into U.S. belonging through racist discourses. Finally, I work to show how the particulars of exile and resettlement for the “Lost Boys” factor into the ways identity is communicated and belonging is negotiated for this particular community.

Keywords: Identity; “Lost Boys of Sudan”; Refugees; Resettlement; Subjectivity

In the present moment, refugees enter public discourse as objectified problems in need of fixing or repair by state actors and aid providers (Baines, 2004; Haddad, 2003a; Hyndman, 2000; Nyers, 2006; Ong, 2003; Soguk, 1999). Haddad (2003b) argues that this positioning emerges as an inevitable result of the sovereign nation-state system. Objectification also happens through the refugee aid structure involving refugee-experts who create policy and programs, aid workers who implement the policy, and refugees who receive the aid (Baines, 2004; Conquergood, 1998; Harrell-Bond, 2002; Ong, 2003). In this structure refugees are misrecognized as nonspeaking subjects when political officials and service agencies speak and provide services on their behalf, without speaking “to” and “with” refugees of their needs.
This objectification additionally happens when, and if, refugees gain long-term resettlement as governmental offices and volunteer agencies determine the conditions of resettlement needs, how services will be allocated and where refugees will live (Conquergood, 1992; Nyers, 2006; Ong, 2003). Rarely are refugees consulted in the process of making these decisions. Conquergood (1998) offers one challenge to this positioning by insisting that the Hmong refugees he researched with be recognized as full subjects in the process of creating and enacting popular theatre health performances, thus breaking the pattern “of importing the knowledge of ‘experts’ and distributing it to the refugees, who were expected to be grateful consumers” (p. 223).

Additionally, the positioning of refugees as nonspeaking, or objectified subjects, is the result of the very definitions that distinguish refugees as refugees. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines a refugee as “someone outside his or her own country and unable to return as a result of a well-founded fear of persecution on grounds of race, religion, nationality, public opinion or membership of a social group” (2000, p. 2). Refugees must be living outside of the borders once called home and in fear of returning; stateless subjects, existing outside of the logics that make one citizen (Haddad, 2003b). Moreover, the refugee is constituted as a subject of perpetual transition and displacement, while always intelligible through the primary fear that caused the flight (Nyers, 2006). The oppositional position to the citizen-subject constructs refugees in a continual state of transition, never quite intelligible as fully citizen, fully subject, though subjugated through these processes all the same (Ong, 2003). Rather, in entering political realms as stateless subjects, refugees are understood as objects—spoken for—in need of assistance, training and a host of other resettlement services, though never able to speak and act of their own accord in the public.

One refugee group recently resettled in the U.S. has had particular success in challenging the ways refugees are often positioned in public discourse. Beginning in 2000, the U.S. began to resettle nearly 4,000 refugees across the country known as the “Lost Boys of Sudan.” Now, “Lost Boys” are recognized as one of the most successful refugee resettlement programs in U.S. history. An annual report to Congress by the Office of Refugee Resettlement illuminates that the “Lost Boys” have responded particularly well to the expectations they faced in U.S. resettlement. Of those surveyed, 86% of the “Lost Boys” were employed, while the employment rate for non-“Lost Boys” refugees was 55% (ORR, 2003). Moreover, 65% of the “Lost Boys” surveyed were attending school, nearly 79% were fluent in English, and as of the survey none of the men surveyed relied solely on public assistance for their income (ORR, 2003). Part of the success of the “Lost Boys” has been their ability to garner public awareness about their experiences and support of their resettlement. As it stands, several “Lost Boys” have published autobiographical books detailing their experiences in Sudan (Bok, 2003; Deng, Deng, Ajak, & Bernstein, 2005; Nhial & Mills, 2004). There is a nationally released movie about their resettlement in the U.S. (Mylan & Shenk, 2003). And there are two NBA players from Southern Sudan, Manute Bol and Luol Deng, who have actively increased public attention about the human rights violations in Sudan. Moreover, recent media attention concerning civil conflict in the Darfur region of Sudan has made the experiences of the “Lost Boys” living in the U.S. even
more present in public discourse. Despite the success of their resettlement and the increased public awareness about their experiences, the “Lost Boys” still negotiate the ways they are positioned as subjects in resettlement. In this critical examination of the “Lost Boys of Sudan” experiences in resettlement, I explicate the ways that refugees negotiate this discursive positioning in forging a sense of identity and belonging in resettlement. To do this, I examine the intersections between the positioning of refugees and the qualitative experiences of one group of “Lost Boys of Sudan” in U.S. resettlement through the following research questions: How are the “Lost Boys of Sudan” discursively situated as refugee subjects? What does this positioning mean for the ways they experience and/or negotiate resettlement in the United States? How does this positioning work in relation to the ways that the men negotiate identity and belonging in resettlement?

Constituting Refugees

Refugee positions are not recognized equally, though the encompassing term sets in place the stable and ideal refugee figure (displaced, stateless, and politically persecuted). In short, falling within the confines of the refugee defined by the UNHCR are persons living across neighboring borders—either independently or in established refugee “camps.” Refugees also include persons who, after taking refuge within a host nation, return to their country of origin. As well, refugees might be persons seeking asylum outside of their nation of citizenship who have not yet been given official refugee status (Lammers, 1999). Perhaps most known are “long-term refugees” who are resettled in a nation because the conflict they fled has no foreseeable resolution. As should be evident, variances within the term refugee make it very important to note that this particular research focuses specifically on long-term refugee resettlement in the United States.

As is clear from the refugee definition, modalities of movement have come to define the ways that refugee subjectivity is both explicated and theorized. First, the refugee experience is defined by the first movement from the location deemed home because of some fear or presence of persecution (Haines, 1996). Movement continues to mark the refugee experience as refugees move to and through transitional locations known as refugee camps. While many refugees inhabit these spaces for decades, a liminal atmosphere prevails in most of the world’s camps. Aihwa Ong (2003) explains that refugee camps, through the involvement of volunteer agencies (VOLAGs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), serve to regulate the refugee subject, preparing them for possible resettlement through various organizing institutions. These institutions function to form refugees as certain kinds of subjects in the possibility that they might one day become subjects of the state. If clearance for long-term resettlement is granted by a neighboring or third nation, then a refugee’s political subjectivity is strongly determined by the host-state’s articulation of their future (Krulfeld, 1994). Liisa Malkki (1995) theorizes the ways in which refugee camps and settlements become spaces of identity building and construction. In particular, she illustrates that displacement and spatial variances in settlement produce diverse renarratizations of
national identity and affiliation: “The territorializing metaphors—roots, soils, trees, seeds—are washed away in human floodtides, waves, flows, streams, and rivers. These liquid names for the uprooted reflect the sedentarist bias in dominant modes of imagining homes and homelands, identities and nationalities” (pp. 15–16).

Indeed, memories and questions of home and belonging dramatically impact the tenuousness of refugee resettlement (Bauer, 2000; Daniel & Knudsen, 1995; Fisiy, 1998; Huttunen, 2005; McLellan, 1998). The past serves as both a location of happiness and fear as refugees remember their positions before flight, while simultaneously reliving the painful reasons they were forced to take exile (Camino, 1994). In many ways, this tenuousness calls forth and constitutes the need for shared memory and identity—if only to maintain a cohesive sense of self and belonging amongst the discursive messages that always, already label refugees as fearful, stateless subjects.

In order to understand the tension between subjectivity and belonging in the U.S., it is important to recognize that the system of refugee resettlement functions to constitute refugees granted access to the U.S. as proper subjects in relation to the state. Ong (2003) notes that this belonging is recognized through “democratic, racial, and market norms” (p. 15). For “increasingly, citizenship is defined as the civic duty of the individual to reduce his or her burden on society, and instead to build up his or her own human capital—in other words, to ‘be an entrepreneur of her/himself’” (p. 12).Thus, certain refugees, particularly those associated as “parasites” of the state (Rosello, 2001), are recognized through “racializing schemes that serve to blacken and stigmatize” their bodies (Ong, 2003, p. 13):

The bipolar racializing scheme is a social regulatory scheme that situates such at-risk subjects along the continuum of more or less likely to succeed. They become racialized not simply because of their perceived skin color, and ethnicized not simply because of claims of a particular ancestral culture, but because they have been assessed as belonging to a category and inscribed with a radical indeterminacy in the game of becoming self-motivated, self-propelling, and freedom-loving American citizens (p. 14).

Because the U.S. immigration and citizenship systems are historically situated in gendered, racial and economic logics (Luibhéid, 2002; Moloney, 2006; Nicolosi, 2001), refugees entering resettlement are also constituted as subjects through these logics, working both at the corporeal level of signifiers as well as in the social imaginary that situates refugees in subjectivity. As refugees are hailed into particular subject positions, resettlement turns into a negotiation of competing discourses, conflicting norms and complicated positionalities, alongside a resettlement of identity and belonging that happens within the refugee community. In this text, I analyze how one particular community of Sudanese refugees negotiates both their positioning as subjects and identity constitution in resettlement.

Methods
The majority of the qualitative research was conducted at the Arizona Lost Boys Center (2003) between March 2003 and May 2004. Opened in 2003 by some of
the first Sudanese refugees to resettle in Phoenix, the center houses and organizes cultural, social and pragmatic activities for local Sudanese and other refugee populations. Such activities include: information sessions with immigration attorneys, ESL courses, computer training, resume building, theater and dance performances, and community dinners. Since the Phoenix metropolitan area is nearly 40 miles across with no major public transportation aside from the bus system, the founding members believed that the Sudanese refugee community needed a centralized meeting point. While the center struggles as a meeting place for all refugees, since its opening it has served as a primary center for political, social and cultural organizing for the “Lost Boys” in Phoenix as well as across the country.

I employ qualitative research methods for this project in direct challenge to the discourses that position refugees as nonspeaking subjects, though still mindful that researchers of refugee resettlement must be extremely careful in formulating and implementing methodology. While qualitative methods provide a move away from the sort of objectification that comes with generalizable-driven methods of social scientific research, they present their own ethical dilemmas in working with and representing participants as full-speaking subjects. Krulffeld (1998) explains that power and inequity are built into researcher-participant relationships. The task is then to explore and experiment with methodological techniques that recognize and open up this power differential. In my own effort to diffuse this power dynamic in the research relation, I attempted to follow Tillmann-Healy’s (2003) and Trethewey’s (1997) “friendship” methods, positing that research relationships might be grounded in “conversation, everyday involvement, compassion, giving and vulnerability” (Tillmann-Healy, p. 734). While my interpersonal engagement at the Arizona Lost Boys Center perhaps verged upon this sort of relationship, the structural power infused in my signifying body and subject position could not be diffused in ways that the “friendship” method works toward.

With this in mind, I approached research situations with the ideal of dialogue and ethical singularity (Besio, 2003; Davis, 2002; Spivak, 1999). In entering the Arizona Lost Boys Center, I realized that my role was to listen carefully and well, to rigorously examine the meanings I attached to interactions because of my positionality, to tentatively make connections and to share such ideas with the men. To do this, I engaged in respondent interviews with 11 individuals who I interacted with most at the center and who understood well the intent of the research. Interviews were approximately 1 hour long, totaling 86 pages of single-spaced transcripts, and included questions such as the following: What sorts of things were you told about the United States before resettlement? What is the significance of the label “Lost Boy”? What does it mean to be or be known as a “Lost Boy” in the U.S.? What are the challenges for you in being a refugee in the U.S.?

Additionally, I adapted focus-group methods to fit the cultural codes prevalent at the center. The dialogue sessions included roughly 5–7 individuals per session. They were informally structured as time and participation at the center is fluid and multiple. Participants unfamiliar with the focus-groups were made aware of the research goals and were given the opportunity to participate by signing a letter of consent.
assuring them that their participation would remain anonymous and that they could choose not to participate at any time in the research. In order to document the events of the dialogue sessions, I recorded scratch notes and then transferred them into formal field notes totaling 34 single-spaced pages.

Additionally, I completed a total of 60 hours of participant observation equaling 205 single-spaced field notes. Field observations provide me access to the social interaction prevalent at the center. Observations included social gatherings such as monthly dances, workshops with immigration and law enforcement representatives, soccer games and practices, cultural activities such as theatre performances and cow sculpting, but also informal interactions in the center. Additionally, the “Lost Boys of Sudan” Leadership Council invited me to observe their bimonthly meetings to gain insight into the needs and issues of the community. The leadership council meetings illuminated the interworkings of hierarchy both within the “Lost Boy” community as well as the greater Sudanese refugee population.

Field notes include many informal “ethnographic interviews” as my times at the center were normally filled with a variety of discussion and conversation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). For interactions with individuals unfamiliar with the research, I recited a scripted explanation of the research and asked for verbal consent to write about the interactions. Scratch notes and head notes were taken while in the field and then typed up within 24 hours of being in the field to provide rich and detailed data.

In analyzing the data I first used line-by-line coding to flush out the tacit knowledge embedded in the field notes and to create active, open, descriptive codes (i.e., “Gesturing to America”). In addition to “open codes,” I analyzed the data through an iterative process of reviewing field notes and transcripts alongside the research questions and current literature producing codes such as “collisions of community,” “communicating ‘Lost Boy’” and “revealing racism.” In vivo codes also emerged from the actual dialogue of the participants and were used to descriptively organize data (i.e., America of opportunities). After several close readings, the data was typed into and once again coded via NVivo, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software program.

All of the represented participants are active members at the Arizona Lost Boys Center, regularly organizing and attending events sponsored by the center. The men from Sudan now living in Phoenix comprise a growing community of 300 plus individuals. They range in age from 19 to 35 however there are also many “Lost Boys” under the age of 18 who have been resettled with U.S. American families. While the research included many participants, some of whom are included using pseudonyms in this paper, the 11 key informants are identified by pseudonyms in the analysis with a brief description of their resettlement the first time they are mentioned.

Negotiating Identity in Resettlement

The conflict that propelled the “Lost Boys” to flee in 1983 began when civil war erupted in 1955, one year before British colonial rule exited Southern Sudan. Claire
Metelits (2004) explains that dynamics of ethnic and religious difference, disparities in power and wealth, as well as disputes over land factor into the historical and contemporary conflicts in Sudan, but that the colonial legacy that marginalized the South from participating in national political and economic processes also factors into the conflict. Southern Sudan is populated by mostly African ethnic groups including Dinka, Nuer, and Nuba who either practice indigenous religious traditions or the Christianity introduced by British colonialists. Northern Sudan however is overwhelmingly populated by Arabic-speaking Muslims. Paul Salopek (2003) explains that “the north-south war is rooted in the old toxic relationship between Arab master and African servant” (p. 41). The Northern Sudanese government holds the majority of wealth and power in this country and those in power have continually pushed to extend control over the Southern regions. In the South, the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/SPLM) has fought against this control, seeking land rights and greater prosperity. While there have been periods of peace in this entanglement, the most recent fighting began in 1983 and has yet to cease (Martin, 2003; Metelits, 2004; Salopek, 2003).

On the surface, it seems as though the SPLA/M is defending the South, however Salopek (2003) argues that “the SPLA has mistreated as much as defended Sudan’s long marginalized southern peoples” (p. 43). The SPLA, dominated by Dinka leaders, have often fought against other ethnic militias with the government instigating both sides towards violence (Metelits, 2004; Salopek). It was only recently, when oil was found crossing the northern part of Southern Sudan (and was thus claimed by the Northern government) that ethnic groups began working together against the Khartoum government to fight for land and prosperity.

While millions have died in fighting, more than two million causalities have come from famine and disease (Martin, 2003). The Northern government, even before the war broke out again in 1983, cut off supplies of food and material to the Southern regions of Sudan. When the war began Khartoum forces came into the villages of the South seeking greater control of the entire country. At this time the “Lost Boys” were children of 7 and 8 years. As fighting infiltrated their homes, they were forced to flee, often alone. Many of the “Lost Boys” I spoke with explained that they were out in the pastures when the fighting began and rather than returning home they ran for safety. While many did find refuge, others were drafted, sometimes forcefully, into fighting with the SPLA/M in exchange for food and shelter (Metelits, 2004). For those who did make it to safety, refugee camps became home. Many Southern Sudanese fled to Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and Egypt in search of shelter including the “Lost Boys” as well as families who traveled together. Many of the men who are now resettled in the Phoenix area lived for a majority of their lives in the Kakuma, Kenya refugee camp.

It is in these camps that the international refugee community learned of experiences of these men from Southern Sudan. Refugee groups are often recommended for resettlement by NGO and VOLAG representatives working with refugees in camps around the world. Since the “Lost Boys” became quite infamous for the details of their exile—recognized as a group of orphaned men from Southern Sudan who
were forced to leave their communities and homes as adolescents—aid workers were especially eager to recommend them for resettlement. Moreover, aid workers in the camps made direct connections between these men’s experiences of flight and the orphaned “Lost Boys” of Peter Pan, thus naming them the “Lost Boys of Sudan” (Robins, 2003). The label stuck and when the President and Congress met in the late 1990s to make decisions about resettlement, this group was easily identifiable. Additionally, the “Lost Boys” and their stories worked well in the history of U.S. refugee resettlement because their narratives of exile provided great opportunities for human interest stories depicting the U.S. state as benevolent and hospitable.

The label that marks their resettlement program however, also clearly designates their positions as political subjects in resettlement. While most of the men who have come to the U.S. arrive as adults, the title indelibly imprints their experiences and interactions in the U.S. The label, used in relation to the Black African adult men is infantilizing from the very moment of resettlement. Nyers (2006) explicates that the refugee label is exclusionary, yet the “Lost Boys” label further marginalizes the men from being intelligible as political subjects. Children are not considered political subjects on their own accord. While children might gain positioning through kin relations, political access is not granted, as they are still being formed into the proper citizen subjects. When applied to refugees from Sudan, this label marks their position as nonactors of/in the state, or actors in the process of being formed into proper citizen-subject. Yet, the fixity of this label positions these refugees from Sudan as always “Lost,” thus in flux, not stable, in transition, and forever orphaned boys. Put together, the term serves as a way in which the state and media distinguish the refugee subject, in this instance, as a perpetual nonstate subject.

And yet, the “Lost Boys” do not identify with this label in its literal sense. Mike, a Dinka man who arrived in the U.S. in 2001 and has been working and going to the university ever since resettlement explains:

> What does it mean usually when we say we are ‘lost?’ When they say a ‘Lost Boy’ that doesn’t mean we are mentally lost, no, this is a media term and it even could be on political basis. Having or being lost, as they are using it today, is like having these long times away from your motherland or being separated from our parents for a long time. It doesn’t mean that I am lost, that I cannot go back home or that I don’t know where my home is. Right now I could go back there, then I am not lost? But if I took a new direction at night not able to go back home, find home, then I am lost, right? Then I am lost. But if I know that I am from Sudan, Southern Sudan, and Dinka by tribe then I am not lost. It is just the war that forced me to leave my parents in search of peace, in search for a better living place, education, so that I can return and bring something back to my community.

In his statement, Mike reveals that while individuals in the U.S. recognize him as a “Lost Boy,” he does not personally identify as “lost,” as the label connotes. And yet, the “Lost Boys” use this label strategically as a way of communicating what it means to be a refugee from Southern Sudan. The term distinguishes the “Lost Boys” from other refugee groups for nonrefugee populations, as the “Lost Boys” in Phoenix use the cultural capital from their experiences of exile to garner donated resources that
keep the Arizona Lost Boys Center open, provide the men with needed scholarship funds as well as needed resources for daily living in resettlement.

The strategic use of this label and of the “Lost Boy” narrative of exile has certainly contributed to the success of the men’s resettlement. In discussions with several refugee resettlement workers for the International Rescue Committee, it was explained that the “Lost Boys of Sudan” resettlement program was one of the most successful refugee resettlements in U.S. history. Over 90 percent of the men in Phoenix were self-sufficient and working as of the interview. A large majority are going to community colleges and universities within the Phoenix valley. Furthermore, discussions with nonrefugees around the Phoenix area impressively prove that people know, or have at least heard of the “Lost Boys.” Through their ability to successfully negotiate the discursive expectations placed on refugees, the “Lost Boys” settle quickly into Ong’s (2003) description of the “good,” “whitened” refugee (p. 14). Their success in maneuvering entrepreneurial expectations however does not absolve refugees from the negotiation of being systemically positioned as radically different through other discourses.

One of the first discourses that the “Lost Boys” come to negotiate in resettlement involves their interpellation into racial dynamics and histories in the U.S. During the first moments of resettlement, African American youth seem to serve as models for “fitting-in.” However, many “Lost Boys” also quickly come to understand the reality of being Black in a nation with a long history of racism. Joe, a Dinka man who fled to Ethiopia and then to Kenya and now works at a refugee volunteer agency, explains in an interview, “The young want to be like the Black here and there are also things in America that make it hard to be Black.” As he describes how the young Sudanese men wear the same clothing and employ the same language as African American youth, he also raises much reticence because the “Lost Boys” are being similarly recognized with suspicion:

You walk into a store and people think that you are going to take something. That is the same thing that has been happening here for many years with the Blacks from this country. I just don’t want to see the people from our country have to go through that.

In saying this, Joe recognizes America’s racist history and that he and the “Lost Boys” are interpellated into this history through skin color that intelligibly fits within the racial narrative. While Joe seems to hint that the “Lost Boys” can avoid the interpellation, other conversations made it clear that recognition is not that easy.

Sitting on the sidelines of a dusty soccer field, watching the first soccer match of a season, Willis explains the difficulty of resettlement when being read as a racial “other”: “We try to fit in but people still make faces and stare, it’s scary, but it is not all of them.” His words allude to the constant awareness of difference. Even though his skin is the same color as many Americans, and he wears the same clothing as many American youth, he still feels like an outsider. Racial difference is experienced as the men walk down the streets, are discounted as the only Black employee and live with the ever-present feeling of being persecuted for being Black and a
stranger in the U.S. As Marcos, a Nuer man who arrived in the United States in 2001 and now plays for the “Lost Boys” soccer team in Phoenix illuminates, “It is difficult. You walk down the street and people stare, go to school and you are the only black person. Americans don’t even know where the Sudan is.” Moreover, the “Lost Boys” become targets for racial profiling, further heightening the precarious nature and fear associated with being a refugee. In an interview, Mark, a Nuer man who arrived in the United States in 2002 and recently worked as an intern for the center, explained how his fear of law enforcement burgeoned:

One time I was involved in accident. I was waiting for the green light to go and someone hit me behind, but I was given the ticket. I was just waiting for the light so that I can go! I was afraid and didn’t argue with the ticket. There was an old man who saw that the officer gave me the ticket. He told me that it is because I am black. The man told me that he would be in court as my witness, that he was a lawyer and would be there to help me. When the man left, the police officer come and asked me to give the ticket back to him. I say ‘what for? You already gave me a ticket what do you need it for? I am not giving it back. According to law once something is done, there is not returning back. I have to pay for the consequences. See you in court.’ When my court date came I saw the old man waiting for me. The judge wanted to fine me but then the old man stood up for me and said “Excuse me, but if you are in the right lane waiting to turn and the person behind you hits you what would you do?” he said “I was there, I was the witness. The officer gave him a ticket for no reason.”

Similar stories are familiar in the center, creating a distrust of law enforcement and a fear of being wrongly accused. While racial profiling is not a new phenomenon in the United States, for the “Lost Boys,” as well as other refugee groups, the consequences are starkly heightened as refugees live with a threat of deportation. During a dialogue session concerning challenges to resettlement, Mark explained that refugees don’t have the same rights as citizens so when trouble occurs the “Lost Boys” are more dubious than citizens because they are viewed as strangers and guests in this country. Racially marked refugees, in this sense, are doubly bound into the system of oppression; not only does society demonize the “Lost Boys” as the evil-doing other, but it affords them fewer rights and a weaker voice because of their refugee status. This message was sent during a meeting for new refugees to the Phoenix metropolitan area with a law enforcement representative. After running through a laundry list of complicated laws that are often broken by recently resettled refugees, he boiled his message down by saying, “Don’t mess up and don’t look suspicious.” In the eyes of history though, the young men arrive in the United States with the skin color of suspicion. Moreover, coming from Black Africa, the darkness of their skin further marginalizes the young men, boxing them into categories of difference and suspicion.

Compounding the racial difference further is the societal miscomprehension concerning refugees from Africa. Many young men speak of the ignorance throughout U.S. American society concerning Sudan, including where it is located and what it means to be Sudanese. When asked about the challenges of living in the United States, Mark exclaimed that “since I’ve been out here a lot of people don’t know what
the Sudan is and what continent it is located on.” As Africa’s largest nation, the young men express that it is shocking that U.S. Americans, who have rich opportunities to be educated, are so ignorant about Africa and African cultures. Joshua, who arrived in the U.S. in 1995 as a young Nuer man and was resettled with a U.S. American family, explains during a conversation over coffee, “I am always explaining where the Sudan is and who the ‘Lost Boys’ are to people. Most of the time I don’t mind it but it sometimes feels like am always explaining.” The societal tendency to relegate issues pertaining to Africa to the bottom rung impacts the men’s resettlement, for not only do they come from “somewhere else,” but they also come from a “somewhere” that isn’t even mentioned in discourse. Africa is absent. While recent news media and celebrity attention to the Darfur-region conflict and genocide has made Sudan more intelligible in public discourse, the country is still unrecognizable to most. Furthermore, their home is a fictionalized, exoticized place hence the identities of the “Lost Boys” are also constructed on such terms. As explained above, even the label “Lost Boy” confirms this fictionalized, Othered existence as it perpetuates a faraway, enchanted vision of flying Peter, Tinkerbelle, and Captain Hook (Robins, 2003).

Rather than being able to be placed and recognized, the men find their racial and ethnic identities negotiated for them. During a dialogue session concerning race in America, Mike, Dinka, who arrived in the U.S. in 2001 and has been working and attending college explained, “Some people even think that dark skin people are only from Jamaica. That is what they think. Immediately, without wasting time a lot of people assume ‘oh, you are from Jamaica?’” The darkness of the “Lost Boys” skin further locates the men as exotic others. They resemble African Americans or Black Americans, yet dark skin signifies to U.S. publics that the men are not quite light enough to be U.S. American. Skin color, in this sense, is not only a marker of “Otherness” in the United States, it signifies “an other otherness,” or “refugeeness,” a marker of displacement which further unsettles the men’s resettlement in the U.S.

Racial identity forces the young men to reconsider the ways that they interact outside of the “Lost Boys” community. Mark explained that when he goes to a bar he makes sure not to drink and when trouble begins he is the first one to leave. Malik, who arrived in 2001 and is active in the Peace Network Theatre troupe that started in the refugee camps and now continues productions at the center, is aware of his race as he walks out of public establishments, regards law enforcement officers watching him and knows that he will be pulled over. Moreover, many others explain that they understand the racial inequalities in the United States through their positions at work. James confided that when he was working in retail he would make suggestions to coworkers about things to do and they would respond back “why should I listen to a black person?” Moreover this marginalization manifests in unrequited hopes. Mike explained during a dialogue session about issues related to work that he was told when he first came to the U.S. that there would be opportunities for advancement in work if he got an education and excelled in the job. After 3 years he has yet to see any advancement, even though he has been going to school while working full-time. Implicit in Mike’s message are factors that make advancement in America so
much more arduous than the rosy picture that is painted of “America’s Opportunities” during orientation to U.S. resettlement.

Race, in this sense, is not a salient identity marker for the “Lost Boys” until it is against the racist discourses of the United States. It becomes salient as the men encounter experiences with institutions where their racial identity has the potential to impact their status as refugees, and it is salient as people misappropriate and mis-take their racial identity. In such instances, the “Lost Boys” are confronted with a reality, experience, and awareness that was perhaps not present prior to settlement, the consciousness of race. Something that once evoked pride within their communities is now something to be aware of in daily interactions. Color never comes to the forefront in the “Lost Boys” center, but stories infiltrate the hallways serving as reminders of otherness; crisp tokens of new negotiations made in resettlement.

In spite of, or perhaps in response to this marking of “otherness” in resettlement, the first “Lost Boys” who arrived in Phoenix decided that they needed a space, a center that was all their own for training sessions useful in resettlement, information sharing as well as a space to perform and maintain traditions central to their national and cultural identities. While the men speak knowingly about the forces of subjugation that they experience in different public spaces in the U.S., the activities at the center involve the men in their own vision of belonging. In other words, the center provides a space for collective memory maintenance and future-building. These projects of identity are highly political in that they involve making decisions about what counts as a proper history and future within this community.

One Saturday afternoon as a local cultural organization was hosting a lunch at the center, a group of young men turned the lunch talk to critique past leaders of Sudan and to discuss how the “Lost Boys” were the future of their nation. I struggled to follow the names and places they discussed and to understand the implications of the conversation. While the men indicated that they were once without power, their positions as refugees in the United States afforded them the opportunity of education. The men expressed that education provided means to assess their experiences of persecution and the complexities of the conflict in order to understand how to enact future change. As Andrew adamantly argued that the future president of Sudan would be a “Lost Boy,” the project of future-making happening within the center was quite clear.

An element of this future-making involves understanding how experiences and events of the past settle into present configurations of belonging and community. While many of the “Lost Boys” now in the U.S. participated in the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/SPLM) in Sudan, now the chapters in the United States led by elder groups seek to keep the “Lost Boys” from participating. In fleeing the conflict, the “Lost Boys” were often drafted into the SPLA; however the elders who led the movement in Sudan are still at the helm in the U.S. chapters. During one Leadership Council meeting, a representative from the SPLA/SPLM chapter in Arizona came to speak with the men about registering as members. There was much contention in the room as he divulged that the leaders tried to have a secret election 2 weeks before the scheduled election. In responding to questions
he argued that the leaders did this to keep the “Lost Boys” out of decision making roles. He encouraged the men to register because their voice is strong and there is potential for great change. The representative also urged the men to demand representation and voice within their chapter because, as he explained, “if you shed just one drop of blood for the cause, or lost one family member to the civil war, then you are a member.”

Refugees experience a politicization of their identities from outside their communities—via the state and society—but also within their communities through projects and decisions concerning who belongs and how they belong. For the “Lost Boys,” this means negotiating what it means to be a “Lost Boy” in relation to the other populations of resettled Sudanese refugees. Shared history certainly provides a space for coming together but in this instance belonging is strongly dependent upon where individuals fit within that history. While some fissures concern language and ethnic group affiliation, other divides involve the path that individuals took in fleeing Sudan. During a Leadership Council meeting, a group of “Lost Boys” were discussing how to commemorate May 16, a day designated to honor those who fought with the SPLA/SPLM and to remember those who have lost their lives in Sudan. Most of the attendees agreed that the celebration should include all of the different Sudanese refugees living in Phoenix including the elders, women, and the SPLA/SPLM chapter, but there was much contention about how to go about doing this. Theo, who was resettled in Tucson, Arizona but travels often to Phoenix to participate in the center’s events, explained that “in Houston they tried to do this but that those that came from Egypt started speaking in Arabic and none of us who came from Kenya could understand.” Moreover, he went on to explain that when several “Lost Boys” began addressing the crowd in Kiswahili, fighting broke out between the groups.

Age also demarcates divisions in the ways that the men construct a sense of belonging in resettlement. In Phoenix there is a separate community of Sudanese refugees who were resettled as families. This population is talked about as the “elders” by the “Lost Boys” and, because of their age, the elders are considered to have wisdom and power. The elder population, including families, is estimated by one informant to include roughly 400 individuals while the “Lost Boys” constitute approximately 300. Joshua explains that there are great divisions between the communities because the elders were not included in the decision-making process about the construction of the center: “This again is a cultural thing. The elders have to be up first, they have to know whether things are good decisions for them. They made decisions all the time back home and they want to do the same things here.” David, a Dinka man who came to the United States as a minor, went to high school in Phoenix and now attends the local university, critiques the elders for wanting to be the primary decision-makers in this community: “This is a different society and you have to think what is something that will benefit the Sudanese refugees instead of criticizing the young men who try to make the difference in the community.” Many of the men express that the elders are not helping their adjustment and comfort in resettlement, but making it more difficult.
As the Sudanese proverb goes, “A community that excludes just one member is no community at all.” What these disparate-yet-connected communities are doing is negotiating how to maintain the importance of belonging while still remaining true to the lived experiences that constitute their refugee subject positions. Most specifically, the struggle with the elders involves a negotiation of who will lead and guide the maintenance of belonging and future-building in resettlement. Discourses of masculinity are most certainly central to this negotiation, but a gendered analysis of identity construction deserves its own space entirely. Most of the men I spoke with fled Southern Sudan when they were young children of 8 and 9, spending most of their formative years in the refugee camps of neighboring countries. The elder Sudanese refugees who fled their homes entered the refugee camps as adults and often fled with their family members. When the U.S. government granted resettlement clearance to the “Lost Boys,” it was under the auspices that the men were still orphans, meaning that they were living in refugee camps without kin relations. Many of the men had established families in the camps, yet they weren’t able to resettle with their partners or children. The elders often settled in the United States with their families. These particulars of exile and of the resettlement program dramatically impact the ways in which belonging is negotiated in resettlement. If the “Lost Boys” would have fled Sudan as children with their families, the current negotiating of belonging and future-building might not involve the present struggle concerning leadership and decision-making, as there might not have been space to question the decisions of their elders. Fleeing alone and growing up outside of this kin structure enabled the “Lost Boys” to question and to subsequently make decisions on their own concerning the future in resettlement. Moreover, if the men would have been resettled in the U.S. with the families they established in the refugee camps, the importance of maintaining belonging as “Lost Boys” might also not be as important. In other words, familial identity might have trumped the need to create a sense of belonging as men in relation to one another. For the “Lost Boys,” the communication of identity involves not only negotiating belonging in relation to the discursive structures that form the particulars of resettlement, but it involves a negotiation of identity within a community that is often taken for granted in refugee resettlement literature. In this instance, this internal identity negotiation involves narrating history and the dynamics of social relations (age, ethnic, and linguistic differences) in such a way that they come to constitute a sense of identity. And, in this instance, identity is strangely marked through interpellation as the “Lost Boys of Sudan.” This hailing provides means for the men to distinguish themselves, in various ways, from other refugee groups in resettlement. Thus, refugee resettlement involves an unsettling of social relations in creating identity, and consequently, a refiguring of that resettled belonging.

Unsettling Resettlement

The purpose of this paper was to examine the ways that structures and discourses in resettlement impact how refugees are recognized as political subjects and negotiate
identity in resettlement. I have illuminated here the ways in which discussions of identity, particularly for refugee groups, must remain mindful of the intercommunal negotiation of identity that exists in relation, and perhaps in response to, the constitutive discourses that define refugee resettlement. This research also underscores the importance of challenging the sedimentary, stable theories of identity that “assume a significant separateness between identities—of race, class, gender, nation, colonialism—that we mark as ‘self’ and ‘different’ that then allow the dialectic of ‘difference’ to be staged” (Shome & Hegde, 2002, p. 176). Similarly, this research of the “Lost Boys of Sudan” identity emphasizes what other scholars have already concluded about the problematic of applying theories of intercultural adaptation to explain experiences like refugee resettlement and migration (Chuang, 2003; Hegde, 2000; Subervi-Vélez, 1986, 1989; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Instead, critical communication research concerning identity must consider the ways that the nuances of mobility in refugee contexts—including the particulars of history, persecution, forced migration, relocation in refugee camps, refugee resettlement and the threat of deportation—factor into the ways identity is communicated and belonging is negotiated. In this instance it is not enough to say that mobility and exclusion matter; we must excavate how they matter (Shome & Hegde, 2002, p. 176).

Additionally, refugees in U.S. resettlement challenge dominant conceptions of political subjectivity that void refugees, through definitions of statelessness and fear, of recognition as speaking-subjects. As should be clear from this analysis, the “Lost Boys” are speaking strongly about the contexts they fled and the situations they now experience, making change in resettlement as a community, but also for greater publics; and the “Lost Boys” are not unique as a refugee group in doing this work. I urge, as many have, for state actors and service providers to look to refugees groups first in making decisions about the particulars of resettlement policy and programs. This includes speaking with refugees about their needs both before and after resettlement to ensure that they are provided with useful resources. It also means enabling refugees in resettlement with the power to enact those policies and programs. For, as Ong (2003) illuminates, the regulating techniques used by the state to form refugees into proper-subjects rarely work out as planned. However, refugees will make the resources work, for “subjects interpret and act in ways that undo systems of classification (cultural, ethnic, moral), refuse different kinds of objectives (involving needs, desires, behavior), and thwart rules of surveillance and punishment” (p. 17). And in these strategic responses, identity and belonging for refugee communities is continually negotiated. Research concerning cultural identity must attend to the ways that subjectivity and the acts resounding from that public recognition complicate how identity and belonging matter for refugees in resettlement.

Qualitative examinations of refugee resettlement must attend to the ways that the receiving state and nation position refugees within the social imaginary of belonging. Related scholarship must also examine the ways that refugees are interpellated and refigured into certain national histories and identities via the systemic discourses prevalent in resettlement. Finally, studies of refugee resettlement must consider
how the particulars of a refugee’s experience influence how identity and belonging will be communicated in communities of resettlement.

Scholars examining the particulars of refugee resettlement must also question the ways that their own tacit cultural understandings enter the research context and representation of the research. In my own experience, the layers of my own assumptions about culture, relationality and communication called me to analyze the data, and subsequently critique my analysis; to write and theorize and then critique the connections that I was making. This work cannot and should not be done in solitude, nor can it be done quickly. Krulfeld (1998) underscores the importance of dialogue and participation with participants about the connections and implications researchers come to in researching refugee contexts. In this research, dialogues over time provided means to question and understand the layers of discourse that shape the refugee resettlement context for the “Lost Boys.” These conversations provided space to examine how discourses of the state and nation intersect and impact the ways in which the “Lost Boys” construct belonging in resettlement. And even with this space and participation, I recognize that there are still complexities and connections of the “Lost Boys” experience that are beyond my capacity to know; that my own positionality in discourses of whiteness, nationality, education, gender and class constitute what I can(not) know, both on my own and in dialogue. Recognition and acceptance of this (un-)knowing are vital to accepting a stance of ethical singularity in qualitative research. As Davis (2002) illuminates, “There is always an excess to the Subject (in the form of a secret which escapes even the strongest desire to disclose); it is that which escapes disclosure that constitutes the limits of responsible encounter with an/other” (p. 146). Rigorous awareness of this excess in reflecting upon the research site and interactions, as well as the research analysis and representations must be central to the critical qualitative communication project.

Notes

[1] While I problematize the ways in which the “Lost Boys of Sudan” label discursively positions this group of Southern Sudanese refugees, it is currently the most accurate label for describing the particular community that I researched with in this study. Alternative labels such as Sudanese refugees or Southern Sudanese refugees include groups that are not participants in the “Lost Boys” resettlement and construction of identity.

[2] I recognize that the increased attention to civil war and subsequent peace accords in Sudan may change this recognition; however I posit that the average U.S. citizen still does not know much about Sudan, just that it is a place where there is current conflict.

[3] May 16th is the day that the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/SPLM) began to fight against the Northern Khartoum government.

[4] The importance of a gendered analysis cannot be underscored enough. One of the first questions I receive upon explaining this research is whether or not there are “Lost Girls” too. The answer is that there are many orphaned Sudanese women, but that they were not accounted for in the refugee resettlement interview process. Hence, while nearly 4,000 “Lost Boys” are resettled in the U.S., only 87 “Lost Girls” have been granted resettlement. Moreover, participants’ responses to interview questions concerning community-building and leadership consistently centered on masculinity or “maleness” as a rationale for being able to make decisions about the community and center.
References


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