

Coalition-Building, Rural Organizing, and Academic Accountabilities: Letting Rural Women Take the Lead

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Abstract: This article interrogates what coalition means in the face of increasingly polarizing times, especially as means to coalesce across rural vs. urban divides. Settled in Chandra Mohanty, Karma Chávez, and Pritha Prasad's ideas of coalition, it unravels rural mythologies and calls for academic accountability toward rural organizing. In particular, this text focuses on two rural-centered organizations (Yellowhammer Fund and Rural Assembly), highlighting their rhetorical positionalities, their actions, and their BIWOC feminist leadership teams as powerful models of coalition. This work invites readers to imagine coalitional possibilities within these models and asks them to listen and learn from rural women as coalitional leaders.

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Introduction

Take a moment and view the stage—three scenes are set here.

In the first scene, it's the summer of 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic is at its peak, the presidential election of Joe Biden is just a few months away, and Black Lives Matter protests are making waves across the country. At the start of summer, a Black man named George Floyd was killed in Minnesota, a direct result of the excessive force deployed by white police officer Derek Chauvin. Within two weeks of Floyd's death more than 2000+ BLM protests spread across the United States—and one of them just happens to be in Rocky Mount, Virginia (Burch et. al). A distinctly

rural town, Rocky Mount's population sits at just under five thousand and nearly 70% of that population is white. Yet when Brigette Craighead, Katosha Poindexter, and Malala Penn, three local Black women, plan a Black Lives Matter protest, hundreds of people show up, all of them a mix of different genders, ages, and races. Craighead, Poindexter, and Penn, who lived in Rocky Mount their entire lives, were shocked by both the crowd itself and the diversity within it. Craighead even pointed out that it "was more people than she had ever seen at one time in Rocky Mount" (Natan-son).

The second scene takes place in Temple, Texas in October 2021. Though larger than Rocky Mount, Temple is still rural in both its culture and geographies—especially in comparison to its nearest urban center of Austin, Texas. And in Temple, Kendall Tinoco has just been banned from using the girl's restrooms and locker rooms at her school. Though she has been using women's facilities since she came out as transgender at age thirteen, teachers at her school now deny her the right, claiming that Tinoco should not be in either of those spaces while "actual girls' are in there" (McNab). Tinoco takes to Instagram, where she and her friends call out the school and plan a transgender rights walkout for the following week. Though they initially only expected a handful of students to participate, hundreds of students ended up walking out and rallying around Tinoco. There was even support from people within the larger Temple community, who showed up to document the walk out and to support the students' protest. As Tinoco noted, "the support was overwhelming—in a good way. I loved it" (McNab).

The third and final scene shows a view from Topeka, Kansas in August 2022. At the capitol, votes are being tallied for the "Value Them Both" amendment, a piece of state legislation that significantly restricts abortion access in Kansas. This is one of many similar laws being voted on in the United States, all of them acting as a response to the Supreme Court overturning *Roe v. Wade* in June 2022. However, the votes in Kansas are making it clear that this amendment will not pass. What is surprising is just how many of those pro-choice votes are coming from the state's most rural places. In Osage County, 56% of voters reject the amendment and in Jackson County, 52% vote against. Similar numbers are present in many of the state's rural counties, with margins that lie in significant opposition to voting patterns during the 2016 and 2020 elections (Bahl and Hrenchir). The amendment failed and for now, Kansas still has the right to choose. As Pamela Martinson, a deeply Catholic woman from Jackson County said: "It's very simple. Being Catholic, I don't believe in abortion for myself, but I feel women have a right to decide what happens to their bodies" (Bahl and Hrenchir).

I set the stage of this article with these three scenes because they are not unique, but rather, they are representations of contemporary coalition building in rural spaces. In 2020 and beyond, there were Black Lives Matter protests in hundreds of rural and small towns across the United States (McCarty; Solliday; Robertson). Over the last decade, there has been a significant rise in LGBT+ events across rural America, as well as calls for providing trans-affirming healthcare in

these same areas (Martin; Kenning; Gandy et. al). And in the urgencies of a post-Roe world, people are giving more attention to reproductive inequities in rural areas than ever before (Batstone; Carey). These are only a few ways that activism and coalition-building are deeply present in rural America. It's easy to overlook rurality, because we're constantly told the same myths: urban areas are progressive, while rural areas are conservative, and our best hope for radical change lies in liberal cities, not in the small towns whose presence is insignificant in the larger scope of social movements. These myths are easy to believe, proliferated by cultural and political tensions, and used to fan the flames of ever-increasing polarizing divides. When we believe these mythologies, we refuse accountability to rurality and the many ways working across cultural and geographical boundaries may lead us to new coalitional possibilities.

This article is an invitation to listen and learn, with a particular focus on how rural organizations led by BIWOC (Black, Indigenous, Women of Color) can act *as coalition*. In giving attention to these organizations, and the rural women who lead them, I make calls and inquiries for academic accountability toward rural geographies, highlight how coalitional possibilities exist within these organizations, and posit inquiries about reimagining coalition within academic thinking. I position my thoughts on coalition around Jaquette Shade-Johnson and Phil Bratta's offering in their introduction to *Spark: A 4C4Equality Journal*: "coalitions are not formed on merely shared ideology, but they must integrate difference and embodied experiences as they develop collaborative action that addresses oppression, exploitation, and discrimination to build more just and livable worlds" (Shade-Johnson and Bratta). I also consider Karma Chávez's arguments in *Queer Migration Politics* about analyzing coalitional moments to witness how "activists draw resources toward building alternative rhetorical realities and possibilities for livable lives" (Chávez 9). I give attention to these arguments for more livable worlds, because in our current times the world feels deeply unlivable, especially for marginalized folks. Coalition-building is an answer to this, a practice of radically hoping in these unlivable times, in fighting against present realities to create more just and equitable worlds for all. These scholars also argue that coalition is about navigating differences and embodied experiences, about collaboratively working together to position more powerful rhetorical possibilities.¹ I build on their ideas to argue that some of the best models for coalition-building lie in the rural spaces that rhetorical imaginaries have rarely considered. Organizations in these rural spaces are productively responding to present crises and policies, serving diverse communities whose needs are often overlooked, and powerfully acting as coalition in difficult times. looked, and powerfully acting as *coalition* in difficult times.

Learning from these organizations comes first in unraveling tightly woven rural mythologies. In *Critical Rural Pedagogy*, Sharon Mitchler argues that rural is not "a static concept, but rather a dynamic, variable, and contested reality" (Mitchler 76). Our understandings of rurality should

1 Throughout this paper, I use the singular use of "coalition" most often to refer to the overarching ideas of coalition itself, as proliferated by academics, activists, and rural organizations. I use the plural term of "coalitions" most often to refer to specific initiatives and movements, which exist in multiplicity underneath the larger ideas of what coalition means.

describe this complexity as well as acknowledge the ongoing boundary shifts within rural areas themselves, instead of only viewing these differences in relation to rural areas' urban counterparts. In doing this, we ground our understandings in actual realities rather than in the presumptions of rural mythologies. Or, as Mitchler offers, we should “honor the multiplicities of peoples, cultural structures and contributions, and relevancy of the spaces called rural” (15). Through an expansive understanding of rurality, we open doors to moments of coalition-building and rhetorical possibilities beyond mythologies, offer productive means of shaping more livable worlds across cultural and geographical boundaries, and better answer to the calls of coalitional moments. According to Chávez, a coalitional moment is “when political issues coincide or merge in the public spheres in ways that create space to re-envision and reconstruct personal imaginaries” (8). Our present exigences demand we re-envision coalition-building across boundaries of difference, and rural organizations can act as a model for doing so. I am especially interested in rural organizing that answers to pressing traumas and marginalization of women across the spectrum². Women's reproductive rights are more fraught than ever; transgender women and other queer women are being stripped of various agencies; immigrant and refugee women continually face backlash; and the struggles of BIWOC *multiply at every turn*. These inequities affect women in all geographic locales, but they are particularly prevalent in rural areas, where women have significantly less organizational, cultural, and political support than their urban counterparts.

As such, in my analysis of our present coalitional moment, I look to two different organizations of rural organizing. The first is Yellowhammer Fund, a reproductive health organization dedicated to serving women in the Deep South. Yellowhammer Fund is a relatively new organization, which collates its structure and services around grassroots activism. The second organization is Rural Assembly, a group dedicated to building civic activities, like workshops, campaigns, advocacy roundtables, and a multitude of other initiatives, to marginalized populations in rural areas. Rural Assembly is a long-established organization with significant ties to national activism and politics.

Though the goals and methods of these two organizations differ, they are primarily led by rural BIWOC and primarily serve the needs of rural women, even as their missions encompass dimensions beyond rurality. Both organizations also represent forms of coalition-building situated in intersectional lived experiences and feminist praxis unique to rural areas. However, in acting as coalition, they act as models for rethinking academic theorizations of coalitional possibilities. In my analysis of Yellowhammer Fund and Rural Assembly, I contextualize their origins and services, outline how they rhetorically position and build coalition, and examine the feminist leadership teams that guide them. These organizations offer frameworks for coalitional potentials, serve as models for inclusive and equitable activism, and imagine new rhetorical possibilities in enacting

² I use the term “women” here as an all-inclusive term to consider all people who may concretely or loosely identify as “woman,” as these identities are present within rural areas. Additionally, as TERF ideologies and anti-trans policies continue to increase, it's deeply important that rhetorical positionings of “woman” are as inclusive and equitable as possible.

more just futures—and they do this in the face of dismissive political and cultural mythologies that do not consider rural geographies as livable worlds. In letting these rural women take the lead, we unravel rural activism mythologies just as much as we reimagine a multitude of coalitional possibilities.

Rural Organizing as *Coalition*

So far I have used coalition-building as an umbrella term to push for thinking and activities that break down boundaries of difference in cultivating more livable worlds. Before I look to Yellowhammer Fund and Rural Assembly as *coalition* and suggest their BIWOC-centered teams as productive models of coalitional feminist leadership, I further untangle perspectives on coalition.

Though calls for coalition have been present in feminist rhetorics since the 1960s onward, Chandra Mohanty's *Feminism without Borders* made waves by defining coalition outside of the middle-class, white-centered frameworks that dominated calls for coalitional sisterhoods in second and third-wave feminisms. In particular, Mohanty argues for understanding “politics of location... the historical, geographical, cultural, physis, and imaginative boundaries that provide the grounds for political definition and self-definition” (Mohanty 106). Coalition-building comes not in overlooking the politics of location to champion feminist sisterhoods, but in understanding, working within, or around these differences. As Mohanty says, “I have argued for a politics of engagement rather than a politics of transcendence” (122). I borrow from this thinking in my positioning of coalition-building, especially as I argue for coalition as pushing beyond cultural and geographical boundaries. Like Mohanty, I do not want these differences to be ignored or dismissed for promises of universalizing transcendence. The struggles that rural women face are deeply shaped by their embodied experiences within rural realities, experiences that may overlap with urban women, but often require more specific theories and actions to work through. When I call for more attention to rural geographies, unravel rural mythologies, and cast an analytical eye to BIWOC-centered rural organizing, I do so to engage with these differences. I offer Yellowhammer Fund and Rural Assembly as coalition because they are actively navigating these differences, both in rural areas themselves and in relation to their urban counterparts. In my invitation to consider the feminist leadership and rhetorical possibilities within these organizations, I push for academic accountability and act alongside Mohanty's reconstruction of coalition around the politics of location.

For more contemporary views of coalition, I turn to Pritha Prasad, who follows Mohanty in critiquing coalitional rhetorics of the past by offering responsive theorizations of coalition-building for presents and futures. In “‘Coalition is Not Home’: From Idealized Coalitions to Livable Lives,” Prasad calls out “coalitional gestures”—well-meaning but empty rhetorical moves that emerge as a response to violence (particularly racialized violence) but do little to work against these op-

³ Prasad particularly focused on the #BlackOutTuesday movement that happened in June 2020. A response to the murder of George Floyd and happening alongside the many Black

coalition as sustainable beyond kairotic moments, which positions coalition around false forms of collectivity, rather than around reciprocal means of ongoing work. As she asks, “what would it look like to shift from idealized coalitions towards coalitional structures and modes of collectivity that are reciprocal, materially-grounded, and do not depend primarily upon racialized violence for exigence” (Prasad). Though I have positioned rural organizing as a significant model for responding to current political polarizations, it also models how to move through a multitude of coalitional moments. Yellowhammer Fund and Rural Assembly offer the coalitional structures Prasad calls for: they are materially grounded in the needs, wants, and exigencies of rural women and offer coalition before, during, and after crises. Similarly, they structure collectively around imaginative, rhetorical possibilities rather than in response to violence (though sometimes these possibilities do mitigate violence). Further and finally, they enact coalition through actionable gestures of change rather than empty gestures of false collectivity. In other words, they act as coalition just as much as they aim to create and sustain coalition as a “continual and committed practice” in cultivating more just and livable worlds (Prasad). 3

I build off of these scholars as well as others (Chávez; Glenn and Lunsford; Shade-Johnson and Bratta) to consider both the theoretical and actionable potentials in learning from each organization. When unpacking the potential theorizations of rural organizing, I consider what rural organizing might teach us about navigating difference, what rhetorical possibilities look like in these organizations, and what it means to be a coalitional feminist leader. Action, however, is just as important as theory because without it, our scholarly work is an empty coalitional gesture, akin to the type of false forms of collectivity that Prasad critiques or even the transcendent calls for sisterhood that Mohanty undoes. When considering the actionable potentials of rural organizing, I consider how coalition is built through action, how these actions may serve pasts, presents, and futures, and how these actions are reflections of coalitional feminist leadership. In analyzing Yellowhammer Fund and Rural Assembly, I also practice and challenge others to consider academic accountability, to theorize and act ourselves, alongside these coalitions of rural organizing.

I posit academic accountabilities alongside Karma Chávez’s arguments on accountability, doing work “in a way that is deeply accountable to the communities I work with, the communities whose voices I want to engage, whose voices I want to work with to build theory” (Johnson). I feel academic accountability toward rurality, because I am both personally and professionally tied to these geographies: I grew up in a rural area, teach rural students, and run literacy programs for rural communities. As such, I continually act in service to the many and varied potentialities of rurality. However, my practice of academic accountability also comes in challenging others to see these same potentials, or in pushing them to imagine potentials that I have not yet envisioned. There

Lives Matters protests in summer 2020, #BlackOutTuesday asked that social media users post black squares in solidarity in the BLM movement, a performative rhetorical move that almost immediately backfired. As Prasad notes: “This performative gesture of posting black squares using the ‘#BlackLivesMatter’ hashtag, in spite of its ‘well-intentioned’ deployment to express collective solidarity, thus demobilized and erased protest efforts on the ground, rather than upholding or extending them” (Prasad).

is powerful rhetorical possibility within these spaces, in rural organizing that acts as coalition in polarizing political times, and in pushing ourselves beyond comfortable cultural and geographical boundaries. As Chávez notes, “what we do with ideas is all about accountability” – so take these ideas about the theoretical and actionable potentials of rural organizing and find ways to make them matter to you (Johnson).

The Yellowhammer Fund

Though the Yellowhammer Fund has made headlines over the last few years, this reproductive justice organization is still relatively new, as it was only founded in 2017.⁴ Its organizational base is in Tuscaloosa, AL, but they offer services to all corners of the Deep South in the United States. These services include financial and practical assistance for any and all aspects of reproductive health, from basic medical procedures to abortions. They deliver emergency contraceptives, safe sex kits, childcare supplies (diapers, baby wipes, etc.), and menstruation supplies across Alabama, Mississippi, and the Florida panhandle. They also generally advocate for reproductive healthcare at local, state, and national levels. Until recently, the Yellowhammer Fund also acted through a dedicated abortion fund and owned a rural abortion clinic. However, these latter two services have been temporarily paused, a result of Alabama’s recent abortion ban—a trigger bill that went into place when the Supreme Court overturned *Roe V. Wade* in June 2022 (*The Yellowhammer Fund*). Despite the pause to these services, their leadership team promises to “serve our communities in the best capacity in our new post-Roe reality” (Miller).

Though the Yellowhammer Fund serves women across the Deep South of the United States, they most significantly serve rural women. Part of this is due to the obvious geography: nearly half of the nation’s rural population lives in the Deep South (Fields et. al). But another part comes in how they rhetorically position their stance on reproductive justice as an invitation toward inclusive and equitable worlds. The Yellowhammer Fund cites SisterSong (the Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective) in their definition of reproductive justice: “the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities” (“Reproductive Justice”). Following this definition, one founded on the theorizations of women of color, Yellowhammer Fund collates its services around eight primary concerns: abortion, abortion stigma, sex education, birth justice, criminalization of pregnancy, self-managed abortion, and access to healthcare. In their outline of these concerns, they cite specific policies and laws that surround these issues, discuss how these issues affect women in rural vs. urban areas, and give attention to how these issues affect BIWOC, trans women, and other women who are variously marginalized. They also issue demands with each of these concerns, about specific policy changes, economic funding, and cultural shifts that are needed to enact reproductive justice. These demands offer rhetorical possibilities for more livable

⁴ Since its founding in 2017, the Yellowhammer Fund has been discussed in national politics, been profiled by *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and a multitude of other major media outlets.

worlds, or in their words, “a society in which reproductive decisions are made free from coercion, shame, or state interference, a society in which individuals and communities have autonomy in making healthy choices regarding their bodies and their futures” (*The Yellowhammer Fund*). By rhetorically positioning their beliefs in this way, the Yellowhammer Fund builds coalition from the ground up.

Their understandings of reproductive justice pay homage to women of color, a resistance to the whiteness that dominates many narratives of reproductive health. Within their primary concerns, they give nuanced attention to reproductive issues across boundaries of cultural and geographical differences by calling attention to the inequities between rural vs. urban healthcare as well as acknowledging how reproductive healthcare often fails BIWOC, trans women, and other multiply marginalized women. And further, they position coalition by understanding it as means for building more just futures. This rhetorical vision of coalition feels akin to how Chávez presents coalition as “a present and existing vision and practice that reflects an orientation to others and a shared commitment to change. Coalition is the ‘horizon’ that can reorganize our possibilities and the conditions of them” (146). Coalition-building exists within the Yellowhammer Funds’ present beliefs as well as in the rhetorical possibilities of futures grounded in reproductive justice. When they give attention to the maternal mortality rates of Black women, demand a full range of healthcare services in rural areas, call for more inclusive sex education curriculums, or make any number of similar rhetorical moves, they are enacting coalition as Chávez describes, as a shared commitment across difference, as a coalescing vision and practice, and as an imaginative reorganization of our present horizons into more livable worlds.

Coalition-building is also present in the actions that Yellowhammer Fund takes. The fund is committed to “community education and empowerment, policy advocacy, and the development of systems of mutual aid” (*The Yellowhammer Fund*). Mutual aid, in particular, is an inherently coalitional system, which asks people to collaboratively answer to the wants and needs of others. It also works as a coalitional method for building communities across differences. As Dominiguez et. al note, “Mutual aid is different than empathy...it implies a practice tied to acts of solidarity and a desire to overcome structural injustice through social transformation and action” (Dominiguez et al 7). The Yellowhammer Fund’s systems of mutual aid are how they supply their various services; how they maintain delivery systems across the most rural areas of the Deep South; and how they act *as coalition* by reciprocally aiding a number of different communities. They also build coalition by working with “partners in action,” six other grassroots organizations in the Deep South, some which focus on similar missions of reproductive justice and others that focus on assisting LGBT+, BIPOC, or immigrant women across rural and urban divides. As their website notes, “creating a racially and economically just society means building strong relationships and uplifting our allies as we work together” (*The Yellowhammer Fund*). Their actions build coalition in multiple ways, from mutual aid that offers assistance across various differences to cultivating partnerships across a “multiplicity of subjectivity, agency, and politics” (Chávez 147). These inclusive and equitable

actions reflect Yellowhammer Fund's feminist leadership team.

Run by a group of four women, one non-binary individual, and one man, members of Yellowhammer Fund's leadership team have shaped the organization's missions around their own embodied experiences. This is present in how Jenice Fountain's struggles as a single Black mother continue to shape her attention to the specific needs of BIWOC, how the financial burden of Kelsea McLaine's abortion shaped her desires for economic equalities in reproductive care, or how Denni Arjona's childhood in border communities shapes their work with immigrant women (*The Yellowhammer Fund*). Each member of their team has a story, which is not only highlighted within the organization's priorities but also extended, so that their stories speak across a variety of cultural and geographical boundaries, to converse with those whose stories are both like and unlike their own. They build coalition by being accountable to their own identities and experiences, by rhetorically positioning these experiences within larger conversations on equity and inclusion, and by collaboratively enacting coalition throughout all facets of their organization. Prasad notes that coalitions are a "sustained, ongoing alignment of one's own self-understandings, interests, and goals with other oppressed groups" (Prasad). The organizational team of the Yellowhammer Fund represents feminist leadership as settled in self-understanding and beyond, where coalition-building transforms them from individuals into a productive and responsive collective.

Rural Assembly

Located in Whitsburg, Kentucky, Rural Assembly was first started in 2007 as both a coalitional branch of the Center for Rural Strategies and as an individual organization itself ("Rural Assembly"). Rural Assembly is dedicated to teaching, developing, and organizing assembly activities across rural America: such as campaigns, roundtables, workshops, action groups, media profiles. The Rural Assembly also runs a series of programming dedicated to specific issues in rural areas (such as Rural Journalism Collective, Connecting to Our Heartlands, Pathways to Repair, Rural Youth Catalyst, and more) and moderates several rural-centered media platforms (such as The Daily Yonder, Everywhere Radio, Drawing Resilience, etc.). Rural Assembly also holds a yearly conference, Rural Assembly Everywhere, where rural leaders come together to share ideas, hold discussions, and coalesce across differences. These are just a few of the ways Rural Assembly builds "more opportunity and better policy for rural communities" (*Rural Assembly*). While Yellowhammer Fund identifies as a grassroots organization, Rural Assembly's scope is greater in longevity, size, and funding. It has significant support from the Center of Rural Strategies, has a large variety of partnerships with other rural-centered organizations, and the investment of several key political figures.⁵ As such, this organization acts as coalition in wide-reaching ways.

Rural Assembly acts as coalition in part because they explicitly identify as a coalition; this

⁵ In particular, Rural Assembly has the support of Deb Haaland, of the U.S. Department of the Interior, and Xochitl Torres Small, the USDA Undersecretary for Rural Development.

is most obvious in how they rhetorically position rurality. As their mission offers, rural America is “more than the convenient stereotypes and stories that dominate public discourse. It is a place of innovation, tight-knit communities, and civic participation” (*Rural Assembly*). Instead of giving into these stereotypes, Rural Assembly wants to “draw the connections between rural and its counterparts, to name the roads, fibers, and futures that connect us” (*Rural Assembly*). They see their work as a productive means to combat the issues facing rural areas and for building connections between rural and its counterparts.

By rhetorically acknowledging the importance of these differences, Rural Assembly understands that “coalitions ultimately need people to relate and connect to each other without erasing difference and differential experiences” (Shade-Johnson and Bratta). I have echoed these same ideas throughout my argument, that coalition is about undoing rural mythologies, about seeing possibilities within the rurality, and about reframing those possibilities for imaginative and expansive futures. Within Rural Assembly, I am especially interested in how these coalitional moves are led by and directed toward rural women. Although Rural Assembly is not specifically dedicated to rural women (in the same way Yellowhammer Fund is not), their organization is primarily led by women, the Rural Assembly Conference has featured almost exclusively women speakers, and their various programming is run by or acts in service to rural women. In other words, even if they do not explicitly name it, the rhetorical positioning of their mission collates around rural women.

These same ideas echo in the expansive actions that Rural Assembly takes, especially in how it understands that “real change moves at the pace of relationships” (Rural Assembly). Rural Assembly runs all their present, in-progress, and potential programming through four principles of reciprocal, ongoing action:

- *Gathering*, creating a web of connection between rural people, places, and issues.
- *Mobilizing*, cultivating and amplifying diverse rural voices.
- *Advocating*, building bridges between rural leaders and national platforms.
- *Acting*, providing tools and media support for rural-led campaigns.

These principles build coalition by concentrating efforts around the direct concerns of rural people; by making connections between cultural and geographical boundaries; and by giving rural folks the tools they need to take the lead. In their #RuralWomenLead Profile Series, this means making ample space for BIWOC to share their commitments to change and community building. In their Rural Youth Catalyst program, this looks like granting space to and validation of LGBT+ youth. And in their Drawing Resilience project, it comes from giving attention to rural leaders (mostly women and LGBT+ folks) who are “staying in the work, in relationship, in community, even

amid deep divisions, systemic injustices, and social and economic challenges” (*Rural Assembly*). The prioritization of these reciprocal, ongoing principals are present in these programs and in Rural Assembly’s in-progress projects. As such, they build coalition through open and sustainable forms of action, a continued effort of “staying in the work” to cultivate more equitable futures.

This sustainable focus on coalition is especially present in the Rural Assembly’s leadership team. Though a branch of the much larger Center for Rural Strategies, Rural Assembly is primarily run by a team of five women and one man. What is significant about these leaders is just how much work they are doing in service to rural areas—as their positions in Rural Assembly tends to be one of only many. For instance, Tyler Owens also works for the National Congress of American Indians, Kim Phinney does work for Rural and Native Initiatives, and Joel Cohen does work with Rural LISC. Other members of their team also hold a variety of positions, practicing feminist leadership in Rural Assembly, the Center for Rural Strategies, and a handful of other organizations. They are dedicated, in both specific and expansive ways, to serving rurality on multiple fronts (*Rural Assembly*). Prasad notes that “coalition should be understood not just as an activist response to an issue or context, but a life-affirming practice” (Prasad). The leadership team of Rural Assembly represent feminist praxis in building coalition not only as a response to the contexts of this organization but as life-affirming practices that carry them to many and varied organizations (*Rural Assembly*). They build coalitions both inside and outside of the Rural Assembly and continually work toward the goals of cultivating more livable worlds for rural peoples across a variety of boundaries and positions.

Following Rural Women’s Leadership

What is notable about Yellowhammer Fund and Rural Assembly is that they are primarily (though not exclusively) led by women of color—women who are building inclusionary spaces in rural communities, spaces that urban America rarely imagines exists in these rural regions. As the scholars I have referenced throughout this work have noted, women of color have always been coalitional leaders, but too often, calls for coalition ignore their contributions and dismiss the theoretical and actionable potentials of letting them take the lead. Scholarship might gesture to women of color in theory, it might reiterate their arguments, and it might call attention to the inequities they face, but there’s a difference between borrowing from women of color and in building coalitions alongside them. I echo Mohanty, Chávez, and Prasad by calling attention to these insufficiencies in coalition-building, because I do not want my perspective as a white academic to supersede the arguments these scholars, as well as other scholars of color, have made about building inclusionary coalitions across academic and activist spaces. Just as much, I want my analysis of the BI-POC feminist leadership teams at the center of these rural organizations to highlight the significant contributions these women of color have made within the rural spaces they occupy. I emphasize their leadership because within it, there are a multitude of possibilities for imagining and enacting powerful forms of coalition building.

Understanding women of color's power as leaders is a move toward academic accountability. Within both academic and activist contexts, there is a time and place to step up and be generative within leadership, but there is also a time and place to step back, to understand that feminist coalitions are built through responding to the leadership of those outside of the self. In rural areas, which are so often mythologized as lost causes, it is especially important to acknowledge feminist leaders whose lives and activism resist dominant narratives of homogeneity. This call for academic accountability is twofold: as a white academic deeply concerned with rurality, my scholarship, teaching, and activism have been significantly influenced by knowing when to find power in the leadership, especially in those whose positionalities differ from my own—an academic accountability that I try to continually embody as praxis. I also believe that those within the academy, across our many positionalities and agendas, could greatly benefit from turning further attention to rurality and models of BIPOC feminist leadership within these geographies. Prasad notes that in an age of corporate and institutional misappropriation of anti-racist ideas, solidarity often comes in the form of “abstract rhetorical gesture rather than a material and systemic intervention” (Prasad). I call attention to the women of color at the center of these two organizations to resist abstract rhetorical gestures, to view their leadership as a model of material and systemic intervention within rural spaces, and to build theory and actions alongside them, as we all learn how to make the world more livable for everyone.

In other words, rural women taking the lead means BIWOC take the lead, trans and other queer women take the lead, disabled women take the lead, and immigrant and refugee women take the lead, because it is only in understanding and learning from these differences that we enact coalition. Coalescing across differences cannot exist without inclusionary theories and actions, and in calling for academic accountability throughout this work and, in the following conclusion, I invite readers to consider the significant ways coalition has been formed by, continues to be pushed by, and should be led by marginalized women in a multitude of ways.

A Call for Academic Accountabilities

In their key concept statement on coalition, Cheryl Glenn and Andrea Lunsford offer that “the ‘co’ in coalition is key for us because it invokes more than one: in it we hear doubling and redoubling along the reverberations of other key words beginning with ‘co’: collaboration, coordination, cooperation” (Glenn and Lunsford 11). My analysis demonstrates the many ways these rural organizations reverberate with various dimensions of “co” in acting as coalition: how they rhetorically position coalition, how their actions build coalition, and how their diverse leadership teams are centered in a feminist praxis of coalition. Coalition starts here, in writing this scholarship, in reading this article, and in understanding how to “turn our attention(s) to our own house” (Johnson). Chávez notes that “one of the reasons why a lot of organizing and activist communities are so anti-academics being in their space at all, let alone building theory from their ideas, is because academics have been historically and notoriously completely unaccountable to the communities

that they study” (Johnson). I conclude by calling for academic accountabilities in learning from rural organizing, in letting rural women take the lead, and in reverberating across various dimensions of “co” within our own work.

I am particularly interested in imagining theory and action as academic accountability to rural areas. One way of doing so comes from direct, interpersonal measures: undo notions of rural mythologies by listening to rural women, especially rural BIWOC, following diverse leadership, and donating to rural organizing as a coalescing investment across differences. The Yellowhammer Fund and Rural Assembly are certainly smart places to begin with these efforts, but rural organizing exists in all corners of the United States. Do some research, discover what rural issues speak most to you, and put your time and money where your words are.

These are the beginning steps of building academic accountability to rural areas, interpersonal measures that may guide readers in creating more significant and sustainable partnerships between academic positionalities and rural geographies. There’s more to imagine beyond these direct measures (though direct measures are always needed), because academic accountability involves moving beyond interpersonal relationships—it asks us to bring theory and action into our own academic homes. In my own academic home, I’ve worked with the Nebraska Writing Project to participate in and plan initiatives that build bridges between rural and urban educators across the state. These initiatives begin as conversations across differences and often, they are sustained by listening to, learning from, and letting rural teachers take the lead. I have also supported students as they have participated in the Rural Fellows program, which partners undergraduate students with rural communities to work on projects defined by wants, needs, and exigencies of rural communities themselves. In my personal academic accountability, I have worked with rural LGBT+ organizations, worked in rural archives, and continually draw attention to rurality as a space of possibility. I continue to do so now, in calling for more individual and collective academic accountability in letting rural women take the lead.

Conclusion

The examination of rural organizing I have offered invites and imagines a multitude of coalitional paths in undoing rural mythologies; it positions rhetorical possibilities in coalescing across differences; it offers reciprocal and sustainable actions for building coalition; and draws attention to models of BIPOC feminist leaders, whose dedication to rurality is both individually and collectively grounded in building more livable worlds. For me, these theories and actions manifest in my scholarship and pedagogy in a multitude of ways, in anything from writing articles that continually illuminate rurality as akin to possibility, to designing classrooms where students interrogate their own politics of location. For others, this examination of rural organizing may hold a litany of other potentialities.

The assertion I am making within this work is less about offering a specific conclusion and more about inviting readers toward imaginative possibilities. This invitation asks you to undo your notions of rural mythologies; to research and learn about the issues facing women and other marginalized individuals in rural areas within your own geographies; to listen to, learn from, and work with rural leaders in these same geographies; and to understand academic accountability as a sustained praxis of building coalitions across cultural and geographical differences. These coalitions should be responsive to our present coalitional moment, but they should also offer rhetorical possibilities toward more livable worlds for all. This is how we resist, how we hope, and how continually reverberate with the many possibilities that the “co” within coalition entails. I featured these rural organizations and their BIWOC feminist leadership as models for acting as coalition in this way, but I conclude with a final inquiry, one which I hope leads readers into possibility: What coalitional theories and actions, as well as personal and collective praxis, merit space within our academic homes?

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