Coalitional Refusals: Transformative Justice Beyond Repair

Brynn Fitzsimmons, University of Alabama, and Pritha Prasad, University of Kansas

Abstract: This article theorizes "coalitional refusal" as a set of tools that are necessary for coalitional work grounded in abolitionist thought and transformative justice. Coalitional refusal questions the limits of "togetherness" in coalition's "together-ness-in-difference" (Mao 100) and makes space for the possibilities of refusal to help build and sustain coalitions. The authors discuss key trends in rhetoric and composition's dominant approaches to "scholarship-activism" that highlight the necessity for coalitional refusal as a legitimate, and often vital, form of political engagement. This essay offers frameworks for conversations about writing that attend to, open space for, and build relationships with lived experience—and address when we have slipped away from it. This article offers a pathway towards "orientations and re-orientations" (Del Hierro et al.) in our coalitional work within and beyond our field.

Brynn Fitzsimmons (they/them) is an assistant professor of English – Composition, Rhetoric, and English Studies at the University of Alabama. Their current work focuses on issues of epistemic justice in public discourse, with particular focus on community media and literacies as well as rhetorics of health, embodiment, and access in abolitionist social movements. Their teaching and research draws on feminist and queer cultural rhetorics, disability studies, and participatory/community-based approaches to teaching and research.

Pritha Prasad (she/her) is an assistant professor of English at the University of Kansas (KU). As a scholar and teacher of rhetorical approaches to critical race and ethnic studies, feminist studies, and queer studies, her research focuses on how cultural, political, and educational institutions negotiate the politics of race and racism in the wake of racial unrest and violence. At KU, Pritha teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in cultural studies and rhetorics, rhetoric and composition theory and history, and critical university studies.

Introduction

In Jordan Peele's sci-fi/UFO film *Nope* (2022)*,* film industry horse handler and Black man, OJ Haywood, notices one night that the lights and sprinklers in his ranch's indoor arena have been mysteriously turned on. He turns them off and begins to walk away when, to his surprise, the sprinklers turn on again. When he realizes someone–some*thing*–is hiding in the arena, he considers going back to investigate, but changes his mind. "Nope, nope, nope," he says, shaking his head and walking away.

Such "nope" moments, which occur throughout the film, appear to be secondary to the plot. But, they nonetheless forward one of the film's most important rhetorical questions: Why should Black people risk their lives to save the world? Unlike in a typical sci-fi film in which protagonists might feel compelled to fight aliens to save humankind, in *Nope,* neither OJ nor his sister Em have any interest in saving anyone. This is why, rather than notifying any state or government officials of a possible alien invasion, OJ and Em instead work to secure video proof of UFOs they can sell to save their family's ranch from bankruptcy. "Nope" is a political refusal, a resistance act that rejects white futurity and refuses the abstract "happy talk" (Ahmed 10) of inclusionary paradigms that suggest "we are all in this together" (even when "we" are not).

Inspired by *Nope*, Pritha and her colleagues Alexis McGee and Louis M. Maraj proposed a panel for the 2023 Conference on College Composition (CCCC) originally entitled "Doing Nope: Surviving Anti/Racism in the University" (an implied critique of the conference's theme of "Doing Hope"). The panel sought to highlight the "harmful, divisive, and dangerous strategies" institutions embrace to "appear equitable and just." How, they asked, can we do our jobs as unwarranted attention "force[s] BIPOC into the rigged spotlights of our institutions and disciplines? How do we cultivate 'hope' while making space for 'nope'" (Maraj et al.)? Each presentation on the panel featured moments of "doing nope" via personal narrative, from refusing technologies of anti-Black surveillance in the academy in the Zoom era, to unsettling white institutional apologies, to highlighting gossip as a Black feminist rhetoric of resistance and survival. But when the three presenters arrived at CCCC in February 2023, they were surprised to find that the program had listed their panel as "Doing *Hope*" instead of "Doing Nope." The program had also classified them, without their prior knowledge or consent, as a "featured" panel that would be live-streamed and recorded. Ironically, CCCC organizers had not only forced Pritha, Lexi, and Lou into the very same "rigged spotlight" their panel critiques, but they had also–in their efforts to highlight hopeful visions of social justice–failed to consider the material risks of livestreaming/recording three BIPOC junior scholars sharing personal narratives of institutional racism at the field's largest professional conference.

Such "performance culture" (Ahmed 85) supports institutional norms of diversity and inclusion and forecloses possibilities for refusal–for "nope." In valorizing romanticized notions of "performative solidarity" (Cohen), this paradigm disavows the messier questions that surround coalition-building: How does the disciplinary embrace of "social justice" (Walton et al.; Carter et al.) and the "rigged spotlight" it entails for multiply-marginalized folx complicate or foreclose possibilities for coalition-building? When do we make space for enthusiastic moves articulating solidarity across power differences to be *refused*? What if coalition isn't just about what we welcome *in*, but also what we intentionally keep *out*–for protection, for survival, for transformative justice *beyond/outside* the academy?

As we consider these questions, we might also think of the CCCC's 2024 conference

theme of "Writing Abundance." Citing Candace Fujikane's work on "Indigenous economies of abundance" as a refusal of capitalist logics of scarcity, the CFP calls for "tak[ing] stock of the growth we have seen in this organization" as a "result of the abundant and ongoing work of BI-POC scholars" (CCCC). While the CFP seeks to legitimately, meaningfully center and celebrate the intellectual and resistance labor of multiply marginalized communities, how might *uncritical* narratives of abundance still support colonial and carceral narratives of *extraction* that regard "the labor/knowledges of disabled, queer, (and) people of color as an endless resource" and delimit possibilities for "respectful and reciprocal" relationships (Cedillo et al.)? Can *refusal* to engage in "inclusion," to support abundance rhetorics, or to mobilize our knowledges as multiply-marginal-ized folx to support institutional "social justice," lead to coalition-building?

In this essay, we offer "coalitional refusal" to describe coalition-building based in abolition-ist, transformative justice (brown, *We Will Not*; Hassan; Page and Woodland). Though Leslie D. Gonzales and Heather Shotton describe coalitional refusal as the building of coalition "by refusing the impositions of a neoliberal university" (549), we expand how we think about the uses of refus-al in/for/towards coalition. In working outside of the dialectics of abundance vs. scarcity, inclusion vs. exclusion, and presence vs. absence that typically dominate academic theorizing, coalitional refusal presents an alternative to the liberal-multicultural models of "recognition" that are too often narrowly focused on belonging *within* the dominant.

Refusal, we argue, offers us an alternative. As Audra Simpson argues, refusal goes beyond belonging-based frameworks by raising "the question of legitimacy for those who are usually in the position of recognizing: What is their authority to do so? Where does it come from?" (11). Refusal "involves an ethnographic calculus of what you need to know and what I refuse to write" (Simpson 105). It is necessary in the face of dispossession, whiteness's "skewed authoritative axis," and the ongoing role of "writing and analysis" in forwarding logics of imperialism via "discursive contain-ment" (Simpson 105). Extending Simpson, we offer *coalitional refusal* in this essay as a kind of political act that, in not purporting to present "everything" (Simpson 105), critically questions the limits of "togetherness" in coalition's "togetherness-in-difference" (Mao 100). Is there space for an understanding of coalition that not only maintains, but also values, when necessary, the power of purposeful *disengagement*—the "turning point" (Chávez 9) of a coalitional moment as turning *away* rather than turning *towards*? How do we recognize when "a coming together, or a juncture, for some sort of change" (Chávez 9) is *not* possible? Even as rhetorical and cultural studies schol-ars imagine what sustainable models for coalition might look like (Hubrig; Jackson and Cedillo; Hatrick; Licona and Gonzales; Reyes; Yam), what happens when the answer is, simply, *nope*? In what follows, we identify and discuss key trends in rhetoric and composition's dominant approach-es to "scholarship-activism" that highlight the necessity for coalitional refusal as a legitimate, and often vital, form of political engagement.

Re/Defining Coalition and Coalitional Refusals

Calls for refusal as a coalitional gesture have long been part of scholarly work on activist/academic collaboration, although remarkably, much of the foundational critical work explicitly interrogating the ethics and political implications of "scholarship-activism" has occurred *outside* of rhetoric and composition studies proper. In her foundational 1993 essay, "Public Enemies and Private Intellectuals," Ruth Wilson Gilmore identifies four tendencies in "oppositional studies": 1) individualistic careerism; 2) romantic particularism; 3) luxury production; and 4) organic praxis (72-73). For Gilmore, only organic praxis can reject the careerist, particularist, and luxe modes of "displac[ing] needed energy from where it is most needed" (73), and meaningfully interrogate relations between/among institutions, laborers, activists, and material and embodied violences across geographic and cultural spaces.

Scholars' mere presence and participation within institutions that depend upon continued external support from state and corporate actors, however, fundamentally call into question whether transformative or radical "oppositional studies" are even possible within the university. Because institutions of higher education often exercise and support carceral and militarized power *through* rhetorics of "diversity" and "equity" themselves, the mandate of academic theorizing to keep scholarship "'objective' (mystifying), 'nonpolitical' (nonsubversive), and 'academic' (elitist)" will never enable the academic mainstream to produce a revolutionary or radical practice (James and Gordon). As Julia C. Oparah notes, the "academic-military-industrial complex" fosters "an interdependent and mutually constitutive alliance whereby corporate priorities and cultures, including the intellectual needs of the military-industrial complex, increasingly shape the face of academia" (101). In this system, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) rhetorics "provide much needed moral capital because of their association with progressive values,"–an illustration of the "dangerous complicities implicit in our attempts to carve out sites of resistance from within the neoliberal university" (Oparah 101). Joy James and Edmund T. Gordon therefore prefer "radical subject" to the notion of "scholar-activist," arguing that radical subjects do not primarily concern themselves with coherence in the academic arena, but instead "suggest a coherence shaped by political literacy emanating from communities confronting crisis and conflict" (James and Gordon 371). Oppositional, radical subjectivity requires a complex attunement to the material, the local, and the immediate, rather than an emphasis on the global thinking and abstraction that characterizes scholarly knowledge-production in the university.

We argue that it is this "radical subjectivity" that is too often missing from dominant methodological trends in rhetoric and composition studies. Some rhetorical studies scholars, for example, too-optimistically identify inductive methods like grounded theory as "decolonial" for how they ostensibly assist analysts in avoiding biases and emphasize "respect for participants, humility, flexibility, and reflexivity in data gathering and analysis" (Dorpenyo 72). While we appreciate these general aims, such methods still typically valorize and work in service of the same forms of ab-

Indeed, our field still lacks sufficient tools to pursue accountability, address harm, and do the "constant work" of coalition without falling back on the same carceral logics and histories that have necessitated these struggles to begin with: "social justice" scholarship that works to support the university's narratives of "imperial benevolence" (Durazo 190); "diversity" initiatives masking the university's historical complicity with technologies of state and military surveillance[1]; and on-going efforts to fold the rhetorics and platforms of radical resistance movements into the institutional lexicon via the perpetual creation of DEI committees, task forces, and institutional policy statements (Ahmed; Ferguson, We Demand; Prasad). Often, this work takes the place of actually challenging (and working with students to challenge) the systems of control and surveillance that structure our classrooms (Kynard, "This Bridge"), and police and censor students and faculty (Chatterjee and Maira 5). This means, of course, that we *keep needing* those committees, task forces, and policy statements, since the field has not actually addressed the conditions that create the need for them.

To articulate a mode for coalitional practice that centers radical subjectivity and the "fragmented self" James and Gordon discuss, we argue that a return to embodied, material understandings of coalition is necessary. In particular, we, like Christina Cedillo, call for understandings of critical embodiment that use and rely on embodied knowledge and a critical view of how embodied experience is structured and created to help us "contest the conditions that create exclusion." Activist-engaged rhetorical scholars should work towards coalitions that model transformative justice–not reforms to a discipline, university, or scholarship that are still working in the same exclusionary ways they were designed, and which keep their power through systems of punishment that are built on the same carceral logics that many Black and women of color feminist, trans, and disabled activists and scholars have long critiqued.

Marquis Bey, in fact, argues that this kind of practiced undoing and constant renegotiation is core to what coalition must be; that the "undoing" of coalitions can itself operate as an articulation of coalition (208). This type of refusal–a "refusing to succumb to circumscripts" tethered merely to "positional identities" (Bey 207)–can enable us to imagine alternative futures for justice work. This coalitional refusal, for Bey, is a "refusing to leave while refusing to let here" (207). In this way, we might understand coalitional refusal as a temporally specific and materially situated practice. If, for example, the resources available for "coalitional" work *now* and *here* do not enable an "organic praxis" (Gilmore) or "radical subjectivity" (James and Gordon), the act of undoing or turning away may itself be, as Maria Lugones writes of coalition, the "horizon that rearranges both our possibilities and the conditions of those responsibilities" (ix).

---

1   As Roderick A. Ferguson (2017) discusses at length, the category of "diversity" was often deployed post-Civil Rights in opposition to student protesters of color. Then-President Richard Nixon, in response to the 1970s murders of Black student protesters, established a President's Commission on Campus Unrest that ultimately recommended universities establish diversity initiatives emphasizing "values held in common" to both snuff out insurrection and frame student protesters of color as threats to democracy and public safety (Ferguson, We Demand 18).

straction, researcher individualism, and "luxury production" that Gilmore critiques. Even in aspiring to construct knowledge "from below" (Dorpenyo 72), they prioritize upward theorizing (James and Gordon 371) and the researcher's own epistemic orientation and self-reflexivity.

In a 2020 article on the potentials of grounded theory for "social justice research and critical inquiry in the public sphere," for instance, Kathy Charmaz discusses reflections from qualitative researchers on their experiences using grounded theory. One researcher, Kapriskie Seide, discusses her work on issues of the social construction of health and health equity in Haiti: "I was in Haiti with no school, no advisor, no computer, no office, and no choice but to face my participants, whose words savagely slapped me into seeing my inadequate attachment to 'data' and shook me to overcome my own parochialism" (Seide qtd. in Charmaz 166). Even though Seide herself emigrated from Haiti, she notes how she nonetheless "saw the world from the perspective of an American and could not be trusted to decipher the subtleties of their lives without help." Seide then goes on to praise the "flexibility and social astuteness" (Seide qtd. in Charmaz 166) of grounded theory as a method, as well as its requirement that researchers "travel between research and practice" (Seide qtd. in Charmaz 167). Charmaz thus concludes that grounded theory can "move researchers to develop theoretical categories that situate their participants' lives within larger social and political structures" and show "where, why, and how change can occur in their respective public spheres" (174).

Note how Seide's insightful reflections on the potentials of grounded theory to provide nuanced understandings of social justice issues still replicate logics of colonialism and extraction. Seide, though a kind of insider-outsider as a Haitian researcher working for a U.S. university, reads her research participants and the "data" collected as unruly, uncomfortable, even "savage." While she does reflect upon her distrust of her positionality, she suggests that this distrust might still be successfully overcome with the "help" of her research participants, or through the act of iteratively "traveling" between "research and practice"–the former located in the realm of the academy, with the latter confined to the presumed wildness and unruliness of the "data." Charmaz's conclusion that grounded theory can "move researchers to develop theoretical categories" to imagine "change" in "their respective public spheres," then, again recenters "coherence in the academic arena" (James and Gordon 371) as the ultimate goal of grounded theory. Even though Charmaz and Seide's methodological reflections emphasize a nuanced commitment to rejecting objectivism, to what extent might such in/abductive methods reinforce capitalist, colonial visions of research participants and the "data" they yield as endless assets for intellectual and academic knowledge-making? Even as the field calls for "reciprocity" in research across power differentials (Powell and Takayoshi; Middleton et al.; Brady; Santiago-Ortiz), when does reciprocity and its focus on *mutual* benefit become yet another way the academy reasserts itself into the center of "social justice" work? Opposition in the form of refusal, we argue, can offer a key pathway towards a critical, embodied approach to coalition.

Furthermore, an inability to meaningfully address harm outside of punitive models makes us rigid–unable to address coalitional tensions, changing needs, and harm when it happens. This is a problem of practice, but it is also an indicator that we don't actually understand coalition as founded in linked struggle. Fred Moten, for example, argues that coalition is not "a maneuver that always gets traced back to your own interests." It emerges "out of a recognition that it's fucked up for you, in the same way that we've already recognized that it's fucked up for us . . . I just need you to recognize that this shit is killing you, too, however much more softly" (qtd. in Harney and Moten 140-141). This kind of understanding of struggles as linked doesn't just require a systemic analysis; it actually requires a deep attention to embodied experience—to our own subjectivities. That is, we must–as we might also learn from many recent and historic student-led movements– foreground *joint struggle* in our moves towards coalition (Hitchcock 94). Moten, here, relies on a model of coalition that emphasizes material realities and embodied experience; coalitional work, then, would ask us to research and write (or, sometimes, not research and write) from a central understanding of one's own positionality and *how that positionality is tied up in systems.*

Thinking about coalition like Lugones, Harney and Moten, Bey, and others asks us to re-frame how we might think about terms like "reciprocity" that typically structure activist-engaged research, scholarship-activism, and community partnerships. At present, rhetoric and composition's understandings of these concepts remain underdeveloped. For example, Katrina M. Powell and Pamela Takayoshi note the limits of "reciprocity" as *methodologically* determined, preferring instead to highlight reciprocity as an ethical framework. Too often, they argue, researchers create and assign predetermined roles for research participants rather than building genuine, "quality" re-lationships in which research participants "should be allowed to construct roles for themselves and us in the same way we construct roles for them" (398). Ellen Cushman, however, in her 2004 re-sponse, rightly critiques Powell and Takayoshi's romantic suggestion that reciprocity and collabo-ration might actually level asymmetrical power relations, particularly through the type of self-reflec-tion they model in their essay. Researcher self-reflection, Cushman writes, can not only overpower participants' lived realities and literacy practices, but it can also become a "performance of exotic moments of trial, distress, or anxiety" and a sensationalization of "tense moments or researchers' personal lives" (152).

Consider, for example, the common practice across academia, popular culture, and politics of simply listing one's demographic characteristics to mark positionality. Phrases like "I recognize my privilege as a white, cisgender, heterosexual white man in discussions of race and racism," which are often deployed as gestures to mitigate racial anxiety or tension, can be weaponized to relieve oneself from the responsibility of delimiting *specifically* what one can and, more impor-tantly, cannot know by virtue of their identities and lived experiences. They also work to re-center the speaker's own epistemic orientation and uncertainty at the expense of those for whom (or over whom) they are speaking. Such performances, as an iteration of what queer of color critique theorist Kevin Duong identifies as "descriptive intersectionality," foreclose possibilities to think

beyond the binary of inclusion/exclusion. This narrative affixes whiteness, heteromasculinity, and able-bodiedness at the epistemic center; it is usually only an abstract response to "the political problem of exclusion" (Duong 375) rather than an intentional interrogation of material and epistemological relationships between and across differences.

Relatedly, cultural anthropologist and queer of color critique theorist Suparna Bhaskaran critiques social sciences' disciplinary valorization of researcher experience and experiential knowledge over the perspectives of those who are "the researched," a notion she theorizes as "arrogant experience" (16). Arrogant experience embraces a liberal humanist ethnographic approach whereby ethnographers represent a "core" Western, imperialist, atomistic-individual, white-male subject, who "chooses to travel to new worlds to gather data from Others, and who objectively reports back to the metropole" (17)–an ethnographic humanism "reproduced in brown/black face" (17) that romanticizes relationality and collaboration to "boomerang" back to the white academy (we might again recall, here, Seide's reflection on her research participants during her fieldwork in Haiti). Similarly, Cedillo argues, "The "invisibility" of privileged bodies lends credence to the discourses advanced through those bodies, equating their speech with objectivity as though said discourses were not products of specific standpoints."

These imperialist, Western modes of discourse structure rhetorical studies' relationship to and understanding of bodies writ large. As Cedillo notes, "those whose bodies are seen (in terms of surveillance and an ableist predilection for sight) as Other are framed as too corporeal and incapable of legitimate speech, as rhetorically expedient but never rhetorical in their own right. They are mere bodies, objects upon which meaning can be imposed." As Indigenous scholar Sandy Grande has argued, however, one cannot simply mitigate the materiality of power differences through discursive self-reflection, citation politics, or methodological nuance. Doing so contributes to what Grande calls "whitestream" theory, which depends heavily on postmodernism and post-structuralist epistemologies that privilege academic theorizing and knowledge-making over political, material action (330) and enable "high status feminists" to build "lucrative careers by theorizing the lives of 'other' women" (331). This, we would argue, is where refusal becomes a coalitional tool; we might pursue the undoing of discipline, punishment, and carcerality *within our discipline* through strategic refusals of whitestream norms and epistemological mandates.

We already see such refusals reflected, for example, in the 2020 "This Ain't Another Statement! This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice," which, drawing on the work of Carmen Kynard (*Vernacular Insurrections*), both explicitly refuses the field's longstanding practice of "position statements" and argues for the ways in which "Students' Right to Their Own Language" was "always imagined, and yet never fully achieved." This erasure, Kynard writes, "falls squarely in line with our inadequate responses to the anti-systemic nature of the '60s social justice movements" (74). That is, an effort to include varieties of English other than white mainstream English without changing the systems that led to the centering of white mainstream English to begin with does not

8

lead us to justice. We might also consider calls for us to refuse individualized approaches to accommodations for disabled, mad, and neurodivergent students and instead meaningfully address how *which* universities are built of "steep steps" (Dolmage, *Academic Ableism*, 41; see also Price). These exclusions are perpetuated, of course, in the writing classroom, which has long placed emphasis on preparing the next managerial class (Ruiz 59-60) by prioritizing the written word (Dolmage, "Writing Against Normal") and particular criteria for rhetoricity that excludes other forms of rhetorical expression and ways of knowing (Yergeau 7-8). These priorities reflect the whitestream epistemologies that have historically shaped the field by valorizing logocentric, Judeo-Christian models of written or verbal expression. We might *allow* difference within these norms, but while they stand, difference is allowable only so far as it can be, as disabled folx are often told, "*reasonably*" accommodated.

The field increasingly acknowledges subjectivity the way we acknowledge injustice–as systemic, attached to groups, and larger than any one interaction can address. While understanding both the construction of identity and systems of oppression as bound up in one another is important (Greene 49), Ruha Benjamin warns that we sometimes use arguments about systems to the exclusion of addressing ways that we "can uphold unjust systems" in everyday actions (21). Within our own field, Cody Jackson and Christina Cedillo point out a growing acceptance for discussion of the systemic nature of injustice that is incapable–or unwilling–to move down into the ways individuals, small groups, or specific organizations are perpetuating those injustices in the immediate, material, embodied moment (109). This is not to say we should over-individualize, or not pay attention to the systemic nature of oppression, but rather that, if we're seeking to build coalitions, we also need to build in practices that identify and address the ways we perpetuate those systems, both individually and as a field, a department, or a university. This certainly includes building alternative practices, such as different models for tenure and promotion that value work beyond the terms set by the academy, or editorial policies that decenter white standardized English and language norms. It can also look like working coalitionally to define small actions that systematically, collectively refuse whitestream norms and epistemologies in order to make room for those alternative practices.

Coalitional refusal can help us work towards transformative justice. More specifically, it can help us work with and beyond our academic, disciplinary, and research commitments in ways that don't not simply create "access to the same crappy system that everybody else has" but rather "think about how we move towards what a just world would look like for us all, and what liberation really looks like" (qtd. in Macdougall, "Beyond Access"). Coalitions cannot survive when priorities are on optics, research agendas, and project deliverables; we must refuse these kinds of "idealized coalitions," as Pritha has called them. An *idealized* coalition, in fact, is a replication of carceral logics, because in this model, one pays far more attention, in research and professional spaces, to *optics* rather than actual, messy, embodied experience. One might be so concerned about optics–about *looking wrong* and being somehow punished for doing so–that they are unable (or unwilling)

to meaningfully address harm when it happens. This prevents an understanding of struggles as linked in the deep, embodied ways we need to build the power to overturn systems of oppression and address how the academy and university perpetuate them in everyday actions.

In fact, coalitions grounded in transformative justice must at times refuse restorative justice precisely because restoration to a carceral past is itself a violence. As Chávez puts it, "coalition connotes tension and precariousness in this sense, but it is not necessarily temporary. It describes a space in which we can engage, but because coalescing cannot be taken for granted, it requires *constant work if it is to endure*" (8, emphasis ours). In taking up this definition, Gavin Johnson pushes scholars to consider their coalitions in light of these questions: "What work comes after the disruption of institutions? How do we–as rhetoricians, activists, and/or teachers–move beyond the tendency to simply critique and toward an ethic of coalitional accountability and restorative justice?" While Johnson echoes Chávez's call to move beyond critique, the appeal to restorative justice emphasizes a return to a sense of peace, wholeness, or hope within unjust systems. Restorative justice–appeals to which are echoed in other work on non-punitive models of justice in the field (Juergensmeyer; Kells; Carter)–assumes it is possible to restore an institution or system to some earlier point where that institution or system was, presumably, centering justice in how it operated (brown, *We Will Not Cancel Us*, 4). However, many of the institutions and systems we might work to (coalitionally) refuse–the university included–have not strayed from some less violent past; they are working as intended.

This extends, too, to our scholarly discourse. Critical histories of our field note how rhetorical studies is built on rhetorical and systemic violences (Kynard, *Vernacular Insurrections* 133; Ruiz 41-43). The risk of ignoring these histories is that call-outs from, in particular, women of color scholars in the field are perceived as ruptures in our imagined coalitions–ones that must quickly be repaired in order to restore an idealized multicultural, coalitional rhetorical studies. However, repair can itself be a violence; addressing harm often requires a complete undoing–a move to something new. As adrienne maree brown writes, while "restorative justice [has] often meant restoring conditions that were fundamentally harmful and unequal, unjust," transformative justice addresses "harm at the root, outside the mechanisms of the state, so that we can grow into right relationship with each other" (*We Will Not Cancel Us* 4).

One way coalitional refusal might help us move towards transformative justice is by refusing the carceral logics tied up in apology[2]. This includes punishing ways of being with each other in which apology is used to avoid punishment rather than meaningfully address harm or prevent it from recurring. These kinds of carceral logics limit our imagination; they prevent conceptions of callouts or critique as generative, as a form of care, and–of particular interest to us here–as a form of refusal. *Transformative* justice is predicated on addressing harm not through punishment but

---

2   See Prasad and Maraj, "'I Am Not Your Teaching Moment': The Benevolent Gaslight and Epistemic Violence" (2022) for an extended discussion and critique of the racial politics of white apologies.

through identifying and addressing the root cause of harm in ways that center the person who has experienced harm (Kaba and Hayes; Kim), and this includes accountability (which does not carry the Judeo-Christian expectation of apology as a means of restoring a relationship). It similarly includes moves to change underlying structures–including disciplinary ones–that make repeating that harm imaginable.

Coalitional refusal might also mean a refusal to *do research*. Recent scholarship from rhetorical studies on *in situ* or participatory research has sought to forge methodological models for ethical, participatory/activist-oriented research across identity and power differences. Michael Middleton et al., for example, theorize "participatory critical rhetoric," a set of research practices that bridge ethnography with rhetorical criticism to reconsider the relationships between critic, rhetor, text/context, and audience (xiv). Under this framework, "the critic enters a naturalistic field in which rhetoric occurs in order to observe, participate with, document, and analyze that rhetoric in its embodied and emplaced instantiation" (Middleton et al. xv). A participatory critical rhetoric scholar thus becomes "an activist both in their scholarly efforts and in their embodied engagements with the rhetorical communities they examine" (xviii). Middleton et al., too, note the value of privileging researchers' embodied, affective responses "to being in the moment… to hold signs and march along with their participants" as well as the risks "rhetorical communities" take when they allow critics "representational authority over their identities and their rhetorical practices" (164). This process allows the critic to "reforge" observer-observed hierarchies "into more of a partnership" to do ethnography "with," rather than "of" (164).

While Middleton et al.'s intervention is promising in *theory*, these moves towards participatory partnership and collaboration can sometimes lead to "idealized coalitions" in which progressive publics "imagine collectivity in places where it may not actually exist" and falsely assume shared politics across axes of power, even in contexts in which reciprocity or consent might not even be sustainable or possible (Prasad). A white rhetorical critic studying Indigenous movements, for instance, may make any number of nuanced self-reflexive, theoretical, and methodological moves to navigate and attend to histories of distrust and violence between settler-colonizers and Indigenous peoples in the Americas (Tuhiwai-Smith; Tuck and Yang). But a shared, collective vision may still be impossible or unavailable given both the critic's identity and orientation to power and their commitment to the same knowledge-making institutions that have underpinned colonial and imperialist logics and violences.

Researchers too often ask the question of *how* to do particular types of research "ethically" or "responsibly," yet may be afraid to ask questions that meaningfully unsettle the epistemic authority of the academy: *Should* I do this research? *Can* I even do this work ethically? Does "hold[ing] signs and march[ing] along with participants" (Middleton et al. 164) necessarily place researchers in solidarity or coalition with research "participants"? In one Kansas City occupation in which Brynn participated, the coalitional move was distinctly not to "hold signs and march along

with participants"; in fact, while Brynn did work with activists during and following the occupation, coalitional work didn't really begin until Brynn stepped away from the occupation, which had become so preoccupied with holding signs, marching, and keeping a tent city going that the coalitions it was built on had fallen apart. The obsession of, predominantly, other white people in their 20s (like Brynn) with *participating* at a certain point prevented the cultivation of longer-term, strategic relationships and behind-the-scenes work that defined coalitional work, rather than just work for a single activist moment (Reyes).

Here, we note another refusal: sometimes, coalitional work means a refusal to do something *right now* in favor of longer-term relationships and coalitions. Coalitional refusal might look like refusing a grant or research project in the present, even if the work is needed in the future. The "constant work" (Chávez 8) of coalition-building is also slow. The mere choice to just *slow down*, however, is not alone a coalitional refusal (nor is it always possible). Rather, as Eli Meyerhoff and Elsa Noterman write, "slow scholarship needs to be a collective political project rather than merely an individual one–and one that addresses power and inequality in the university" (219). This politicized, *coalitional* slowness is a refusal also aligned with notions of *crip time* (Samuels; Price; Piepzna-Samarasinha and Lakshmi); it is refusing the demand for *output*–of research, of grant project deliverables, of CV lines, of conference presentations–that can distract from or actively prevent coalition-building.

For example, Brynn's most recent research project included collaboration with Kansas City-based abolitionist citizen journalists from Independent Media Association (IMA). In 2021, IMA participated in a grant-funded project in collaboration with the university and a School of Nursing faculty member. While the grant aimed at fostering research and public-facing events, IMA hoped it would serve to help them build community–and, ultimately, coalition–with other citizen journalists. The project timeline (even with generous extensions from the grantmaking organization), however, didn't allow for the slow pace of community-building the group needed both to avoid burnout themselves and to effectively connect with others doing community media work. Instead, IMA members commented that in working with the university, they found themselves standing in for "the community" in ways they weren't comfortable with when community was something they were still building. The timeline of a grant project that was meant to end in research created more burnout than funding alleviated.

Even if we don't refuse research altogether, the best coalitional practice sometimes might be to refuse to let the urgency created by a grant or conference deadline, a graduate program's timeline, tenure clocks, or a publication cycle structure our relationships with activists and community members. This might look like siphoning institutional resources in the undercommons (Harney and Moten; Hatrick), advocating for funding for relationship-building or operational costs for community partnerships rather than project-based funding (brown, "Thoughts for Foundations"), or postponing, slowing down, or reimagining research and public-facing collaborative work.

While coalitional refusal represents a set of generative strategies for working collectively against oppressive and carceral logics, systems, and norms, we recognize that refusal can also be a typical white, masculinist response. This kind of refusal might *also* refuse apology, for example, or refuse to engage in research based not on accountability, but rather the types of individualism and opportunism that can sometimes characterize many (often very charismatic) leaders in activist movements and academic fields alike. Many activist spaces both in and outside the university have faced the impact of refusals that gesture at being coalitional while actually supporting the kinds of virtue-signaling and individual platform-building that have historically harmed activist efforts and movements. While being conscious of this potential for slippage between coalitional and hegemonic forms of refusal is crucial, we feel it would be overly simplistic or even naive to offer a clean framework that allows us to determine when refusal is or isn't coalitional. Indeed, these distinctions, in practice, are often worked out in individual contexts and relationships–and *over time*. We might instead consider how a refusal of the compulsive desire for certainty, for a *framework*, might itself be a coalitional move towards transformative justice that emphasizes accountability within the ebbs and flows of relationships and their material and temporal specificities, rather than through absolutist logics of judgment and punishment.

Conclusion

If, at this point, you are wondering what we should *do* rather than what we should *refuse*, we would ask you to sit for a moment in that feeling and perhaps reconsider this binary. Refusal isn't the opposite of action or hope or abundance. Rather, it's a coalitional move–a collective, politicized, and generative choice to not research, or be productive, or engage in rhetorics of apology, or negotiate with dehumanizing systems and epistemologies. We see these uses of refusal at play when activists march in the streets or occupy public property in an effort to refuse state surveillance and violence while simultaneously allowing space to do *something else*. Sometimes that "something else" looks like grassroots efforts to house people, feed people, care for people's mental health, or educate people, but sometimes it looks like creating and holding space to be. In fact, some activists, like Kyharra Williams, a Kansas City abolitionist activist, argue that's what protest is for. As they told Brynn in a 2022 interview: "Protests aren't for the oppressors; they're for the people…it's a place where we can gather and hold space for people that we've lost, for each other, and just like, remind ourselves that we have community with people" (Williams). Space doesn't have to be filled with action, or some hopeful message, or some new framework or scholarship, to be useful and necessary.

In closing, we return again to Nope. In the film, Angel Torres, an acquaintance of the Haywoods who helps them set up cameras on their ranch, at one point rationalizes their continued work together with the justification that it will be worth it if they can, beyond the money, also "save some lives" or even humanity. Em says "yeah," but by the end of the film, after retaining photographic proof of the alien, she screams in celebration of the Haywoods' "Oprah shot," yelling "no-

body fucks with Haywood, bitch!" Em gives meaning to the Haywoods' actions not because they may have saved the world, but because they've succeeded here, now in doing what they needed to survive. The feeling of hope with which the film leaves viewers is the Haywoods' vision of hope, not one inspired by some grand, moral imperative or even the capitalist film industry upon which their ranch has depended. The film shows us that refusal and hope aren't mutually exclusive, even as–like in the example of Pritha's 2023 CCCC panel–the impulse to reject "doing nope" in favor of "doing hope" might suggest not only that refusal and hope must be opposites, but also that of the two ends of that binary, we must always orient towards hope.

Is it any wonder that so many of us as multiply-marginalized scholars are burnt out if all we can ever imagine for our coalitions is what we *do* or what we are asked to do? We do hope, we do antiracism, we do access work, we do SafeZone trainings, we do public-facing scholarship, we do talks on that public-facing scholarship for the university, and so on. What might be possible if we were instead to work together, within our coalitions (whatever those look like), to cultivate coalitional refusals–to refuse to participate in our current scholarly, institutional, economic, or political systems, and be hopeful about it?

Works Cited

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Duke University Press, 2012.

Benjamin, Ruha. *Viral Justice: How We Grow the World We Want*. Princeton University Press, 2022.

Bey, Marquis. *Black Trans Feminism*. Duke University Press, 2021.

Bhaskaran, Suparna. *Made in India: Decolonizations, Queer Sexualities, Trans/National Projects.* Springer, 2004.

Brady, Ann. "Rhetorical Research: Toward a User-Centered Approach." *Rhetoric Review,* vol. 23, no. 1, Jan. 2004, pp. 57–74, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327981rr2301_4.

brown, adrienne maree. "Thoughts for Foundations and Major Donors." *Adrienne Maree Brown,* 15 Jan. 2013, https://adriennemareebrown.net/2013/01/15/thoughts-for-foundations-and-major-donors/.

—. *We Will Not Cancel Us: And Other Dreams of Transformative Justice*. AK Press, 2020.

Carter, Shannon. "HOPE, 'Repair,' and the Complexities of Reciprocity: Inmates Tutoring Inmates in a Total Institution." *Community Literacy Journal,* vol. 2, no. 2, Apr. 2008, https://doi.org/10.25148/CLJ.2.2.009493.

Carter, Shannon, Deborah Mutnick, Stephen Parks, and Jessica Pauszek, editors. *Writing Democracy: The Political Turn in and Beyond the Trump Era. Routledge*, 2019.

CCCC. "2024 Call for Proposals." Conference on College Composition and Communication, 2024, https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/call-2024.

Cedillo, Christina V., et al. "Intentional, Institutional Pessimism: Supporting Meaningful Resistance." Conference on College Composition and Communication, 2024, Spokane, WA. Roundtable proposal (under review).

Cedillo, Christina V. "What Does It Mean to Move?: Race, Disability, and Critical Embodiment Pedagogy." *Composition Forum,* vol. 39, Summer 2018, https://compositionforum.com/issue/39/to-move.php. Retrieved 28 August 2023.

Charmaz, Kathy. *Constructing Grounded Theory.* SAGE, 2014.

—. "'With Constructivist Grounded Theory You Can't Hide': Social Justice Research and Critical Inquiry in the Public Sphere." *Qualitative Inquiry,* vol. 26, no. 2, Feb. 2020, pp. 165–76, https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800419879081.

Chatterjee, Piya, and Sunaina Maira. *The Imperial University: Academic Repression and Scholarly Dissent.* U of Minnesota Press, 2014.

Chávez, Karma R. *Queer Migration Politics: Activist Rhetoric and Coalitional Possibilities.* University of Illinois Press, 2013.

Cohen, Cathy. (2014, December 2). #DoBlackLivesMatter?: From Michael Brown to CeCe McDonald on Black Death and LGBTQ Politics. [Transcript of public lecture at

City University of New York]. Retrieved from http://www.racismreview.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Cohen_CLAGS_Transcript_121214.pdf.

Cushman, Ellen, et al. "Response to 'Accepting the Roles Created for Us: The Ethics of Reciprocity.'" *College Composition and Communication,* vol. 56, no. 1, 2004, pp. 150–56. JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/4140685.

Dolmage, Jay. *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education.* University of Michigan Press, 2017.

---. "Writing Against Normal: Navigating a Corporeal Turn." *Composing Media Composing Embodiment,* Jan. 2012, pp. 110–26.

Dorpenyo, Isidore. *User Localization Strategies in the Face of Technological Breakdown*. Palgrave Macmillan US, 2019.

Duong, Kevin. "What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about Intersectionality." *Politics & Gender*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2012, pp. 370–86.

Durazo, Ana Clarissa Rojas. "Decolonizing Chicano Studies in the Shadows of the University's 'Heteropatriracial' Order." *The Imperial University: Academic Repression and Scholarly Dissent,* edited by Piya Chatterjee and Sunaina Maira, University of Minnesota Press, 2014, p. 0, https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816680894.003.0008.

Ferguson, Roderick A. *We Demand: The University and Student Protests.* Univ of California Press, 2017.

Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. "Public Enemies and Private Intellectuals: Apartheid USA." *Race & Class,* vol. 35, no. 1, July 1993, pp. 69–78, https://doi.org/10.1177/030639689303500107.

Gonzales, Leslie D., and Heather Shotton. "Coalitional Refusal in a Neoliberal Academy." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, vol. 35, no. 5, May 2022, pp. 540–52, https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2022.2025472.

Grande, Sandy. "Whitestream Feminism and the Colonialist Project: A Review of Contemporary Feminist Pedagogy and Praxis." *Educational Theory,* vol. 53, no. 3, 2003, pp. 329–46, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2003.00329.x.

Greene, Ronald Walter. "Rhetorical Materialism: The Rhetorical Subject and the General Intellect." *Rhetoric, Materiality, & Politics*, edited by Barbara A. Biesecker and John Louis Lucaites, Peter Lang, 2009.

Harney, Stefano, and Fred Moten. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. Minor Compositions, 2013.

Hassan, Shira. *Saving Our Own Lives: A Liberatory Practice of Harm Reduction.* Haymarket Books, 2022.

Hatrick, Jessica. "How to Outlive the University?" *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies,* vol. 17, no. 4, Oct. 2020, pp. 410–17.

Hitchcock, Jennifer. "Framing Palestinian Rights: A Rhetorical Frame Analysis of Vernacular Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) Movement Discourse." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, vol. 53, no. 2, Mar. 2023, pp. 87–103.

Hubrig, Ada. "'Liberation Happens When We All Get Free'–or–Disability Justice Academia Isn't." *Spark: A 4C4Equality Journal*, vol. 4, Sept. 2022,   https://sparkactivism.com/volume-4-introduction/.

Jackson, Cody, and Christina Cedillo. "We Are Here to Crip That Shit: Embodying Accountability Beyond the 'Word'." *College Composition and Communication,* vol. 72, no. 1, Mar. 2020.

James, Joy, and Edmund Gordon. "Activist Scholars or Radical Subjects?" *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*, edited by Charles R. Hale, Univ of California Press, 2008, pp. 367–74.

Johnson, Gavin, and Karma R. Chávez. "The Time Is Always Now: A Conversation with Karma R. Chávez about Coalition and the Work to Come." *Spark: A 4C4Equality Journal,* vol. 3, Apr. 2021. https://sparkactivism.com/volume-3-call/conversation-with-karma-r-chavez/.

Juergensmeyer, Erik. "Sharing Control: Developing Research Literacy through Community-Based Action Research." *Community Literacy Journal,* vol. 5, no. 2, Apr. 2011, https://doi.org/10.25148/CLJ.5.2.009417.

Kaba, Mariame, and Kelly Hayes. "Rejecting Our Fear of Each Other" *Inquest: A Decarceral Brainstorm,* 15 June 2023, www.inquest.org/rejecting-our-fear-of-each-other/.

Kells, Michelle. "What's Writing Got to Do with It?: Citizen Wisdom, Civil Rights Activism, and 21st Century Community Literacy." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 7, no. 1, Oct. 2012, https://doi.org/10.25148/CLJ.7.1.009382.

Kim, Mimi E. "From Carceral Feminism to Transformative Justice: Women-of-Color Feminism *and Alternatives to Incarceration."* Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work, vol. 27, no. 3, July 2018, pp. 219–33, https://doi.org/10.1080/15313204.2018.1474827.

Kynard, Carmen. "'This Bridge': The BlackFeministCompositionist's Guide to The Colonial and Imperial Violence of Schooling Today." *Feminist Teacher: A Journal of the Practices, Theories, and Scholarship of Feminist Teaching*, vol. 26, 2016, pp. 126–41.

—. *Vernacular Insurrections: Race, Black Protest, and the New Century in Composition-Literacies Studies*. State University of New York Press, 2013,   http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ku/detail.action?docID=3408730.

Licona, Adela C., and J. Sarah Gonzales. "Education/Connection/Action: Community Literacies and Shared Knowledges as Creative Productions for Social Justice." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1, Aug. 2013. www.communityliteracy.org,   https://www.communityliteracy.org/index.php/clj/article/view/216.

Lugones, María. *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions.* Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003.

Macdougall, Greg. "Beyond Access: Mia Mingus on Disability Justice (Video Interview)." *EquitableEducation.Ca*, 30 Nov. 2013, https://EquitableEducation.ca/2013/mia-mingus-disability-justice.

Mao, LuMing. *Reading Chinese Fortune Cookie: The Making of Chinese American Rhetoric.* Utah State University Press, 2006.

Maraj, Louis M., et al. "Doing Nope: Surviving Anti/Racism in the Academy." C*onference on College Composition and Communication,* 18 February 2023, Hilton Chicago, Chicago, IL. Conference panel.

Meyerhoff, Eli and Elsa Noterman. "Revolutionary Scholarship by Any Speed Necessary: Slow or Fast but for the End of This World." *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies,* Jan. 2017.

Middleton, Michael, et al. *Participatory Critical Rhetoric: Theoretical and Methodological Foundations for Studying Rhetoric In Situ*. Lexington Books, 2015.

Nope. Directed by Jordan Peele, Universal Pictures, Dentsu, Monkeypaw Productions, 2022.

Oparah, Julia C. "Challenging Complicity: The Neoliberal University and the Prison-Industrial Complex." *Imperial University : Academic Repression and Scholarly Dissent*, edited by Piya Chatterjee and Sunaina Maira, University of Minnesota Press, 2014, pp. 99–117, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ku/detail.action?docID=1693973.

Page, Cara, and Erica Woodland. *Healing Justice Lineages: Dreaming at the Crossroads of Liberation, Collective Care, and Safety.* National Geographic Books, 2023.

Piepzna-Samarasinha, and Leah Lakshmi. *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice.* Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018.

Powell, Katrina M., and Pamela Takayoshi. "Accepting Roles Created for Us: The Ethics of Reciprocity." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 54, no. 3, 2003, pp. 394–422. JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/3594171.

Prasad, Pritha. "'Coalition Is Not a Home': From Idealized Coalitions to Livable Lives." *Spark: A 4C4Equality Journal,* vol. 3, Apr. 2021, https://sparkactivism.com/volume-3-call/from-idealized-coalitions-to-livable-lives/.

—, and Louis M. Maraj. "'I Am Not Your Teaching Moment': The Benevolent Gaslight and Epistemic Violence." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 74, no. 2, 2022, pp. 322–51.

Price, Margaret. "Time Harms: Disabled Faculty Navigating the Accommodations Loop." *South Atlantic Quarterly,* vol. 120, no. 2, Apr. 2021, pp. 257–77. Silverchair, https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-8915966.

Reyes, Berte. "Moments and Movements: On Scholar-Activists Considering the Connection Between Activism and Organizing." *Spark: A 4C4Equality Journal,* vol. 1, Feb. 2019, https://sparkactivism.com/volume-1-intro/moments-and-movements-on-scholar-activists-considering-the-connection-between-activism-and-organizing/.

Ruiz, Iris D. Reclaiming Composition for Chicano/as and Other Ethnic Minorities: A Critical History and Pedagogy. Springer, 2016.

Samuels, Ellen. "Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time." Disability Studies Quarterly, vol. 37, no. 3, 3, Aug. 2017. dsq-sds.org, https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v37i3.5824.

Santiago-Ortiz, Aurora. "From Critical to Decolonizing Service- Learning: Limits and Possibilities of Social Justice– Based Approaches to Community Service- Learning." Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, vol. Winter 2019, pp. 43–54.

Simpson, Audra. Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States. Duke University Press, 2014.

"This Ain't Another Statement! This Is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice!" Conference on College Composition and Communication, 3 Aug. 2020, https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/demand-for-black-linguistic-justice.

Tuck, Eve, and K. Wayne Yang. "R-Words: Refusing Research." Humanizing Research: Decolonizing Qualitative Inquiry With Youth and Communities, edited by Django Paris and Maisha T. Winn, SAGE, 2014, pp. 223–47.

Tuhiwai-Smith, Linda. Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples. Zed Books, 2013.

Walton, Rebecca, et al. Technical Communication After the Social Justice Turn: Building Coalitions for Action. Routledge, 2019.

Williams, Kyharra. Personal interview. Conducted by Brynn Fitzsimmons, 1 July 2022.

Yam, Shui-yin Sharon. Inconvenient Strangers: Transnational Subjects and the Politics of Citizenship. Ohio State University Press, 2019.

Yergeau, M. Remi. Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness. Duke University Press, 2018.