

“Be In But Not Of” the University: Collective Refusal as Resistance to Isolation and Precarity

Athena Co-Learning Collective

University of Georgia, Department of Geography

Maya Henderson

University of Georgia, Department of Geography
Maya.Henderson@uga.edu

Syantika Mandal

University of Georgia, Department of English
Sayantika.Mandal@uga.edu

Ben Prostine

University of Georgia, Department of History
benjamin.prostine@uga.edu

Jennifer L. Rice

University of Georgia, Department of Geography
jlrice@uga.edu

Kayleigh Taillefer

Independent Scholar
Kayleigh.taillefer@outlook.com

Amy Trauger

University of Georgia, Department of Geography
atrauger@uga.edu

Constanza Urresty-Vargas

Independent Scholar

Elizabeth Wayson

University of Georgia, Department of English
elizabeth.wayson@uga.edu

Abstract

Many of us in academia navigate a visceral tension: our role as learners, teachers, and employees allows us the refuge to do meaningful work and deep thinking on issues of importance, yet, this privilege comes amid long-standing and ongoing racialized exclusions and neoliberal rationalities of productivity in the academy. We explore, here, the role that collective refusal can play in this navigation. We describe ways that we can come together, even if our positionalities are different and our benefits uneven, to refuse the most oppressive aspects of higher education. We draw on various notions of refusal, largely rooted in Black and Indigenous scholarship, to identify both the harms of higher education and how “to be in but not of” (Harney and Moten 2013, 26) the university. This requires collective support of one another through acts of refusal in learning, knowledge production, and employment that allow us to have a shared stake in the reform of academic life.

Keywords

neoliberal university, solidarity, higher education, inclusion, exclusion

Introduction

As a coalition of university professionals, we find ourselves navigating myriad sites of struggle in the academy. These include exclusionary admissions policies, low wages, decreased job security, expulsions for peaceful protest, weakening of tenure protections, discriminatory promotion practices, sexual harassment, and bullying. The university is also a key target of political actors, whose reinterpretation of diversity policies and research funding priorities is intended to silence scholars, most notably by attacks on the scholarship of climate change, gender, sexuality, and critical race theory. LGBTQIA+, BIPOC, and international

faculty and students are particularly vulnerable to these attacks, as they continue to be excluded and marginalized due to increased restrictions on their rights as humans.

Yet, the university is also a diverse and porous space existing within a wider web of struggles, movements, histories, crises, and ruptures. We navigate its complexities and entangled truths from the inside, as students, employees, and faculty. The university may be a place that is marked by exclusions and increasing precarity, but it also provides a space to produce, learn, and share knowledge on the production and experience of oppression. We argue that the oppressive actions of the university require *refusal*. But, we are not positioned the same way vis-a-vis the consequences of refusal, and recent federal attacks on funding, international students, and political resistance have raised the stakes. This requires a deeper understanding of what divides us and how the university exploits these divides to set people up for success or failure.

Thus, we come to this paper as a collective from a diversity of academic disciplines (human and physical geography, history, creative writing, and English) and positions (full professors, MA students, PhD students, teaching assistants, research assistants) and identities (queer, cis, straight, nonbinary, Indigenous, Latina, Asian) to refuse the oppressive systems of the university. We have moved through diverse pathways (international spaces, activist spaces, spaces of manual labor, reproductive labor, as faculty and administrative labor) to arrive at the shared space of the Athena Co-Learning Collective, if only for one semester in the spring of 2023, during which we co-wrote this paper.

This paper and our efforts are connected to a longer history of radical feminist organizing at our institution. The Athena Co-Learning Collective, centered in the Department of Geography at the University of Georgia (UGA), was created in 2016 to resist the masculinist, racist, patriarchal, and anti-queer politics that underpin knowledge production in higher education, which have accelerated in recent years (Athena Co-Learning Collective 2018, 2020, 2021). Our teaching and learning focus on rehumanization, ambiguity, multiple stories, co-learning, and solidarity. We center female, queer, Black, Brown, and Indigenous ways of knowing, and we bridge our academic practice with real world transformative politics and action. The authors on this paper were part of a spring 2023 graduate seminar in which the ideas here were co-learned and co-developed.

In this paper, we reckon with the contradictions of the university—a neoliberal, settler colonial, racialized space that, nonetheless, can provide intellectual and political-economic refuge and space for refusal (Simpson 2014, Simpson, 2017, Hernandez, 2022). This was a frequent point of discussion, tension, and discomfort in our co-learning conversations during the seminar. For example, campuses across the U.S. have witnessed a historical surge of labor activism with graduate students and unionized workers, including faculty, at the vanguard, offering hope and inspiration. Yet, we also grapple with what it means to form diverse coalitions for collective refusal of unjust conditions and hypercompetitive, individualized ideas of success and worth. Through the writing of this paper, we show how university professionals from various backgrounds may create space for collective and coalitional refusal to work toward other modes of learning and belonging and develop a course of action toward equity and justice. (Simpson 2007; Gökarıksel et al. 2021, 2; Gonzales and Shotton, 2022).

Co-Writing Process

This essay is a direct product of an intentional co-writing process in our seminar. A primary goal of the Athena Co-Learning Collective is to learn *with* and *from* each other, for which collectively writing a single final class paper is a central practice. A detailed description of the process is beyond the scope of this paper, but key elements of our co-writing include: collective whiteboarding of key themes from assigned readings, providing time and space for students to identify and discuss course topics that have been important to them, and collectively generating a thesis statement and outline for a final paper that is of shared interest.

Refusal emerged as a generative topic multiple times in various ways during our seminar. After deciding to use this topic for the final class paper, students chose to apply this concept to the university, largely because of the stated aims of our collective/seminar to undo patriarchal and white supremacist norms of education, but also because it was a context we all shared. The instructors dedicated three partial class days and two entire class periods to work on the paper. The goal of this was to allocate time for idea generation well before the end of the semester and to provide already dedicated class time for working together. The instructors engaged in the end-of-semester co-writing process in several ways on different days. These included facilitating discussion of the paper's theme, offering ample time and space for the students to brainstorm together without them, and periodically engaging in reflective review and troubleshooting of the paper's progress. Each student focused their specific writing contribution according to their strengths and interests. The instructors evaluated the process with anonymous surveys to ensure equitable contributions amongst the participants. The instructors revised the final paper for publication with input from the students and shared the process with them to help develop their academic writing skills (the same took place for the revision of the paper).

The Neoliberal University

Our collective engagement with refusal starts with an assessment of the current conditions under which we produce knowledge in the academy. According to Alexander Weheliye, "Man" is a symbolic representation of the Western world's "heteromasculine, white, propertied, and liberal subject that renders all those who do not conform to these characteristics as exploitable nonhumans, literal legal no-bodies" (2014, 135). These academic spaces are "saturated with tension" (Ahmed 2012, 162), through the atmosphere of hypercompetitive individualism that is required to succeed in academia. The spaces of academia exercise power and define who produces knowledge through exclusion, the pressure to overwork, and a culture of isolating hypercompetition which is harmful to most. The university is also linked to the broader racialized assemblage of settler colonialism and white supremacy that allows for forms of racism, such as the exclusion of certain non-white peoples and their viewpoints from the university (Weheliye 2014, 46).

The logic of Man's liberalism manifests in the contemporary university through its current expression of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism can be understood as a "political rationality," a "mode of governance" that extends the logic of capitalist markets into all aspects of life and configures the human individual as an entrepreneur (Brown 2009, 37). The restructuring of institutions as neoliberal spaces has brought market rationalities directly and without question into all aspects of the university, including tenure, promotions, admissions,

recruitments, courses, and funding (Brown 2009, 43; Freeman 2000; Kezar et al. 2019). More specifically, "managerial imperatives," such as performance metrics, revenue generation goals, efficiency restructuring, profit-generating programs, and entrepreneurial incentives reduce and subject scholarly worth to market-based evaluations (Morley, 2024, 571). Knowledge production, therefore, takes a backseat to economic productivity.

"Man's" possessive logics also marginalize non-white and feminist ways of knowing and being through settler-colonialism in liberal nation-states. Moreton-Robinson (2015) terms these possessive logics as "a mode of rationalization" that "circulate sets of meanings about white ownership of the nation as part of commonsense knowledge, decision making, and socially produced conventions" (81). For instance, in many cases, Indigenous people are not considered legitimate producers of knowledge, as Indigenous people have been historically excluded and their ways of knowing are marginalized within the academy (Hernandez 2022; Simpson 2017).

The university then becomes what Katherine McKittrick (2006) terms "Man's geographies" (128), a geographical site that "overdetermine[s], normalize[s], and naturalize[s]" whiteness, through the creation of unequal knowledge hierarchies that exclude other knowledge systems such as Indigenous and traditional ecological knowledge (Hall and Tandon 2017). This is especially challenging for international students/workers who are spatially tethered to the university away from sources of support, and for whom "failure" can jeopardize their positions in both the university and the nation-state.

University professionals are also submitted to increasing metrics of productivity beyond the necessary signposts described in our handbooks. That is, we are continually asked to do more with less. We must obtain vanishingly scarce and politically gatekept monies for research, teach without support, and contend with a declining level of university funding for publishing and conference attendance, all while navigating new priorities, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), that funnel money away from the social sciences and humanities. The dictates of professional development shift the focus from thinking critically to what makes a person marketable to academia, which in the teleological world of the neoliberal university favors those most likely to succeed, that is "Man." We asked, while reflecting on these trends in academia, what it would mean to refuse the isolated processes of making one marketable (that is: exploitable) and instead pursue a course of collective action toward equity and justice?

We argue here that, despite being a space that has adapted to neoliberalism with commodification of education, individualism, and reliance on student debt, the university has and can also be a place of safe haven for many. For example, some scholars come to the university to take space from the exploitation of other work that is even more demoralizing and undercompensated. For others, the university can mean gaining skills and knowledge to obtain more secure employment, while providing an opportunity to delve deeply into chosen fields, engage with complex ideas, and participate in knowledge co-production. It might, as we have done in other forums through the Athena Co-Learning Collective, give us the space to collaborate with peers and faculty and to grow as scholars to understand what produces the oppressions and inequalities on and around us. Despite the deep power imbalance that exists within it, the university is uniquely positioned to provide us with a community of academics, mentorship, and peer support, as well as a space to refuse the oppressive dynamic of neoliberalism.

Forms of Refusal

Harney and Moten (2013) capture the tension we grapple with when they write, “it cannot be denied that the university is a place of refuge, and it cannot be accepted that the university is a place of enlightenment” (26). Subversive intellectuality, as Harney and Moten (2013, 26, emphasis added) put it, means “to be *in but not of*” the university. Their rallying cry asks us inside the university to do the work differently—to subvert the power dynamics of knowledge production in favor of the oppressed and away from the oppressors:

“After all, the subversive intellectual came under false pretenses, with bad documents, out of love. Her labor is as necessary as it is unwelcome. The university needs what she bears but cannot bear what she brings” (Harney and Moten, 2013, 26).

Subversive intellectualism moves beyond antagonism and works towards generating other sets of relations that can move beyond the obstructions of the university. Similarly, as Gilmore (2005) writes, the scholar-activists “who wish to rewrite the world” must confront “barriers, boundaries, and scales” (95). “A scholar-activist’s project,” Gilmore (2005) writes, “both defines and produces an opening on the ground, through which creative possibility can move” (101). It is this challenge that we explore here.

To resist the neoliberal university, we theorize the idea of collective refusal, taking inspiration from the Indigenous praxis of refusal. Standing in direct opposition to the ongoing project of settler-colonialism, Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson argues that refusal serves to recenter Indigenous and colonized peoples as political actors. More specifically, Simpson writes:

“The Academy has continually refused to recognize and support the validity, legitimacy, rigor, and ethical principles of Nishnaabeg intelligence...so we must stop begging for recognition and do this work for ourselves” (2017, 171).

Therefore, refusal, as a method of resistance, is not simply a “no,” but a *generative* act grounded in agency, autonomy, and self-determination (Dorries and Harjo, 2020; Simpson 2017; Tuck and Yang, 2014). Since refusal is a “resistance to plunder” (Tuck and Yang 2014, 813), it takes shape in a variety of ways from a refusal of colonial recognition to the refusal of the university and its appropriation. Some refusals are a turn *inward* away from settler colonial state-sanctioned recognition and towards inherent self-determination. Some are a turn *outward* to challenge the institutional structures that uphold “Man’s” dominance.

The idea of refusal has been used in many important ways. Audra Simpson (2014) describes ethnographic refusal, highlighting her firm limit against data collection that “would not contribute to Iroquois sovereignty...” (113). Gonzales and Shotton (2021, 549) use the term “coalitional refusal” to describe how the friendship between two differently situated women of color became a “site of refusal” that contributed to a more just academy. If refusal is about resisting settler colonial and oppressive logic, then the act of refusing is not solely about oneself, but about community, collective action, and reciprocal relations (Simpson 2014; Simpson 2017; Tuck and Yang 2014).

A mode of refusal termed “fugitivity” also comes out of the Black radical tradition and becomes a keyword in Harney and Moten’s (2013) articulation of the “undercommons.” Historically, fugitivity depended on mobility, an escape from the enslavement of the

plantation and the enactment of a new set of relations. Fugitivity here means "to steal the enlightenment for others," to move through the undercommons and experience "the secret once called solidarity" (Harney and Moten 2013, 42). This is not simply about the elimination of any particular thing, but about "the founding of a new society" (Harney and Moten 2013, 42). Those who enter the undercommons perform other labors that cannot be mapped in CVs, lecture halls, and grant proposals; the work may take place in the university, but it works towards alternative futures and autonomous spaces that cannot be contained by the university. Refusal is to be understood as affirmative, productive, and can be considered a mode of politics itself (McGranahan 2016).

In organizing for "testing refusal and opt-out activism," teachers in NYC brought together collective organizing strategies of horizontal grassroots coalition building that crossed city boundaries, created shared resources, and made use of small groups for better communication and momentum (Malsbary 2016). For the teachers, refusal allowed them to make "meaning of their resistance, both through what they opted-out of and what they opted into" (Malsbary 2016, 1330), highlighting the complexity of refusal itself. This means of collective organizing and solidarity work is personal. Some teachers in the NYC testing refusal movement stated, "my refusal is about me saying 'Enough!'" and "...my refusal was also about where I am from" (Malsbary 2016, 1334). Refusal is deeply linked to the lineage of resistance and grounded in collective organizing practices, bringing new components to this lineage through its bringing together of "no" with a productive "yes." In other words, refusal is *not only opting out* but also about what *is being opted into* through that movement (Malsbary 2016; McGranahan 2016).

Collective Refusal as Practice in the University

We draw inspiration from these forms of refusal and fugitivity in thinking about how we as academic professionals can "be in but not of" the university (Harney and Moten 2013, 26). We are, sometimes all at once, employees, teachers, students, and knowledge producers. Each of these positions is nuanced by the identities and positionalities of the professionals themselves, who may have crossed borders to join the university, may be parents or caregivers, may be survivors of violence or abuse, may be queer, trans, Black, Brown, or Native. These multiple and often overlapping identities require that collective refusal is intersectional and engaging with the precarity within the university that is created by whiteness, (settler) colonialism, anti-Blackness, anti-Indigeneity, xenophobia, sexism, classism, ableism, and more.

Despite our widely varying positionalities within the university and the divergent vulnerabilities we have to repercussions, we have a shared stake in the reform of academic life. While coalition can be a first step to build relations between vulnerable and precarious communities, *collective refusal* rooted in *solidarity* is necessary for effective strategies of reform in the academy. For us, solidarity, as part of collective refusal, means that we come together as a group to advance shared interests, even if we do not all derive the same benefit. We do this because we all have a stake, even if our stakes differ due to our varied positionalities.

Creating spaces of refusal through radical care, radical dreams, and radical formations, "grounded in values antithetical to the neoliberal order – collectivism, relevance, public good, and compassion" (Museus and Sasaki 2019, 561) is a way to transform the space of university

into an alternative ground for collective thinking beyond the given hypercompetitive neoliberal structures. Here, we explore different forms of collective refusal *by and for* university professionals, moving through our overlapping identities, positions, and roles within the university: as knowledge producers, as learners, and as employees.

First, as *knowledge producers* at the university, we propose an anti-colonial research method of refusal that honors the agency of those exploited, researched, marginalized, and appropriated by the university. Following the aforementioned scholars, we refuse to require colonial “evidence” to prove or justify our claims to knowledge. For example, many of us in our research chose to not use as evidence of expertise certain things that were shared with us by members of historically excluded populations—that is, stories of subverting the system, methods of survival, collective spaces of refuge. We feel that by including such evidence we further our own careers at the continued expense of others, which is not a form of knowledge production that we wish to practice.

Similarly, many of us refuse to take the time of the vulnerable and oppressed through interviews or surveys, despite peer review often demanding such “data.” We opt instead for a form of “ethnographic refusal” (Simpson, 2014) that privileges embodied and first-hand knowledge in the forms of stories, connections to land, and authority based in the non-human world. We embrace dualities and reject stable explanations that reduce lived experience to a single story. Others among us refuse to allow increased annual review scrutiny to induce the fear of inadequacy as researchers. Instead, we work together to collectively build and render visible our scholarship in ways that are incompatible with neoliberal evaluation metrics. Similarly, in the current era of research cancellations, we take the time to reflect on the language we use to be more specific to our aims, instead of relying on shorthand terms that have become targets of political retaliation.

Second, as *learners* we propose a form of collective refusal against the isolating and hypercompetitive spaces where students are expected to be better than their peers in a performance of learning, rather than actual learning. We opt for co-learning by implementing collective syllabus creation, reflective journaling, collaborative writing, and making space for ambiguity in (co)-learning (Athena Co-Learning Collective 2018, 2020, 2021). This can allow for classroom spaces and platforms to directly challenge the (settler) colonial and racial capitalist foundations of the university. We do this through collaborative concept mapping of main arguments from the texts and creating shared notes that anyone can access. In this case, if someone cannot follow or grasp the ideas as quickly as others, they are not at a disadvantage. This form of refusal can create an alternative shared ground for learning, thus transforming the classroom space, and fostering a sense of belonging and support among the students, alleviating isolation, competition, and the risks of “failure.” For example, in this paper we also use a collective authorship strategy that emphasizes both the Athena Co-Learning Collective, but also allows for individuals to have their name on the paper in ways that reflect the neoliberal authorship prerogatives of the academy. Furthermore, one of the students used this paper as part of their comprehensive exam portfolio to indicate the relationality of knowledge and interconnectedness of knowledge production.

Third, as *employees*, we see unions as a method of collective refusal in the university. We write this during a strike wave and unionization drive not seen in academia since the 1990s (Hahamovitch et al., 2023). Despite widespread faculty unionization in academia outside of the United States, American universities lag behind their counterparts elsewhere. In the

South, where we work, "right to work" laws prohibit compulsory union membership and effectively union-bust through legislation. This has not prevented university workers from organizing at UGA and other school, however, as the United Campus Workers (UCW) nearly doubled its membership in the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, with nineteen new university chapters starting up in six new states (Quinn, 2023). As a "wall-to-wall" union, UCW represents graduate students, faculty, and staff and has waged successful campaigns against exorbitant student fees and health insurance policy changes. Furthermore, through the union, university professionals can connect with faculty and staff across disciplines, departments, and occupations. This model of organizing has the potential to work across the occupational divisions of the university and form broad-based struggles.

Still, others among us have used faculty governance and our expert committee roles to advance social justice by challenging unfair and discriminatory university policies and practices. This requires the support of collective refusal to withstand the inevitable backlash. Most recently, in the current era of federal attacks on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), we renew and strengthen our challenge to practice this work, knowing the removal of public DEI statements and dismantling of DEI offices does not change what we did in the past, nor will the presence or absence of such statements or offices change what will continue to do. We must adapt, evolve, and refuse in the ways that are consistent with our values and politics.

Conclusion

We, as a group of differently positioned university professionals, brought together in the shared space of a graduate seminar and the previous work of the Co-learning Collective, sought to reflect on and interrogate the way the university excludes and isolates certain groups of people. We sought to understand the ways that the university offers many of us a space of refuge and security, while at the same time it is a space of division meant to isolate and exclude according to predetermined ideas of success and failure. We understood that these conditions require refusal, but many of us were not equally positioned to enact it, which led us to the question of what it would look like to develop a collective course of action toward equity and justice.

Over the course of the semester, we collaboratively read and learned about the strategies of refusal enacted by Indigenous scholars and feminist scholars of color against white supremacy and colonization. We settled, at least temporarily, on the idea of collective refusal, which follows from Simpson's (2014) "ethnographic refusal" and Gonzalez and Shotton's (2021) "coalitional refusal." Collective refusal allows us to engage in acts of refusal in our research, in our classrooms, and in our workspaces in ways that decrease risk to individuals and maximize benefits for all. This is enacted through refusing the coloniality of what counts as research evidence, embracing co-learning as the primary mode of education, and collectively organizing for workplace protections. In writing this paper and choosing the authorship strategy we do, we engaged in another form of collective refusal of the pressure to individually claim knowledge. We aim to "see one another's light and reflect it back to them" (Simpson 2017), and in so doing, heal divisions and create and share knowledge in ways that are equitable, just, and inclusive.

It is important to note that the original drafting of this paper was done during a specific moment in time: the spring semester of 2023. As we revised this paper in 2025, state-led attacks on the university have intensified via attacks on DEI and the ending of many research

funds, further illustrating the significance of the forms of refuge and refusal explored in this article. The university, as a site of refuge for dissent and critique has been further eroded, while various acts of refusal have been greeted with administrative and state repression. Such events, then, necessitate further consideration of the themes initially analyzed in this article. We hope that by sharing our approach we might extend this strategy of collective refusal to wider audiences and engage in the broader transformation of life in the university.

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