

Chapter I. Composite Poetry: Relationship Between the One and the Many

Composite poetry is one type of poetic inquiry that has been valuable in my research with faculty writers. As the term *composite* suggests, this approach combines lines, words or phrases from multiple research participants into one found data poem. Composite poems are ideal for highlighting the complex relationship between unique and resonant experiences, between the individual participants and larger groups of which they are a part. With composite poems, writing researchers can mine qualitative data to trouble common assumptions about writer development and success that support some writers more than others. Of the questions poetic inquiry can help writing researchers pursue, composite poetry is well suited to engage the following:

- How do I stay accountable to those experiences traditional research tools are most likely to miss or flatten?
- How do I acknowledge my entanglement with dominant ideologies and (re)orient to my work in the spirit of knowing, being, and doing differently?
- How can my research directly challenge and begin to transform structures and systems that privilege certain bodyminds (Price, 2015) over others?

To illustrate, this chapter features a composite poem I crafted with transcripts from interviews with faculty writers in my study and highlights how this approach to poetic inquiry honors the complex relationships between individual and collective experiences. I show how composite poetry especially leverages the power of poetic inquiry to hold researchers accountable to multiple truths (Faulkner, 2020), revealing and juxtaposing many realities so that we might begin to disentangle seemingly universal constructs around writing that impact writers' lives in complicated ways. I suggest that interrogating normative constructs through composite poetry can inspire new strategies for supporting more diverse trajectories, making the method a promising vehicle for democratizing writing development and pursuing access and equity for writers.

Composite Poetry as a Tool for Interrogating Social Constructs

Composite poetry, artistically combining words and phrases from multiple research participants into one poem, illuminates the relationship between commonalities and divergences in lived experience. In doing so, this approach to poetic inquiry reveals how social constructs that may seem universally applicable may actually

operate differently in material lives shaped by interlocking privilege and oppression to the benefit of some more than others. Michelle Commeyras and Mercy Montsi (2000), for instance, use composite poems to explore gender identity and ideology among Botswanan youth. They juxtapose a poetic representation composed from 25 essays written by young females in Botswana about how life would change if they woke up to find themselves a member of the other sex with a composite data poem composed from 25 essays written by young males in response to the same prompt. The poems depict social constructions of gender identity by “captur[ing] some of the lyricism of the words and phraseology that Batswana youth had used to express themselves” (Commeyras & Montsi, 2000, p. 342). Commeyras and Montsi (2000) report using the research poems in their work on gender issues in education with students in Botswana and teachers in the US where they have sparked profound responses. Considered alongside the researchers’ more standard thematic content analysis, the composite poems contribute to efforts to develop pedagogical practices for creating a “gender-literate population” in Botswana able to address tensions between “contemporary lifestyles and a gender ideology with historical roots” (Commeyras & Montsi, 2000, p. 345).

In a different vein, Eric D. Teman (2010) composed from his study of a queer cultural center a composite or collective poem from the words of four participants as they shared feelings about the suicide of an undergraduate student leader of the center during the course of the study. The poem was not designed to do analytical work like Commeyras and Montsi’s (2000) composite poetry. Yet even as a stand-alone artifact the research poem compellingly captures participants’ feelings about suicide in the gay community, shedding light on suicide as a social construct. As these examples show, composite poems offer more dynamic and multifaceted views of phenomena of interest than do poems created from words of single individuals. Resonant with portraiture as a genre of inquiry, composite poetry “capture[s] the texture and nuance of human experience” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 5) in ways that recognize and celebrate the individual even as it blurs the “boundaries between individual and humankind” (p. 21). In doing so, it can usefully trouble dominant social constructs that are always more complicated than they seem.

The versatility of composite found poems for surfacing similarities and differences among individuals and groups within a set of research participants make it valuable for studying constructs related to multidimensional and fraught phenomena. As Alison Happel-Parkins and Katharina A. Azim (2017) illustrate in their “interruptive narratives of pregnancy and childbirth,” because composite poetry “underscores the impossibility of (re)presenting a/the Truth” of an experience, it “allow[s] researchers to work with transgressive data that is often ignored in more traditional analyses.” Composite poetry offers a way to examine complicated, transgressive “truths” by “tell[ing] it slant,” to paraphrase a line from Emily Dickinson’s famous poem. In their book *Tell It Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction*, Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola (2005) interpret Dickinson

to be acknowledging that “truth takes on many guises” (p. viii); truth depicted through art is both deeply rooted in and distinct from the truth of daily life. By capturing the dynamic relationship between the one and the many when it comes to lived experience, composite poetry artistically represents realities of daily life, working within and across complex layers of multiple truths. It invites researchers and readers to interrogate the paradoxical elements of social constructs that mean differently as they move across discursive, ideological, and material spaces.

I turned to composite poetry as a way to engage with a particular construct that emerged in my interviews with faculty writers: resilience. Resilience is just one example of a construct writing researchers could interrogate through composite poetry. A study of graduate writers, for example, might use composite poetry to examine the relationship between individual and collective experiences of imposter syndrome to show how that construct circulates in academic discourse and impacts the lived realities of graduate writers. A study of workplace writers might feature composite poems crafted from interviews with new employees of an organization to investigate how productivity operates as a construct circulating through company discourse and shaping the workers’ writing identities and development. By demonstrating how I used composite poetry to analyze and recast social constructions of resilience and the role it can play in faculty writers’ lives, I hope to inspire writing researchers to imagine ways to use this type of poetic inquiry to examine relevant constructs in their own research contexts.

In what follows, I explain how resilience emerged as a theme in my data and how I identified it as a construct worth interrogating based on how resilience is discussed (or not) in published scholarship. I then illustrate how I used composite poetry to study and critically recast the construct of resilience in the context of faculty writing lives and offer suggestions about how researchers might identify occasions for composite poetry in their own work.

Resilience as a Theme in Interviews with Faculty Writers

I became interested in exploring the concept of resilience upon reading a round of interview transcripts and noticing experiences of adversity that faculty writers shared hesitantly with me and seemed compelled to keep hidden from others (i.e. evaluators and peers) for fear of judgement. Each writer’s experiences were striking and distinct but also resonant with the experiences of other writers in the study, related if not exactly shared. Exploring how faculty responded to the adversity they experienced seemed vital in the context of academic ideologies such as “publish or perish” and “survival of the fittest” that make faculty believe any setback or struggle is a sign of personal failure or “not enoughness” (as one participant in my study put it). As I read and re-read transcripts, I saw the concept of resilience emerge in response to adversity in complex ways. Faculty wrestled with the message that they should appear resilient, show resiliency, no matter the adversity they faced and no matter the cost of performing resilience. It became

clear that although experiences of adversity created opportunities for resilience, all were not equal in terms of stakes and consequences.

Intrigued by the emergent theme of resilience, I gathered definitions from ecology, psychiatry, and psychology. Resilience, I discovered, is often understood as the capacity (of a system or individual) to “absorb disturbance” (Walker & Salt, 2006, p. xiii), to “bounce back after encountering difficulty” (Southwick & Charney, 2018, p. 8), to adapt to stressful situations (Palmiter et al., 2020), to demonstrate “hardiness” (Kobasa & Puccetti, 1983, as cited in Jordan, 2004, p. 29). In this view, resilience is a valuable mechanism for sustaining a person or a system; it is an uncontested good. However, scholars problematized the notion of resilience from a range of perspectives, including education (Gallagher et al., 2019; McMahan, 2007), race (Bachay & Cingel, 1999; Griffin, 2016), queer studies (Cover, 2016; I. Meyer, 2015), disability studies (Hutcheon & Lashewicz, 2015) Indigenous studies (Reid, 2019), and feminist studies (Bracke, 2016; Flynn et al., 2012a; McMahan, 2007). For example, as Fulford laments, resilience is often associated with “individual persistence” and grit (Fulford, 2019, p. 231), neglecting “relationality and mutuality as constitutive dynamics of resilience” (Flynn et al., 2012b, p. 5). Treating resilience as a personal trait obscures systemic forces that demand resilience from some more than others.

Resilience can also be problematic when it is indexed to the status quo (Lerner, 2019). The goal of resilience is typically to return to “normal” after a challenge or disturbance, but when “normal” constitutes a state of oppression, the aim of returning to rather than transforming original conditions becomes questionable. As Sarah Bracke (2016) points out in her feminist critique, traditional forms of resilience can actually limit the capacity to imagine and pursue transformation because it depends on the very “dispossession it seeks to overcome” (p. 63). Thus while valuing and encouraging resilience may seem like an accepted moral good, uncritical pursuit and demand for resilience, particularly in the context of institutions like higher education, can thwart equity and access.

I began to wonder if and how resilience might be a complicated and potentially problematic construct for faculty writers, perhaps insidiously shaping their perceptions of self and their struggle to build sustainable writing lives. The concept of resilience clearly circulated around them as part of the discourse of faculty success, particularly for writers required to publish for tenure or career mobility. At the same time, resilience seemed to be understudied as a discursive force or experiential phenomenon in the lives of faculty writers. Scholarship on resilience in higher education tends to focus on undergraduates (Gallagher et al., 2019), and few scholars consider resilience in the context of faculty success (e.g., Cora-Bramble, 2006; Cora-Bramble et al., 2010). Resilience is not a featured concept in studies of faculty *writers*; the term does not appear in the indexes of recent publications (Ezer, 2016; Geller & Eodice, 2013; Sword, 2017; Tulley, 2018). I sensed that investigating resilience as a construct with multiple, shifting meanings and ways of circulating discursively could shed new light on the lived experience of faculty writers and inform more nuanced faculty support efforts.

In the rest of the chapter, I demonstrate how I used composite poetry to interrogate the construct of resilience in the lives of faculty writers. In so doing, I don't mean to forward an argument about resilience per se (although I am fascinated by the many and evolving insights about resilience in faculty writing lives my composite poem surfaces), nor do I mean to suggest that other researchers should use composite poetry to study resilience (although they certainly could). Rather, my goal is to play out one example of how composite poetry is useful for probing and even recasting social constructs germane to writers and writing. I invite writing researchers to consider how composite poetry might work in their own research contexts, with different research populations, and different social constructs relevant to understanding hidden dimensions of writers' lived experiences.

Composing Composite Poetry: An Example

To craft the composite poem featured in this chapter, I used an intuitive, non-linear process similar to that of educational researchers Lynn Butler-Kisber (2002) and Susan Walsh (2006) that involved several rounds of selecting, paring down, deleting, rearranging lines, building a "mental kaleidoscope" as words from one participant conjured aspects of other participants' experiences until the accumulation surfaced and made "more tangible" various dimensions of the subject under investigation: resilience (Butler-Kisber, 2002, p. 233). This particular poem was created from a subset of data, interviews with 21 participants in spring 2018.¹² Participants come from three different institutions, all wanted or needed to write for publication, and most were initially recruited from facilitated faculty writing groups. Most were tenure track or recently tenured in 2018. They associated with several field areas and disciplines, though mostly the social science and the arts and humanities. Most self-identified as white women, one woman identified as Black, one man as Iranian, one man as mixed race and three people chose not to specify race or ethnicity. The poem does not necessarily include words from all 21 participants, but engaging with all of the transcripts informed the process of creating composite poetry.

As I read transcripts, I kept a file with sentences and phrases that struck me as I read. Because I was interested in exploring resilience, I paid particular attention to lines that captured adversity or faculty responses to adversity. I whittled down the file to the most poignant or impactful lines, the ones that provoked a bodily reaction in me and those that captured the essence of what I'd heard from other participants. Next, I grouped the lines that spoke to each other and chose lines to

12. There is nothing special about this group of participants or this moment in time. As I prepared to conduct interviews in 2019, listening to audio recordings of interviews and reviewing transcripts from 2018, I became curious about resilience and what I could learn about faculty writers' perceptions of and experiences with resilience by listening differently to the data in front of me.

title those groups. Finally, I arranged the lines within each group into stanzas to address different aspects of the topic or communicate a feeling.

In Butler-Kisber's (2002) words, "there is no question that this found poem is my interpretation" (p. 234) of what I heard in participants' stories based on what "resonated with my—and what I imagined were other [faculty writers']—experiences" (p. 232). Although data poems can be created for a variety of purposes in the process of poetic inquiry, including reflection and analysis behind the scenes, so to speak, this poem was crafted to be shared. In fact, at the 2019 Feminisms and Rhetorics Conference, I invited session attendees to perform a collaborative reading of this poem. Their unsolicited comments about how deeply, and in some cases disturbingly, the words and sentiments resonated with them as writers attest to the features of composite poetry that make it resonant with potential audiences—verisimilitude, narrative truth(s), and evocation (Fernández-Giménez et al., 2019; Leavy, 2018).

Participants whose words appear in the poem also had a chance to read and respond to a draft of this chapter. All who responded were supportive of the methodology. Some were particularly moved by how other writers' experiences resonated with their own and struck by the feeling of not always knowing which words were theirs, again highlighting the significance of composite poetry's capacity for representing the complex relationship between one and many. After sharing my composite poem, I elaborate on the main affordance of this approach to poetic inquiry—untangling complicated constructs such as resilience. In doing so, I invite readers to consider how collective and individual experiences of writers, and how normative discourses or assumptions about writers in diverse research contexts, might be meaningfully engaged, resisted and (perhaps) transformed through composite poetry.

Adversity and Resilience in Faculty Writing Lives: A Found Poem

- 1 All sorts of ways of telling a story,
Find the rhythm.
- 2 Get told: Okay, here's the path, go down the path.
Over and over and over
Over and over and over again.
Such a torture!
- 3 You have to imagine Sisyphus is happy.

Failing Better

- 4 Anxious. Nervous.
Always
Always

Always

Always the question:

Will the words come?

5 Writing is what makes the pressure
of writing go away.

6 It shouldn't be that hard, but it is for me.

A constant battle:

You can do this.

You can't do this.

The good and the evil.

7 The demon has quieted.

8 I'm nervous in the chair.

Other people can do it, why can't I?

Get stuck in feeling bad--

Why are you doing this, you're such a fake?

It's terrifying to feel that anxious.

Just keep my head above water,

surrendering to the fact that I'm not okay.

9 I'm more comfortable in the struggle.

It's the Losses that Stick

10 Writing is such an alone thing,

in-between kind of purgatory position.

You don't really have a choice, do this or fail.

I didn't do it right,

I should have done it better.

I disappointed you.

I let you down.

I, I, I, I, sad, personal stuff.

11 I'm going to fail trying.

12 Waste of my talent,

waste of years and relationships,

letting down my family.

It'd be catastrophic.
Don't know if I can think of anything worse,
besides severe disability or death.

13 Tenure has removed a lot of those shackles.

- 14 Life? That's a whole other story.
To live my life and work
but not have work erode that life.
I lost the chance to make that choice.
Do people have to suffer
to live the quality of life they want to lead?

My books aren't going to come visit me when I'm old.

15 Learning to do life better.

I Want Poetry, I Want a Poetics

- 16 Time to go on this archeological expedition
and find the thing that I want to be.
Try to put your round peg into that square hole.
That's just not how I am.
Creative juices don't flow that way.
Just need to suffer through it.

Everything is fine,
except when it's not.

17 Just let it be.

- 18 Other people's expectations:
Good people are people who work hard.
I don't want to be that person
checking the boxes.
Am I being prideful?
Am I too invested in praise and recognition?
Get the fuck over yourself.
You're not special.

19 Y'all can kiss it. I could care less
what y'all care about.

20 Work is where I lose my sense of self,
not where I get my sense of self.
It was such a clear omission,
like I didn't even exist.
There's a thing there that I'm chasing
that I can't quite get to.

21 I feel in my bones that the work is important.

Our Labor is Our Labor

22 Being pulled apart
there just aren't enough parts of me.

Like the ameba that's splitting in half,
this physiological connection in my mind
around writing.

23 Start dislodging the association
between anxiety and writing.

24 Physical and mental torment.
Bargain with yourself,
what you're willing to accept.
I wake up hot, sweaty.
It's awful,
like being smashed down
but with no way out.

25 It comes down to support.

26 Emotionally exhausted and depressed,
incredible sense of sorrow and guilt,
heartbrokenness for the subject matter.
Couldn't talk myself out of the way that felt.
Went home and cried,
several times,
by myself.

27 Just walk along with me.

28 So I'm just fucking doing it—

Sewing together my parachute
with the writing.
Like the falcon rising from the dust.

- 29 How are you gonna start the revolution if
you're not writing?

Mining Composite Poetry: Resilience in the Lives of Faculty Writers

To highlight the transferrable value of composite poetry as a particular approach to poetic inquiry that can illuminate the complexity of writing-related constructs, I mine my composite poem for insights about how the construct of resilience operates in the lives of faculty writers. By revealing multiple truths in a collective voice, my composite poem honors affective, material experiences of faculty writers, ones that often remain hidden in an academic culture that separates mind/body/emotion, privileges independence, and favors linear narratives of success. The poetic representation invites a visceral association with embodied feelings of perpetual torment, anxiety, self-criticism and doubt, loss, longing, exhaustion, and persistence that plague many faculty writing lives. The composite nature of the poem generates insights that might not have emerged from the storied experience of any single participant alone. Taken together, those insights suggest a *re*/conceptualization of the construct of resilience that challenges bootstrap ideologies and truisms about self-sufficiency that dominate academic discourse around faculty success. A new vision emerges in which

- Resilience is constructed: Resilience looks, feels, and means differently, has different implications, depending on the context and the type of adversity that demands it.
- Resilience is nonlinear: Far from a steady march through adversity to success, resilience is more likely to be a messy, recursive mangle of starts, stops, and perpetual returns.
- Resilience is discursive: Discourses of resilience shape how faculty writers understand their struggles and experiences in ways that enable and constrain their work.

In what follows, I elaborate on the vision of resilience revealed through my composite poem in order to illustrate the value of this approach to poetic inquiry for *de*/reconstructing dominant ideologies that affect writers' lived realities, including access to resources and support and likelihood of thriving in the context of systems and structures designed to sustain some more than others. Of course the process of creating composite research poetry isn't just valuable for interrogating resilience; it also can be used to mine various constructs for the purpose of troubling stock

stories about writers and writer development. My hope is that in considering the kinds of insights I gleaned, researchers will feel inspired to imagine how composite poetry might generate insights in their own contexts by unraveling problematic constructs and ideologies around writers/writing.

Resilience is Constructed

By featuring “all sorts of ways of telling the story” (stanza 1, line 1), composite poems reveal that dominant ideologies about writers and writer development, assumptions rooted in evaluative systems of belief that guide behavior, are constructed rather than inherent. By surfacing numerous, sometimes paradoxical constructions, composite poems challenge stock stories and truisms. Because poetry honors and evokes emotion, readers *feel* multiple truths around how writers experience their writing lives. For example, because resilience depends on adversity, dynamically representing multiple descriptions of the lived experience of adversity in the foregoing composite poem troubles perceptions of resilience as a moral good, acknowledging how certain experiences and consequences of resilience are more meaningful than others. To be sure, adversity can be necessary and worth enduring. The struggle to figure out what one wants to say or be—how one works as a writer (stanza 16)—is essential for building a healthy writing life, in which case resilience can be an empowering self-investment. On the contrary, needless adversity demands resilience that is discriminatory and dehumanizing—writers describe “Physical and mental torment” (stanza 24, line 1), “. . .splitting in half,” (stanza 22, line 3), “Being pulled apart” (stanza 22, line 1). The demand to advocate for one’s right to exist (stanza 20), being “Emotionally exhausted. . .” (stanza 26, line 1), filled with “heartbrokenness. . .” (stanza 26, line 3) and suffering in solitude (stanza 26)—often the result of fighting to survive in sexist, racist, classist, ableist, colonialist institutions—are not only without benefit but also demeaning. In such a diminished state, individuals and groups are distracted from and ill equipped to transform dominant ideologies that create and sustain senseless adversity in the first place.

Spotlighting varying truths is important because too often expectations about what successful, productive writers look and act like are treated as universal when they are actually constructed and sanctioned through dominant ideologies (Hutcheon & Lashewicz, 2015). In my example resilience seems to be determined by how well individuals fulfill institutionally valued roles; those who deviate from or resist those roles may be considered less resilient. Academics often cling to “understandings of resilience that reflect the dominant cultural ethos of the rugged individual and that tout resilient individuals as possessing above-average levels of fortitude or character-armor” (Hutcheon & Lashewicz, 2014, p. 1388), and thus identify resilient writers as those who are stoic and independent, who seem “together,” confident, who don’t need help. Processes such as “mourning, distress, suffering, anxiety, vulnerability, or uncertainty” are attributed to “less-than resilient” individuals and groups (Hutcheon & Lashewicz, 2015, p. 44). In

this view, lines in the poem such as “It comes down to support” (stanza 25, line 1) and “Just walk along with me” (stanza 27, line 1) suggest writers are unprepared or, as one writer in my study heard from her senior colleagues, in need of inappropriate “handholding.” Admission of extreme anxiety—“I’m nervous in the chair” (stanza 8, line 1), “It’s terrifying to feel that anxious” (stanza 8, line 5)—devastating doubt—“Will the words come?” (stanza 4, line 6)—and tortuous guilt—“I didn’t do it right/I should have done it better/I disappointed you/I let you down” (stanza 10, lines 4-7), “waste of years and relationships,/letting down my family” (stanza 12, lines 2-3)—might likewise indicate lack of resilience.

In their study of resilience in families with members with disabilities, community health researchers Emily J. Hutcheon and Bonnie Lashewicz (2015), argue for more nuanced understandings of resilience, questioning existing scholarship “predicated on...prescriptive assumptions” about what constitutes a resilient family. In a similar vein, my composite poem resists traditional definitions of resilience. When expressions of vulnerability, anxiety, and struggle emerge from the collective, as in the poem, they become more than unfortunate flaws and failures of a select few and begin to trouble assumptions about what constitutes resilience in the first place. What if, the poem asks, writers who “focus on stressors and burdens” and don’t always ascribe “positive meaning” (Hutcheon & Lashewicz, 2015, p. 44) could still be demonstrating resilience? The lines “Just keep my head above water/surrendering to the fact that I’m not okay” (stanza 8, lines 6-7), for example, might initially suggest floundering, drowning, giving up. However, surrendering could also be an empowering release of denial, a refusal to waste energy treading water in order to appear resilient, the first step to making changes in structures or practices that are not sustainable. Like the families in Hutcheon and Lashewicz’s (2015) research, my poem shows how faculty “navigate successes and challenges” in ways that are not always “expected, or even imagined, under prevailing definitions of resilience” (p. 42).

Resilience is Nonlinear

Prevailing constructions frame resilience as a linear progression in which individuals weather adversity, emerging worn and scarred but triumphant. In composite poems, literary strategies are used to crack the smooth surface of normative constructions. In this case, repetition troubles the linearity of resilience by forcing readers to linger with faculty in the grueling reiteration of relentless adversity. Writers don’t always see (let alone reach) the finish line. As my composite poem reveals, they endure the torture of going “...down the path./Over and over and over/Over and over and over again” (stanza 2, lines 1-3), eternally chasing a thing they “...can’t quite get to” (stanza 20, line 6). The terrible possibility that the words will never come is “Always/Always/Always” (stanza 4, lines 2-4) a reality as faculty experience high stakes writing for publication as an “in-between kind of purgatory position” (stanza 10, line 2). Poetic techniques create an interpretive

representation of faculty writers' individual and collective experience. The composite nature of the poem makes it impossible to rationalize that the few who get stuck or stalled in the quicksand of adversity are personally delinquent, unusually flawed, somehow responsible for the failure of resilience to overcome hardship once and for all. Composite poetry reveals this underacknowledged aspect of resilience; few actually experience it as consistent forward momentum.

Even as many lines of the poem emphasize the relentlessness of adversity, others indicate hope—writers "...imagine Sisyphus is happy" (stanza 3, line 1), notice "the demon has quieted" (stanza 7, line 1); they demonstrate earned insight—"Writing is what makes the pressure/of writing go away" (stanza 5, lines 1-2), and become "...more comfortable in the struggle" (stanza 9, line 1); they demonstrate dogged determination—"I'm going to fail trying" (stanza 11, line 1). Importantly I did not gather these lines at the end of the poem as final statements of resilient fortitude in the face of adversity. Rather, I placed them to run alongside writers' experiences of wallowing in the muck and mire, refrains that respond to but do not resolve the agony expressed in the verses running down the left side of the page. In this way, the poem highlights a recursive relationship between adversity and resilience. Resilience is not necessarily a solution or even a response to adversity, as linear constructions would suggest. Instead, writers hold these forces simultaneously in tension. The composite poetic form allows this seeming paradox to emerge, as the literary/rhetorical technique of call and response contrasts writers' experiences of perpetual adversity with sentiments of grit.

I regularly followed lines that suggest resilience with lines that reiterate ongoing clashes with adversity, resisting the notion of resilience as a happy ending. In the poem, writers describe "...a constant battle" (stanza 6, line 2) of good and evil: "You can do this./ You can't do this" (stanza 6, lines 3-4). They struggle to the point of exhaustion to "...keep... head above water" (stanza 8, line 6), and they "Get stuck in feeling bad" (stanza 8, line 3) as they ponder why others appear more resilient than they feel. Writers fail to take an optimistic view or convince themselves to stay positive; they sit "...exhausted..." (stanza 26, line 1) and full of "...sorrow..." (stanza 26, line 2) and "...heartbrokenness" (stanza 26, line 3). Writers doubt whether the goal is worth the effort to be resilient in the face of such anguish. They wonder, "Do people have to suffer/to live the quality of life they want to lead?" (stanza 14, lines 5-6) and question what it is all for: "My books aren't going to come visit me when I'm old" (stanza 14, line 7). By circling through adversity and resilience, the movement of the poem resists linearity and invites readers to reconsider the relationship between those forces and the agency they have in traversing them. Composite poetry illustrates how faculty writers "navigate, in a multitude of ways, the interface between the positive and the negative aspects of their experiences" (Hutcheon & Lashewicz, 2015, p. 57), allowing "narratives of unevenness, paradox, and contradiction" (Hutcheon & Lashewicz, 2015, p. 56) to emerge in ways that challenge traditional, one-dimensional notions of resilience. Depending on the dominant construct at play, intentional use of particular literary techniques within

the framework of composite poetry to juxtapose the one and the many can bring into question previously taken-for-granted dimensions and create opportunities for critical transformation of the constructs themselves.

Resilience is Discursive

Finally, composite poems expose, in nuanced ways, how dominant constructs and ideologies shape and are shaped by the discourses surrounding the lives and work of writers. The composite poem shared in this chapter suggests that sometimes discursive constructions of resilience are positive and empowering for writers. Building a healthy writing life can inspire important identity work as faculty decide who they want to be as scholars and people (stanza 18). The poem illustrates that writers are able to critically consider how the forces of academic discourse are shaping them for better or for worse. Resilience can come in the form of a reality check: “Get the fuck over yourself./You’re not special” (stanza 18, lines 7-8). These lines showcase writers who are able to get outside of and critique discourses that aren’t serving them in order to be resilient in living out their values. At the same time, the poem emphasizes how discourses of resilience rooted in neoliberal values can negatively shape writers’ self-perceptions. Individualistic constructions of resilience are prevalent in neoliberal climates wherein faculty “are expected to compete and produce” (Stenberg, 2015, p. 7). Such constructions can be damaging when writers, like those in my study, internalize neoliberal constructions of resilience, such as “Good people are people who work hard” (stanza 18, line 2).

My composite poem raises provocative questions about faculty writers’ expressions of resilience given the cultural value of resilience reinforced through neoliberal academic discourse. That many verses focus on experiences of adversity accentuated with flashes of resilience begs the question: Do faculty feel compelled by dominant discourses to find a silver lining in the midst of struggle? Might the prevalence of normative narratives of success coerce them into performing resilience? Do faculty celebrate “Learning how to do life better” (stanza 15, line 1), claim to be “...dislodging the association/between anxiety and writing” (stanza 23, lines 1-2), and admonish themselves to “Just let it be” (stanza 17, line 1) because they’ve been taught to want and expect themselves to be able to? If so, then the need to be and appear resilient, in a traditional sense, may very well be another source of adversity.

In their pursuit of resilience as a “desired good” (Bracke, 2016, p. 53), individuals often develop strategies for embracing and maintaining it, even if it means solidifying the conditions that demand resilience. For example, faculty writers find the resilience to endure the tenure track by believing that things will be better post-tenure. In the poem they say “Tenure has removed....shackles” (stanza 13, lines 1-2). They normalize and resign themselves to torment, they “...have to imagine Sisyphus is happy” (stanza 3, line 1) and “Just need to suffer through it” (stanza 16, line 6). In his study of the role “resilience” plays in the lives and identities of queer youth, Rob Cover (2016) calls this attitude “resilient hopefulness” (p. 358) wherein

the conditions that require resilience are presumed to be “timeless and unchangeable” (p. 359) so that individuals are “only able to find and develop resilience by looking beyond” (p. 358) the adverse circumstances that threaten hopelessness. Because “resilience is structurally linked with the threats against which it is supposed to give shelter,” allowing adverse conditions in the present is necessary for maintaining resilience, which cannot exist without the “disaster or threat” that demands it (Bracke, 2016, p. 59). Resilient hopefulness serves this purpose, thwarting meaningful transformation of oppressive structures and practices that cause inhumane adversity detrimental to individual faculty writers and to the academic enterprise. As seen in my composite poem, faculty feel pressure to show resilience by conforming, submitting to how things are, fitting their “...round peg[s] into that square hole” (stanza 16, line 3).

In a similar vein, my composite poem highlights faculty writers’ experiences of neoliberal discourse in which “resilience turns away from vulnerability” (Bracke, 2016, p. 59), and promotes suffering in silence. In the poem, faculty writers say “writing is such an alone thing” (stanza 10, line 1), a “Physical and mental torment” (stanza 24, line 1) they can never admit. At least one person “Went home and cried,/several times,/by myself” (stanza 26, lines 5-7). Faculty say you have to “Bargain with yourself” (stanza 24, line 2) about how much you can endure in silence. My poem depicts ways in which writers deeply feel, but cannot show vulnerability. Entrenched in neoliberal discourses of resilience, which are exploited and reinforced through academic discourse and culture, faculty writers are resigned to “...suffer through...” (stanza 16, line 6) hardship alone because vulnerability is not an option. My composite poem, however, normalizes vulnerability, puts struggling writers in community with one another—literally as their voices meld on the page, and more abstractly as faculty writers read the poem and see themselves in the collective voice reflected there. When I shared a draft of this chapter with a writer from my study, she responded,

Thank you so much for sharing this with me. I think it is beautiful and brilliant.

It feels like I have been trapped in this isolated prison and discovered an entire building full of other people experiencing the same thing.

I want a simple image with the words “I am fucking doing it ... stitching together my parachute” to hang in my workspace; that is powerful!

The importance of the sense of connection and community, of being seen, that this writer expressed cannot be understated, for according to feminist psychologist and scholar Judith V. Jordan (2004) “it is when we feel most separate from others and from the flow of life that we are at most risk” for exploitation and needless suffering (p. 36). Composite poetry leverages strength in numbers to push back

against problematic discourses; it makes visible shared (or at least resonant) experiences so that writers feel less alone and more empowered to (re)define resilience in ways that work for them. My composite poem shows how faculty writers' notions of resilience are often rooted in "a neoliberal social ontology that revolves around the individual" and ignores "the paralyzing effect that the complexity of our world has on that individual" (Bracke, 2016, p. 72). By crystalizing their experiences, I promote a "politics of resisting resilience" (Bracke, 2016, p. 72). At the same time, the multiple, layered truths illuminated through this method unearth the potential for what I call critical relational resilience (Tarabochia, 2021), wherein vulnerability is validated and encouraged as a rightful, necessary state of human connection integral to healthy resilience. The process of crafting composite poetry enacts those values and reinforces the necessary conditions for the kind of resilience it unearths by honoring vulnerability, inviting relationality, and disrupting the isolation that results from imposter syndrome, self-deprecation, and self-doubt.

As I've shown, creating composite poetry with transcripts from interviews with faculty writers revealed the ways in which resilience is constructed, nonlinear and discursive. Interrogating these qualities and how they function in faculty writers' lives surfaced alternative reconstructions of resilience as recursive, relational, collaborative, and vulnerable. By modeling how composite poetry allowed me to critically engage with the particular theme of resilience that emerged in my research I've shown how the method can foster transferrable critical relational practices needed to challenge and transform many different normative constructs at the heart of stock stories about writers that have long informed problematic beliefs and behaviors.

Occasions that Call for Composite Poetry

In this chapter, I've illustrated how composite poetry can be a promising tool for writing researchers using poetic inquiry to engage with qualitative data. I've described how composite poetry worked in my own research practice, emphasizing all it afforded me as a researcher and writer. Next, I identify several goals and occasions that might call for composite poetry as an approach to poetic inquiry so that researchers can discern when it might be an ideal approach for them. In my experience, composite poetry is particularly valuable when a researcher wants to

- honor distinct lived experience and simultaneously surface resonances among various participants' related experiences of a phenomenon;
- consider the perceptions or experiences of two or more groups of participants clustered around certain dimensions of difference;
- juxtapose messy, conflicting experiences of a common phenomenon so as to disrupt artificially smooth narratives that determine normative standards for writers and writing;
- problematize dominant constructs and ideologies that presume who or what writers should be and what they should strive for;

- disrupt forces that reinforce the status quo by isolating people from one another and encouraging self-blame for hardship that is actually common and often rooted in structural inequity; and
- foster a relationship with readers by communicating resonant emotion and experience.

Anne Sullivan (2009) describes “occasions” for poetry as a way to help potential poetic inquirers determine if the data in front of them calls for poetic rendering. She identifies occasions along six domains: concreteness, voice, emotion, ambiguity, associative logic, and tension. Discovery of these occasions in a set of data could inspire all kinds of poetic representation. Certain *ways* they appear in concert with the purposes listed above could signal the possibility of composite poetry as a particularly suitable approach. In what follows, I elaborate on each occasion and suggest qualities for each that might point toward composite poetry.

According to Sullivan (2009) the domain of concreteness is about embodiment, the senses; “There must be things to see, hear, smell, taste, touch” (p. 112). When data reveals how research participants feel, not just one person but many people, composite poetry can prompt readers to feel along with them. When the words of participants include metaphors that tie abstraction to image in a way that “makes it possible for [readers] to know, in the body,” what the participant experienced, composite poetry can bring those metaphorical meanings to life (Sullivan, 2009, p. 113). Composite poetry says, “I/we see you,” “You are not alone,” “Me/us too.” A provocative example of the power of composite poetry to evoke connection through resonant embodied feeling is the participant in my study who upon reading a draft of my composite poem longed to hang above her desk the words “I am fucking doing it ... stitching together my parachute.” The concrete image of that stitched-together parachute, invoked by the words of another participant, a fellow faculty writer, and communicated in a collective voice, was deeply moving and meaningful for her.

Voice is another occasion for poetic inquiry that calls for the affordances of composite poetry, depending on how it appears in the data. To drive home the power of voice in poetry, Anne Sullivan (2009) quotes premier American poet Mark Strand’s musing that good poems “have a voice and the formation of that voice ... may be the true occasion for their existence” (p. 114). Sullivan (2009) explains that “the human voice, authentic and resonant with emotion and experience, has its own sort of concreteness” (p. 114). In the case of composite poetry, the human voice of individual participants does the work of bringing image, emotion and experience to life, the message made all the more powerful because it is communicated through a collective voice. The echo chamber of multiple voices blending into one amplifies the personal, and transforms emotions or experiences that could be interpreted, even dismissed, as idiosyncratic into a foundation for camaraderie, community, and/or common ground.

Attending to voice through composite poetry can be an alternative to more traditional approaches to qualitative coding focused on identifying themes

across data sets. As with thematic coding, crafting composite poetry involves gathering sentiments that speak to an identified concept, question, or phenomenon—adversity and resilience in the case of the poem featured in this chapter. But rather than abstract the theme from the data and then use illustrative quotes or excerpts to illustrate, composite poetry mines data for nuanced expressions that maintain concreteness and voice, that remain provocative and alive, even as they reverberate with one another and beckon readers to be buoyed by the sound, held by it. The poem IS the research; the poem IS the analysis. Readers are invited to reflect on their own lived experiences and their relationships to the collective voice manifested in the poem. Relationality is centered in composite poetry.

In a similar vein, composite poetry is a valuable tool for normalizing the role of emotion, including negative emotion, for writers and writing lives. Emotion is a particularly important occasion for composite poetry in contexts like academia that privilege the life of the mind wherein emotion is often treated as an inconvenient distraction, a weakness to be managed or overcome. The collectivity of composite poetry allows for emotional vulnerability that may not be possible in other types of poetic inquiry and resists dominant, neoliberal ideologies that pitch vulnerability as weakness. Expressing emotion, “with all its human raggedness and volatile ambiguity” (Sullivan, 2009, p. 119), in the voice of the many rejects common misperceptions that writing is a disembodied independent, cognitive activity and recenters emotion as an essential component for all writers. Composite poetry not only “give[s] access to...emotion” by highlighting the intersecting emotions of others, but also prompts readers to access emotion by remembering their own past experiences of emotion or even to “*hav[e]* an emotional experience through the particulars of the poem” (Sullivan, 2009, p. 118). These affordances make composite poetry an apt choice for accessing human dimensions of writers and writing lives not always centered with other qualitative methods and for inviting readers to directly engage along those dimensions as they interact with the poem. In this way, the poems themselves and the experiences they offer are subversive, making visible and conjuring embodied, emotional experiences that tend to be ignored, hidden, or rejected by the dominant cultures writers inhabit.

Ambiguity is another occasion for composite poetry, as poetic form can honor the messiness of human existence. Although composite poetry offers insight by surfacing resonant emotions and experiences among writers (the collective voice), because composite poetry also honors and distills the uniqueness of particular realities (the words of individual participants), realities that are distinct, even in conflict, composite poetry also leverages the ambiguousness of poetic sense making to represent data that have no clear meaning or interpretation. According to Anne Sullivan (2009), data “rife with ambiguity, open-endedness, paradox, mysteries, unresolved complexity” presents “an occasion for poetry” (p. 119). Moreover, I found composite poetry to be a particularly valuable tool for troubling assumptions that pin mystery, paradox and anomaly to difficult

or struggling writers as indicators of deficit. Sullivan (2009) explains that “in poetry, non-linearity is a source of energy and interest, an asset, generally, rather than a problem” (p. 120). Composite poetry celebrates the presence and value of “unresolved complexity” (Sullivan, 2009, p. 119) at the heart of all writing lives.

Finally, composite poetry is a promising tool when researchers want to crystallize threads we see emerging in a qualitative data set. The need to embrace what Sullivan (2009) calls associative logic is another occasion for composite poetry. As Sullivan (2009) points out, poems often eschew “principles of linear, traditional Western logic” and operate instead “according to a set of complex principles related to web-like relations” (p. 120). Holding “in a close association” this web of connections, creating “a single unity,” is the work of a poem (Sullivan, 2009, p. 120). Composite poems, in particular, leverage the associative logic of poetic invention bringing into relationship sentiments and experiences of individuals that otherwise might remain isolated or be subsumed in an effort to identify common trends. Sometimes, according to Sullivan (2009), associative logic is present in the research material we encounter—“connections, associations, linkages of conscious and unconscious elements, memory and emotion, past, present and future merging in the process of making meaning” (p. 121). Data in which these complexities inhere is ripe for poetic inquiry and composite poetry in particular because poetic form itself honors, maintains, and enacts those very processes. Composite poetry is a fitting response when from the data emerges “a sort of coherence that signals the occasion for a structure that holds together by associative, rather than linear logic” (Sullivan, 2009, p. 122).

According to Sullivan (2009), other occasions—concreteness, voice, emotion, ambiguity—“are all part of the complex architecture of a poem’s associative logic” (p. 122). I’ve suggested here when each occasion might signal the usefulness of composite poetry as a particular tool for poetic inquiry. One more poetic occasion is worth naming in an effort to intuit when qualitative data might call for composite poetry—tension. Sullivan (2009) names a nexus of tensions that might emerge in research material several of which gesture to the unique affordances of composite poetry, including “tensions among the voices of participants or within the contradictions of a single voice”; between “ambiguity and clarity”; “self and other”; “the embodied and the conceptual,” “the personal and the communal”; and “expression and constraint” among others (p. 122). Composite poetry captures and holds these tensions as essential to the poetic experience, an experience that resists “the habit of conclusion,” mirroring instead the “motions of the mind,” the firing of impulses across synapses, “incorporating the honesty and complexity of ambiguity, inviting the reader to construct meaning” (Sullivan, 2009, p. 123). This intuitive methodological (researcher-based), meaning-making (reader-based) process is apt for writing research because it echoes the complexities of writing, writing lives, and writer development.

Composite poetry, as a response to such occasions in qualitative research, functions as a feminist rhetorical practice (Royster & Kirsch, 2012), for it invites

“strategic contemplation” (p. 84), encourages “dialogical viewing and dialectical thinking” as “exploratory tools” for “shaking out features, factors, and details multidimensionally ... in order to clarify the materiality of ideas, arguments, sites, and situations; to see more substantively what features and components are visible, what is cast in shadow, and what may be missing” (p. 89). The effect is to “complicate our sense of reality and relationships, making the nature of the multiplicities clearer and more manageable, rather than trying to simplify or oversimplify them” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 90). Composite poetry engages “strategic contemplation as a critical meditative process” that ensures “levels of understanding function polyphonically and in high definition” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 90). Understanding is not foisted upon readers, but rather coalesces amidst the reverberation of experiences and sentiments, different for each reader and in each reading depending on the forces shaping the acoustics in any given moment. Composite poetry allows us—researchers and readers—to get in close, what Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch (2012) call “tacking in” and to stand back, “tack out,” to “observe, reflect, and meditate” on the “patterns and possibilities that may exist in support of knowledge creation and understanding” (p. 90). The telescopic quality makes composite poetry uniquely able to capture and interrogate nuanced similarities and differences in human experience.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I’ve traced how goals and occasions like those described above led me to composite poetry. Although faculty writers in my study were rooted in different lives and contexts, their depictions of their experiences of and responses to adversity resonated, intersected and built on each other like waves. Through composite poetry, I was able to capture this relationship between individual participants and an amalgamated story; between the one collective voice of the poem and the many readers who may find resonance there; between me as researcher-poet and faculty writer with my own lived experiences and each research participant sharing stories that spoke to me in the data. For me, exploring these relationships led to questions about when, why, for whom and to what effect adversity and (various forms of) resilience are necessary, even valuable, and when, why, and for whom adversity might be needless, dominant notions of resilience damaging and untenable, and the effects of discourses around resilience detrimental. In demonstrating how composite poetry made way for critical questions about the construct of resilience, I hope to prompt writing researchers to notice the constructs operating in their own contexts and consider how crafting composite poems might similarly spark critical inquiry and the interrogation of problematic discursive forces and systems that enable and constrain opportunities for writers.