

## Book Review—*Identity and Power in Narratives of Displacement* by Katrina M. Powell

Tabetha Adkins—Texas A&M University-Commerce

As I write this review, the news is filled with stories about refugees, immigration, and displaced people. Today Canada announced that it may not be able to offer asylum to refugees, mostly Haitian, leaving the United States after the election of President Trump. Debates rage in the American court systems over Trump's so-called travel ban, and earlier this year Trump announced the end of DACA. The Trump administration has reportedly approved a draft of the RAISE Act that would use a points system to deny the entry of applicants who do not possess strong English-speaking skills, are not STEM graduates, lack high investment potential, or are not winners of Nobel Prizes or Olympic medals. More than half of the state governors in the United States have publically stated that they oppose resettling Syrian refugees in their states. The treatment of refugees has been at the center of many of Pope Francis's public speeches and even the theme of the band U2's Joshua Tree 2017 tour. The question of what to do with displaced people has serious political, economic, and even religious implications.

As scholars of literacy, we recognize these debates as ones tied to issues of language, power, and context—or, in other words, to rhetoric and literacy. And as the authors in this special issue demonstrate, there is much to be learned about literacy from the ways activists and citizens alike engage literacy in order to affect policy, voting, and public opinion. Katrina M. Powell's book *Identity and Power in Narratives of Displacement*, part of the Routledge Series in Rhetoric and Communication, is therefore timely and serves as an example of how these uses of literacy predated social media and so-called "fake news." A follow-up to her first book, *The Anguish of Displacement: The Politics of Literacy in the Letters of Mountain Families in Shenandoah National Park* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2007), *Identity and Power* analyzes the ways in which narratives of identity are at work through five distinct case studies: those displaced for "public use" space, survivors of Hurricane Katrina, Sudanese refugees, displaced peoples of Sri Lanka, and residents of Virginia's care centers for patients with intellectual disabilities. While *The Anguish of Displacement* relies on archived letters and communications between park and government authorities and those displaced by the park project, the scope of *Identity and Power in Narratives of Displacement* is significantly broader. In order to examine narratives of identity for displaced peoples, Powell examines documentaries, newspapers, photographs, user comments on online stories, personal interviews, and social media posts. Powell's diverse source material serves as a model for literacy research.

Powell's focus is twofold: first, she examines the concept of what it means to be a displaced person, giving deep contextual information about each of the five studies of displacement covered in the book. She shows how narratives of identity serve both to create displaced people and to justify their displacement to the general public. Then she shows why it is important to disrupt these narratives:

“[w]hen extraordinary or exemplary narratives of overcoming great odds are privileged, we tend to overlook the very routine, cyclical, layered displacements that not only have occurred historically, but have also occurred (and continue to occur) within the same places, across the same cultures, and to the same people” (172). Powell makes a powerful argument for “considering...the ways that identity, narrative, public policy, and legislation intersect and interact” because displacement “is a recurrent trope” that is important for a deeper and more critical understanding of the current political and economic forces at work in society (189).

One of the features of this book scholars will want to emulate is the way Powell carefully unpacks the most important terms from the text. For example, she takes care to show that she uses the term “displacement” specifically because of its kairotic focus on *place* (12). Similarly, she returns throughout the book to the controversy surrounding the word “refugee” and the political and economic reasons some displaced people might seek or reject that term. Finally, she takes time to carefully contextualize the complex historical and political conditions surrounding each case study. This contextualization is respectful to informed readers—it assumes neither ignorance nor deep historical understanding.

In the opening chapter, Powell contextualizes her feminist, transdisciplinary, and transnational approach to understanding the function of rhetoric as a resource. Her framework combines “autobiography, genre, narrative, and displacement theories” to address the justifications for and the narratives constructed about those who are displaced (4). As a result, Powell “create[s] an integrative framework of interpreting human rights discourses and formulate[s] a new analytical paradigm for understanding the ways that human rights are configured rhetorically across a spread of historical and geographical locations” (5). The following five chapters treat different displacement scenarios as case studies. Because Powell utilizes disparate examples, the chapters could appear to be disjointed, but Powell takes time at the end of each chapter to explain the links and trends she sees in each case study.

Chapter Two, “Reservations, Interments, and a Little Pink House” examines eminent domain—another issue at the heart of debates about the possibility of building a wall between the United States and Mexico—and the historical contexts of these laws. In this chapter, Powell shows how narratives of identity help the government eliminate uncooperative residents in eminent domain cases, and especially how the eugenics movements of the 1920s assisted the removal, institutionalization, and even sterilization of women who resisted displacement. This chapter makes a strong case for disrupting narratives created by those in power about those displaced by eminent domain—especially narratives about who is worthy of assistance.

Powell carries the theme of narratives about worth into Chapter Three, “Surviving the (Un) Natural Disaster in New Orleans,” which examines the context surrounding the term “refugee” in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Powell shows that the displacement of citizens of New Orleans is recursive—while the hurricane is often at the center of what she calls “the racialized displacement narrative,” the construction of Interstate 10 in the 1970s, which cut right through the historically black neighborhood of Tremé, led to the first displacement of many of the same people (63). Much like the white mountaineers addressed in chapter two and the mountain residents in *The Anguish*

of *Displacement*, residents of Tremé were portrayed as slum-dwellers. I see this chapter as the most impressive because here Powell masterfully interweaves the very complex contexts surrounding the narratives of identity for Hurricane Katrina's victims. These narratives include CNN's Wolf Blitzer's characterization of the victims as "so poor and [...] so black," the history of displacement within New Orleans, and the appeal from community leaders to the media to discontinue use of the racially problematic term "refugees." Powell teases out the ways in which the term "refugee" is usually reserved for those who abandon their country, and in this case, Hurricane Katrina victims were abandoned by their country, especially by the inconsistent policies and actions of FEMA following the storm (75).

In the following chapter, "Buying Refugee Narratives," Powell turns to displaced people who actively seek the term "refugee" and the rhetorical power of this term. In this case study, Powell focuses on "The Lost Boys" of Sudan and constructions of "good" or "ideal" refugee identities. Specifically, she shows how the United Nations and other NGOs train volunteers to collect the kinds of refugee narratives that are clearly tailored to emphasizing the victimization of refugees toward the goal of fundraising. These trends are epitomized by documentaries on The Lost Boys and other Sudanese refugees that often retell stories of "[t]he smiling, grateful, quiet refugee" because, frankly, sad stories help raise funds (116). But Powell points out that while the collection of refugee life narratives and the presentation of these narratives can have real material consequences on the sources refugees have available to them, these kinds of narratives also limit the "discursive identities available to individual people" (121).

The information about rhetorical and material effects of the term "refugee" is necessary context for fully understanding the damaging effects of the media's oversimplification of war and displacement in Sri Lanka in the next chapter, "Barriers and Boundaries." Powell opens with a discussion of how portrayals of people who participated in the war are skewed by bias, ideas about traditional gender roles, and a desire to bring meaning to seemingly needless deaths. She then introduces several literary responses that attempt to disrupt "'refugeeness' and how it is written, performed, and examined" (149). These efforts "ask audiences to reconsider what a displacement narrative is and how dominant discourses are troubled" (160). Powell highlights some literary efforts to disrupt dominant narratives about displaced people like the play "The Captain Has Come" by Jean Arasanayagam. She argues that these "interior" or individual stories resist "dominant narratives and creates a different narrative space in which to consider processes and consequences of displacement" (154). In other words, and in the case of Sri Lanka, that means recognizing that we must pay attention to individual stories that represent or were created by the people who experienced displacement over dominant narratives often created in efforts to make sense of a horrific situation.

In the final chapter, "Layers of Displacement," Powell addresses the problem of repeated displacement—the fact that many displaced people are actually experiencing what she calls layers of displacement because they are deemed to be displaceable. She makes a powerful call in this chapter to examine the assumptions readers have of displacement narratives and the often-paternalistic tone with which these narratives are delivered. She heeds readers to be wary of the tropes of "savages, victims, or saviors" in these narratives and instead look for evidence of resistance (174). The danger of these tropes is that they make "action less likely" (174) and instead can make a reader feel as

though their sentimentality or empathy is enough. To illustrate her point, Powell examines the case of residents with intellectual disabilities who live in care centers called Virginia Training Centers (VTC). She explains the historical contexts for these centers and the governmental decisions to close them. Powell focuses on how the VTC and families of the residents who live in the VTC rely on human rights discourse to argue for the continued support of the VTC, but she also shows how terms like “vulnerability” have become useless buzzwords for cases like this one, resulting in fewer strategies to resist displacement and narratives about displaced people.

Powell’s work is a lesson in why it is essential to disrupt dominant narratives about vulnerable subjects and also a model for how to do so—by drawing on a diverse bank of resources ranging from personal interviews to artistic expression. Powell’s previous work has made masterful use of archival materials, and in *Identity and Power in Narratives of Displacement*, she illustrates how to trace the rhetoric surrounding an issue for which no archive exists. This book is a tremendous contribution to scholars interested in rhetoric, narratives, refugee studies, and related fields.