

Performance Matters

Pedagogies of Negation Notes on the Politics of Refusal

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Volume 8, Number 2, 2023

The Syllabus is the Thing: Materialities of the Performance Studies Classroom

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1099885ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1099885ar>

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Publisher(s)

Institute for Performance Studies, Simon Fraser University

ISSN

2369-2537 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Velasquez-Potts, M. (2023). Pedagogies of Negation: Notes on the Politics of Refusal. *Performance Matters*, 8(2), 111–122. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1099885ar>

Article abstract

This essay discusses a course I taught in 2021 at the University of Texas at Austin. The course, titled “The Politics of Refusal,” was prompted by my interest in exploring how pain, debility, and suffering, usually understood as limited and passive experiences, might also be generative and disruptive. The essay reflects on the trajectory of the class as the semester progressed. In particular, I pay attention to the dynamics of discussion as they relate to students’ relationship to theory and to disability and care. I consider what worked, what needed rethinking, and what possibilities were opened up for imagining new and creative ways to approach teaching theory during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Pedagogies of Negation: Notes on the Politics of Refusal

Michelle C. Velasquez-Potts

“Politics of Refusal” started from the question: what if pain, debility, and suffering weren’t states to be avoided but instead states that we embraced and used toward political and relational transformation? This question had long percolated alongside my primary research interest concerning the political history of force-feeding inside carceral institutions and the implications of medicalized modes of punishment for the practice of hunger striking. In one sense, hunger striking is concerned solely with refusal: refusing food, water, sustenance. In another sense, hunger striking is an embodied practice that is both self-harm and self-determination; it negates the givenness of the present while creating alternative possibilities. When the state, through the prison, takes away nearly all choice and all forms of relationality, hunger striking becomes a form of political protest to refuse state violence and control.

This course, like so many others, was motivated by my own research and political commitments. But this course also came from a place of curiosity: how would undergraduates approach “refusal” as a scholarly topic and an embodied practice? How might they understand vocabularies and performances of “refusal” in political struggles, protests, and visual art? How would they be able to see “refusal” beyond the binary frames of limited/generative and passive/disruptive that I operated within? I developed the syllabus to offer a multidisciplinary approach that engages with Black studies, performance studies, psychoanalysis, trans studies, disability studies, prison studies, and science fiction, among others.

We started the semester reading Saidiya Hartman’s “Innocent Amusements: The Stage of Sufferance” from *Scenes of Subjection* (1997) and Tina Campt’s “Black Visuality and the Practice of Refusal” (2019). Hartman’s work laid the groundwork for the students to understand a pointedly Black feminist approach to refusal. *Scenes of Subjection* and Hartman’s writing on the wayward, which concluded the semester, respectively problematized how Black pain and suffering are only discernable through the most grotesque and abject examples and illuminated the assemblage of Black refusal, movements, and sounds that imagine beyond state violence and abuse. Campt’s work described and argued for various affective approaches to the politics of looking and listening to Black visual art. Indeed “listening” and other embodied modes of knowing and sensing theory, beyond merely reading for meaning, became a key feature of the way we approached course material in the weeks to come. Ultimately, both scholars helped students create shared language and analysis for considering how, when engaging with images of racial violence and suffering, there is no “pure” approach nor any escape. This is to say that there are myriad ways to approach images and texts, all of which are saturated within realities of violence, both epistemic and material. No approach overcomes power relations or our subject positions. Hartman and Campt suggest that the stakes involved in our individual and collective consumption of such representation are just that: stakes.

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Throughout the semester, themes of looking and witnessing violence took on different meanings as we engaged with authors such as Juana María Rodríguez (2011) and Chris Eng (2002, 2020). Their queer theorizations around racial abjection and submission helped us think about negation and pleasure in the work of artists Nao Bustamante (2003) and Xandra Ibarra (2014). In the final weeks of the course, we explored queer histories of AIDS activism and prison abolition. We read selections from the anthology *Captive Genders* (Smith and Stanley 2015) and watched the film *Criminal Queers* by Eric Stanley and Chris Vargas. And for our final class, we returned to questions of listening and discussed the sounds and poetics of the wayward in Saidiya Hartman’s “The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner” (2018) and Octavia Butler’s short story “Speech Sounds” in *Bloodchild and Other Stories* (2005). We felt encouraged by these texts to develop a reading practice around questions of violence and negation that is more sensorial and affective, returning us to Camp’s practice of refusal that we began the semester with.

Because this was a course created for undergraduate students, my central objectives were first, for students to be able to analyze and describe each scholar’s arguments and second, to apply these authors’ critical tools to their own writing practice. But the most important objective was to challenge students to engage with theory such that they could develop the capacity and discernment to not only articulate but also confront forms of state violence such as anti-Blackness, institutionalization, and trans antagonism, among others. Some students openly wondered whether theoretical approaches could facilitate such an undertaking or if “Theory” was actually part of the problem, especially in the context of the university.

Below, I reflect on the trajectory of the “Politics of Refusal” class as the semester progressed. In particular, I pay attention to the dynamics of discussion as they relate to students’ relationship to theory and to disability and care—topics that were ultimately the most salient throughout the semester. I consider what worked, what needed rethinking, and what possibilities were opened up for imagining new and creative ways to approach teaching theory during the COVID-19 pandemic. In short, the wisdom of disability justice movements and feminist pedagogy indelibly changed the content, possibility, and modalities for this class, and I hope to continue to identify practices to support all students’ learning, even online, even in a pandemic and isolation, and even in an atmosphere that battles refusal.

Materialities of the Classroom: Notes on Refusing Theory

When I initially pitched this course before COVID, I was excited to share abolitionist approaches rooted in feminist/queer theory to guide the students’ thinking around refusal. But by the time I had the opportunity to teach the course in the midst of the pandemic, my excitement had faded. I was worried about how to navigate and facilitate a course and syllabus structured so heavily around violence and suffering, and that its contents would cause burnout and fatigue. Indeed, in their introductory posts on Canvas, many students expressed apprehension about the emotional and theoretical weight of required course readings. On a personal level, I too was worried about the toll such a course might take on the students and myself.

Although the syllabus primarily focused on theoretical texts, it also included considerations of visual art. After the second week, however, it was clear that the course felt too conceptual and “abstract” for some students. Some voiced feeling anxious about being able to metabolize the material and contribute to class discussions. In response, I revised the syllabus, incorporating film screenings and

several guest speakers. After I let them know about the changes, students expressed relief. If I were to teach this course again, I would integrate even more visual culture into the syllabus because this mode of representation resonated deeply with students and often felt more stimulating than written texts did.

Still, many students did not want to speak in class. A few confided in me during office hours that they lacked experience reading queer theory, didn't understand the readings, or were embarrassed by what they perceived as their lack of knowledge around course themes. I was grateful for their honesty, but I tried to remind them that reading theory takes time and practice. Theory requires a technical skillset, much like math and science, yet the difficulty in these areas of study is always presumed and rarely resented. These conversations during office hours clarified the importance of cultivating more creative and expansive ways of approaching texts while supporting analytical skill development.

At the start of the course, I gauged students' interest in collaborative notetaking. Each week, students volunteered to take discussion notes on a shared digital document. I presented this mode of reading and recording as a disability justice-informed practice because it facilitated accessibility and created an archive of what we learned from the readings, lectures, and class discussions. This practice contributed to a sense of collaboration and thinking collectively among the eighteen students. This was particularly helpful to offset a dynamic where some students left class each week feeling that a handful of students knew everything while the rest didn't. Collaborative notetaking helped gauge the rhythm of the course. These notes also helped us to build trust.

Most importantly, collaborative notetaking was also the beginning of a semester-long conversation about the purpose of theory. For example, these were notes I wrote to myself during the third week of class while prepping my lecture on Lee Edelman's "The Future is Kid Stuff" (2004) and José Muñoz's "Feeling Utopia" (2006):

Make a few comments regarding theory and fatigue. Moving forward, I'll signpost the next week's readings during class and whenever it's particularly dense, I will always provide a glossary of terms. But I also think it'd be interesting/worthwhile to spend some of our discussion talking about why dense theory is worthwhile or why it's not.

This pairing was intended to highlight the foreclosure/possibility aspects of pain and suffering from identity- and embodiment-based practices. Students noted and picked up the tension between the density of Edelman's anti-relational argument and the effervescent utopic promises of Muñoz's queer futurity. For instance, one student asked, "When there is a text as difficult as Edelman's, what is the point of it?" By the end of the discussion, the racial politics of the piece, and more specifically, the figuration of the "Child," became more pronounced and central to our discussion. For Edelman, Western politics is organized around reproduction and progress. As such, collective hope and investment in the future is narrativized through the figure of the "Child." We considered whether or not Edelman's polemic reproduced a kind of epistemological violence whereby the "Child" could only ever be reducible to the white child. Along these lines, the collective notes from that day ended with a series of questions:

How does the author's own embodiment end up on the page? And what does this do for the argument? How do we push against figuration and what does this make possible, or more interesting, or more ethical?

Ultimately, our discussion began with “What’s the point?” but by the end, it had shifted into a more meaningful dialogue about the epistemological stakes of Edelman’s argument and the affective experience of reading a text that many felt refused to imagine a future for them.

Throughout this inquiry, many students suggested that theory itself seemed to function as a kind of negation. Some of this negation involved important critiques concerning accessibility and the politics of gender, race, class, and ability that have come to dictate whose knowledge production is deemed legitimate. Reading over the course’s collaborative notes for that day’s discussion, I was reminded of students’ interest in what possibilities queer politics hold for a liberated, less (hetero)normative future. As one student wrote in the notes, “queer theory itself does not signify queerness, queerness is something that emerges from the everyday and is predicated both on praxis and embodiment.”

This class was significant for two reasons. First, students were challenged by the difficulty and complexity of the texts. Second, rather than be dissuaded, students became more interested in the function, possibility, and limits of theory, even while grappling with the psychoanalytic vocabularies of the texts and how to converse over Zoom about such difficult material. Instead of leaving class frustrated by not immediately understanding all of Edelman’s Lacanian vernacular, they were open to feeling out what was interesting and engaging about the texts—even if confusing. Together, we thought about when it was worth wading through the density of a text and when one might leave it behind. And as the semester progressed, we asked how to not only read texts but to listen to them, to the rhythm of the sentences and the sounds that emanate from them. This attunement to form opened up new ways to think and feel the limits and possibilities of language.

In so many ways, this was a class about the expansiveness of language, the language of theory, protest, the body, all the different organizing principles of refusal. What felt memorable for me facilitating each week was the attention we paid to how refusal shows up in an abundance of embodied forms. On reflection, it makes sense that, as one student framed it, they preferred Muñoz’s utopic politics to Edelman’s death drive because they understood Muñoz as saying, “things are fucked, but still, think about the beauty in the struggle.” Of course, Muñoz and Edelman are only two thinkers, and not every group of students will respond in the same way when I teach their articles again. Nonetheless, I was reminded that so often, what we look for in the texts we read is a glimpse of ourselves. My students made clear that what they desired from theory was a blueprint for how to live. And that even if utopic, they’d refuse anything less.

Notes on Care as Refusal

It’s not surprising that in the second year of the pandemic, our most animated discussions involved our relationships with disability and illness. For many, the pandemic continues to unearth ecosystems of care that have long been practised by those refusing to go along with the death-making of the state. And the responses to the pandemic, both by the state and interpersonally, have demonstrated the possibilities of care but also the individual and collective refusal to engage in long-term solidarity across disability and difference. Toward the end of the semester, we watched the video work of Mel Baggs, an autistic writer and artist who passed away in 2020. Baggs used a

communication device and identified as “non-verbal.” At the core of their work was the idea that to fall out of normative modes of communication and language is to ultimately fall out of personhood. We watched two of their videos that explored the relationship between language and the human, ideas they expanded on in their essay “Up in the Clouds and Down in the Valley” (2010). For Baggs, to communicate in “legible” ways is to be considered a “real person.” This question of legibility was important for the course, and we spent our time together that week discussing care and disability more broadly.

It was a particularly vulnerable discussion, and almost the entire class contributed. For the first time that semester, I could see my students really talking with each other as opposed to looking to me for approval. They shared their own experiences with chronic pain and illness, neurodiversity, and medicalization. The notes from that class centre on themes of abandonment and isolation. And there was a general feeling of being considered “too much” and a “problem” for many people in their lives. I was moved to see how my students responded to each other in these moments. There was a sense of recognition but also anger about how those of us living with disability or illness are seen as disposable and unworthy. I don’t think every week can be this confessional, but I also know that this discussion shifted something for us as a collective, and the syllabus felt more material and alive moving forward. Or, as one student put it, “we must normalize care as part of being in relation to each other.”

This experience made me curious about how to design syllabi that foster interrogations and practices where students engage with each other as opposed to solely with me as the facilitator. After all, this experience didn’t result from something I did as a professor but rather from what students took from the readings and videos that week. The assigned materials invoked meaningful dialogue among students because they saw themselves reflected in the material. Part of what performance studies syllabi and radical pedagogies do is give students enough to consider, discuss, and refuse easy right or wrong answers. Put differently, what worked the best in this class was balancing assignments that challenged and developed students’ analytical skills but also allowed them to provoke, contest, and stake out their intellectual investments and modes of communicating those investments.

Minor Modes of Apprehending the Social

The second year of the COVID pandemic was an intense period of mourning for students and faculty alike. I came to think of our syllabus for this class as one of mourning. Far too often, the readings for the week felt resonant with news of yet another instance of state negligence, violence, and/or white supremacy. Many of us were mourning family and community members that were ill or who had recently passed. I also realized that some of the authors on our syllabus had also recently passed away, adding to a collective sense of loss. The final assignment for the semester was a Blog Project where students brought image and text together to think through course material, and many of the students’ blogs had a melancholic feel. However, what struck me most was their commitment to investigate the term refusal and not abandon it. How is it operative in photography, in gay rights discourse, in HIV/AIDS activism? What can the term do? So many confessed to having no idea what the term meant, and many returned to Tina Campt’s definition or used the assignment to reflect on their own relationship to negation and rituals of mourning. One student created digital collages that imagined the resting places of poet Justin Chin and the Irish hunger striker Bobby Sands. They called it “A Place called Heaven.” Another student created a playlist inspired by José Esteban Muñoz’s text “Feeling Brown, Feeling Down” (2006). I was impressed by their willingness

to mobilize their grief toward creative practice and to approach the theories found within the syllabus as more than abstractions but as material realities of being in the world.

I also hoped the syllabus would facilitate experimentation in how we approach reading, writing, and listening to histories of refusal and political struggle. By the end of the semester, music playlists were being shared, and we were thinking sonically as much as visually, and in the realm of language. Zoom enables these different approaches to accessibility and engagement. It allows for the immediacy of bringing in voices from outside the syllabus without the anxiety of completely alienating those who haven't yet read or encountered the names. The interface fostered an openness to building connections from inside and outside the classroom. That the students were so willing and enthusiastic to go on this journey with me was deeply meaningful, and every week I found myself listening to the texts differently, developing an alternate attunement to how the sensorial presents itself in practices and moments of refusal. I found myself less preoccupied with "the body" than I thought I would be and more with how refusal shows up in language/communication and sound/noise and how each of these relates to the visual.

By the end of the semester, we were paying better attention to minor modes of apprehending the social that illustrate the beauty and devastation of trying to make sense of the different sounds that emanate from within us, trying to articulate that which might only ever be opaque. Perhaps this is what it means to be attuned to practices of refusal. The authors and artists we engaged with throughout the semester offered us ways to read and listen for moments of refusal in the archive while also providing the tools to consider how the archive—a text—is mediated by our own embodiments and positionalities. At its best, this is what theories of refusal offer us: approaches to how we might confront the unfolding violence surrounding us and the stakes involved in our engagement with violence. Ultimately, the constellation of theoretical texts and films we engaged with throughout the semester made us more thoughtful and critical of our desires to look and engage with refusal and negation. Most importantly, coming together around these authors and artists helped us consider what an ethical relationality might look like and what role pain, suffering, and negation play in such an endeavour.

Politics of Refusal

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Performance theorist Tina Campt defines refusal as “a rejection of the status quo as livable and the creation of possibility in the face of negation i.e. a refusal to recognize a system that renders you fundamentally illegible and unintelligible . . . using negation as a generative and creative source of disorderly power to embrace the possibility of living otherwise.” Following Campt, this course examines how minoritized subjects have mobilized performative and aesthetic modes of negation toward political ends. In doing so, the course will advance critical approaches to what may appear in the contemporary moment as new forms of embodied practices that centralize abject states such as silence, self-starvation, pain, and debility in relation to not only artistic productions, but political protest as well. Students will engage a range of social, cultural, and political theory from feminist and queer thought to psychoanalysis and Black studies, all of which offer methods for analysis as well as objects of study. Assignments will include discussion posts, two critical reading responses, and a final blog project.

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

Canvas Discussion Posts

Less formal than the critical response papers, the discussion posts are an opportunity to pose interpretations and questions of that week’s readings. I will offer a prompt or guiding set of questions to aid in your writing beforehand.

Critical Response Papers

Throughout the semester students will write two critical response papers that serve as an interpretation of concepts from that week’s (or previous weeks’) readings. These responses are less about rehearsing the arguments of the texts themselves (although it can be helpful to restate their claims carefully as you start your response) than it is a place in which you might risk a reading of your own creation.

Blog Project

Given the emphasis on visibility, students will reflect on course themes by creating their own online blog or website. Each student should develop a visual component for their blog. The visual component may include photographs (taken by others and/or by you), and could also extend to film, video, drawings, charts, maps, and beyond. Each blog or website needs to include at least five separate written entries.

COURSE SCHEDULE

(Deviations may be necessary in order to benefit all of us, I will always notify you of any changes made)

Week 1- Introductions

Week 2 - Refusal and the Sensorial

- Saidiya Hartman, “Innocent Amusements: The Stage of Sufferance”
- Tina Campt, “Black Visuality and the Practice of Refusal”

Week 3 - Indigenous Refusals

- Audra Simpson, “Ethnographic Refusal: Anthropological Need”
- Nick Estes, “Indigenous Resistance is Post-Apocalyptic”
- Kim Tallbear, “Caretaking Relations, Not American Dreaming”

Week 4 - Futurity and Refusal

- Lee Edelman, “The Future is Kid Stuff”
- José Esteban Muñoz, “Feeling Utopia”

Week 5 - Desire/Negation I

- Film Viewing, *Children of Men*
- Octavia Butler, “Bloodchild”
- Samuel Delany, “Aye and Gomorrah”

Week 6 - Desire/Negation II

- Art Viewing, Nao Bustamante, “Neapolitan”; Xandra Ibarra, “Spictacle II: La Tortillera”
- José Esteban Muñoz, “Feeling Brown, Feeling Down”
- Juana María Rodríguez, “Queer Sociality and Other Sexual Fantasies”

Week 7 - Minor Feelings

- David Eng and Sinhee Han, “A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia”
- Justin Chin, “Bite Hard: Three Poems by Justin Chin”
- Chris Eng, “Apprehending the ‘Angry Ethnic Fag’”

Week 8 - Trans/Queer Epistemologies

- Film Viewing, *Loxoro*
- Dora Silva Santana, “*Mais Viva!*: Reassembling Transness, Blackness, and Feminism”
- Giancarlo Cornejo, “Travesti Dreams Outside in the Ethnographic Machine”
- Guest Speaker, Giancarlo Cornejo

Week 9 - Spring Break!

Week 10 - Power, Protest, Destruction I

- Michel Foucault, “The Right to Life and Power Over Death”
- Banu Bargu, “The Silent Exception: Hunger Striking and Lip-Sewing”

Week 11 - Power, Protest, Destruction II

- Film Viewing, *Hunger*
- Jasbir K. Puar, “Will Not Let Die: Debilitation and Inhuman Biopolitics in Palestine”

Week 12 - Visibility/Surveillance

- Frantz Fanon, “The Lived Experience of the Black Man”
- Ruha Benjamin, “Coded Exposure: Is Visibility a Trap?”
- Simone Brown, “The Feds Are Watching: A History of Resisting Anti-Black Surveillance”

Week 13 - Disability and Embodiment

- Video Viewing, Mel Baggs, *In My Language* (2007); *Being an Unperson* (2006)
- Mel Baggs, “Up in the Clouds and Down in the Valley”
- Christina Crosby, “Faithful to the Contemplation of Bones”
- Johanna Hedva, “Sick Woman Theory”
- Mia Mingus, “Moving Toward the Ugly: A Politic Beyond Desirability”

Week 14 - Queer Histories of Refusal

- Film Viewing, *United in Anger*
- Douglas Crimp, “Mourning and Militancy”
- Paul B. Preciado, “Learning from the Virus”

Week 15 - Refusing the Carceral/Prison Abolition

- Film Viewing, *Criminal Queers*
- Eric A. Stanley, “Fugitive Flesh: Gender Self-Determination, Queer Abolition, and Trans

Resistance”

- Mariama Kaba, “Yes, We Mean Literally Abolish the Police”
- Guest Speaker, Eric A. Stanley

Week 16 - Refusal and the Visualsonic

- Saidiya Hartman, “The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner”
- Octavia Butler, “Speech Sounds”

Acknowledgment

Thank you to the eighteen students who participated in “Politics of Refusal.” The many forms that our weekly discussion, and your writing, took taught me new ways to listen and imagine being together in the classroom. Though mediated, I hope I did justice to our class’s affective and political sensibilities. Thank you to Kel Montalvo, Sonya Merutka, and A. D. Lewis for reading drafts and encouraging me to finish. And all my gratitude to Karin Shankar and Julia Steinmetz for their comments, edits, and labour on this special issue.

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