

## The Politics of Literacy in Shenandoah National Park Letters

The key project in contemporary Literacy Studies is to understand how language functions in society. Recent studies emphasize the political, social, and historical factors shaping certain “literacy events,” i.e., the ways that individuals use literacy to operate within certain parameters (Brandt, Stuckey, Cushman, Schaafsma, Heath, Jones Royster). Within the broader field of Rhetoric and Composition, the term literacy itself has become contested, ranging in definition from reading and writing to a more all-encompassing consideration of the ways that reading and writing are represented, narrated, and culturally understood. Understanding literacies in context enables further insights into the historically constructed ways of knowing about certain events and historical moments. Indeed, as Susan Miller’s recent work suggests, literacy, especially the study of “ordinary acts of writing” (3), is crucial to our understanding of historiography. As “socioliteracy” studies (Gee) continues to develop, “situated literacy” (Barton and Hamilton), or literacy in context, asks scholars to discern the social practices surrounding written texts so as to understand the complexities of a specific literacy event.

"Rhetorics of Displacement" therefore focuses on a particular, situated literacy event: the writing of letters by Virginia mountain people to government officials in the 1930s. These hand-penciled letters were prompted by the mountain families’ removal from their land and homes under the Federal Right of Eminent Domain, after the Shenandoah National Park (SNP) was approved by Congress in 1925. After their land was “condemned” and their displacement was imminent, mountain families waited for government homesteads to be built. During this period, they wrote to National Park and other government officials, requesting various services, property, and harvests. The 300-letter collection recently made public at the Park’s Archives depicts a complex dynamic between the people and the government, and also reveals a moment in American history when the social, historical, and political climate was ripe for the displacement that occurred. The letters expose multi-faceted issues surrounding literacy, its use and disuse, and its power to document individual stories within broader hegemonic narratives about the Virginia landscape and the mountaineer.

The impetus for these letters is a complicated story, with the makings of a southern gothic novel where people are arrested and forcibly removed from their land, the state is sued, homes are razed, and lives are forever changed. What simultaneous political, social, and economic forces must have been at work for such a large-scale removal of people from their homes, especially when the displacement was in service of a tourist attraction rather than for water reservoirs (e.g., Tennessee Valley Authority)? What might make a Blue Ridge mountaineer—a person whose primary source of income is selling the potatoes grown on a small farm, a person whose living is made from the land, a person who has never attended school—write a letter to a government official? What social practices and values were at work in orchestrating the correspondence between powerful government agencies and people with little more than “plain lumber” houses and barns? Through rhetorical and discourse analyses of the letters, this project considers literacy as social and symbolic action (Jones Royster, Burke) and explores what individual literate acts reveal about public educational practices. How do disempowered individuals represent themselves to those in positions of power in written form? In what ways might we consider SNP a “literacy sponsor” (Brandt), through which we can examine the larger

social, political, and economic systems that influence what literacy is acquired and how it is consequently used? Certainly, the Virginian letter-writers examined in this project would not have written these letters, would not have recorded their requests and lives in this way, without the imposition of the park and the officials managing the park. Thus, such a large-scale displacement effort has a role in the education and literacy of the surrounding communities. That is, how did literacy education and practice change as a result of the displacement, once the mountain people moved to the lowlands?

"Rhetorics of Displacement" fills two significant voids in Literacy and Appalachian Studies. Like Susan Miller's "Assuming the Positions: Cultural Pedagogy and the Politics of Commonplace Writing" and Jacqueline Jones Royster's "Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women," my project examines the literate practices of a particular community and what those literate practices suggest about larger social, political, and historical issues. As a socioliteracy study, "Rhetorics of Displacement" breaks new ground by placing competing discourses about the Shenandoah region and its history alongside one another. While family life of this region has been explored in the fields of folklore (Perdue and Perdue) and archaeology (Horning), this study reads these discourses in conjunction with contemporary literacy theory, to reveal the complex imbrications gender, material condition (i.e., health, housing, wealth), and education in determining—and resisting—social position. The tensions and contradictions present in the correspondence of mountain folk and government officials uncover complex negotiations of power and social determination. Because these letters have never been published, "Rhetorics of Displacement" highlights voices not yet included in current studies of literacy.

While this study provides new access to an important collection of letters, it also examines self-representation versus published representations and thus re-writes the story of SNP, Appalachia, and the myth of the mountaineer. Dominant discourses about the region avowed that the mountain families were all poor, illiterate, and ill-suited to make decisions for themselves. Park promotional brochures, newspaper articles, and letters among government officials, explicitly and implicitly assert that the mountain people were not capable of being part of the process of establishing the park. However, the rhetorics employed by the mountain families in writing their letters counter monolithic discourse written about them. As an act of social participation, these writers resisted the rhetorics of isolation inscribed for them and created a unique identity that extends the collective memory of this time and place. Elucidating these re-constructed identities, "Rhetorics of Displacement" builds upon works like "Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes: Back Talk from an American Region" (eds. Billings, Norman, and Ledford); and "Appalachia in the Making: The Mountain South in the Nineteenth Century" (eds. Pudup, Billings, and Waller) which discuss individual and communal resistance to outside constructs of Appalachia, both historical and contemporary.

However, as the theoretical stance of this project suggests, re-writing the myth of the mountaineer is not the primary goal of this book. Ultimately I argue for the inextricable link between literacy and identity. The analyses in "Rhetorics of Displacement" contribute to the evolving theories of identity and autobiography and ultimately theorizes that the autobiographical act, such as the rhetorical act of letter writing, is a "fundamental challenge to identity" (Kristeva). That is, in asserting an identity counter to the one constructed for them,

mountain families not only resisted a large government agency but also radically shifted their sense of who they were. This project examines letter writing, an autobiographical act of asserting agency and identity, as resistance and social participation. In this way, this book provides a unique combination of literacy, linguistic, and rhetorical analyses to better understand the rhetorical and social act of letter writing.

What these letters—both those written to mountain inhabitants and those written by them—make resoundingly clear is that issues of identity are, at core, issues of power. Identities constructed, enforced, and resisted through literacy go hand in hand with larger power dynamics, reinforced with symbolic—and sometimes literal—violence. Chapter One, “Historical and narrative representation: Literacy and the identities constructed for the mountaineer,” situates the “official” rhetorics surrounding the formation of SNP within broader conversations within Appalachian and Literacy Studies concerned with the ways identities are represented in order to serve political and economic goals. After briefly outlining the political and representational history that perpetuated Appalachian stereotypes, I analyze the different ways that state and federal officials constructed identities for mountain residents that rendered them displaceable.

The following chapters focus on the multiple ways that mountain residents constructed themselves in relation and counter to government representations, using specific and strategic literacy practices. Chapter Two, “‘I’ve always known him to be a good citizen’: Constructing identities of advocacy,” examines written advocacy networks established on behalf of mountain residents who wished to keep their homes, harvest their remaining crops, or remove building materials. Ethical claims to status and connection are asserted through the letters of attorneys, wealthy residents, and business people writing in support of these residents, and in the letters mountain residents wrote on behalf of each other. These ethical claims are supplemented by the pathos appeals to shared middle and upper class values presented in Chapter Three. “‘I ain’t never give the Park no trouble’: Constructing identities of cooperation,” discusses letters where mountain residents carefully construct themselves as cooperating with park officials, even as they work towards advancing their own individual rights and interests. In contrast, the letter writers presented in Chapter Four assert agency by using literacy as a form of open resistance. “‘You all...sending me your harble letters’: Constructing identities of resistance,” analyzes letters that more explicitly resist the ways mountain families were represented and exploited. Their acts of social participation illustrate an enacting of literacy, when no other means is available, to resist not only what was happening but also the ways they were constructed.

Finally, chapter five, “Literacy and letters as social participation: Constructing identities that resist cultural codes,” extrapolates from the literate practices of this particular community to theorize what those literate practices suggest about larger social, political, and historical issues. Through the study of literacy, the complexities of identity and region can be better understood, and in turn, an understanding of regional and identity contexts enables a fuller understanding of literacy practices. Ultimately, this analysis lays the groundwork for further study about gender and culture, and the conditions for displacement that continue to affect those with relatively little power. As contemporary displacements occur (e.g. refugees from Sudan, Bosnia), this project exemplifies the necessity of placing literacy at the center of historical and

political study.

Two publications have resulted so far from my research on this collection of letters, one in the journal "Biography," and one forthcoming in a collection on women and literacy, edited by Peter Mortensen and Beth Daniell. In addition, I have presented this work at five major conferences, including two international conferences (two will occur this summer). LSU has supported this project through three research grants and additional grants for travel to SNP's Archives in Luray, VA, and the National Archives in Washington, D.C. and College Park, MD. My primary research is complete, including transcriptions and cataloging of all the letters, and I have completed a full preliminary draft of the book manuscript. During the award period (academic year 2005-2006), I plan to conduct final research and revisions to this manuscript.

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