



Hipatia Press  
www.hipatiapress.com



Instructions for authors, subscriptions and further details:

<http://qre.hipatiapress.com>

## **Photographic Images of Refugee Spatial Encounters: Pedagogy of Displacement**

Binaya Subedi

1) Department of Education, The Ohio State University, United States of America

Date of publication: October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2013

Edition period: October 2013 – February 2014

---

**To cite this article:** Subedi, B. (2013). Photographic Images of Refugee Spatial Encounters: Pedagogy of Displacement. *Qualitative Research in Education*, 2(3), 277-301. doi: 10.4471/qre.2013.29

**To link this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.4471/qre.2013.29>

---

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

The terms and conditions of use are related to the Open Journal System and to [Creative Commons Attribution License](#) (CC-BY).

# Photographic Images of Refugee Spatial Encounters: Pedagogy of Displacement

Binaya Subedi  
*The Ohio State University*

*(Received: 27 August 2013; Accepted: 6 October 2013; Published: 28 October 2013)*

## Abstract

---

This paper examines my effort to document the experiences of a Bhutanese refugee community in a mid-western city of the United States. In particular, the essay looks at housing experiences the community encountered and my efforts to translate the events through photographs. The essay also explores how oppression operates in relation to refugee experiences. Recognizing that knowledge of recent refugees of color has been absent and perhaps may not be addressed in school curriculum in the near future, this photo essay project was created to serve as a curriculum about marginalized communities who are invisible in the curriculum. By using photographs, I explore three concepts that may help us examine the relationship between space and politics: (1) ideal spaces (2) violated spaces (3) damaged spaces. Lastly, by examining refugee experiences, the paper examines pedagogical approaches utilizing photographs to document oppression.

---

**Keywords:** displacement, oppression, photographs, violence, pedagogy, curriculum, refugees, space, politics, migration.

# **Imágenes Fotográficas de Encuentros con las Viviendas de los Refugiados: Pedagogía del Desplazamiento**

Binaya Subedi  
*The Ohio State University*

*(Recibido: 27 de agosto de 2013; Aceptado: 6 de octubre de 2013;  
Publicado: 28 de octubre de 2013)*

## **Resumen**

---

Este artículo examina mi esfuerzo para documentar las experiencias de una comunidad de refugiados butaneses en una ciudad del medio oeste de los Estados Unidos. En particular, el ensayo examina las experiencias de vivienda de la comunidad, y mis esfuerzos para traducir los eventos a través de fotografía. El ensayo también analiza cómo funciona la opresión en relación con las experiencias de refugiados. Tomamos en cuenta que el conocimiento de los refugiados recién llegados de color ha estado ausente y tal vez no estará disponibles en los programas escolares en un futuro próximo. El proyecto de ensayo fotográfico fue creado para servir como un currículo sobre las comunidades marginadas que son invisibles en el currículo. Mediante el uso de fotografías, exploro tres conceptos que pueden ayudarnos a examinar la relación entre el entorno y la política: (1) los espacios ideales (2) los espacios violados (3) los espacios dañados. Por último, mediante la exploración de las experiencias de refugiados, el documento explora estrategias pedagógicas para documentar la opresión a través de la fotografía.

---

**Palabras clave:** desplazamiento, opresión, fotografías, violencia, pedagogía, currículo, refugiados, espacio, política, migración

Visual knowledge is never innocent, although it may be taken less seriously as a legitimate form of knowledge. The mobilization of visuals for personal and political purposes is not new (Said, 1981; Lutz & Collins, 1993). The production of visual knowledge operates independently or side-by-side with written narratives to claim its legitimacy. In his seminal work in media studies, Hall (2013) argued that visuals signify multiple meanings depending on historical and cultural contexts. According to Hall, analysis of representations needs to go beyond the exchanges between producers and consumers of media and requires analysis on how narratives on power and politics influence representations. Jackson (2004) asked, “How can visual matter, whether found in the field or created by the field-worker, tell stories about the cultural Other?” (p. 36). What political or transformative purpose can visual research serve? This paper examines my effort to document the experiences of a Bhutanese refugee community in a mid-western city of the United States. In particular, the essay looks at housing experiences the community encountered and my efforts to translate the events through photographs. By using photographs, I explore the following three concepts that can enable us to examine the relationship between space and politics: (1) ideal spaces (2) violated spaces and (3) damaged spaces. I also explore how educators can develop a pedagogy of displacement, the politics around why displacements take place, and how displaced subjects are received.

Photographs are produced for personal consumption as well as to be part of the vast network of visual media culture. Ultimately, photographs tell stories and (mis)represent what is being photographed. In *The Children are Watching: How the Media Teach about Diversity*, Cortés (2000) argued that media, particularly visual media, influences how students learn about social differences such as race, religion, gender, etc. Since critical discussion of visual knowledge is often absent in schools, formal and informal curriculum, including textbooks, reinforces dominant narratives on self-other relationships. Apple (1996) suggested that school curriculum is a political project, including the writing, selection, and the adoption of textbooks in schools. Apple (1996) wrote:

The curriculum is never simply a neutral assemblage of knowledge, somehow appearing in the texts and classrooms of a nation. It is always part of a *selective tradition*, someone’s selection, some

group's vision of legitimate knowledge. It is produced out of the cultural, political, and economic conflicts, tensions, and compromises that organize and disorganize a people. (p. 22)

Considering that what is produced via the camera lens is political knowledge, any photographic representation of a community cannot avoid the relationship between space and power. A few years ago, I was asked to evaluate photographs for a textbook company that was trying to publish a book on world cultures that targeted an early childhood audience. It included a very short segment on Nepal that emphasized cultures and it included multiple photographs with a short narrative about each image. The photographs that I evaluated emphasized three broad themes: (1) nature (2) school experience and (3) extreme poverty. Nature was mostly addressed through images of the mountains and through images of rhinos and elephants, and included one digital image of a monkey holding the Nepali national flag. The theme of school experience was explored in a visual consisting of smiling children going to school on the back of a cart that was pulled by two cows, a very rare image in the country. Images of extreme poverty were embedded in photos such as a close-up photo of a disheveled child looking at the camera and a house that seemed to be crumbling in the background. Despite the backdrop of poverty, the child was still smiling. For me, all three themes fell into the orientalist trope of representation that provided a one-dimensional portrayal (exotic, deviant, etc.) of a geographical space. Gupta & Ferguson (1997) argued how the project of representing spaces is about representing culture and that questions of power cannot be separated from how ethnographic knowledge is produced in fieldwork. Thus, as in the case of the Nepal segment, the use of visual medium consciously or unconsciously produced political representations about space and culture. It seemed to me that the photos attempted to capture what readers desired to see about Nepal and was part of the visual voyeurism that has been part of the western tradition of reifying differences. Clearly, representations are inseparable from conversations about colonialism and imperialism (Smith, 1999)

## **Photographs Beyond the “Inclusion” of the Other**

As one who researches refugee communities, I share the concern with many scholars regarding unconscious or intentional exclusion of knowledge of marginalized communities in school curriculum. The narrative of exclusion is political since the knowledge of a refugee community may be seen as being too complex, too critical, or too difficult to be understood by mainstream children/youth and may be omitted from the curriculum. Or it may be viewed as less legitimate knowledge to be learned in schools. Recognizing that knowledge of recent refugees of color has been absent and perhaps may not be addressed in classrooms in the near future, the photo essay project was created to serve as a curriculum about marginalized communities who are invisible in the curriculum. The project also sought to address how oppression operated in relation to refugee experiences, and how pedagogy about displacement could be developed. The research was based on a two-year ethnographic work (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). The research questions for the study emerged from community identified needs and concerns. It utilized observation, document analysis, and interviews to collect data from more than forty participants.

Clearly, the very idea of “inclusion” is political. For marginalized people, inclusion often means token representation. For this reason, although ethnic minorities may be more visible via photographs, illustrations, etc. in school textbooks, their stories and experiences continue to be devalued and silenced. Unfortunately, photographs in textbooks and in school curriculum often function as a way to superficially include the Other. One may see photographs of people of color in a school’s hallways to show diversity of the school or textbooks may include photographs of people of color, yet their history or experiences are consistently absent, especially those about whom it is deemed difficult to speak. In other worlds, marginalized subjects can be “present” yet be absent because of how knowledge is packaged in the curriculum. McCarthy (1998) spoke about how “textbooks embody real, lived relationships of representation, production, and consumption that tend more or less to suppress minority identities and reproduce existing social inequalities” (p. 114).

I also share the sentiments of educators who point out that textbook visuals are simply left alone or dismissed, and they are often not connected to written narratives since they are not read as serious forms of academic

knowledge. Too often, the relationship between visuals and geographical or spatial concepts is not addressed as a critical topic of research (Driver, 1995; Rose, 2003). I also agree that visual knowledge is often not scrutinized and critical pedagogical approaches are simply avoided so that visuals continue to reproduce selective social imagination, including stereotypes. In school textbooks, what needs to be asked or interrogated about visuals and the accompanying narratives is often foreclosed.

Although I envisioned my research as a way to include what is silenced in curriculum, my interpretation of inclusion or supplementation was to disrupt dominant ways of reading refugee experiences and to help students/educators understand how oppression operates against those who are displaced. Inclusion narratives often repeat stereotypes and are inaccurate in their portrayal of people of color since they reinforce the dominant culture as the norm. In discussing indigenous Hawaii representation in textbooks, Kaomea (2000) explored how well-meaning visual representations reinforce dominant ideas about the Other, and how the very idea of “inclusion” of Hawaiian themes in textbooks exoticizes indigenous subjects as tour guides and as a labor force that is (always) ready to serve tourist desires. The commodification of indigenous experiences in curriculum such as indigenous land as tourist spaces and indigenous cultures as being the space for tourist pleasure reinforces colonial ideas of indigenous cultures as being inferior and having limited intellectual potential.

Discussion of visual representation helps us to understand broader politics of knowledge: “the whole process of who gets to define whom, when, and how. Who has control over the production of pictures and images in this society?” (McCarthy, 1999, p. 114). One way to read works on photography is by recognizing that representations are always open to interpretation and that representations speak about what is present as well as what is absent. Concerning visual representations, Sensoy (2010) argued that educators need to ask, “What stories are told? How are they told? Who tells whose stories? Whose interests are served?” (p. 49).

## **Research and Refugee Community**

Since 2008, more than 60,000 Nepali speaking Bhutanese refugees have settled in the United States. In the Midwestern city where I conducted the research, close to 8,000 refugees had settled in what is commonly referred by those who work with refugees as “slums.” The Bhutanese refugee population lived in refugee camps in Nepal for close to 20 years and began settling in North America, Australia, and Europe in 2008. The expulsion of the refugees from Bhutan was triggered by the dominant state belief that Bhutan needed to be ethnically, linguistically and religiously “pure.” Many of the youths who came to the United States were either born or raised in refugee camps in Nepal. A majority of the adults with whom I came into contact had limited or no formal reading or writing skills in Nepali or in English.

Pratt’s (1992) category of “contact zones” was useful in my research as it helped me to understand the complex and heterogeneous ways in which marginalized subjects negotiated power relationships, and to understand the dominant narratives that attempted to discipline them. Pratt used the term “contact zones” to theorize the ways in which indigenous cultures interacted with European powers in colonial Latin America. I was interested in taking photos of contexts that spoke about power relationships and began taking photographs within and around the apartment complexes where the refugees lived. Since most had lived in refugee camps and did not have much economic possession (credit history, etc.), the refugees settled in economically depressed urban areas where apartments were vacant. Drug activity and burglaries were quite common within and near the apartment complexes. Internet reviews indicated that the complexes were not (highly) recommended places in which to live. This essay examines photographs that expose the politics of housing and the organization of space for refugees. I intend to demonstrate how questions of power, politics, and oppression shape refugees’ living conditions. Housing shapes how one negotiates community and everyday living, and is connected to economic and political discourses (segregation, gentrification, etc.). I propose that the settling of a refugee population in a particular geography is not innocent. The housing discrimination faced by the refugees needs to be seen within the larger or the historical context of housing discrimination faced by

people of color in the United States. Property narratives are undoubtedly connected to discourses on economic injustice and racialization.

Ginsburg (1994) used the term “parallax effect” to speak about the need to compare visual representations that are produced by mainstream and alternative sources so that they can be placed in conversation with each other. During 2012 and 2013, I took and used photographs to generate dialogue and public conversation about refugee conditions and experiences. The photos were also used to influence public policy. First, to address housing concerns, I wrote letters to landlords and sent photos to document the conditions of apartments since the landlords consistently were unresponsive to requests for repairs and to poor conditions within the apartments. As I observed the Bhutanese refugee experiences, I was reminded of Jonathan Kozol’s work *Savage Inequalities* that documented the relationship between poverty and segregation and the ways in which African American children were shorted-changed from quality schooling experiences. Kozol’s work explored the racialized and class struggles that economically underprivileged people of color experience in the United States. His work helped me to contextualize the challenges the Bhutanese refugees experienced in an urban space. Furthermore, the project also initiated a critique of the dominant representations of Asian experiences in the United States. It was an attempt to critique (1) model minority narratives which conflate Asian experiences with white experiences (2) the perception that Asians are economically wealthy and (3) the view that Asian newcomers automatically “make-it” because of their “culture”.

### **Researcher Positionality and Photography**

The role of the photographer is never innocent. Photographers are indeed agents of knowledge production and dissemination processes. In other words, “visual medium is not an objective and disembodied process but one that is always culturally mediated” (Parvez, 2011, p. 687). Ways of “seeing, looking, and knowing is fundamentally shaped and determined by the traditions of representations, and ways of looking within which one has been socialized” (Sensoy, 2010, p. 53). The kinds of photographs researchers take reflect their politics, whether they are approaching the project as “neutral” or as openly social justice or change-oriented endeavor. For example, Dorsey & Diaz-Barriga’s (2010) photographic research

challenged stereotypical representations of life on U.S.-Mexico border regions. The authors pointed out how dominant representations render the region as (only) being desolate, poverty stricken and a conflict-ridden zone. The authors provided alternative representations that accounted for how communities negotiated everyday living in the border areas and how they negotiated bi-cultural formations. Their work emphasized how local subjects re-negotiated borders walls in which the wall became yet another object of fascination, as well as a constraint that disrupted movement of people.

Although photography has been historically associated as an art form—an activity one may take-up as a recreational activity—the photographs that are produced are always cultural mediated and reflect the politics of the space/people and the historical period. Scholars remind us that the self cannot be detached from where, when, or how a photographer may use the camera to document a community's experience (Parvez, 2011) My involvement was beyond the realm of intellectual curiosity since the photos were taken to produce knowledge, to critique misrepresentations, and to serve as a political project that called for social change. Along with my intention to use the photos for pedagogical purposes, the purpose of the research was to inform the public on refugee conditions within the (refugee) geographies of the United States. I was interested in documenting where or how refugees lived and the kinds of institutions and oppressions they encountered, since such a topic is rarely discussed in school curriculum. It is often assumed that the refugees will be free, prosperous, and secure the “American dream” once they experience life in the United States.

I began the research project recognizing that I was both an insider and an outsider. Although I speak Nepali, the language of the Bhutanese refugees, and I am familiar with some of the community's cultural practices, I identify myself as a Nepali immigrant who entered the United States to be educated in a university setting. Indeed, my academic affiliation with a university is a symbol of privilege. I am quite naïve about what it means to be dispossessed of citizenship, to shoulder the history of refugee migrations, and to embody the difficult experience of being a refugee in the United States. My initial encounter and unlearning about the condition of refugiality took place through academic knowledge and later through observations and community work (Fadiman, 1997; Ong, 2003).

### **Housing Spaces and Visual Representations**

Appadurai (2006) suggested that both de-territorialization and re-territorialization have been recurring themes within the contemporary global flow of migration. As refugees are uprooted from their lands (the process of de-territorialization), they negotiate new cultural and political spaces (re-territorialization). The process of negotiating racial, cultural, and political spaces is not without challenges in mainstream society; as Malkki (1997) argued, the condition of uprootedness is often represented in pathological terms as if displacement would have permanent “loss of moral and, later, emotional bearings” (p. 65). When refugees experience new forms of displacement, they are forced to negotiate the space and the politics of (that) space. I elaborate on three spatial concepts explored in the photos that speak of the challenges refugees encountered on being uprooted: (1) ideal spaces (2) violated spaces (3) damaged spaces. One must look at the concepts not as separate events but as part of the larger refugee struggles for spatial and cultural citizenship.





*Visual I and II: The Representation of Ideal Spaces of Living*

The owners of the apartment complexes where Bhutanese refugees settled marketed their properties through two narratives: (1) as a space of/for escape and (2) as a space of old-fashioned English values. The theme of escape was conveyed by naming apartment complexes with oceanic themed words such as Isles, Islands, Harbor, Nantucket, etc.—as if one were renting a space for the purpose of tourism. The photo of the pond behind the apartment complex illustrated the tourist theme—yet the community did not have access to the pond. We may ask: Why do such names provide currency or status in U.S. society? Why may people find naming practices appealing—especially people who are in search of safe spaces? What might be the politics behind portraying apartment complexities as seeming to be tourist destinations or as places to/for escape? Similarly, the brochures distributed by the apartments emphasized travel metaphors and portrayed the complexes as alternative, tranquil location. The travel narrative is ironic considering the displacements into which the refugees had been forced. Also, the names were of a classical English (white) era and used as a device to claim their elite status via words such as Manor and Restoration. Visuals of apartment complexes often included images of castle-like structures with elegant trees surrounding the property. In contrast, the classical English period was rarely ideal, tranquil, or democratic, yet naming the apartment complexes as such represented the spaces as elite, prosperous, and safe.

The fence in both photographs raises questions about the relationship between the fence and surrounding communities. What does the fence signify? Does it provide safety or does it provide the illusion of protection? One may read the fence as a symbol of protection or a deterrent from burglary, etc. For a newcomer to the country, the initial impression of the area may be that of the area being safe and stable, a feeling that refugees desired to have after years of living in refugee camps. However, the fence also served as a way to separate the boundaries between the refugee community and a privileged (religious) private school; the fence served to protect the school from the undesirable elements. Consequently, the purpose of the fence was to keep the residents *within* the parameters of the fences. Thus, it is useful to read the naming practices and the function of the fence as not simply producing comfortable or safe spaces and feelings; it also operated to counter the image of the neighborhood as being violent, although violence was prevalent in the area. The invention of the apartment as an ideal location can be seen as an effort to whiten a brown or black neighborhood. We cannot neglect the larger conversations on the connection between property narratives and whiteness, and how such properties are involved in the (white) image-making project.

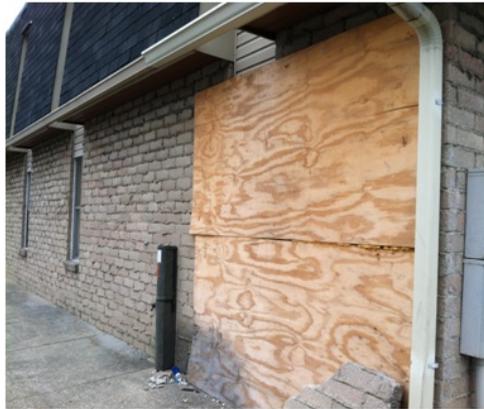


*Visual III*

Visual III speaks to the irony of comfort that is often promised to underprivileged communities. One cannot avoid the paradox of naming a

segment of the complex “Luxury Lane”, since the living space was anything but a space of high-life. Many refugees encounter or are “sold” what one may call “luxury” life, however, the visual of the boarded-up window demonstrates the impossibility of imagining and experiencing what might be considered “normal” ways of being and living. The image illustrates how degrees of normalcy are exploited to market the properties to underprivileged communities. Such exploitation implores us to examine how such geographies can be read as spaces of violations.

### **Violated Spaces**



*Visual VI and V*

If the production of ideal spaces creates the myth that refugees can be content at a designated space, the previous photographs document violations and interrupt the ideal images myth that is often created about living spaces. The images speak of the difficulties or the impossibilities of being in an ideal space. Considering where the refugees settled, their desire for being unharmed becomes difficult to negotiate. Thus, the desire to be unharmed becomes, once again, a central narrative in refugee lives. The discourse of violence resurfaces again in a new nation-state that often claims to be free, democratic, and safe.

Similar to other marginalized communities who are trapped in deep poverty, choice is an illusion for refugee subjects. When they arrive in the United States, there is no choice involved in where they can live. Via the expert knowledge of resettlement agencies, refugees are placed in apartments that claim to be hospitable. I learned that although families may sign the lease, they are often settled in pre-determined areas. A primary reason refugees lived in the apartments was because they desired to be close to their families and community members. The notion of living together is appealing since they can rely on each other to negotiate new systems and cultures. The Bhutanese community often settled in areas where they could easily access “public” systems such as buses, hospitals, grocery stores, and schools. Since they came to the United States with limited or no financial resources, they were settled in economically depressed areas where crime was common. Often they were exploited because of their lack of English skills and know-how of U.S. systems, and they often become victims of crime and robbery (St. John, 2009).

We may ask: How do both photographs depart from the ideal aspect of life (in U.S.) that is often produced to local/global audience? What does the first photo indicate about rupture in “luxury” narrative of housing? What are the unspoken linkages between refugee life and violence? Refugee life does not necessarily mean that one has encountered physical violence but it does suggest that one has endured various forms of oppressions that have led the community to being resettled. One may call these forms of oppressions accepted forms of violence since they are not systematically addressed by the people in power. The placement of refugees in a particular space makes them targets of violence and who are often ignored by mainstream society since the said violence is considered to have little significance to the social order.

Parvez (2011) argued that when researchers take photographs they cannot fail to consider how the produced image is not only a story of an event but that the image also speaks of a larger story or a series of events. Thus, a particular image can be part of the larger contemporary or historical narrative that transcends geographical boundaries. In essence, the violence endured by refugees in their neighborhoods is part of the larger history of violence they have endured over time. Although the context of the violence differs in context and scope for Bhutanese refugees, it nevertheless becomes part of the refugee ways of being in the U.S.-- a condition and a lived reality of being a refugee.

As I walked around the complexes, disrepair was evident. Boarded up windows were a common sight, remnants of vandalism, burglary, car run-ins, and the like, Visual IV shows a boarded up window and documents the aftermath of a burglary. I was surprised at how long the boarded up windows remained, as if there was no urgency for their repair. These temporary structures had permanent auras; one family put plastic on the damaged windows since the apartment owner constantly delayed fixing the broken window.

Studies indicate that economically poor subjects become disproportionate victims of crime since violence in such areas is tolerated or condoned by institutional authorities such as the police and local governments (Massey & Denton, 1993). Thus, economically underprivileged communities are reluctant to report crime since they think that institutional authorities will do little to address their conditions. At meetings with the police and the Bhutanese community members, the refugees often reported that they avoided reporting crimes since the police were reluctant to hear their concerns. I sensed that a concern stemmed from the fact that the police did not have Nepali-speaking interpreters who could translate their needs to proper authorities. Institutions such as the police seemed to have little credibility among local Bhutanese subjects since such entities rarely assisted or showed genuine concern over their predicaments. This condition created/s a cycle of violence since perpetrators target low-income communities that the police monitor less (or not at all), and thus translate into being a low risk burglary area for perpetrators of violence.

Visual V documents the case of a possible arson that was posted by the local city in the aftermath of a fire at the apartment complex. Although no one was injured, many Bhutanese refugees lost their possessions. The sign

about arson promises a potential reward and suggests that informants contact the city if they have information related to the arson. Some Bhutanese community members speculated that fire seemed to follow the refugees because many had endured two or three fires in refugee camps in Nepal that had wiped out all or most of their limited possessions. Since makeshift houses in refugee camps were often made of bamboo sticks and were built in close proximity to each other, the houses rarely survived an inferno.

The suggestion that an act is arson implies an intentionality of the act. Scholars who study the sociology of arson remind us that we not discount the politics of arson and how the common image of perpetrators as juveniles or pyromaniacs is misleading (Bentacur, 2002). One might wonder if institutions (owners, insurance agencies, etc.) are involved in property destruction and how they might benefit from arson. This is not to say that the landlords were involved in the arson in the Bhutanese community; however, the politics of arson ensued when community members were indirectly blamed for creating the condition for the arson. It was suggested that the fire had started at a storage area that was located next to an apartment. It was suggested by the renters that tenants had put used furniture in the storage area and thus had created the conditions for the arson. It was also implied that one of the refugees may have thrown a cigarette toward the storage area that had led to the fire.

Malkki (1997) argued that refugees are often represented as a “problem” since they are assumed to carry cultural deficiencies, which presumably create conditions for their displacements. “They are not ordinary people but represent, rather, an anomaly requiring specialized correctiveness and therapeutic interventions” (p. 63). Malkki also argued that too often the challenges faced by refugees are not framed within political or economical discourses that create the displacement. But that the “problem” the refugees encounter is linked to the “bodies and minds (and even souls) of people categorized as refugees” (p. 63).

What the community found problematic was the lack of resolution of burglary and arson cases; who perpetuated the violence or how it was perpetuated was never resolved. Ironically, the police station was close to the apartment complex, however the community believed that the police had done limited or no investigation regarding the incidents. The nearby presence of police coupled with their perceived lack of response to the

violence raised broader questions about the silences of institutional authorities, and how violence in the community was deemed of lesser significance than in other communities, and not addressed systematically.

### **Damaged Spaces**





*Visual VI, VII and VIII*

These three photos speak about “broken” or “damaged” spaces that are inter-connected to broader economic or political discourses. The images of the broken metal stairs and the damaged stone beam (located below a corridor) were taken at the complex where the owners repeatedly refused to address community concerns about unhealthy conditions such as mold, cockroaches, and rats within the apartments. The refusal to address the problems speaks to the perception that refugees can and should live in such conditions. How can we read the unwillingness to address the concerns raised about the conditions? The lack of response suggests that refugees can “tolerate” such conditions. Spivak (2005) argued that responsibility should be about more than providing a response, that ethical response is not only about responding when the Other calls for a response but when one recognizes or senses before “the call of the other” (p. 152). A central concern for many Bhutanese was the refusal of landlords to hear the community concerns and their adamant refusal to examine the conditions such as water leak and broken windows. Their lack of response can be read as non-recognition--- as if the Other does not need to be recognized, does not exist, or that the Other does not require a response.

The photo documenting red notices on windows raises questions about the politics of displacement. The city issued a red sign order to indicate that the property was deemed unsafe and occupants needed to immediately relocate from that space. The notice read: “Danger. Do Not Enter. Unsafe to

Occupy.” The yellow ribbon next to the pole (that was used to support the second floor concrete structure) signifies that the area was structurally unsafe. The red notice appeared because the city claimed that the building was structurally unsafe for tenants to occupy because of broken stairs, unsafe beams, and such, not because it was unhealthy to inhabit. The notice does not address the unresponsiveness or the refusal of the landlords to respond to the repeated refugees’ requests. The apartment was cited because of the relentless work of local activists who continually called upon the city to look into the inhumane living conditions within the apartments.

In speaking with community members, I learned that the community desires to leave the complex but they were frustrated with the city’s urgency that they relocate, although the conditions had existed for nearly two years. In demanding that tenants find alternative accommodations, it is safe to argue that the sense of crisis served the interests of those affiliated with official power/authority. The crisis of the victims of violence did not seem as legitimate as the crisis of official authority. Yes, there is power and politics involved in determining crisis; although the tenants already knew the building was unsafe, in this case the city determined when it was and was not safe to live and enter the premises. One cannot ignore the role of the State in governing subjects, and in this case, refugee subjects and in producing crisis. For me, the events surrounding the notice by the city illustrated how and when states of emergency are determined by people in power although the emergencies may have existed for an extended time. It also raised broader questions about why the landlords were not cited or reprimanded for their negligence in addressing aforementioned concerns within the apartments. I recognize that one can read the city’s approach as a strategic move, a creative strategy, that helped refugees resettle in another location. Yet the naming of the “problem” as only a structural (building) failure suggested that no one was responsible for the displacement because the property had aged and was not suitable for living.

### **Pedagogy of Displacement**

In this essay I have raised the question of how educators can examine visual knowledge about space and displacement in fieldwork (1) to critique knowledge (and oppression) that serves people in power and (2) to produce knowledge that can transform society. Clearly, well-meaning research can

reproduce oppression however well-intended a project might be. I found Kumashiro's (2004) work useful in framing questions about the politics of visual knowledge and its relationship to oppression, in particular how our practices can be un/consciously embedded within oppressive systems. By addressing how oppression operates in society and in schools, students can critique "common-sense" practices that are "masked by or couched in concepts to which we often feel social pressure to conform, including such concepts as tradition, professionalism, morality, and normalcy" (Kumashiro, 2004, p. xxviii). A common-sense approach to visual knowledge about refugees can provide comfort since one does not have to emotionally or personally invest in unlearning one's positionality and privilege. "After all, commonsensical ideas are often what helps us to make sense and feel at ease with the things that get repeated in our everyday lives" (Kumashiro, 2004, xxiii). Photographs that document oppression can be used to disrupt how the definition of common sense and normal are reproduced in schooling contexts.

Kumashiro (2004) proposed that educators critique mainstream knowledge that reproduces oppressive systems. He wrote:

Students come to school with harmful, partial knowledge about people from different racial backgrounds, gender identities, religious affiliations, and so forth: either they know very little, or they know only what is inferred from stereotypes and myths. When schools do not correct this knowledge, they indirectly allow it to persist unchallenged. (p. xxv)

The harmful, partial knowledge of which Kumashiro wrote is consistently reinforced via visual representations in school curriculum. By examining the politics of how displacement takes place, students can interrogate how people become refugees in the first place. Clearly, the well-meaning inclusion of marginalized experiences or histories of refugees is not enough. The common-sense approach to knowledge is problematic since it reinforces dominant views about refugee subjects and does not challenge social structures that perpetuate oppression and constant displacements.

Aside from the intent of addressing oppression, I took the photos to raise broader questions around the pedagogy of displacement and how to speak

about the politics of displacement about refugees. The pedagogy of displacement asks that learners unlearn how they have come to understand the category of refugee and to question how refugees are represented and received locally and globally. I found Sensoy's (2010) visual analysis strategies useful to frame pedagogically the refugee settlement and displacement photos. Sensoy proposed that pedagogical practices consider how questions of truth are mobilized for political purposes. The practice of examining truth claims can be extended to how representations may be essentialist or how or why mass media may distort a particular story. Visuals of ideal spaces illustrate how "truth" about living spaces is mobilized and mis-represented. We can ask: why are such portrayals more prominent in relation to economically underprivileged communities?

Sensoy (2010) proposed that educators consider the context in which visuals are produced. "To examine the context of an image invites us to explore how various groups make meaning of any particular representation, and how that representation challenges dominant ideas in society" (p. 51). Context enables us to understand the settings in which visuals are produced so that learners can understand the cultural and political meaning the images might signify. My photographs speak about spatial politics and the politics of recent refugee displacement. We may ask: what is the relationship between refugee settlements and the local/national politics?

Sensoy (2010) proposed that educators consider the motivation or the politics of why certain photographs may have (more) currency. "Who produces any particular representation? For whose consumption? What motivations might any group have for putting forward particular representations?" (p. 51). The photos of ideal, violated, and damaged spaces speak of the politics of space and the non-innocence of photographs. They also speak of the politics of signs and notices posted in marginalized communities. It is worth considering what creates urgency in visual analysis work. Who orders a particular sign, whom does it order and why? Who decides the immediacy or the urgency of a condition? How are questions of responsibility addressed during the call for urgency?

Photographs can be used in classrooms as a supplementary (and radical) knowledge to speak to the broader issues such as displacement and oppression. Historically the meaning of texts was conflated with textbook knowledge in mainstream academic research. A more critical interpretation

suggests that texts can be spaces where language shapes meaning (bodies as texts, visuals as texts, etc.). Giroux (1997) wrote:

Texts do not refer merely to the culture of print or the technology of the book, but to all those audio, visual, and electronically mediated forms of knowledge that have prompted a radical shift in the construction of knowledge and the ways in which knowledge is produced, received and consumed. (p. 241)

Indeed, photographs are texts and are part of the debate about what is included and excluded in the formal school curriculum and the school knowledge system. Visual or written narratives about refugees are rarely included in schools, nor are contemporary racialized refugees' experiences explored in school curriculum. Using photographs as classroom texts creates spaces to discuss the politics of the mobilization of various texts, and how texts can become critical pedagogical tools to explore discourses on oppression.

I found hooks' (1995) writing to be useful to frame the relationship between images of displacement and its pedagogical usefulness. hooks has written about how photographs can be a critical space to interrogate images that reinforce white supremacist ideologies. In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks' (1994) reflected on her pedagogical practice:

My pedagogical practices have emerged from the mutually illuminating interplay of anti-colonial, critical and feminist pedagogies. ...Expanding beyond boundaries, it has made it possible for me to imagine and enact pedagogical practices that engage directly both the concern for interrogating biases in curriculum that reinscribe systems of domination (such as racism and sexism) while simultaneously providing new ways of teaching diverse groups of students. (p. 10)

To hooks, the use of critical teaching practices cannot be separated from the struggles and the questions of race, class, and oppressions that marginalized communities face. The use of photographs of refugees to document questions of power, knowledge, and politics is critically significant in the field of education--- especially since U.S. school curriculum is consistently silent about this marginalized area of inquiry.

Bell (1993) reminded us that race is a permanent feature of life in the United States. Refugees entering the United States are entering a geography where racial oppression has long been part of the dialogue on democracy and freedom. When refugees enter a space that has been produced as an ideal space, they enter a racial space. Property narratives are often racialized in the U.S. context since racialization determines how mainstream society looks at the subjects who occupy such spaces. Property/space determine where refugee children will attend public school and the kinds of “public” goods to which they will or will not have access. For this reason, the photographs can be seen as racialized images that speak to and of how racialized communities occupy certain status in society.

### References

- Appadurai, A. (2006). *Fear of small numbers: An essay on the geography of anger*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Apple, M. (1996). *Cultural politics & education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Bell, D. (1993). *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*. New York: Basic Book.
- Betancourt, J. J. (2002). The politics of gentrification: The case of West Town in Chicago. *Urban Affairs*, 37(6), 780-814. doi: [10.1177/107874037006002](https://doi.org/10.1177/107874037006002)
- Clifford, James & Marcus, G. E. (1986). (Eds.). *Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cortés, C. E. (2000). *Children are watching: How the media teach about diversity*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Dorsey, M. E. & Diaz-Barriga, M. (2010). Beyond surveillance and moonscapes: An alternative imaginary of the U.S.-Mexico border wall. *Visual Anthropology Review*, 26(2), 128-135. doi: [0.1111/j.1548-7458.2010.01073.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-7458.2010.01073.x)
- Driver, F. (1995). Visualizing geography: a journey into the heart of the discipline. *Progress in Human Geography*, 19(1), 123-134. doi:[10.1177/030913259501900112](https://doi.org/10.1177/030913259501900112)
- Fadiman, A. (1997). *The spirit catches you and you fall down*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

- Ginsburg, F. (1994). Culture/Media: A (mild) polemic: *Anthropology Today*, 10(2), 5-15.
- Giroux, H. (1997). Is there a place for cultural studies in college of education? In H. Giroux & P. Shannon (Eds.), *Education and cultural studies* (pp. 231-247). New York: Routledge.
- Gupta, A. & Ferguson, J. (1997). (Eds.). *Culture, power, place: Explorations in critical anthropology*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Hall, S. (2013). The spectacle of the ‘Other.’ In S. Hall, J. Evans & S. Nixon (Eds.), *Representation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (pp. 215-271). London: Sage.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress*. New York: Routledge.
- hooks, b. (1995). *Art on my mind: Visual politics*. New York: New Press.
- Jackson, Jr., J. L. (2004). An ethnographic flipflam: Giving gifts, doing research and video taping the native subject/object. *American Anthropology*, 106(1), 32-42.
- Kaomea, J. (2000). Curriculum of Aloha? Colonialism and tourism in Hawai‘i’s elementary textbooks. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 30(3), 319-344. doi: 10.1111/0362-6784.00168
- Kozol, J. (1993). *Savage inequalities*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- Kumashiro, K. (2004). *Against common sense: Teaching and learning toward social justice*. New York: Routledge.
- Lutz, C. A. & Collins, J. C. (1993). *Reading National Geographic*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Malkki, L. (1997). National geographic: The rooting of peoples and the territorialization of national identity among scholars and refugees. In A. Gupta & J. Ferguson (Eds.), *Culture, power, place: Explorations in critical anthropology* (pp. 52-74). Durham: Duke University Press.
- Massey, D. & Denton, N. (1993). *American apartheid: Segregation and the making of the underclass*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- McCarthy, C. (1998). *The uses of culture: Education and the limits of ethnic affiliation*. New York, Routledge.
- Ong, A. (2003). *Buddha is hiding: Refugees, citizenship, the new America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Parvez, N. (2011). Visual representations of poverty: The case of Kroo Bay, Freetown. *City*, 15(6), 686-695. doi: 10.1080/13604813.2011.609014
- Pratt, M. L. (1992). *Imperial eyes: Travel writing and transculturation*. London: Routledge.

- Rose, G. (2003). On the need to ask how, exactly, is geography “visual”? *Antipode*, 35(2), 212-221.
- Said, E. (1981). *Covering Islam: How the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Sensoy, Ö. (2010). “Ickity-ackity open sesame”: Learning about the Middle East in images. In B. Subedi (Eds.), *Critical global perspectives: Rethinking knowledge about global societies* (pp. 39-55). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous people*. London, England: Zed.
- Spivak, G. (2005). Use and abuse of human rights. *Boundary 2*, 31(1), 131-189.
- St. John, W. (2009). *Outcast United: An American town, a refugee team, and one woman’s quest to make a difference*. New York: Random House.

**Binaya Subedi** is Associate Professor in the Department of Education at The Ohio State University. United States

**Contact Address:** Department of Education, The Ohio State University, 1179 University Drive, Newark, OH 43055. Email: [Subedi.1@osu.edu](mailto:Subedi.1@osu.edu)