

## Chapter 2. Poetry Clusters: Constellating Meaning in Writers' Lives

As I've embraced poetic inquiry to study the lived experience of faculty writers, I have found cluster poetry, the construction of "a series or 'cluster' of poems around a theme" to be a "powerful way of expressing a range of subtle nuances about a topic while simultaneously producing a more general overview" of that topic (Butler-Kisber & Stewart, 2009, p. 4). Like composite poems, poetry clusters throw into relief the complex relationship between the uniqueness of individual experiences and connections among experiences had by individuals with shared circumstances. Unlike composite poems, however, in which words of multiple research participants are intermingled without explicit distinction, each poem in a cluster is crafted from the words of a single participant or source text, or is generated by a single researcher. Each individual poem could "stand on its own and provid[e] a specific viewpoint on the experience," but read together they form a cluster that "provides various nuances" that point to different aspects of the experience, allowing "for a more multi-vocal understanding of a phenomenon" (Butler-Kisber & Stewart, 2009, p. 5).

Simultaneity makes cluster poetry uniquely valuable. Clustering inspires "a simultaneous appreciation of experience" that "removes the need to move back and forth from the particular to the general and ... [ultimately] provides a richer understanding of the phenomenon" (Butler-Kisber & Stewart, 2009, p. 4). Each poem depicts the concrete materiality of a lived experience, inviting "an up-close and granular reading of a theme" (Butler-Kisber & Stewart, 2009, p. 4); when compiled, the separate, sometimes even contradictory poems, offer a wider view, a more general reading of a theme or phenomenon without obscuring or smoothing out differences. In this way, cluster poetry allows researchers to counter the hegemony of traditional approaches and renditions by conveying a messy, agonizingly real, incongruous kind of "truth" while concomitantly discovering "something more" in their research—"the revelation" of dimensions of a theme or phenomenon "that might not otherwise be revealed" (Butler-Kisber & Stewart, 2009, p. 4; see also Faulkner, 2020). By honoring the partiality, the tentativeness of individual perceptions and experiences, poetry clusters elucidate "the subtle variations of a phenomenon" and create "a prism-like rendition" that is powerful and compelling, whole if not complete (Butler-Kisber, 2012, p. 166). Of the questions poetic inquiry invites researchers to embrace, cluster poetry is ideal for those compelled by the following:

- How can I more fully honor the nuance of participants' lived experience?
- How do I stay accountable to those experiences traditional research tools are most likely to miss or flatten?

- How might I orient to my work not as an objective analyst but as a “vulnerable observer” (Behar, 1996) immersed in the process?
- How can my research directly challenge and begin to transform structures and systems that privilege certain bodyminds (Price, 2015) over others?
- How can I honor and draw forth my work from the rich historical roots of theories of the flesh, forged by women of color to theorize from physical realities and embodied experience?

In pursuit of such questions, poetry clusters can be used to represent data and analyze data, to present the poetically interpreted and arranged words of participants to readers, and to use scholarship and experience in the process of making sense of qualitative data. Clusters can consist of found poems created from interview transcripts, found poems using words from published literature, or generated poems—original, often autobiographical poems crafted from researchers’ own words as they work to understand their own and others’ experiences (Butler-Kisber, 2012; Butler-Kisber & Stewart, 2009; Faulkner, 2020). Poems in a series can be crafted by one or multiple poets, say members of a research team, and they can come from one or several different source texts, different pieces of published literature or transcripts from interviews with different study participants.

For example, to try to understand what life is like for young people coming to terms with sex and gender differences, Kristopher Wells (2004), created a cluster of found poetry crafted from interviews with four queer youth about their experiences in school. Wells’ total of twelve poems consists of clusters of several (between two and four) poems crafted from interviews with each participant. Each poem renders an aspect of life from the perspective of a particular young person “on a personal, temporal and evocative level” (Wells, 2004, p. 8). Sets of poems crafted from words of the same participant combine to depict multiple dimensions of their lived experience. Taken together, the series of poems “serve[s] as a map that explores the ways in which Queer youth navigate, resist, reclaim, and make use of the available discourses that surround them to construct and challenge representations of their everyday realities” (Wells, 2004, p. 8).

In a similar vein, Elizabeth J. Meyer (2008) created “identity poems” from the transcripts of secondary teachers reflecting on their experiences and perceptions of bullying in school. She interviewed three teachers three times and used the sets of transcripts to create a narrative profile for each teacher. Meyer (2008) then composed a found poem from each profile, creating a portrait of each individual that offered a “brief, yet emotionally powerful representation of the internal influences that shaped a teacher’s daily actions and choices” (Meyer, 2008, p. 202). Arranged in a series, the separate identity poems demonstrate the influence of personal identities and educational biographies in shaping perceptions and actions and make visible shared phenomenon such as how the experience of feeling marginalized due to minoritized identities motivated action against discriminatory behavior (Meyer, 2008).

Whereas Wells (2004) and Meyer (2008) created poetry clusters with found poems crafted from interview transcripts, Butler-Kisber & Stewart (2009) model the power of clustering with generated poetry (Butler-Kisber, 2012). Their cluster on “Death and Dying” consists of poems written by each of them during times when they were grieving the loss of loved ones (Butler-Kisber & Stewart, 2009). Each poem on its own offers a reflection on the experience of dying rooted in the particularities of a lived experience. Read as whole, however, the cluster “provides various nuances that point vividly to the mundane aspects of dying, [and] the inevitable interconnectedness between living and dying” among other insights (Butler-Kisber & Stewart, 2009, p. 5). Their work shows how clusters generated by two or more poets can create “a more multi-vocal understanding of a phenomenon” (Butler-Kisber & Stewart, 2009, p. 5). Generated cluster poetry can also be single-authored, as with Butler-Kisber’s series “School Days” in which each poem re-creates particular memories from elementary school and high school (Butler-Kisber & Stewart, 2009). As a whole, the cluster “speaks to the multi-layered...cumulative effects” of schooling that often go unnoticed, without eliding the nuances of specific experiences (Butler-Kisber & Stewart, 2009, p. 5).

Prendergast (2006) demonstrates a third type of poetry cluster, one using found poems crafted from published scholarship rather than interview transcripts. She created found poetry from theoretical literature on contemporary continental philosophy and performance theory and used the arranged “suite” of “literature-voiced research poems” to distill her secondary research as part of the literature review for her doctoral dissertation (Prendergast, 2006, p. 369). She applies an approach similar to the one used to create found research poems from participant data, “intuitively sorting out words, phrases, sentences, and passages that synthesize meaning,” in this case from published prose, “in the light of a particular research question” (Prendergast, 2006, p. 370). The process of creating this kind of cluster poem engages and represents the poet’s sense-making processes; it is “reflexive in that the researcher is interconnected with the researched,” in this case secondary research, and in that “the researcher’s own affective response to the process informs it” (Prendergast, 2006, p. 370). All of the words in Prendergast’s (2006) poems can be found in the original source text, which she cites, though she plays with line breaks, arrangement of words on the page, parentheses and repetition “in an attempt to capture a number of different, and valuable, voices and theoretical perspectives” (p. 372). No matter the version, cluster poetry shines as a type of poetic inquiry that invites researchers to focus on a central topic or theme, weaving in, around, and through a main idea from various perspectives.

In what follows, I use a blend of these approaches to demonstrate the value of cluster poetry for studying and representing the lived experience of writers. As is typical of cluster poetry, my series explores a particular theme: academic motherhood. In the following section, I explain how that theme emerged and how the

series featured in this chapter seeks to engage it. My poetry cluster includes found poems from the transcripts of several participants in my study; generated poems written in my own words as I reflected on the stories faculty writers shared with me and pondered my own writing life; and found poems crafted from published literature created as I engaged with secondary research as a way to put the lived experience of faculty writers (my own and those of study participants) in conversation with extant theories and scholarship.

In creating, weaving, and juxtaposing poems in the series, I remained cognizant of my positionality as a cisgender, enabled, middle-class, white settler mother with access to higher education, reckoning again and again with the reality that, as Renata Harden Ferdinand (2022) puts it, “my motherhood is stained with privilege” (p. 141). Taking my cue from Kimberly Wieser-Weryackwe and colleagues (2023) I realize that my “choices regarding identification and dissociation, what is worth saying and what is not, have major consequences in terms of who is seen as worthy of inclusion, attention, care, and respect and whose positionalities, perspectives, and participation receive space, resources, and esteem” (p. 10). Thus, even as I craved resonance and camaraderie with other mothers navigating shared challenges of academic motherhood, I actively sought out divergence and difference across a range of dimensions and lived experiences. The transcripts and published scholarship I drew on became more than source texts for found poetry; they infused the method itself, prompting recursive engagement with stories from participants in my study and from published scholarship, inspiring reflexive self-generated poems, shaping the arrangement of poems in the cluster, and sparking unexpected interpretations. By reflecting on my process of creating cluster poetry to explore and represent a resonant theme from my research, I hope to inspire readers to imagine instances in their own research that might call for this particular poetic method and model one approach for embracing those opportunities.

## Clustering Around Academic Motherhood

My son was born in May 2009 near the end of my fourth year in my doctoral program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. I was writing my dissertation, and I remember oscillating between feeling crushed beneath the enormity of tackling two high stakes challenges—new motherhood and finishing my PhD—and feeling grateful for the perspective their juxtaposition offered. When I couldn’t think anymore, when I felt unintelligent, inherently incapable of producing a book-length piece of scholarship, I lingered over mothering tasks, marveled at the tender magic of breast feeding, gazed in awe at tiny slippery limbs in the bath, the rise and fall of my son’s chest, delicate fluttering of his eye lashes while he slept. And when I was completely overwhelmed by the all-encompassing responsibility of mothering, when I found myself sobbing alongside my screaming infant who did not want to eat, sweaty, milk-stained shirt clinging to my aching breasts,

feeling inept in every way, I reveled in my time at the computer, grappling with theory, working through interview data, playing with text on the page.

Gabe turned two the year I accepted my first (and current) tenure-track faculty position in Oklahoma. I remember licking frosting from my lips and fingers sticky red icing from the Elmo cake we'd devoured for his birthday breakfast as my partner and I kissed him goodbye, thanked grandma for flying in, and drove from Nebraska to Oklahoma to find a place to live. I was the only woman faculty member with small children in my new department, and while my colleagues graciously welcomed me and my family, mothering on the tenure track was a lonely experience that often felt fractured and fraught. Now, as I write this, my second book, the one required for promotion to full professor, Gabe is 14 and navigating his first year in high school. Playing chauffeur to an active teenager could be a full time job. We struggle to protect one or two family dinners a week, and my partner and I often have little contact beyond an encouraging fist bump as we pass each other between chores or hand off our teen between activities.

All this to say, "mother" and "academic" have always been closely adjacent if not intimately connected identities for me. Processing revise and resubmit feedback from journal reviewers from the sidelines of a soccer game, writing the proposal for this book in the bleachers at a summer sports camp—writing and mothering, as much as they feel in conflict, even irreconcilable at times, are inextricable for me. It makes sense, then, that when faculty writers in my study shared experiences about parenting, especially mothering, as academics, their stories resonated with me in deeply moving, often visceral ways. They provoked and inspired me, made me laugh, cry, feel proud of my decisions and achievements, and doubt myself and my choices. When "dual pandemics" of COVID-19 and increased attention to systemic racial injustice (Yeh et al., 2022), created unique challenges for parents, especially mothers, in academia, we commiserated, consoled, reassured, delighted, heartened one another. We raged together about social and structural inequities that were not new but seemed in some cases more widely visible and intense.

I craved an intellectual, creative, human space to process the stories of mothering that emerged in my study and to reflect on who I was as a mother and a scholar in relation to my unfolding work. Cluster poetry offered an ideal method for the reflexive, relational, epistemological, ontological work I longed for. I wrote found poems from sections of transcripts describing experiences of mothering. I also generated poems using my own words to express my understanding of my own and others' experiences with academic motherhood and "to explore and reflect upon research memories, roles and assumptions" (Butler-Kisber & Stewart, 2009, p. 4). Some of the poems I generated were composed in the context of meeting with a group of people who identified as academic mothers at my institution, a group I co-founded with a colleague in a leadership position in diversity, equity, and inclusion.

My experience in that group surely impacted my engagement with stories about mothering from faculty writers in my study, so I'll say a bit more about it here. Our group represented a range of intersectional identities, axes of difference (including age, race, family structure), and institutional positions (a teaching professor, research professor, program administrator, department chair, and central administrator). We had children ranging from toddlers to teenagers, which allowed for rich conversation and reflection, and for openly addressing fears and hopes for the future. The differences and similarities in our lived experiences cultivated an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1989, 2015), and prompted me to reflect critically on my unique positionality and the privileges it affords, particularly in terms of whiteness, ableism, and heteronormativity. We met biweekly for several semesters to share our experiences, successes, worries, questions, and frustrations as both mothers and scholars living and working in spaces that tend to devalue one or the other identity. Our group became "a consistent organic space to evaluate, reconsider, interrogate, and revise motherfull decisions and experiences" (Howard et al, 2023, p. 596). Topics of conversation included race/racism, gender identity, sexual identity, ableism/disability, interracial co-parenting, religion and spiritual understanding, and mothering our children in light of their evolving identities. Our collaboration led to two presentations at the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education (NCORE) and an article in progress. A central theme of our work was to grapple with and begin to establish our own definition of what Joy Howard and colleagues (2023) call "motherscholaring" and consider what it could mean for us, individually and collectively, to lean into the identity of motherscholar<sup>13</sup> in our local context.

As part of my work with this group and in the process of putting into conversation found poems from interviews with writers in my study and generated poems reflecting on my own experience of academic motherhood, I have sought out published scholarship about mothering and motherscholaring in the field of rhetoric and composition and beyond. Thus, I include found poems composed from literature discovered through secondary research as a way to consider how published narratives and existing theories resonate (or not) with my experience and the stories of this particular group of faculty writers. By clustering these types of poems—found research poems, generated poems and literature-voiced poems—I begin to capture the "radical specificity" (Sotirin, 2010) of motherscholaring (Howard et al., 2023).

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13. I chose motherscholaring as the theme for this poetry series because of the centrality of the concept to the group I was a part of. We wrestled with the potential for exclusion involved with choosing "mother" instead of parent or caregiver but ultimately decided to stick with "mother" because it gestured toward particular histories, locations and experiences for us and others who might identify with the term/identity. Howard et al. (2023) likewise describe the significance of the term for their collective "soulwork" (p. 596) even as they acknowledge the work and experiences of other "parentscholars," including those who identify as "Other-mothers and fathers" (p. 608).

## Clustering Poems to Capture the Radical Specificity of Motherscholaring

Poetry clusters can be constructed around almost any theme—death and dying (Butler-Kisber & Stewart, 2009), school experiences (Butler-Kisber & Stewart, 2009; Wells, 2004), bullying (Meyer, 2008); scholarly concepts and theories (Prendergast, 2006), family stories (Faulkner, 2014), etc. The value is in the way clustering individual poems honors nuance, including tension and conflict, as it creates a multidimensional, multivoiced exploration of a topic or phenomenon. As I show in this chapter, the affordances of cluster poetry are particularly apt for honoring what Patricia Sotirin (2010) calls “radical specificity”—the ungeneralizable intimacy and intensity of sensations, events, emotions and relations—of motherscholaring (Howard et al., 2023).

According to Joy Howard, Kindel Nash, and Candace Thompson (2023), Cheryl Matias coined the term motherscholar in 2011 to describe “the inseparable identities of being both mother and scholar, both-and not either-or” (Matias, 2011, as cited in Howard et al., 2023, p. 591). Extending the initial definition, they understand motherscholaring “as a mode of intellectual and spiritual travel, soulwork, epistemologically rooted in love, occurring at the intersections of personal and professional theories, research, and practices that move toward social justice” (Howard et al., 2023, p. 591). Whether or not they use the term, others have critically explored the simultaneity and liminality of mothering and scholaring as well. For example, in her Black, feminist autoethnography, Renata Harden Ferdinand (2022) weaves narrative storytelling, critical self-reflection, theory, and scholarship to tell her story as a Black mother and academic—a story, in her words, “of living, of surviving, of falling down, of standing up, of giving up, of struggling, of keeping the faith, of crying, of laughing, of remembering, of forgetting, of coping, of teaching, of learning, of growing” (p. 140). For her autoethnography provided a means to engage the messiness of Black motherhood in ways the “good girl,” smart student, rule-following expectations of academia didn’t always honor or allow. With experiences of Black mothers largely absent from mainstream texts and even published scholarship in academic studies of motherhood, Ferdinand wrote the book she craved.

Relatedly, in *The Chicana M(other)work Anthology* (2019), editors Cecilia Caballero, Yvette Martínez-Vu, Judith Pérez-Torres, Michelle Téllez, Christine X. Vega, and Ana Castillo collect “research, *testimonios*, and essays about Chicana and other Women of Color (WOC) mothering” (p. 3) as a “call to action for justice within and outside academia” (p. 6). Borrowing the term “motherwork” from Patricia Hill Collins (2000), they use parenthesis to gesture toward what they call “layered care work” (p. 5), a form of self and communal care that moves across contexts, relationships, and time. M(other)work unfolds across the collection with various points of focus, including migration, state violence, reproductive

justice, pregnancy, and loss. Several contributors theorize and enact “motherscholaring” in particular as it occurs in academic contexts.

In “Mothering the Academy: An Intersectional Approach to Deconstruct and Expose the Experiences of Mother-Scholars of Color in Higher Education,” four doctoral students of Guatemalan, Indian, Iranian, and Mexican origins, highlight how agency and empowerment emerged from what they call “Mother-Scholar overlap (MSO),” a generative cojoining of mother and scholar identities that enriches (non)academic spaces mother-scholars of color inhabit (Hernández-Johnson, et al. 2019, p. 129). Likewise focused on experiences of student-parents, Nora Cisneros and colleagues (2019) describe grassroots efforts of Mothers of Color in Academia (MOCA) to challenge exclusionary practices through “fierce mothering” (p. 289) a framework inspired by Grace Gámez (2015) and concepts of Chicana feminist praxis (Delgado Bernal et al., 2006). In a slightly different vein, Alma Itzé Flores (2019) draws on findings from her study of daughters—Chicana first-generation college students raised in Latinx working-class communities in Los Angeles—and their immigrant mothers—who had little formal education but were integral in their high-achieving daughters’ education—to theorize a “Chicana mother-daughter spiritual praxis” (p. 196) that supports advanced educational achievements.

These examples demonstrate how vast experiences of motherwork and motherscholaring intersect and diverge within and across a diverse range of contexts. Cluster poetry is well suited for capturing the rich overlaps and vital differences because as Howard et al. (2023) explain theory and methodology are intertwined: poetic inquiry and motherscholaring can be viewed as both noun (idea, form, material examples of living theory) and verb (action, process, doing through embodied experience). My use of cluster poetry to reflexively probe motherscholaring as a living theory and embodied process is inspired by their collaborative autoethnographic poetic inquiry through which they embrace collective storytelling, honor researchers’ voice(s) and experiences, and seek to humanize research, “blur[ring] the lines between researcher and researched” (Howard et al., 2023, p. 601). Blending autoethnographic and multivocal elements, cluster poetry enables me as a researcher to inhabit the vulnerable space necessary to study my own lived experience of motherscholaring—to “bare heart and soul, skin and bone”—and to “expres[s] and authentically represent[t] multiple meanings and complex ways of being, acting, and experiencing the world” (Howard et al., 2023, p. 603). A vital alternative to traditional academic research methods and writing conventions that may never capture “adequately or accurately” (Howard et al., 2023, p. 604) the complexity of “love, joy, pain, rage, anger, dissonance, change, shame, and discomfort” (p. 602), cluster poetry is ideal for engaging a phenomenon like motherscholaring, that is both achingly personal and widely experienced.

Working across specificities and distinctions, cluster poetry begets what Patty Sotirin (2010) citing philosopher Elizabeth Grosz calls “*radical specificity* of lived experience, ‘the plethora of sensations, vibrations, movements, and intensities

that constitute both our world and ourselves” (p. 2). In “Autoethnographic Mother-Writing: Advocating Radical Specificity,” Sotirin (2010) makes a distinction between autoethnographic practice and autobiographical writing that is useful for understanding the concept of radical specificity. According to Sotirin (2010), while autobiographical memoirs focused on motherhood honor difference “as a way of representing a shared condition or nature,” autoethnographic mother-writing should “confront us not with what is recognizable about another’s experiences but with the specificity of experience itself” (p. 8). Instead of evoking “empathy” or “cultural insight” around what we know, for example “the shared angst of momhood,” autoethnographic mother-writing should offer “a lived narrative that doesn’t come with an automatic sense of what its significance might be” (Sotirin, 2010, p. 8). The goal is to provoke readers with “the *radical specificity* of living a life, not in the sense that we all live our own lives but in the sense that life is lived in the flows, multiplicities, and provisionality of each moment, event, emotion” (Sotirin, 2010, p. 8). It’s about resonance across difference.

Following Deleuze, Sotirin (2010) explains that radical specificity shifts away from “the relation between ‘this’ moment in its generalizable features with other such moments toward a sense of ‘thisness’ that retains its specificity” (p. 9). Ferdinand (2022) aims for radical specificity when she draws on her situated, individual experience of mothering as a Black academic to surface struggles common to Black women/motherhood without claiming to speak for all Black mothers. Relatedly, Danielle M. Stern’s (2020) embodied autoethnography examining “the debt of heteronormativity” illustrates radical specificity as a reflexive moment of reckoning that emerges from a research process focused on the particularity of lived experience and committed to “queer, open, fluid, mobile forms that reveal the joy in the messiness and possibility” (p. 109). Thus, radical specificity is not about representing shared nor distinctive experiences but, more rhizomatically, about “movement of senses and perceptions” that surface and inspire “lines of flight that do not converge upon shared passions or pain but that disrupt or disregard ready commonalities and assumed connections” and lead to new ways of thinking, researching, surviving, and resisting (Sotirin, 2010, p. 10). In the case of my project, cluster poetry evokes radical specificity by refusing to collapse motherscholaring into “something shared and understandable”; it eschews “reassurances of comprehensibility and transparency” in order to be “begin to think differently about what we know and what we might become” (Sotirin, 2010, p. 8). My poetry cluster circles around the “thisness” of motherscholaring in ways that provoke reflection and connection across difference.

Poetry clusters are well suited for inviting researchers and readers alike to lean into radical specificity because they invite engagement with what can never be communicated fully or directly. Reflecting on the first comprehensive anthology of Native poetry, editor Joy Harjo, the first Native American (Muscogee Nation) poet to be named Poet Laureate of the United States, marveled at what poetry can do in this regard: “Poetry can hold grief so immense that there’s nothing else [that] can contain it; poetry can hold stories that are dense or unspeakable;

poetry can hold joy and awe; poetry can hold the contradictory parts of ourselves . . . . Sometimes three or four little lines can hold a whole lifetime” (cited in D’isa, 2020). Cluster poetry holds in relation many poems that become immense, dense, radically specific fragments and invites us to revel in the silences, spaces, gaps, abstractions and associative meanings—both within and across poems—to look beyond familiar scenes and “empathic resonances,” to resist assumptions about “common grounds or conditions,” in my case those underlying mothering in academia (Sotirin, 2010, p. 11). It is this capacity to illuminate infinite facets of what can never be fully known, to push beyond empathy and the complacency that comes with resting on common ground, that draws me to cluster poetry.

The move to resist the “maternal . . . humane impulse” (Sotirin, 2010, p. 11) to understand how others feel and feel understood ourselves can be a radical act. Sotirin (2010) suggests that to privilege understanding is to “repress what cannot be known or said about [a] particular experience, event, or life in favor of what can be shared, communicated, and held in common,” and thus to stifle “the opportunity to think beyond the dominant, the familiar, and the common” (p. 11). By conjuring the radical specificity of motherscholaring, my poetry cluster seeks to deconstruct dominant narratives, emotional “truths,” and common critiques that characterize familiar stories of mothering in academia. My hope is that it entices readers to join me in critiquing the “banal ways we engage the world,” so that we might relinquish our conditioned assumption that life is “comprehensible, perceptible, amenable to representation, and conducive to our own purposes and projects” (Sotirin, 2010, p. 12) and consider new lines of flight and flow, new ways of seeing and being in the world.

The poems in the following cluster have many different sources. Some are author generated, written in my own words as a way to reflect on my experience of mothering as a scholar. Others are found poems crafted from interview transcripts as I worked to capture and understand my study participants’ different experiences of mothering (or not) and scholaring. Still other poems are found poems crafted from published work, as I intentionally searched for diverse experiences of mothering within and beyond the academy. One poem was written by my son, Gabe, included with his permission. I include a note about the source text after each poem to honor and emphasize the range of voices and experiences represented here. I decided to significantly indent the attributions so that they are accessible for readers without disrupting a holistic reading of the poems as a cluster.

## [Hurt-Heal-Rage-] Write Like a Mother: A Poetic Cluster

### Unfold *Only* in the Sharing

Abundance of life’s stories within us  
myriad of . . . people, identities, places,

experiences carefully crafted  
open so beautifully the inner  
landscape of an academic life.

– From Cynthia B. Dillard (2006)

### **Hobbling Along**

I'm a writer who is hobbling along,  
trying to do what I can in the pockets of energy  
I can muster. I'm a writer who's trying to  
meet her commitments  
make *enough* commitments  
that writing gets done.

I'm a writer who wants to write ... but right now?  
I'm a writer who is afraid, as I feel ... just now ...  
giant baby movement.  
Less than two weeks out.

– From Betty's 2021 interview transcript

### **How to Make a Tenure Case**

Stand there answering  
bullshit questions feel  
the breast milk drip  
down get back  
to the baby run  
home and wait—  
lactating still  
bleeding—  
for the results.

– From Victoria's 2019 interview transcript

### **On The Front Lines**

Mothering is love  
by any means necessary.

Mamas on the margins  
punk mamas in the valleys.

Breast-fed in ripped t-shirts  
leather cuffs, purples/blue/green hair.

Palestinian mothers, toddlers hiding  
listened quietly to military bombing.  
Congolese mothers, rape survivors.  
Teenage Black mamas fought for  
the right to give birth.

Sudanese refugee mamas in crumbling  
ghettos, waiting for a new life.  
Egyptian mama “Day of Rage” one  
child on shoulder, other by the hand  
faced down tear gas, water cannons.

In this life of exile  
revolution and mamas  
feed my life.

– From Loretta J. Ross (2016)

### Kids Welcome

First faculty position, warm invitation  
Drinks at 8, heavy hors d'oeuvres  
Two-year-old glee on the edge of  
passed-bedtime bliss exhaustion  
Crystal coffee table holds tiered truffles  
delicate puffed pastries, tea lights aglow  
Aghast, gasping, *don't touch, don't run, wait, stop*  
Sliding glass door, open, summer breeze sweeps  
across...the swimming pool (!), roiling in the Oklahoma wind  
cactus plants squat lazily, treacherous waders waiting

– Author-generated poem

### For G

There is a poem in this place.  
Open-faced eyes over easy  
downy-soft wisps of toddler

blonde, Velcro shoes and  
 snap-up overalls. Always an  
 arm clinging, protective  
 hand in the frame, holding  
 you up. Smile, don't slip.

There is a poem in this place.  
 Good-natured grin, goofy  
 o-shaped lips, tough-guy tongue,  
 backwards ball cap, tie-dye tee,  
 signature Adidas jacket and  
 mismatched socks.

Remember, running  
 through the rain, ice cream  
 cones drenched and drooping,  
 dropping, plopping into  
 puddles as we dashed,  
 laughing, for cover,  
 for home.

– Author-generated poem

### **Default Option**

Settled into stable domesticity  
 by the time I turned 36: married, job,  
 two-bedroom house, quiet street,  
 college town, orange tabby named Woody.

Marital tradition pulling, nagging  
 for offspring, for routine.  
 No plan to have human children.

Friends ask, whispered speculations, vivid  
 descriptions of non-existent [offspring].  
 Incongruous: responsible, nurturing  
 woman has chosen not to be mother.

Society finds me illegible,  
 grown woman, not

mother pitied until, *gasp*,  
she becomes                    incomprehensible.

*Why would you—? Why wouldn't you—?  
You'll eventually want to...*

– From study participant Julie's  
unpublished essay *Cat Abortion*

### **Indulgence**

I was supposed to:  
wake up  
kids to school,  
coffee, a run,  
sit down and write  
couple thousand words,  
a bubble bath...

Tired so tired.  
Every imaginable way:  
physically  
emotionally  
spiritually.

Took a nap the other day.  
I was sick. Basic human need  
treated like indulgence.

– From Elizabeth's 2021 interview transcript

### **Spectacular Bodies**

Silence, endemic embers ravenous,  
consumptive “institutional polishing.”\*  
What happens when our bodies  
GET LOUD, so to speak? Story  
opens a widow ushering in  
a gush of fresh air.

Survivor's guilt from brutal market  
encasing of one fruit and flesh of another.

Accumulation of racist acts *head down*  
*lie low*, silent in the face of power.  
 Fine line visible but unheard, marked  
 different but conform.

Fear of becoming unsightly spectacle,  
 cannot trust power to defend the vulnerable.  
 Make this a public fight to reclaim personhood  
 in the midst of laborious tumult, a miscarriage.  
 Afraid to publicly mourn “heavy period”  
 What agony...

A mother’s failure, toll on a mother’s body.  
 Life could not be bracketed, broke down  
 into tears neither mask nor disclose my  
 world shrank. Blurred body is not a neutral  
 vessel controlled, sanitized, tamed  
 mother to be mother in mourning both.

Spectacular bodies labo[r] forth.

– From Julia H. Chang (2016)

\*Sarah Ahmed (2017) cited in Chang

### First day of 7th grade

Quick rolling-to-the-curb kiss, up the path  
 loping cool-kid strut atop signature mismatched socks.  
 Untethered, he floats further and further.  
 He hides, rolls his eyes, preteen (re)version of the terrible twos,  
 leaping, bounding, becoming a man and it breaks my heart,  
 my concentration, like endless questions from the teeny voice  
 in the backseat driving me mad, desperate for silence  
 to rest, to think. Now longing to cling, to clutch, inhale him.

Have I squandered it, the closeness, with my choices? Dis-tractions.  
 Dissertating baby! Mommy’s working, writing.  
 Dr.’s bathing, rocking, changing, pinning  
 my identity, where? Resigned to live with longing...  
 Honk! Blink. Pull away from the dawdling serpent

of cars, crawling, ripping  
the chord like Velcro on kindergarten kicks.  
He doesn't look back.

– Author-generated poem

### Keep a Family Running

I should have written today; I didn't.  
I feel guilty but I was running errands,  
folding laundry, all these things...  
  
Last night, not a pair of underwear in sight.  
Go to the laundry, get the basket, search.  
In the very bottom. One pair. So...  
  
I feel bad. I did not write today.  
There were other things.

– From Elizabeth's 2021 interview transcript

### To Become a Target

Not interested in access,  
membership in this cultural disaster.  
I know a black hole behind a country-club  
façade when I see one.

– From Ariel Gore (2016)

### But Who's the Real Mother[scholar]?

Only one? Brown hair, long fingers.  
*You* hold, *you* comfort, blur me out  
so you can be seen.  
  
There can be two Moms.  
Our family is two Moms.  
If I die, she stays with her Mom.  
  
But, it gets better (lol, classic gay).  
Finally marry, ~~being able~~ having  
to adopt her own kid.

Still see soft edges, more detail,  
 more definition now. She  
 less of a mother?

Do I count? She is *the real*  
 scholar—PhD, publications, title.  
 Shit. Did I just ask  
 “But who is *the real* motherscholar”?

– Remix of a poem a friend/colleague  
 from the motherscholar group wrote for  
 our 2022 NCORE presentation

### A Mother's Work

Be a good mother, that's all—like Skywoman  
 maybe, cobbled together tree forts  
 in the maples, fixing the pond for my kids.

Skimming? Useless. Addressing only symptoms  
 of scum, dredge up muck, cart it away  
 like trying to catch wind in a butterfly net.

A good mother does not drown, driven by  
 a motherly urge to make a swimmable  
 pond raker, tadpole plucker, mesh of algae.

Predaceous diving beetles, sharp black mandibles,  
 small fish, dragonfly larvae, teeming with  
 copepods, daphnia, whirling rotifers.

A theoretical matter? True. Practical level? Murky.  
 Spiritual and pragmatic bumping heads,  
 beautiful nest, cup woven sweetly, marvel:

Homemaking. What does a good mother do?  
 Life adds up, eutrophic. Disintegrate to  
 set them free, fabric rewoven?

Balance is not a passive resting place, giving  
 taking, raking out, putting in,  
 skating in winter,  
 peepers in spring  
 summer sunbathing

autumn bonfires  
hours stretched into years, lives  
entwined.

Changing roles of women spiral through phases,  
life like changing face of the moon circle,  
wider than our own, sphere beyond.

Little pond spill over, caregiving other waters  
everybody lives down stream—  
brook, creek, needful lake.

Shed tears, good mother, creat[e] a home  
where life's beings can flourish  
grandchildren  
frog children  
nestlings  
goslings  
seedlings  
spores.

– From Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013)

**Hallmark of Black Academics**

A Black woman in negotiations  
elderly dependent, not just me  
anymore, bachelorette pad  
secure place, Mom,  
adamant about that.

Jim Crow ethos, white folks  
straight up see an  
uppity negro,  
how dare you,  
uppity negro ask for  
what you are worth? Mom

moving in today from  
today on  
together.

– From Sadie's 2021 transcript

### Spiritual Strivings

feminist and artistic  
 spirituality as transformational  
 possibility in academic life

live and work in contexts dominated by  
 western-white-male-capitalistic-hegemony  
 hope attune to mind, spiritual reservoirs  
 transform these lives into tools of service  
 for life itself.

– From Cynthia B. Dillard (2006)

### Lost Illusions

I could do *all* the projects  
 So much time. Pursue all these seeds...  
 No illusions anymore.

Pandemic. Pregnant. Twins and a toddler.  
 Not a complaint. Just a reality.  
 A lovely reality. Also, I'm terrified.

Don't have tenure, about to have  
 three kids under two. If I had  
 time and energy and space

I could do it.  
 Hard time remembering  
 last time I had energy.  
 And it's on a clock. *If*  
 it's gonna happen,  
 it's gonna happen  
 when I have little kids.

We need me to keep my job. Also  
 sense of self. Worked really hard  
 for a really long time. For that  
 not to work out crushing.

– From Betty's 2021 transcript

**Vision of a Mama**

fist in the air  
baby on your back  
climb mountains  
paint murals

– Loretta J. Ross (2016)

**Write Bold**

Working mother, pandemic,  
things to say, [no] time to write them.

Had a baby  
cookingcleaninglaundry  
just so much  
writing pushed to the side.

Raw, wrong to complain.

I chose this **Write bold.**

Imposter Syndrome? Always.

Virus-triggered relapse.

I hear: *I've written so much!*  
*Unexpected sabbatical!*

How lovely for you,  
surging ahead.

Just ~~trying~~ to keep  
everybody alive and sane  
doesn't even...

– From Elizabeth's 2021 interview transcript

**Birth Song**

January. Pregnant. Eighteen.  
Gramma cried. *Not you.* Almost  
not a teen (mother).

Pregnancy harrowing emotionally  
devastating, single mother suspended

reality floating time of pain, torment  
wonder. Gramma died, paths crossed  
to and from existence.

Space to nest, to hide, to heal. Queer  
cousin and strong womanist friends.  
Big lecture halls even bigger belly  
waddled, swollen fear, pity, disgust.  
*Malcriado.*

Trickle by trickle women arrived.  
Prayer, song, energy, relief. Power  
and endurance and love born  
baby girl empowered blessed.  
New momma with a love and  
a vision.

– From Aja Y. Martinez (2020)

### **Three Blows**

April, my father, process of passing, died,  
pandemic, back to bury him. Son diagnosed,  
communication disorder, hard for somebody  
whose trade is language.

Crying all the time, not functional, looked  
around and realized I need help. Over the edge,  
not thinking rationally anymore.  
Pretty dark months.

Breakdown, couldn't stop screaming,  
crying. Kids at school, but not good,  
always been able to trust my brain.  
Still a rut in my head.

At the same time, started job as Chair.  
Directing program, making curriculum.  
Too much. Rough year. Well shit.  
Mid-career.

And in the midst husband horrifically depressed.  
Sitting, staring at the wall, crying. Bad.  
Stiff upper lip, don't ask for help. Physically  
bring him to psychiatrist, cash only.

Homeschooling the kids. First grade,  
algebra, Pythagorean theorem, finished  
Harry Potter, 7 year[s] old. I did that.  
Five hours a day, reading, talking, working.

Mental and emotional energy researching  
how to help them. Dealing with graduate  
students' mental health. Drowning.  
Who uses other hands to write.

– From Victoria's 2022 interview transcript

### **Mothers on Mute**

Muted, sidelined. All the same  
mind racing, inequities visible  
to all but those who choose  
to stay blind. Writing ever more  
urgent oppressive compulsion  
to have domestic chores done  
before she sits to write, effective  
way to steal her voice.

Brought to my knees.  
How many dishes?  
How much laundry? And  
So. Much. Clutter.  
Disorder of home  
disorder of thoughts linked.  
Like pins in a doll, I clean  
taming my cluttered mind.

Writing: font of liberation.  
Pandemic left me so parched  
I will guzzle any water I find.

Day in and day out, unheard.

Whittled away by domestic responsibilities, my authorial voice is changing. If I waited to produce something beautiful, I would have nothing.

Fissures in the foundation papered over. Leaning in falling through the cracks, anxiety creeps. Entire days unable to find a word dances just beyond my grasp. Nursery rhymes play on endless loop in my brain, relapse.

Motherhood compounded, mothers struggling, mourning what might have been, people counting on me to unmute.

– From Lauren Miller Griffith (2021)

### **Frenetic**

i'm just trying ... i just keep saying yes and yes, and yes, and yes, and yes to everything a new project just came up three days ago and i'm looking like i might be involved with that and then i'm in the middle of ... and i do the same, it's not just other people contacting me, it's me just thinking of more things and then, pretty soon, i'm running down that rabbit hole and so, i don't know that i'm handling ... i don't know how i'm making decisions i just keep piling it on i don't feel i'm coalescing in this higher ed writing world you're supposed to have a way that you're going and what you're known for, or something i don't really know exactly what that all means, but...

I come to work, better if I leave,  
but then, I'm not with him, so  
I'm torn. I love my job. But...  
in the ultimate grand scheme  
of things not important.

My son is important.

... so, i'm all over the place just everything, i can't even tell you how many ... i *can* tell you i could list ... that's not even everything that's just to begin ... and i have no idea what normal people do, but to me, that doesn't feel ... i'm not even sure i'm on a good pace i might be going really slow i don't really know so what it's all gonna mean in the end at the end of it all do i look and see my list and will i feel valuable

– From Estella's 2021 interview transcript

**Work Ethic**

Day and night

Working and working

Day and night

Writing and rewriting

Day and night

Until I get it right

– Gabe Doughty,<sup>14</sup> my son, 12 years old (2021)

**Bounce**

Life for the next decade with younger children

Wish I could have deep thoughts

Then make waffles

Then get back to deep thoughts

– From Elizabeth's 2020 interview transcript

**Keeping Time: Notes from Drum Practice**

Where are the accented triplets?

Does this page look familiar? No?

The ostinato, a motif persistently repeated, same musical voice.

It's called "comping," adding to the standard ride beat

*boom, boom, bat, boom-boom, bop*

Left hand plays notes around the ride, accompanying cacophony

*two and three and four and*

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14. Published with permission.

compliments the other instruments. Hear the cymbals?

*Crash! Do, blop, do-do, blop*

Tempo zipping past, keep up, keep time, keep going

*Hit the high hat, ride the floor tom, groove*

You come in on beat 8, then on beat 1 ... see? How that happens.

*Da-da-da foom, da-da-do-do-dum*

Harmonic and percussive, rosewood claves make a chamber, sound

Depends how much you choke the stick—

*Bum, bum, bum, bum-bum, Woo!*

Clave rhythm dressed up and placed in a pile of triplets

Full rest there.

– Author-generated poem, 2021

### **Genesis**

Stories don't just tell us

who we are...

blueprint for responsibility

to ourself and others.

– Alexi Rocha & Ryan Skinnell (2021)

## **Constellating Insight Through the Radical Specificity of Cluster Poetry**

Rather than crystalize the “essence” of motherscholaring, my poetry cluster constellates an array of lived moments and ideas that converge and diverge bricolage-style, inviting readers to tinker with disparate elements and piece together generative spaces of possibility (Howard et al., 2023). Constellating meaning is a practice of relationality and accountability, worldviews and approaches to knowledge making central to cultural rhetorics and Indigenous research/writing paradigms (Hidalgo et al., 2021; Kovach, 2009; Riley-Mukavetz, 2020; Simpson, 2017; Wieser-Weryackwe, 2023, Wilson, 2008). From the perspective of Nishnaabeg thought, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) explains that “constellations exist only in the context of relationships; otherwise they are just individual stars” (p. 215). Only collectively do stars become “beacons of light that work together to create doorways ... into other worlds” to “reveal theory, story, and knowledge” (Simpson, 2017, p. 212). As Houser and Özyeşilpınar (2024) demonstrate in their examination of how religious systems perpetuate misogyny, constellation can be a “performative-reflective-embodied writing methodology” that uses embodied storytelling to forge connection and resistance across stories,

space, and time. A constellation praxis, Wieser-Weryackwe and her colleagues (2023) elaborate, involves “examining ideas and stories in a piece of scholarship based on their relationships to one another and on making new knowledge/s in those in-between spaces or liminal zones that are always ripe with change” (p. 6). Writing and interpreting cluster poetry is an act of constellation, forging ever expanding webs of meaning-in-relation.

Theorizing Indigenous poetics, contributors to Neal McLeod’s (2014) collection allude to the ways poetry lends itself to the praxis of constellation. For example, in his contribution to the collection, Sam McKegney (2014), a settler scholar of Indigenous literature who grew up in Anishinaabe territory on the Saugeen Peninsula, describes “the act of reading, listening to, and interpreting Indigenous poetry” as a process by which “the meanings of words and lines and stories inevitably multiply as they collide with the thoughts, memories, and spirits of audience members, who perform acts of translation through engaged listening” (p. 44). Each poem in my cluster represents an individual story, and meaning constellates across, around, and through them. The poems “mean” in relationship with each other and in relation with the in-between “dark spaces” (Schoone, 2020, p. 40) that set them apart. Readers are invited to play an active role in meaning making, to enter into “critical alliance” (McKegney, 2014, p. 51) with the poetic constellation, resisting the urge to “obligatorily endorse” (p. 52) every story, experience or point of view they encounter and opening themselves up to “a ritual of cataclysmic engagement” (p. 52). Readers of all kinds, whether mothers and scholars or not, breathe meaning from and into my poetic engagement with motherscholaring.

Constellation is not only about relationality, but also “relational accountability,” demonstrating respect, reciprocity and responsibility in the act of meaning making (Wilson, 2008, p. 11). In the case of my poetry cluster, relational accountability means respecting the lives and perspectives of the motherscholars represented in found poems created from source texts, even when (especially when) they are different from my own. It means reciprocating the vulnerability of the humans whose lives I poetically rendered by including my own self-generated poems to place my-“self-in-relation” (Graveline cited in Kovach 2009, p. 14). It means taking seriously my responsibility to be critically reflexive about whose realities I sought out and found worthy of representing and, by extension, what meanings I make possible (or not) with the particular poems I clustered. It means embracing constellation not as a tool but as a way of being and coming to know that transforms the process and possible meanings to be made.

Divergence is essential for constellating meaning, for “our differences, too, teach us” (Wieser-Weryackwe et al., 2023, p. 13). As Houser and Özyeşilpınar (2024) point out, by revealing shared experience and simultaneously acknowledging and respecting difference, constellation resists “a totalizing gaze,” offering instead “small windows” into myriad lived experiences and their unique “rhetorical and material consequences.” In other words, constellating enables radical

engagement with difference. Instead of triangulating what is recognizable or shared in common, constellating honors the specificity of experience. In the case of my cluster poetry, each poem, each star, eschews inherent significance; the specificity of each poem evokes a multitude of potential meanings that emerge only in relation to the radical specificity of other poem-stars and the countless “lines of flight” (Sotirin, 2010) that exist between them. The uncertainty of meaning creates opportunities to disrupt truisms, assumed commonalities, and connections in favor of new ways of thinking, being, and relating. Through “personal, historical, and cultural differences” observes Rachel C. Jackson (Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma), “unexpected solidarity” can emerge (Wieser-Weryackwe et al., 2023, p. 10). Stories will come together to make meaning, she holds, “even if (and as) they diverge” (p. 11). Houser and Özyeşilpınar (2024) call this “the rhetorical power of relationality” cultivated through constellation, a power that reaches beyond individual stories alone.

As a researcher and faculty writer experiencing academic motherhood, clustering poems around motherscholarship is an act of constellation that allows me to inhabit, and invite readers to inhabit, what Howard et al. (2023) call the living theory, or “soulwork” (p. 596) of this ever-shifting identity- and community-forging process and to discover new insights. In what follows, I sketch out several constellations that might be traced through my poetry cluster as a way of demonstrating what cluster poetry can do. Readers will no doubt see other potential paths or ways of drawing connections and juxtaposing divergences that lead to different shapes, patterns, and insights. Poetry clusters are ripe for this kind of recursive, expansive, meandering meaning making. The constellations I trace are inspired by themes Howard et al. (2023) identified as central to their understanding of motherscholarship as both a process and identity. These themes stoked my curiosity and launched me into scholarship on mothering and academic motherhood which inspired many of the literature-voiced poems included above. I use them here to highlight possible patterns in the stars, so to speak, ways of tracking ideas through certain groupings or constellations of poems within the larger cluster. Themes include motherscholarship as risky community, defiant learning, epistemology, accountability, and representation of scholarly thought (Howard et al., 2023).

One constellation of poems I might trace through my cluster explores the reality that mothering is risky work in scholarly communities where our identities as mother and scholar are continuously cleaved. I borrow the word “cleave” from Howard et al. (2023) who describe “academic spaces that cleave us into fragments of mother space, scholar space” (p. 599). The dual meanings of cleave<sup>15</sup> seem particularly apt for capturing the lived paradox of a motherscholar identity. Cleave means to cut, split or sever; it can also mean to stick, adhere or cling. Just

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15. Thanks to Julie Ward, friend, colleague, scholar, poet, and research participant for pointing out the rich double meaning of “cleave” as apt description for the paradox of motherscholarship.

as identities of mother and scholar can feel conflicting, even antithetical in academic environments, they are also inseparable and for me at least reciprocal and often mutually sustaining. “Against the backdrop of academia,” Howard and her colleagues (2023) lament,

where academic success is measured in impact factors and citations; where poetry is not an acceptable mode of communication; where we all, as fugitive breastfeeding mothers, had to crouch in school and university bathroom stalls to pump breastmilk for our babies, mothering and scholaring are not written together in the same paragraph, much less the same word. (p. 9)

In this context, motherscholars sustain by cleaving to “a decades-old legacy of postcolonial feminist and womanist scholars who have long theorized about mothering ... as a ‘revolutionary praxis’” (Howard et al., 2023, p. 596). Inspired, challenged, called out, and called in by the framework of Revolutionary Mothering (Gumbs et al., 2016), I crafted literature-voiced poems from the collection including “Vision of a Mama” and “On the Front Lines.” Considering those poems along with my found poem “How to Make a Tenure Case” and generated poem “Kids Welcome” creates a constellation that grapples with the meaning and stakes of risk and resistance for white academic mothers like me, living relatively comfortably with basic needs met, for motherscholars suffering daily racism and oppression in flawed systems of higher education, and for mothers within and beyond academia surviving mortal peril, risking life and limb to mother in the face of grave violence.

A second constellation one might trace through my cluster encircles the idea of motherscholarship as a “living theory of defiant learning,” wherein our “motherfull identities ... [are] connected to our spiritual selves, which are too often left outside academe” (Howard et al., 2023, p. 599). This grouping considers what it means to inhabit a motherfull identity, to be in “critical and caring relationships” (Hardee & Thompson, 2020, as cited in Howard et al., 2023, p. 599) with others who long for wholeness “in the face of academic spaces that cleave us into fragments” (Howard et al., 2023, p. 599). When creating the larger poetry cluster of which this constellation is a part, I wrestled with whether to include poems written from interviews with faculty writers who did not identify as mothers. Ultimately, I decided to include “Hallmark of Black Academics,” from an interview with Sadie in which she reflected on the process of negotiating the terms of a new faculty position as a Black woman newly responsible for her ageing mother; “Default Option,” created with permission from an essay written by a writer in my study, Julie, about what it is like to be a woman who decided not to have children; and “Work Ethic,” a poem written by my son, Gabe. I included them because they force me to reflect on ways that my motherscholar identity can sometimes be rooted in indignation about my own self-perceived suffering in ways that foreclose opportunities for community and coalition building with

others shouldering needless adversity at the hands of the same oppressive system I rage against. Including them now in this constellation along with “Spiritual Strivings” and “Unfold *Only* in the Sharing” from Cynthia B. Dillard’s (2006) *On Spiritual Strivings: Transforming an African American Woman’s Academic Life*, I see the connection between motherfull-ness and spirituality and the value of radical specificity that embraces resonant dissonance in order to attest to “unfolding possibilities” (Sotirin, 2010).

Yet another constellation to be traced through my poetry cluster illuminates the epistemological nature of motherscholaring. It matters whose voices, experiences, and material realities contribute to understandings of motherscholaring, from whose lives we theorize and make sense of motherscholarling as process and positionality (Howard et al., 2023). I am aware of my privilege and responsibility as I struggle to raise a cisgendered white boy and theorize motherscholaring through my writing and research; I realize that of the participants who remained in my study, no mother identified as a person of color; and I acknowledge that I am drawn to stories in my data that depict white, middle-class academic motherhood. With these ideas in mind, I trace a constellation through “Spectacular Bodies” from Julia H. Chang’s (2020) same-titled chapter in *Presumed Incompetent II*, “Birth Song” from the epilogue of Aja Y. Martinez’s (2020) *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*, “Hallmark of Black Academics” about a Black daughter negotiating elder care for her ageing mother, “To Become a Target” from Ariel Gore’s (2016) chapter “Queering Family” in *Revolutionary Mothering* about resisting what can become a cult of (white, heterosexual, middle class) motherhood, and “But Who’s the Real Mother[scholar]?” written by a friend and colleague wrestling with what it means to claim the identity of mother and scholar in the context of her non-normative family dynamic. This grouping fuels my commitment to resist epistemic injustice, account for my privilege, and actively seek out and honor lived experiences different from my own, especially those that have been minoritized and historically excluded.

The theme of accountability reminds me of a conversation about collective resilience we had in the motherscholaring group on my campus wherein a colleague reflected on the chapter in Robin Wall Kimmerer’s (2013) book *Braiding Sweetgrass* about nurturing a sustainable pond as a form of mothering creatures and ecologies of the future. My found poem “A Mother’s Work” from Kimmerer’s chapter with the same name was inspired by that conversation and might form a constellation with poems such as “Indulgence,” about how an academic culture of productivity teaches us to treat as indulgent caring for tired, sick bodies and minds, “Keep a Family Running,” about the raw guilt of not writing in order to attend to “other things,” “Lost Illusions,” about tempering expectations and reconsidering a sense of self tethered to dogged accomplishment at all costs, and “Genesis,” a meta-reflexive poem suggesting that the radical specificity in the cluster might enact a form of mutual accountability, care, and relational reciprocity.

A final constellation I see in this cluster poem encircles Howard et al.'s (2023) claim that motherscholaring represents scholarly thought and thus “ignites, expands, and deepens conversations about the relationship between maternal identity and scholarship” (p. 600). In particular, the following poems constellate this theme: “Mothers on Mute,” from anthropologist Lauren Miller’s article with the same name about mothering during the pandemic; “Bounce,” which captures the visceral frustration of identities divided; “Write Bold” and “Frenetic” that reveal the torn-ness and chaos of living cleaved lives; “Three Blows” and “Hobbling Along” about the toll of mental health crises and the paralyzing fear that accompanies loss of control—over time, attention, emotion, brain, and body; and “Spectacular Bodies,” which “interrogat[es] the thorniness of visibility” for scholars of color (Chang, 2020, p. 259). I would include in this constellation Gabe’s poem “Work Ethic” and my poems “First Day of 7th Grade,” “Keeping Time,” and “For G” as well, for they are my attempt at “embodied theorizing that moves against the normative and conventional demands of binary mother and scholar” (Howard et al., 2023, p. 600)—my move to embrace motherscholaring as “a form of self-authorship” of “writing [myself] into visibility” (Howard et al., 2023, p. 600) always with a critical awareness of the hypervisibility bestowed by whiteness upon motherscholars of color (Chang, 2020).

Writing this poetry cluster and tracing these constellations has cultivated in me a reinvigorated, critically hopeful, ever-evolving sense of myself as a faculty writer and motherscholar, a relational sense that shifts, turns, and transforms each time I read the poems, discovering new constellations and possibilities. I focused on motherscholaring in this chapter, but I can imagine many other focal points around which I could have composed poetry clusters—uses of anger in faculty writing lives, the psychosomatic effects of forging a writing life in toxic academic culture, lived experiences of the mental health crises endured by writers and their loved ones. Researchers studying different populations in different contexts with various study parameters could no doubt identify countless other touchstones. As I hope I’ve made clear, cluster poetry is a promising “misfit” tool (Restaino, 2019, p. 85) for disrupting common understandings based on generalities and recognizable experiences related not only to motherscholaring but to writing, writers, and humans in a range of contexts.

Ideal for researchers aiming for radical specificity, who want to “evok[e] emotional response and resonance and promot[e] critical self-reflexivity about not only daily events but their larger political and cultural significances” (Sotirin, 2010), creating cluster poetry is perfect for probing any complex phenomenon, experience, narrative, or trope that resists coherent representation. Through radical specificity, poetry clusters animate what cannot be easily represented, puncturing normative, normalizing accounts and holding space for myriad ways of knowing, being, and doing. Gathering lived experiences (both resonant and dissonant) that are “in tension with the cultural scripts, material forces, and historical contingencies that shape our personal selves,” poetry clusters uniquely

“display existential disruption, self-questioning, and the exploration of lived possibilities and constraints” to “affect an intimate political analysis” (Sotirin, 2010). The critical, justice-oriented method enables researchers and inspires readers to constellate—to connect and reconnect the “shining parts” (Schoone, 2020, p. 40), to notice different parts gleaming or fading into the background, like different takes on a Rorschach inkblot. In doing so, it cultivates “compassionate knowledge about [both] the constraints and possibilities of our own and others’ lives” (Sotirin, 2010). In this way, by evoking radical specificity, poetry clusters constellate new meanings and reveal insights undiscoverable through any other means.