

# Community Literacy Journal

---

Volume 7 | Issue 2

Article 7

---

Spring 2013

## Keywords: Refugee Literacy

Michael McDonald

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/communityliteracy>

---

### Recommended Citation

McDonald, Michael. "Keywords: Refugee Literacy." Community Literacy Journal, vol. 7, no. 2, 2013, pp. 95–100, doi:10.25148/clj.7.2.009352.

This work is brought to you for free and open access by FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Community Literacy Journal by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [dcc@fiu.edu](mailto:dcc@fiu.edu).

## Keywords: Refugee Literacy

*Michael McDonald*

The subject of refugee experience poses compelling problematics for the study of community literacy. Yet, community literacy projects that support language acquisition, cultural orientation, and cross-cultural communication are some of the most important resources available to newly resettled refugees. Refugee students and adult learners arrive in the U.S. and are forced to learn English as quickly as possible while also having to figure out the new and complicated bureaucratic trappings of finding a job, making doctors' appointments, and enrolling in school. Refugees, however, cannot be considered one homogeneous group, and the issues surrounding refugee resettlement and community literacy play out in a myriad of ways. Community literacy research, particularly of the ethnographic variety, teaches us that very little can be generalized or concluded about literacy practice or literacy acquisition from one community to another. This observation cannot be overstated when it comes to the literacy issues faced by refugee communities in the U.S. In this keywords essay, I outline several aspects of refugee experience that carry important implications for understanding literacy in the contexts of refugee resettlement. While this essay is not meant to describe *how* refugees gain literacy or what their literacy practices look like—such work requires ethnographic study—instead, I offer a range of ways for talking about literacy in relation to refugee experience, particularly through the lenses of the interdisciplinary field of refugee studies and rhetoric and composition. Despite the implications refugee experience might have for understanding literacy in global contexts, the perspectives of refugees have been given only cursory attention. A synthesis of contemporary scholarship, however, affords us sufficient grounds to enact a more reflective, ethical, and responsible approach to understanding literacy-learning in refugee communities.

Refugee studies is a distinctly interdisciplinary field that emerged as a “whole new” object of study after World War II (Malkki 497), and many scholars have described the twentieth century as the “age of the refugee” (Lewellen 171). Given the amount of forced displacement so far in the twenty-first century, we are not any closer to amending that reality. Refugee studies includes a wide range of approaches to the study of refugee experience, including the theorization of refugee identity in contradistinction to citizenship (Nyers), the particular experiences of refugee children (Watters), the implications gender has on displacement and resettlement (Grewal), the study of the interview process crucial to the granting of asylum (Bohmer and Schuman), and the study of how refugees are perceived by the international community and general public (Malkki). As Charles Watters explains, merely the topic of migration is a “wide-ranging, multifaceted and highly complex phenomenon” that is only made more complicated when the transnational movement of people is forced (9).

Refugee identity is vexed by several competing logics. In practical terms, the word “refugee” denotes a legal status that marks one eligible to receive humanitarian aid, particularly in the form of asylum, though much of the research on refugees agrees that refugee status is difficult to apply evenly across different experiences and

contexts. The practice is fraught with inconsistency. The United Nations provides a conventional definition: an individual who seeks asylum in another nation-state due to a “well-founded fear of being persecuted” (UNHCR 16). Implementations of this definition, however, vary from one governing body to another and, according to refugee studies scholar Peter Nyers, operate according to processes “deeply rooted in political and ideological calculations,” making legal refugee status a form of aid that is unevenly distributed (13).

On the policy level, Nyers observes that the category of *refugee* operates according to a “state logic,” or what “can be understood as a power of capture” wherein “subjects of the classification regime of ‘refugeeness’ are caged within a depoliticized humanitarian space” (xiii). The state logic, in other words, regards refugees as one homogeneous mass of people, and the “depoliticized space” in which they are “caged” constrains both their physical and rhetorical mobility. According to state logic, refugees are measured against that which they are not: “adult,” “historical actor,” “sovereign citizen” (xiv). Individual refugee identity is only acknowledged during the process of determining who is eligible to receive asylum, a process heavily burdened by ideology. For instance, Inderpal Grewal examines how governing bodies might use gender to restructure policy, to determine within a given displaced population who is “more” deserving of aid, resettlement, or protection (159).

Malkki argues, however, that refugees can often come to “appropriate the category as a vital, positive dimension of their collective identity in exile” (377). One way in which refugees express this more positive view is through telling stories of their experience. Since both Malkki and Nyers refer to the “depoliticizing” tendency of governing bodies, we might tentatively term this positive understanding of refugeeness a kind of “political logic,” which draws attention to the historical, political, and communal aspects of refugee experience and its implications for different forms of agency. Even the consideration of refugee identity as positive can rebuke state logic because it immediately contradicts constructions of the refugee figure as a passive object of aid. The stories refugees tell of their own experience are both personal and political, historicizing and concrete, and represent one important intersection between literacy research and refugee studies.

As noted earlier, these logics compete with one another, and the state logic can often silence or appropriate the stories refugees tell. However, the “state,” as Nyers uses the term, does not only imply nation-state authority or jurisdiction but includes governing bodies such as the United Nations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), charitable organizations, and networks of volunteer aid workers, religious organizations, the Red Cross, and so forth—a panoply of actors who govern and bureaucratize refugee subjects as they cross various manifestations of borders. This is analogous to Foucault’s description of “governmentality.” According to Foucault, governmentality refers to the “ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses, reflections, and tactics that allow the exercise” of power (108). In this light, the state logic can be taken to reflect the “ensemble” of attitudes and political processes which produce knowledge about refugees—especially in the way the discourses of power that “cage” refugee subjects are not solely used by the state in its official capacity but also to shape popular attitudes toward refugee identity: political, economic, and military agendas are realized through refugee discourse. Of course, the

prevailing attitude is that refugees are victims, are objects of pity, and because they are sometimes entirely dependent upon aid (when in a refugee camp, for example), they are often seen as a burden on the system. The popular attitude is that only the developed nations of the First World may aid or uplift them. In this way, the concept of “governmentality” points toward the many competing logics, including neoliberal capitalism, that shape public perception of refugee communities.

Literacy research has several important implications for popular perceptions of refugees. One implication concerns the alleged link between literacy and economic development. Harvey J. Graff argues that this, the most persistent of myths about literacy, seems to have been “unreflectively incorporated into the principal narratives of the rise of the West and the triumph of democracy, modernization, and progress. Indeed, literacy was equated with those qualities, each seemingly the cause of the other in a confused causal order” (113-14). The assumed connection between progress and literacy places an explicit emphasis on English literacy in particular. Reading and writing are generally regarded as empowering, but nothing is seen as more empowering or uplifting as English, the steward of democracy and neoliberal capitalism. Graff’s work is crucial for understanding the intersections between literacy and refugee experience because the countries from which refugees are resettled are often misperceived as backward, deficient, illiterate, preliterate, resistant to assimilation, or underdeveloped. Ethnographic studies of literacy in global contexts such as those done by David Barton and Brian Street address such representations. Street’s work on the “ideological model” of literacy, in particular, is helpful for deconstructing the dominant assumption that literacy is inherently empowering or benign and that certain forms of literacy are universally valuable.

Out of such research has come a critique of the perceived link between literacy and citizenship. This relationship is tenuous because, as Amy J. Wan argues, uses of the term “citizenship” are often “ambient” in nature but should be viewed as context-bound rather than universal (29). Wendy Hesford’s work also poses problems for studies of citizenship because she argues that despite embracing a more global perspective, scholars have continued to “take for granted the nation-state and citizen-subject as units of analysis” (788). This is a helpful reminder that students and adult learners who identify as refugees occupy a liminal space in the minds of both researchers and the general public.

Deborah Brandt’s conceptualization of “literacy sponsorship” is one of the most useful approaches for understanding literacy and refugee experience. Brandt defines “sponsors of literacy” as “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy – and gain advantage by it in some way” (166). In the lives of refugees, literacy sponsors come in the form of aid workers, case managers, volunteers, tutors, and teachers, as well as aid and charity organizations who promote literacy as a means for attaining citizenship, education, and employment. Literacy not only takes the form of English language acquisition, but also includes cultural literacy through orientation classes and volunteer mentoring programs. This is the main form of contact new refugees have with other communities. Literacy sponsorship is a framework for studying the many asymmetrical relations of power pertaining to community literacy projects in refugee communities.

Studies in rhetoric offer a useful approach for examining the state and political logics discussed by Nyers and Malkki, particularly in relation to the stories that refugees tell and how they choose to tell them. In “Rhetorics of Displacement: Constructing Identities in Forced Relocations,” Katrina M. Powell observes how “displacement narratives written *about* the displaced often go through a process of *othering* whereby they blame the victim, have particular notions of citizenry, and at worse, dehumanize the displaced through metaphors of savagery”; in turn, stories of refugee experience can provide evidence of how individual refugees can strategically “speak back to” these discourses of power (original emphasis 302). Rhetorical analysis of stories written by and about refugees is another productive intersection between refugee studies and literacy research. Carol Bohmer and Amy Shuman take up similar work in *Rejecting Refugees*, a case study analysis that examines the policies and procedures used to evaluate applications for refugee status, most notably the process of resettlement interviews. These are processes in which the rhetorics of power that “cage” refugees play out most visibly.

While this essay is not an exhaustive review of the intersections between literacy and refugee studies, I have tried to present a tentative outline of the issues most relevant to community literacy. There are many studies across a range of disciplines that address specific refugee populations and their experiences with literacy and education. And, looking through the growing list of “keywords” essays in the *Community Literacy Journal*, several keywords appear immediately applicable to literacy projects in refugee communities. For example, many refugees come to the U.S. as adults or are too old for high school when they are resettled and must pursue a G.E.D., and as William Carney suggests, *adult literacy* is an important concept for understanding the lives of English-language learners and new immigrants. Stephanie Vie’s description of *qualitative research* speaks to the heterogeneity of refugee experience that requires on-the-ground observation rather than sweeping generalization. When we conduct research in refugee communities, though, we also participate in them, and this has implications for our understanding of *reciprocity*. Miller, Wheeler, and White demonstrate that the relationships researchers form with the communities they work in are important for approaches to social justice. Common amongst these keyword essays is an insistence on attending to the many contexts under which community literacy research takes place in an effort to foster ethical and responsible relationships with the communities in which we choose to do our work. As a keyword, *refugee literacy* describes experiences that do not easily mesh with dominant models of literacy, citizenship, and community, but it does nonetheless provide a compelling and important inroad to better understanding literacy in global and local contexts.

## Works Cited

- Bohmer, Carol, and Amy Schuman. *Rejecting Refugees: Political Asylum in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. London: Routledge, 2008. Print.
- Barton, David. “The Social Nature of Writing.” *Writing in the Community*. Eds. David Barton and Roz Ivanic. Newbury Park: Sage Publications, Inc., 1991. 1-13. Print.

- Brandt, Deborah. "Sponsors of Literacy." *College Composition and Communication* 49.2 (1998):165-185. Print.
- Carney, William. "Keywords: Adult Literacy." *Community Literacy Journal* 4.2 (2010): 100-04. Print.
- Graff, Harvey J. *Literacy Myths, Legacies, and Lessons*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2011. Print.
- Grewal, Inderpal. *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms*. Durham: Duke UP: 2005. Print.
- Hesford, Wendy. "Global Turns and Cautions in Rhetoric and Composition Studies." *PMLA* 126.3 (2006): 787-801. Print.
- Lewellen, Ted. C. *The Anthropology of Globalization: Cultural Anthropology Enters the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Westport: Bergin & Garvey, 2002. Print.
- Malkki, Liisa. "Refugees and Exile: From 'Refugee Studies' to the National Order of Things." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995). 494-523. Print.
- . "Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization" *Cultural Anthropology* 11.3 (1996). 377-404. Print.
- Miller, Elisabeth, Anne Wheeler, and Stephanie White. "Keywords: Reciprocity." *Community Literacy Journal* 5.2 (2011): 171-177. Print.
- Powell, Katrina M. "Rhetorics of Displacement: Constructing Identities in Forced Relocations." *College English* 74.4 (2012): 299-324. Print.
- Street, Brian. "Orality and Literacy as Ideological Constructions: Some Problems in Cross-cultural Studies." *Culture and History* 2 (1987): 7-30. Print.
- UNHCR. "Text of the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees." *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees. 2007. 16-52. Print.
- Vie, Stephanie. "Keywords: Qualitative Research." *Community Literacy Journal* 5.1 (2010): 175-180. Print.
- Wan, Amy J. "In the Name of Citizenship: The Writing Classroom and the Promise of Citizenship." *College English* 74.1 (2011): 28-49. Print.
- Watters, Charles. *Refugee Children: Towards the Next Horizon*. London: Routledge, 2008. Print.

