The Promises and Perils of Coalition Building in Academia

Dialogue and Coalition Building in a Multidisciplinary Writing Program

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Abstract: Cultivating and sustaining coalitions, even when informed by feminist values, is an enduring process, and one which cannot be accomplished without shared understandings of values and goals. As a selection of faculty from a multidisciplinary university writing program, we came together to discuss the strengths and richness afforded by the pluralism of our workplace, but also examined our challenges and inadequacies. We offer excerpts from those conversations, and creative riffs on them, in hopes that they will reveal the art and angst of the pursuit of intersectional feminism in other institutional contexts.

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WHAT IS COALITION?

Thoughts from some faculty of the University Writing Program, George Washington University
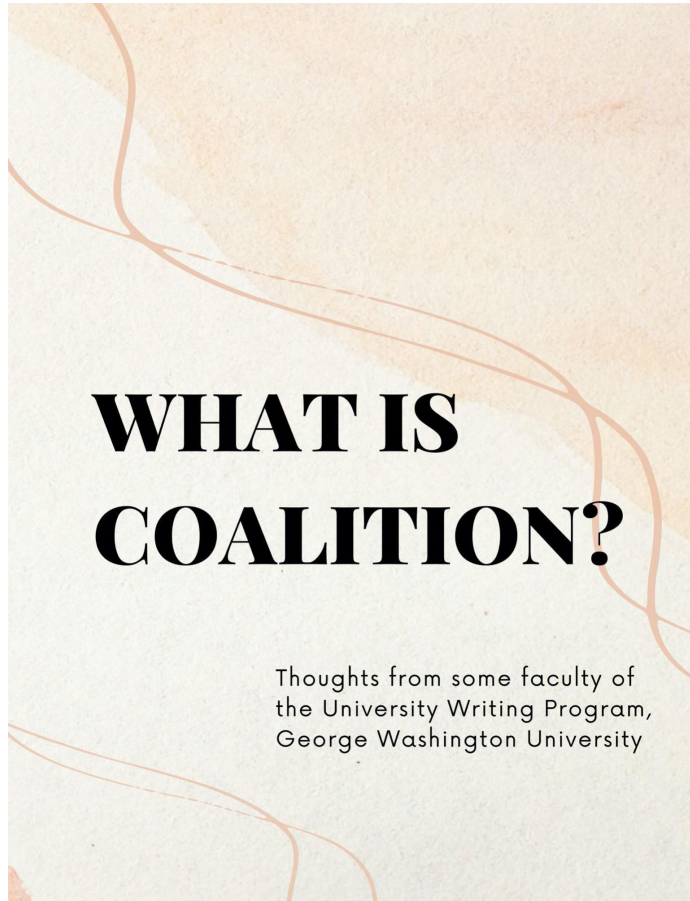
Introduction

> *"In a modern society, who is allowed to speak with authority is a political act."* (Cottom, 19)

What does it look like to engender coalition when individuals may have contradictory goals? When the institutional contexts in which we work are themselves at odds with our collective agendas? We co-authors (all part-time or full-time faculty in a multidisciplinary university writing program, further described below) are composing in this space to work through the contradictions of collectivity we have encountered, some of which we knew before we set out to write this piece together, while others were revealed through the process of answering the CFP for this issue. We thus offer a multi-vocal and multi-modal reflection on what we hold in common and what we currently cannot claim as commonplace.

What we offer here is an exploration of coalition as we understand it. We find multi-modality important to fully express authors' diverse perspectives on coalition, while multi-vocality is essential to this piece to examine disagreement and the evolution of ideas and praxis we have uncovered. We did not expect this collaborative investigation to produce a manifesto regarding how to

fix our academic program, nor did we expect to produce a self-congratulatory conversation about social justice. We thought we would be examining how our existing practices engender or hinder our ability to enjoy a lived experience as a faculty coalition. While the discussions we had in order to write this piece have in some instances resulted in understanding and agreement, in others the discussions scratched at old wounds, or produced cautious revelations amongst ourselves.

The process of crafting this piece revealed that the co-authors all find common ground in many of the tenets of feminism: decentralized leadership, pluralism, transparency, and attention to power differences. However, enacting those feminist tenets has at some moments and in some spaces not lived up to the values of an intersectional feminism. For example, we do not all agree that white supremacy and unearned white dominance are the primary axes upon which institutional and individual power operates. In Shannon Sullivan's Revealing Whiteness, her term "whiteliness" distinguishes between being white as a phenotypic feature versus being whitely as a kind of ignorance of one's unearned dominance through that white embodiment. Charles Mills calls this the "white epistemology of ignorance," in which practitioners "need not to know" the realities of racism and white dominance. Education researchers such as Michalinos Zembylas and Cheryl Matias have recently taken up these lenses to interrogate the "emotionalities of whiteness" among teachers, examining the refusal to see how racialization and racism operate in education spaces. The authors here have variable ways of theorizing these matters, while those who drafted this intro have found that a practiced ignorance of the privileges afforded by whiteness has been a recurring theme in our program's history and is a current impediment to solidifying coalition in the ways we believe we could practice it. We also recognize that even in the inclusive space intended by this multi-vocal effort, not everyone has felt–for reasons of professional status, contingency, marginalization, and other constructed precarities–the security to speak openly in their full authority.
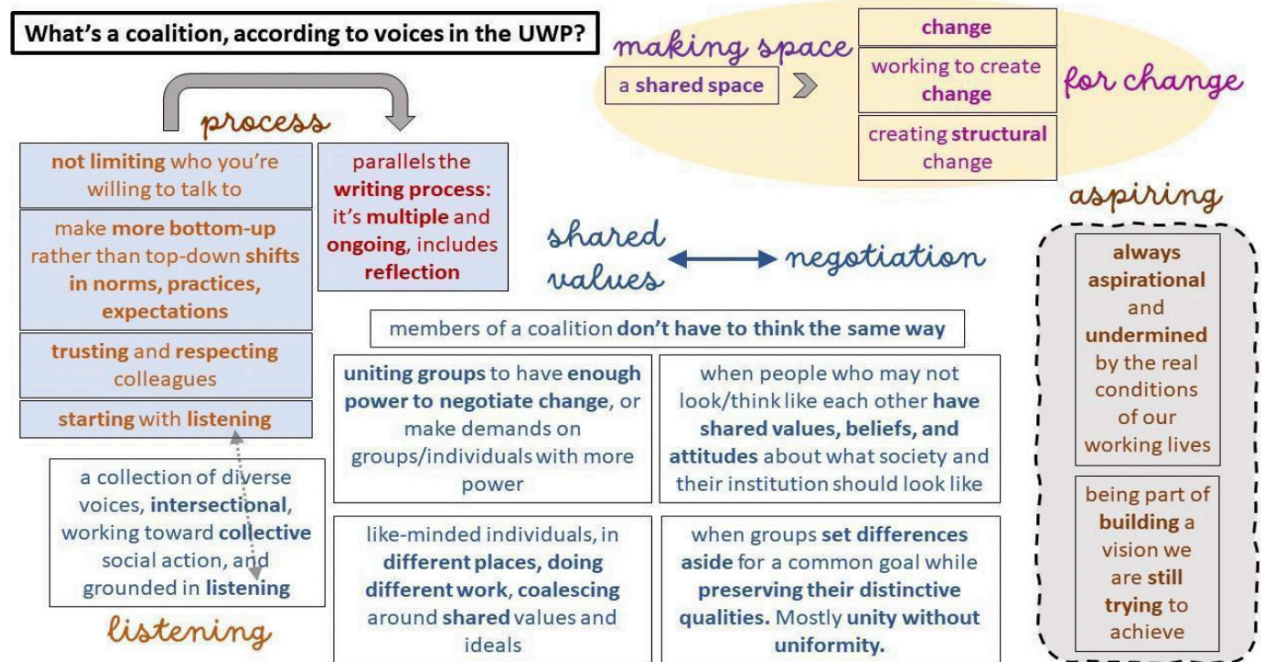
Fig. 1. Clustering of coalition definition concepts that emerged in interviews among co-authors. Image description: Alt text contains full transcription of the quoted phrases grouped into process, listening, making space → for change, shared values←→negotiation, aspiring.

Who are "we"?

The UWP is housed in the College of Arts and Sciences (CCAS) and consists of three distinct divisions (First-Year Writing, Writing in the Disciplines, and the Writing Center). The co-authors of this piece are all First-Year Writing instructors. The program has a sizable faculty, whose research interests and creative work reflect a multi- and interdisciplinary approach to writing instruction. Faculty research strengths lie in a range of scholarly areas, but most prominently in the intersections among writing, pedagogy, social justice, race, and gender.

In the 2022-23 academic year, the UWP had 78 faculty members, 55 assigned on three- or five-year contracts and 19 part-time unionized faculty. There were also three one-year Visiting Assistant Professors and a sole tenured associate professor who held a joint appointment between the UWP and a regular CCAS department.

From 2002-2003, the program was entirely white, with representation from faculty who identified as gay/queer and/or disabled. From 2003 to 2008, the faculty added two Black women. Other BIPOC faculty rotated in and out of regular part time and adjunct positions, but between 2008 and 2017, there was no increase in full-time BIPOC faculty. Current full-time faculty include several new hires who identify as BIPOC.

When the co-authors were asked how they would like to be identified in the article, the

following responses were provided. Clearly, there is more to each of us than what is listed here, but this is what we saw as most important in terms of how we form and fit into coalitions: Working class, middle class, professional class, Southern US, Syrian-American, Afro-Caribbean, immigrant, first-generation college graduate, disabled, Black, White, Muslim, Jewish, secular Jewish, secular Christian, atheist, lesbian, woman, and man. The identities in this assemblage skew toward ones that are traditionally marginalized in US society as well as in our institution.

Programmatic Context

The UWP was formed as an independent academic unit in 2003 as a Provost's Signature program, newly separated from the English Department. With this change came a themed four-credit first-year writing course that all students were required to successfully complete.

Notably, in the development of this new program, there was an administrative desire to rid the UWP of its previous emphasis on cultural studies, a field concerned with the operations and intersection of race, gender, class, and other markers of identity. In fact, faculty in the new UWP were expressly told not to use the term "cultural studies" in representing the new program or their work. This ban reflected a tension between understandings of the relationship between content and writing instruction in writing pedagogy: some across the university saw them as in conflict, while others saw them as interdependent.

Thus, the work of the program was ideologically inflected from its start, and subject to external and internal pressures regarding content and approach. Despite this, the first two years of the program could be described as a period of collective effervescence (Durkheim), building a new writing program with substantial institutional support. Faculty designed writing courses across a range of topics and remained committed to content-driven inquiry as a foundation for writing instruction.

Twenty years later, the shape of the program has shifted in response to the ongoing withdrawal of resources and a constant state of emergency (exigencies often of institutional making). To point to only a few of the most obvious examples of these resource-driven decisions, the program quickly pivoted from hiring only full-time faculty to employing a sizable part-time, contingent faculty; first-year writing courses have moved from caps of 12 to caps of 17 students; and course loads from four four-credit courses per year to six or seven.

Alongside this continued internal state of emergency has been, of course, the much larger, public crisis around racism, which the program has attempted to grapple with to varying degrees. Such work has been informed and made more challenging by a faculty that is, as noted above, predominantly white; by our faculty's very different experiences in the UWP; and by individual views on coalition that seem to sit in conflict with one another at times.

One particularly stark moment showing this came in the fall of 2020. Subsequent to the murder of George Floyd, many organizations published statements affirming their commitment to anti-racism. In response to comments about the program's in/actions and colleagues' in/sensitivities around Black students' and faculty's experiences by one of our Black faculty members and a subsequent related workshop led by another Black faculty member, the UWP formed an ad hoc Anti-Racism Committee, which proposed an anti-racism statement for possible publication on our website. Because we were not in the habit of endorsing program-wide statements, and because committee members felt that an insincere statement was more harmful than no statement at all, we agreed that the statement must garner 100% faculty support, or we would not publish it. The proposal failed.

It is with this programmatic makeup and history and in this environment, that we consider our efforts to create coalition/s within the UWP individually and collectively; we examine how, when, and where these efforts succeed and fail, and we do so multi-vocally not only to allow for voices and perspectives that might not otherwise be heard in publication, but also to highlight the nuances, the struggles, and the ongoing shifts in understanding that one program experiences.

Process

We chose a round-robin interview process as a feminist and coalition-building tool for our explorations. Each co-author asked questions of a colleague and recorded the results; the interviewee then formulated new questions based on that exchange and asked them of a third colleague, and the process continued through all the co-authors. One conversation happened adjacent to this process, between the two Black women faculty members with the longest history in the program, primarily because one had retired and we didn't want to ask for additional labor from her.

As a tool, the round-robin approach highlights the writing process itself, given that the interview process is discovery-oriented, highly individuated, and recursive in nature. We valued the opportunity it offered for listening across varied perspectives and for sharing lived experiences (DeVault and Gross).

This tool also allowed for reflective scrutiny. In rereading the interviews, we have been able to recognize what came to the fore or is markedly original or confirms our understanding of our Program and coalition-building. Of equal importance, we have been able to assess what potentially was elided, neglected, obscured, or lost in the questions and answers. To return to the words of Tressie McMillan Cottom, not all interviewees stand with equal authority to be heard in more public spaces, and some may not feel they can be heard or taken seriously within even a feminist method such as these interviews. While we chose a discovery method intended to center listening, we were always already operating within the political contexts of our and McMillan Cottom's modern society.

Once interview excerpts were compiled, co-authors worked together to sculpt the final manuscript, which includes soundbites and creative interventions: multimedia works, enmeshed compositions, reflective thoughts, and forms of poetry, including some inspired by the ghazal form. Creative re-uses of the interviews helped us to process the revelations from these conversations, and to seek to truly listen to our colleagues on their own terms.

Finally, we crafted intro and outro (as used by adrienne maree brown) bookends to the excerpts from the round-robin dialogue. Our hope was that these generative discussions and the writing they engendered would reveal the art and the angst of coalition building in a/our University Writing Program, which may be instructive for us and for those laboring in other institutional contexts.

### Interlude: Sandie Friedman on The Center Table

Figures by Cayo Gamber

My friend and colleague Nicole Wallack opens her 2017 book, Crafting Presence, with the memory of a shared space in the NYU Expository Writing Program, where we both learned to teach in the mid-1990s. NYU "Expos" (as we called the Expository Writing Program), once conjoined with the English department, now occupied its own space on 4th Street, upstairs from the legendary rock venue The Bottom Line. The program was staffed by graduate students with a small team of full-time faculty as directors. Although the furniture where we met actually comprised three adjoining tables, this space was known as the "center table." For the most part, it belonged exclusively to the graduate student instructors. Perhaps the table could not have existed in a department of full faculty; we built our coalition through our identities as novices, with all the excitement and fear of that role. We felt comfortable sharing our moments of discovery and learning, as well as our panicky last-minute questions and our painful mistakes.

"Every facet of this writing program radiated from the center table. Nearby, in a second squared ring were our shared cubicles where we conferenced with students and sought some quasi-solitude, and at the periphery (but only geometrically speaking) were the semi-private offices of the directors, which like the conference rooms and the Writing Center cubicles looked out over narrow streets. A lot was half-visible, half-audible in that space. The openness gave us many chances to eavesdrop on one another both on purpose and by accident. There still were mysteries." (Wallack ix)

Shared Space: An Interlude OR The Center Table.

To create [structural] change, a writing program must have a shared space.

What does this shared space look like?
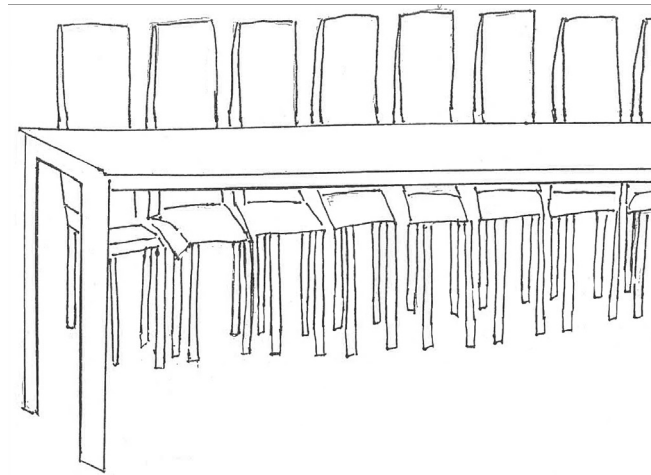
Here at this table, we all believe writing is a place of transformation.

Elbow to elbow, hip to hip, we sit in this shared space.

There were indeed mysteries and also seductions; we fell in love at the center table in multiple ways. I met two romantic partners (Bill, Madeleine), and I found my vocation there. Whenever someone has asked me how I chose the path of teaching writing, I always explain that I found my intellectual home in the "Expos" writing program. Now I realize it was at the center table, where conversations about writing and teaching unfolded. Wallack reflects: "The impetus for this book began in conversations at those tables among my friends, colleagues, and mentors–teachers all–woven through our gossiping, venting, joking, goading, flirting, complaining, and showing off–about essays" (vii).

What happens when there is no center table?

The center of the writing program cannot hold.
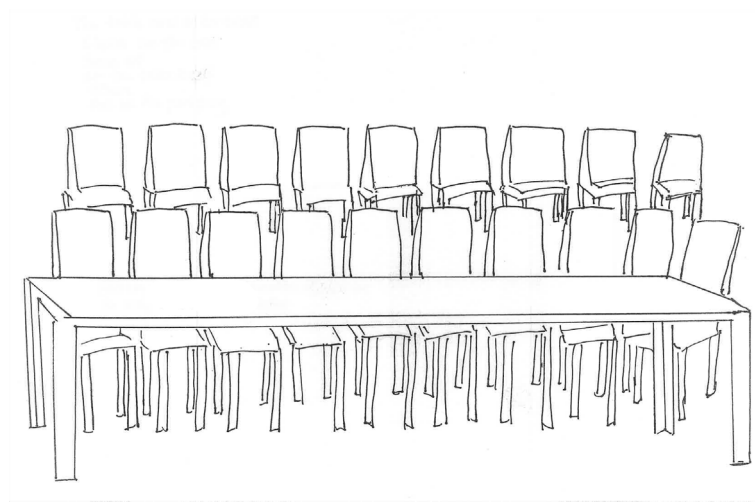
The table is now too small.

Chairs line the walls.

Some sit at the table itself, others line the periphery.

The center table created community not just because it was located in the center of our shared room; community became possible for us because of the circumstances of our lives and the conditions of our labor. As graduate students and teachers-in-training, we led hectic, overfull lives, but as a program, we were not fragmented by institutional differences in status–the academic caste system that stratifies the GW writing program. We were certainly aware that some of us had greater seniority and authority–more funding, for instance, or the title of "mentor." Some of us felt more comfortable speaking out at workshops, while others hung back nervously or listened with a degree of awe. But these differences did not interfere with the center table pursuits Wallack describes (vii). What mattered was that we were learning to read, write, and teach together. It was terrifying and exhilarating.

We don't have a center table in the GW UWP, and not just because it would be impossible to locate a spatial center on our floor of offices. We too live hectic, overfull lives, but mostly they don't feel like an adventure so much as a balancing act. In the aftermath of COVID, as we struggle to care for our families and, at the same time, to give our students—and their writing—sufficient time and energy, we are tired. In the moments between classes, we don't linger in a shared space, but scuttle back to our offices and hastily answer emails. We calculate the time we can allot to each task; falling in love would be an unthinkable luxury.
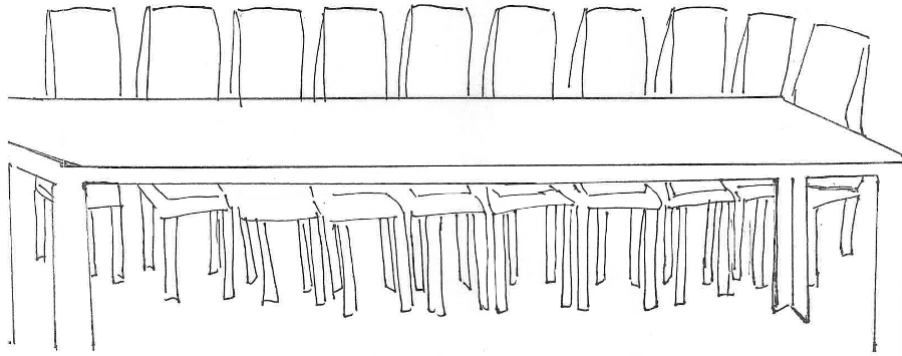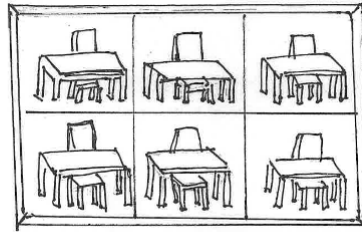
"We should sit down and address each year… have a moment of reflection on: … here are our labor conditions … Here's who is sitting at the table … This is where we are." - Cayo

"If all come to the table and engage in a conversation in a sincere way to understand each other, change can happen—something gets said and even gets done" - Nabila

"They, regardless of these differences, come together to create a shared space; where all people, all entities, of those sitting at the table, and those who aren't, can engage and create change in their respective spaces…pull up their own seat in the spirit of Shirley Chisholm…or maybe even create their own tables" - Jameta

Obstacles to Coalition: Structural Labor

Multiple conversations focused on the stratification of labor as an impediment to coalition in our department. We are all contingent faculty, and thus subject to feelings of trepidation and precarity, and because of the anxiety about our positions, there is incentive to remain silent in faculty discussions. At the same time, faculty at every level feel overworked–constantly addressing the most immediate demands–and this also impedes our ability to form coalitions. Time, necessary for coalition-building, is scarce for everyone.

As Robin Zheng observes, academic casualization has resulted in an inversion of the ratio of tenure-track to non-tenure-track faculty positions in the U.S. – from 78%:22% in 1969 to 30%:70% in 2011 (Kezar and Maxey). The 70% of non-tenure-track, contingent faculty who are engaged in the "actual work" of the academy also come to discover that their labor has been re-conceived as devalued "care work."

While we may all be contingent, our institution has created multiple layers of contingency. We discovered that the felt-experience of the tiers differs within the Program and outside of the Program. In earlier years, a new faculty member on a renewable reappointment would be renewed for three years the first time and then for five years every time thereafter. However, the University now often reserves five-year reappointment terms for faculty members who they believe have achieved some marker of excellence. "Excellence" often is predicated on successfully moving up in rank, a truly laborious process which comes with a modicum-at-best raise in pay and no greater job security. Thus, colleagues with renewable contracts may come up for review every three years and will be called upon to provide a detailed and persuasive dossier that evidences their success in the areas specified in their contract.[2]

Danika: I see myself as in that middle power group: I'm white, I'm cisgender, I'm able-bodied. So I see myself as somebody who's in a marginalized position in terms of being contingent labor, and because I'm a woman, and yet I'm aware that I have much more access to institutional power than somebody who's trans, who's disabled, who's Black, who's Latina/o, or any other racial, demographic, or religious minority.

Nasreen: I'm contingent faculty. As a result, I'm "here today, gone tomorrow." I just have to make one stupid move or someone has to accuse me of something, and I'm gone. There's no way I can say, "That's not true."

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2   Special Service contract expectations are 90% dedication of one's time to teaching and 10% to service. For a Regular Active Status contract, expectations are 60% dedication of one's time to teaching, 30% to research, and 10% to service.Further, while drafting this piece we learned that anyone hired in 2018 or later (which includes many BIPOC faculty) will only be eligible for three-year contracts, regardless of "excellence" or time served.

Nabila: If I say something and it's misunderstood, my position would be on the line. (...) I speak, but I try to be cautious of what I speak or how I speak.

Cayo: The coalition we seek is constantly undermined by the conditions at the University and our (…) labor conditions.

Jessica: There's an element of overwork that can keep us in our hamster wheel of just getting through the day.

Wade: We have to contend with the surrounding noise of the University – the manufactured emergencies (of the University's making): the budget shortfalls and the taking money back and increasing our course loads.

Sometimes I don't have time to get my response out.

The labor of change is embedded in making coalition.

Something that makes it fragile is bandwidth and energy.

The hamster wheel of overwork is breaking coalition.

Race/ethnicity or Who is a PWI for?

We teach at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), which means not only that White people constitute the majority, but also that they hold the highest positions of power. Decisions are then primarily based on their ways of being and knowing, which are categorized as "neutral." People who do not share these ways of being and knowing are excluded from positions of power. Just as one participant [Robin] found conversations about race within the program to be "inauthentic," another faculty member of color [Jameta] observed that the university's efforts at diversity and inclusion are largely "performative." She revisited the fact that faculty of color feel isolated here, and as a result, they leave–undermining efforts for the stated institutional and program aims of diversity.

White participants, in contrast, commented on feelings of connectedness and unity that focused on factors other than race and did not always foreground the experience of their colleagues of color. Helene Lorenz and Randi Gray Kristensen wrote about this phenomenon in 1999: we recognize that racism and sexism are present in the culture, but we tend to deny that these problems are present in the rooms we occupy.

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[O]ne could accuse other people on the campus of racist or sexist attitudes, but never, ever, would it be appropriate to consider how our own discourse reproduced sexist and racist relationships. A corollary rule that is even more problematic [involves] a "totalitarian we." Other groups far away can have internal conflict and dialogue… But we can never do it in the room "we" are in because here there is harmony, congruence, and Sameness, and anyone who says there is Difference is breaking unspoken rules. So faculty who are African-American or Native American, Jewish or Buddhist, or from other identity groups whose presence is being erased often sit in rooms where people say things like "we are all comfortable here" or "we are all WASPS here" or even "we are all white here" and try to make choices. If we are silent, it reinforces the "totalitarian we." If we challenge, we risk being called "militant" or "uncollegial" or "judgemental" or even "fascist." (Lorenz and Kristensen 8-9)

The continuities across a quarter century are clear. For most of the program's history, faculty who have raised issues of reconsidering the Eurocentrism of our curriculum or our faculty composition have been rebuked or ignored.

Kylie: That means that people who hold power to make decisions from the top down are overrepresented for a certain [demographic]. They're overrepresented in the way that reflects where the institution originates–which is that it was built for those kinds of people–and so everyone who doesn't fit the assumptions of that way of being and knowing–which is implicitly framed as neutral–gets left out of the institutional power structures.

I think balancing being proactive in creating community and coalition, and also recognizing that my whiteness is the principal axis on which I experience the world–and that includes in higher education–means that I'm presumed competent sometimes, even if I'm not. Or I'm given credibility when I don't deserve it, and I should use that in ways that don't benefit me, but rather benefit coalitional interests which might not always be the things that matter to me individually, but which matter in the long run, for being part of the institution that I'm in.

Jameta: The assumption that's made is that, for communities of color, [specifically, I'm speaking from my perspective of Black communities], we're coming from a place of lack. (...) But I see that in other communities, other diverse communities, whether it's related to sex, gender, race, religion, etc., and that it's not a place of lack, but because that view is there [at] these predominantly white institutions [that] they are saviors. We got there first! We did this! And it becomes more performative work than actual structural change.

Jameta: [Coalition] is not something we're doing well here at GW. This is something we're aiming to do, and we're looking for. How can we do this in a structural way, not a performative way? [Those questions are] so important, because what often happens is you'll throw diversity all

over pamphlets… all over the website. But these folks come to these institutions and feel isolated. Don't feel supported, don't feel safe, and then they end up leaving, and people wonder why and what was their need. And it's more than just making sure that people are adequately paid. It's making sure that people are adequately supported, holistically.

Danika: I see us as having grown in ways and changed in ways that we desperately needed to change over the last eight to ten years. I'm also wary of being self-congratulatory. Looking back, it seems that I, and at least some of the other white folks in the program, thought we were doing really well ten years ago, and it is now clear to me that my experience of being inclusive and welcoming and seeking to diversify the program and listen to outside voices was not what was happening and not what my colleagues of color were experiencing.

Danika: It's easy to let relatively modest things give you an inflated sense of the work you're doing as a white person in a white program in a white school. If you're doing a little better than the other departments, it's easy to feel self-congratulatory in ways that ultimately are going to be counterproductive both in terms of how they make my colleagues who are not white feel, and in terms of what we can accomplish, because as soon as we're like "well, we're doing better than almost everyone else!" you can stop working, and you can stop listening.

I started separating myself from the program's goals.

While my colleagues feared getting it all wrong; it was a fragile coalition.

They paid lip service to the change, to the reframe.

Across our history here we've been uncomfortable; it was not an agile coalition.

Tokenization

Participants observed that at this PWI, white voices tend to dominate; faculty of color feel tokenized, invisible, or isolated. Some participants felt that conversations about race were "inauthentic" and left intact the basic structures and assumptions privileging whiteness.

While ideologically we might expect "institutions of higher learning" to rigorously interrogate systems of oppression, our discussions as a faculty revealed that in our program and at the University level colleagues had experienced feelings of tokenism.

Who belongs here, what voices belong here, what voices are valued here,

What is required of someone I who is seeking to build a condition of coalition?

I don't think we can get at what we're trying to get at if we're not honest.

When white people decide they're no longer willing it's an inhibition of coalition.

You need to leave; that is not a healthy environment for you. When they are afraid

to cross boundaries it's only an exhibition of coalition.

Robin: My whole life, except for a few years in my late elementary school, what we called Junior High, I was never around only or mostly white people,

Randi: And [the UWP program leaders] didn't say anything about 'now that we're at a PWI, what are your concerns?' They didn't have that vocabulary right?

Robin: Ain't heard that yet.

Randi: So you felt tokenized. Can I use that word?

Robin: Oh, absolutely! How could I feel otherwise? But I got to see up close what it looks like when a director of a program [Service Learning] was really interested in diversity and not just in a lip service way… they went looking for people, didn't wait for them to land in their lap.

Robin: But to be honest, to come into a department that was so overwhelmingly white (...) was daunting. (...)

Robin: I realized I had a lot more in common with the Black students than I imagined, in terms of being present but absent. I had students sometimes, Black students who didn't talk in class, and I knew they were engaged. They might roll their eyes at something that a white class-mate said but they wouldn't respond otherwise. They might come see me in office hours and chat away but in class they wouldn't talk. And I thought shit, I don't talk in faculty meetings either, for

the same reason. That overwhelming whiteness is silencing. Not just because of its presence but because of its potential to say something offensive.

One of the first year writing directors suggested that I should talk more in our larger faculty meetings during my review conference. And I said, nah, I'm not going to. Because there was always a point in the faculty meetings when I would become hyper aware that I was the only one, that anybody could see it, but no one was doing anything to correct it.

Robin: Well, if you're being honest, across our history here we've been uncomfortable, I was uncomfortable the entire time. Except in those rare moments like, remember, Randi, when Jameta came?

I had a rage in me and I could not, I just could not tamp it down. I simply

can't see any coalition. You want me to ask a different question. You want me to say *coalition.*

Because I have a respect for and interest in and affection for the other women–

maybe that has to do with feminism. Maybe that's the coalition.

There're loud voices and those voices seem tethered to the status quo. Sorry to interrupt.

No, I'm done. Just sighing. And you know, I feel relatively okay, whatever the coalition

Jameta: When you're the only one asked to talk about Black people. That happens to me a lot, right? (...) So you want me to talk about Black people because I'm the person to talk about diversity.(...) [This] is a type of tokenizing inclusion to me. What if you had more than one voice that represents that diversity spectrum? Tokenizing often happens even in our committees. When we say we have our diversity person on the Search Committee, right? I just did that for the [Women's Leadership] Program, [but] I shouldn't be the only diversity person; there should be more than one. There should be more than two. So we have to think it through. What does that look like to change? To reframe (…) how we look at inclusion, not just say, hey, we have someone who's gay; we have someone who's bisexual. It's not that. It's representation in a very structural change type of way.

Jameta: I don't think coalition building is possible when you're the only one down to represent a group trying to build (…) and when people are there who represent that larger power dynamic. In this case, we're talking about white people. When they decide they're no longer willing to work on change, you can't do coalition building. You need to leave. This is not a healthy environment for you.

Visibility/invisibility

Settles, Buchanan, and Dotson, in their survey of faculty of color at a PWI, found that "Faculty of color, as an underrepresented group that lacks power within the academy, may be hypervisible due to their race and other markers that distinguish them from dominant group members (e.g., gender for women faculty of color). At the same time, their marginalized group status may render them invisible in terms of their personal identities, personhood, or work performance. As a result, achievements warranting recognition may be largely unnoticed, whereas potential mistakes and missteps, whether real or merely perceived by dominant group members, may be amplified and receive heightened scrutiny" (63).

In their interviews, faculty of color reflected on these feelings of hyper-visibility/invisibility. Faculty of color also drew attention to the hyper-visibility of white faculty, noting how the experiences and concerns of those faculty members were privileged above their own experiences and concerns.

Class and disability were commented on briefly as factors that may not be seen by others but that nonetheless informed participants' experiences.

I was an invisible woman. And I started separating myself from differences.

I lived with separation and suspicion. Pretense interrupted any vision of coalition.

He said are you coming on Friday and I said No, I feel I'm an imposter

We had a lot of tension, although he was very nice. That's a fragile coalition.

We have to deliberately create. I often have that experience of sending something out

and then being like that was stupid! But that won't grow seeds and cohorts of coalition

Kylie: I'm in a contract position, but (…) I don't really consider myself to be precarious. I don't really like the term "privilege". I think that "dominance" is a little more useful, like a person who has unearned dominance in a space, in academic spaces. I come from a background of having parents without degrees and living in poverty. And those things are invisible. Now, my students don't know that; my colleagues don't know that; it doesn't really shape the way that I'm perceived; it shapes what happens internally, but it doesn't really alter my privilege. I think it's important to not weaponize that version of my background as a way to gain credit for being here.

Nabila: While the program is trying to change its hiring practices, it's not equitable. With the emphasis on hiring faculty and recruiting students from underrepresented communities, hostile environments are further created. Racial or religious visibility should not be the decisive factor in hiring or recruiting. Being visibly white or non-white should not affect how good one is as a teacher. So for me, everyone should receive the same opportunity.

Disability

Pam (via email): I would like to be more open about my disability, which is chronic fatigue. Before the pandemic, I was extremely exhausted and ill all the time, but no one was teaching remotely, and I didn't know it was a possibility. After everybody was forced to teach remotely, my doctor recommended that I continue teaching this way. I started applying for disability exemptions and have been teaching remotely ever since. I would be unable to keep teaching if I couldn't get the disability exemption, so I am grateful for the program support that has allowed me to do this.

That said, we need to have program-wide conversations about access and disability. We have had a couple of professional development sessions on disability, and the Anti-racism Anti-oppression Committee considers ableism to be part of white supremacy and thus part of what we are trying to fight against, but we don't have program-wide discussions about disability. We need to have them, especially after what happened during the last search, when I was almost excluded from attending job talks because my chronic fatigue and complications from it prevent me from attending in-person events and the search committee chair did not want to provide a Zoom option. Wade, Kylie, Danika and others advocated for me, and a Zoom option was provided, but it was illustrative for me about the caste system that operates and allows some of us to be marginalized at any given moment.

I am not trying to say that my experience as a disabled person is in any way comparable to Robin's experience or anyone's, but I wonder if my disability and the marginalization that happened because of it can be used to build coalition. During the meeting where we voted on the candidate for that search, a slide was read which basically said that the candidates were put at a disadvantage because they were forced to accommodate people on Zoom. I experienced this as a microaggression, and it made me want to use my visceral experience of how devastating that felt.

I wondered about talking to colleagues of color and anybody else who has experienced microaggressions in the program, but I didn't know a good way to do that. And I don't mean to say that I didn't care about stopping microaggressions before that, it was just a similar feeling I imagine the Queen of England had when Buckingham Palace got bombed during WW2 and she said, "Now I can look the East End in the eye."

Obstacles to Coalition: Process, Fear, Honesty, and Discomfort

As a program, we have failed to recognize the grief and rage that gripped faculty of color after racist murders, such as the death of Michael Brown. We didn't collectively begin addressing structural racism until after the death of George Floyd (six years later). As a result, these faculty members continued to feel isolated in their suffering. In the round-robin interviews, the authors discussed how discomfort isolated them in some instances and in others, how discomfort might drive us to action.

Danika: I do feel fear that I will say something that is harmful, and I don't necessarily think that I shouldn't feel that fear. There are many things [someone in my position] could say that would be deeply harmful to my colleagues, and I don't want to go into that space. (...) That's kind of the balance: how do you have an awareness, a capacity for fear, without letting fear reduce you to timidity? And [without] it impacting your ability to be honest because you're so afraid that anything you say will be misconstrued. Part of it is keeping the fear focused on what harm might I cause, and not focused on things like fear of repercussions for myself.

Robin: *Intentional obliviousness.* It will interfere with coalition-building. It was not until George Floyd's murder that people seemed to get jolted in our department into having a department-wide response.

Randi: And I just want to point out there's a half a decade between Michael Brown and George Floyd.

Robin: But after Michael Brown's murder I had a rage in me. I could not, I just could not tamp it down. And I had space between when it happened during the summer, and when the semester started. But I just identified too much by that time.

(...) I couldn't do anything I usually did to process that anger, and then on the first day of class, a colleague asked me "how was your summer?" I lost it. It all just gushed.

I don't know what I said but I've apologized profusely, and she's cool, but to NOT know? This is the thing that's missing in diversity and inclusion, right? 'Cause to not imagine me having had a tough time, in the wake of that event?

Wade: [Something that] we need to work against in order to be able to come together to make connections is a fear of reprisal. So you start thinking critically about your job security before you sign a petition, or before you attend a meeting.

When you're in an environment where there's a lot of loud voices and those loud voices seem occasionally tethered to the status quo, it could be really hard to speak out, even when you know there are other people in the room that are very close to where you're at. Sometimes I wonder why certain like-minded people are not speaking up. And they probably wonder why I'm not speaking up too.

And then I think, what am I gaining in staying quiet? What do I lose? And, more importantly, what do others lose? I've had many hallway conversations about things that probably should have been addressed in a meeting and those conversations really stay with me.

Interlude - Erasure poem from Jessica McCaughey interview with Wade Fletcher. Fig. 5.

I think it's really important to acknowledge
that there's often quite a lot that
we

fear

addressing,

I think it's really important to acknowledge
what
we
have trouble seeing

I think it's really important to acknowledge
Things like barriers
. So you start thinking
before you
expand outward

I focus on what's so great

But
another is struggling or suffering

Making Change

In a speech delivered to and critical of a feminist conference in 1979, author and equal rights activist Audre Lorde declared, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." This sentiment was one that preoccupied our Writing Program faculty in their discussions with one another. Could we achieve change at the program level? At the university level? And, if so, how? What, or whose, tools would we need to do that work?

Randi: [W]hat could we do to foster social justice and equity?

Robin: You could form a body. A council composed of faculty with a demonstrated track record. And vetting might include a review of their syllabi: who did they include in their syllabi? What did they introduce when they had a chance? What are their affiliations with relevant communities on campus? What has prepared them to be a part of this Council? (...) And then really support that Council with resources. Give it what it needs to imagine what the world of the Writing Program experience could be. Which would mean traveling, maybe zooming, experimenting, just creating a paradigm shift, a new compositionally inclusive world.

Jmeta: When I think about the rise in white nationalism and targeting Black and Brown communities, every day is a day of fear. I would not be able to function if I thought about fear. It's a constant state but I don't allow that to rule my life. If I focus on that, I couldn't focus on creating a better educational experience for my students and a better work experience for myself. And so I think part of what's going to be so essential is that we recognize how we have to bring that unapologetic notion to the work that we do, not just in coalition building, but as professionals and as humans in this world, showing up with all the authentic human experience, and listening to one another. We might not have that same experience, but understanding the commonalities is key because while throughout the world, oppression looks different, (whether it's class, gender, religion, ethnicity, etc.) oppression as a system is oppression. (...) Coalition building is hard, but it's worth it when people are trying to change.

Kylie: I think that inclusion as practiced in PWIs is about getting people into the room, and you've [Jameta] said something interesting before that really relates to a broader rhetoric about inclusion, which is, 'it's not (...) about changing who's at the table; It's about building a totally new house with a new kind of table with a new shape of table, and then figuring out who's at the table.'

Interlude: Nasreen Abbas on Community

Michael P. Farrell writes in Collaborative Circles: Friendship Dynamics and Creative Work that: "[Henry] James argues that without a community of peers, a writer develops with more difficulty, and he contrasts the early work of such loners with the work of those who develop within a group:

> The best things come … from the talents that are members of a group; every man [or
>
> woman] works better when [they have] companions working in the same line, and
>
> yielding to the stimulus of suggestion, comparison, emulation. Great things have of
>
> course been done by solitary workers, but they have usually been done with double the
>
> pains they would have cost if they have been produced in more genial circumstances.
>
> (James 1909, 31)"

However, this phenomenon has been little studied. What are the shared dynamics and values of such collaborations? And why do some flourish while others collapse?

Farrell's questions offer an ideal framework for our process of round-robin interviews on coalition. The UWP has both newer and more established faculty but is marked by many sites of mutual support and collaboration: not only committee work, but also a number of reading groups, peer support social hours on Zoom, and other places where faculty can vent and share. These efforts prevent a feeling of isolation and encourage a sense of shared struggle. Caroline says it best: "I'm not good in large group settings. So, I think one of the easiest or best ways that I've been able to build coalition is in smaller groups on committees," where a colleague feels more like a friend and therefore, nonthreatening. "I think our program, compared to other departments or programs, really excels at coalition building. We obviously have our weaker points, but I feel like all of us are on the same page about what we want from our classes and the program."

So, whether other (tenured or more celebrated) faculty may look down on us, the UWP is welcoming. Caroline claims, moreover, that she "can give that spiel [to students regarding the UWP syllabus common load], and actually mean it because I do feel like we all have common goals."

Another coalition builder is the exposure to diverse groups and attention to intersectionality

here. As Wade says, the "feminist ideology" he was exposed to in the 1990s "informs [his] sense of coalition building. And maybe in the earliest stages, we [feminists and other diverse communities] came together because we each had something to gain and could each help with something."

When I saw the call to participate in this piece for Peitho, I initially had cold feet as I, a Google Doc Dinosaur, had zero experience in writing anything other than literary essays. Thus, for me coalition building is an embracing of others within a community, which we are doing right now.

Outro

Coalition is not forged in the fastest burn. It isn't made within the confines of an academic year or between issues of a journal. As philosopher Isabelle Stengers has pleaded for the deliberative process of a slower science, we now remind ourselves that the kind of coalition we aspire to here requires many months, even years, of deliberation and consultation. Above all, it must include sincere movement toward trust and risk-taking: while the work may be slow, the needs are urgent and overdue. Thus, our mandate is to attend to a mutual ethic of care that draws from the myriad lessons of crip time, both for inclusion of disabled colleagues and for all of us (Samuels). We knew this process would not lead to a utopian place of work and learning. However, the shape of the ways we were able to work with each other was unexpected to some.

Entering into a co-authorship relationship does not necessarily mean *writing together*. We found that cross-referencing viewpoints and achieving multi-vocality is at times merely aspirational. Returning to Tressie McMillan Cottom as in the intro, we are not each equally empowered to speak and be heard. But writing together (in aspirational coalition) must always already involve *listening*. One part of the problem is structural: the knowledge economy of higher education pressures many to publish, to bow to neo-liberal audit culture. With more than a dozen authors here, no one actually stands to gain in publication metrics from this composition. Yet many of us may have carved out space for this effort because of CV-line generating impetuses. We set ourselves on an untenable path, in which the timeline for this project was not conducive to the careful, slow work we very much need(ed).

We do find that crafting a multimodal work like this has led us to unexpected realizations, new forms of transparency with each other, recognition of shared values, and even unwelcome surprises about the gulf between some of us. What we composed here helps us see that consensus is not an achievable or desirable goal; rather *listening* is the process we need. This multi-vocality was a necessary feature of this composition, both as we strived to truly hear each other and where we each come from, and as we now share these thoughts with others.

In a reflection written by Sandie above, she implies that our end goal, the object of our labor, ought to be *building community rather than striving for coalition*. What is structural change for,

if not community? This seems a promising way to frame our process, and echoes adrienne maree brown's sage advice in her "principles of emergent strategy" (41-42). Along with appreciation for small changes, brown emphasizes the value of trust and gradually building community. "There is a conversation in the room that only these people at this moment can have. Find it," brown advises (41-42). Through this project, we discovered a potential community around our diverse experiences and shared visions.

Many of brown's tenets, and the slow deliberation we meditate on, are antithetical to the operations of a modern university. Institutions function in ways that prioritize checking off demographic categories rather than engaging the slow, gradual process of investing in people and their wholeness. (In other words, there are more incentives to tokenize, as interviewees repeatedly noted above.) For similar reasons, institutions also reward intentional obliviousness to systemic inequities, what we have referred to as whiteliness, in channeling the theorizing of Shannon Sullivan. What this all amounts to is that higher education implicitly prevents coalition from growing. And where institutions claim to be forging community, they are more often throwing t-shirts into basketball arena crowds and wheeling popcorn machines onto the quadrangle.

So, it is incumbent on us to continue to work through the discomfort of finding we cannot have consensus. It is incumbent on us to take these generative conversations we had and turn them into realities. Whereas some authors spoke of the feminist tenets they see in the functioning of our writing program, others asked why *have we never heard "feminism" uttered in program meetings? Why do we not explicitly identify as an intersectional feminist program and make our shared values apparent, which would facilitate us holding ourselves accountable to such aspirations?* This process has revealed invisibilities, erasures, structural and interpersonal conflicts and congruences; it has also shown many shared values that took shape under our varied circumstances. We find hope in the continuation of the conversation and seek both optimism and healthy skepticism in the realization of those values.

No act in self-interest; rejection of convenience.

I anticipate the hostility that comes from age-old hierarchist coalition.

People began to think about decentering the power structure.

Where could we find a different structure, an anarchist coalition?

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