The Atlantic

My Fargo

A writer reflects on her experience growing up as one of the very few Asian Americans in her hometown in North Dakota.

Dave Kolapck / AP

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It was a simple request from my editor, one that should have taken minutes, not days. *Please send me a copy of your bio.* Because I am a private person, I labored over a single paragraph, trying to strike a balance between sharing too little and revealing too much. One line in particular worried me, but I chose to include it because its omission would have left nearly a third of my life unaccounted for.

Fifteen months later, in the weeks leading up to and following the publication of my first novel, every interviewer with whom I spoke seized upon that one line in my bio: “Jung Yun grew up in Fargo, North Dakota.”

“So what was that like?” they all asked.

I understood why they were curious, why some version of this question has followed me throughout my adult life. North Dakota is one of the least diverse states in the country. People often assume that growing up in Fargo as a Korean-American immigrant, particularly during the 1970s and '80s, had to be strange. And it was.

When my mother, sister, and I immigrated to the United States in 1975, we joined my father, who had arrived a year earlier to make a home for us. After a brief stint in Chicago, which he dismissed as too expensive, dirty, and unsafe, he settled down in Fargo because it felt like "a big small town." At the time, Fargo was home to approximately 55,000 people, largely of German and Scandinavian descent. Racial and ethnic minorities made up just over one percent of the population, and it was possible to go for weeks, sometimes even months, without seeing another non-white face.

In grade school, my older sister and I were the only Asian American students. The two other minorities enrolled were Native Americans who happened to be in my grade. They were quiet girls—one Lakota, the other Sioux—whose threadbare clothes and erratic hygiene habits earned the ridicule of certain classmates. When both girls moved back to their respective tribal reservations within a year of each other, I kept my head down and hoped that my classmates wouldn't turn their attentions to me, keen as they were to point out anything that made people different.

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During interviews with the press, I always try to focus on what was good about Fargo—the low crime rate, the excellent public schools, the affordable real estate—all the things that drew my father there in the first place, advantages that millions of people in this country may never have. But my relationship with my hometown has always been a complicated one. Most of the people we encountered in Fargo—adults and children alike—were welcoming and kind to us. Those are the public stories that I choose to tell. What I leave out is any mention of the small but vocal minority that made us feel unwanted, the private stories of stereotypes and slights, racial epithets and outright hostility.

Given this environment, I was a dedicated student in school, with an engine that ran for a singular purpose—to leave the state as soon as I could. At the age of eighteen, I enrolled at Vassar College in New York and met other Asians, other minorities, other "others." Surrounded by the type of diversity

that I knew was a better, more accurate reflection of the world, Fargo began to fade in my rearview. And I allowed myself to forget the many good things that kept my parents there, the same good things that made the place home to a new generation of immigrants while I was away.

In 1980, the Refugee Act standardized resettlement services for all refugees admitted to the United States. This legislation prompted a movement away from individual churches that sponsored refugees, one family at a time, in favor of social-service agencies and non-profit organizations that assisted groups of refugees that had been approved for resettlement by the federal government. In Fargo, the first large introduction of newcomers to the community began in the '90s with Kurdish and Bosnian refugees. Later came the Somalis and Sudanese. Unlike my family, immigrants in search of economic and educational opportunity, these newcomers met the U.N. High Commission's definition of a refugee, people living in fear of persecution based on "race, religion, their nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion." None of them chose to live in Fargo, which is known for its harsh climate and long winters. Despite a common misperception, refugees don't get to choose where they live. They go to communities that are willing to take them.

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For many years, I was unaware of the resettlement efforts in Fargo. Because I lacked this larger context, the random sightings of a non-white face never failed to surprise me. During my first year of graduate school, I returned home for Christmas and saw a black man parking his car at the mall. Unlike the occasional foreign-exchange student or visitor passing through town, he was the first black person I had ever seen who seemed to live in Fargo, which I gathered from his North Dakota license plate. As he entered the mall, he said, "excuse me" to someone who brushed past and I noticed his thick accent, which sounded "foreign," for lack of better terms. "Where are you from?" I wanted to ask, but I held back, aware that I'd been asked the same question so many times in the past, sometimes in ways that exacerbated the feeling that I didn't belong.

These days, Fargo bears little resemblance to the big small town I left behind. The population has doubled, fueled by an economy that remained robust even during the worst years of the recession.

The widespread availability of jobs has helped stem the tide of people leaving the state, as well as retain many of the refugees resettled in its major cities. According to Tim Mahoney, the mayor of Fargo, the local business community has played an important role in supporting ongoing resettlement efforts. "We were a state that was losing population," he told me. "Kids would graduate and move as fast as they could to the big city. Employers realized they need[ed] people to work... Our unemployment rate is 2.2 percent, so we have about five or six thousand jobs available for people right now."

Despite some early tensions and concerns that the influx of refugees would strain local resources and social services, many city residents began to see refugees in a more relatable light. "We all want similar things," Mahoney said. "We want to have a job, we want to be able to take care of our children, to have good schools... You've got to understand. Truly, in the community what's happened is that people are embracing [resettlement]. They really do like the fact that we're growing."
Because the demographics of the city began to change soon after I moved away, the effect of returning is always surreal, akin to walking through a door to an alternate reality that I wish to be true, but still find hard to believe. I am no longer the only "other" when I fly into the airport or shop at the supermarket. I can walk downtown or through the park and simply blend in, my presence no more reason to stare than the next person's. There's a mosque now, as well as a Buddhist temple. And across the Red River in Moorhead, there's an immigrant center that helps newcomers learn how to become small-business owners and entrepreneurs.

Perhaps what surprises me most is the fact that North Dakota currently leads the nation in refugee resettlement per capita, and shows no signs of slowing. Of the 400 to 500 refugees who arrive annually in the state, approximately 70 percent settle in Fargo, with the rest going to Grand Forks and Bismarck. While refugees are still not allowed to choose where they live, some express a preference for the area to reunite with relatives, and to the degree possible, the State Department tries to honor such requests. Last year, according to information provided by Lutheran Social Services of North Dakota (LSS), 90 percent of the refugees resettled in North Dakota joined family members who were already living there.

The list of countries from which these refugees fled reads like an atlas of human atrocity: Bosnia, Somalia, Iraq, Bhutan, Sudan, the Congo, Liberia, Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Afghanistan. These are places that have been torn apart by war, famine, ethnic conflict, and genocide. And yet, as was the case in the '70s and '80s, a small but vocal minority does not welcome the presence of refugees in the community and is actively seeking to put an end to future resettlement. The 2015 terrorist attacks in

Paris and San Bernardino, California, coupled with President Obama's announcement that the U.S. would accept at least 10,000 Syrian refugees this year, seemed to inflame these sentiments even more. A Change.org petition to halt resettlement efforts garnered nearly 3,300 signatures. Letters to the editor of *The Fargo Forum* and comments on social media serve as reminders that Fargo is still home to some who regard difference with hostility, filtered through the lens of misunderstanding, miscommunication, and fear.

LSS, a social-services ministry based in Fargo that has received both praise and criticism for its role in helping refugees resettle in the city, is one of the organizations at the center of the resettlement effort. As is sometimes the case in a state with only 750,000 residents and fewer degrees of separation as a result, I learned that the chief executive officer of LSS, Jessica Thomasson, is a woman I knew from when we were both in high school. Thomasson took over the helm of LSS less than two years ago and has devoted much of her time to the ongoing work of clarifying misperceptions about refugees and raising awareness about their contributions to the community. For her efforts, The Fargo Forum named her Person of the Year in 2015. When I asked Thomasson why refugee resettlement is part of her organization's mission, which includes local support and resources such as family and pregnancy counseling, gambling-addiction therapy, housing and senior services, a food bank, and disaster relief, she reminded me that communities of faith have had a long and active role in resettlement work, and were largely responsible for the modern refugee resettlement movement.

"Most faith traditions have a value of welcoming the stranger, a value of showing hospitality, of showing love for your neighbor," she said. "It's maybe articulated a little bit differently in [various] religions, but that's a pretty common tenet of most faiths, and I think it's one of the reasons why after World War II, it was really faith communities around the country and around the world that decided to come together… There was this feeling that we have to do something to help these individuals and families who have lost everything and been displaced because of war and conflict. It's still something that we're called to do."

Thomasson's comments offer sharp relief to the mad times we live in, when opposition to refugee resettlement, particularly with respect to refugees from the Middle East, has reached an alarming tone, even among those who profess to have faith. I listen to and read the rhetoric of politicians, both here and abroad, who refer to the refugee crisis as "a problem" that needs to be dealt with, like unemployment or rising interest rates. I can't help but think that history's judgment of us as a society will be defined by how we care for strangers who want the same thing that all of us want—a safe place to call home. For the first time in my life, Fargo gives me hope.