

Black Matrescence Writing Together: Feminist Healing Counterspaces in Academia

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Abstract

This paper is rooted in my participation in a Black mama's writing group and foregrounds what becomes possible when we write together, rather than alone, within institutions that are structured through racialized and ableist norms. Drawing on practice-based reflections, I argue that Black mothers' writing groups function as feminist healing counterspaces within Canadian higher education. These groups are spaces that contest colonial institutional logics while cultivating care, joy, and survival. I situate Black matrescence as a radical reorganization of self, identity, and time that comes into direct conflict with academic norms of neoliberal productivity. Drawing on counterspace theory and anti-Black sanism, I show how writing groups enable Black mothers to collectively reframe distress as structurally produced rather than individually pathological. I argue that in these spaces, writing becomes relational, embodied, and a site of refusal where counter-narratives are generated, epistemic authority is reclaimed, and collective strategies for navigating institutional harm are developed. Black maternal writing groups are not supplemental supports but critical intellectual, emotional, and relational infrastructures that can sustain Black women's scholarship while making room for different ways of knowing and being that exceed and refuse the limits of the academy.

Keywords: *Black matrescence; mothers in academia; feminist counterspaces; anti-Black sanism; writing groups*

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Introduction

This paper is rooted in my participation in a Black mamas' writing group initiated and facilitated by a Black mother-professor whom I consider a mentor. I write as a Black mother, feminist, and doctoral scholar working within Canadian higher education, where the conditions of knowledge production are shaped by colonial institutional logics that routinely devalue care, relationality, and Black maternal life. The questions animating this piece about Black matrescence, writing, and feminist healing counterspaces, did not emerge solely from reading across bodies of scholarship, but from writing in community with other Black mothers who are also navigating academic and everyday demands.

Our writing group became so much more than a place to draft and revise. It turned into a space of witnessing, where we could tell the truth, hold each other's stories with care, swap strategies for making it through, and affirm Black maternal ways of knowing through the simple, powerful act of writing together. As Fearon (2021) notes, "We embody a rich legacy of using stories to ask and answer epistemological and ontological questions in our own voices" (p. iv). In those shared writing moments, Black mothers build counter-narratives, push back against deficit framings, and create kinship while sustaining themselves through literacy, care, and mutual recognition. Because I am both part of this group and reflecting on its meaning, my positionality matters. It shapes what I notice, what I return to, and what I understand as meaningful. It also shapes how I think about writing. Not just as producing a "paper," but as something embodied and relational. For me, writing is tied to survival and self-making, and to the ongoing work of staying whole in institutions that were never built with us in mind.

With this context, I argue that Black mothers' writing groups function as feminist healing counterspaces within Canadian higher education. They are intentional community spaces that

contest racist, ableist, patriarchal institutional logics while cultivating practices of love, joy, and survival. I further argue that these groups operate as infrastructures of counter-narrative, care, and refusal, drawing on counterspace theory and anti-Black sanism scholarship (Solórzano et al., 2000; Case & Hunter, 2012; Meera et al., 2016). I demonstrate, through practice-based reflection, how writing collectively can help Black mothers to see themselves outside institutional pathologization, turn personal distress into collective strategy, and generate joy as a way of survival and reworlding.

Why Writing Groups?

Black mothers in academia are constantly expected to do the impossible. They are expected to care for others and still be professional, to continue to work even as they become exhausted and to remain calm amid the massive restructuring of self that comes with matrescence. The term *matrescence* describes the transition to motherhood that includes the numerous psychological, social, cultural, and existential transformations (Athan, 2024; Orchard & Rutherford, 2023; Pascoe Leahy, 2020; Raphael, 1975). However, in colonial academic institutions, these transformations are seldom recognized or meaningfully supported. They are instead, seen as counterproductive to institutional order, productivity, and a challenge to traditional scholarly work. Andrea O'Reilly, as cited in Graham (2022), argues that mothering is not just “natural” or universal; it is shaped by culture and social expectations, which structure women’s experiences of becoming and being mothers.

Colonial academic institutions often presume an ideal scholar: endlessly resourced, emotionally contained, and singularly devoted to intellectual production. Motherhood disrupts this figure, while Black motherhood exposes how academic “norms” are racialized and ableist. It reveals whose labour is valued, whose care work is rendered invisible, and whose distress is

pathologized. In this context, Black mothers may experience matrescence not as a supported transition but as an intensely scrutinized and ongoing condition of academic life.

Writing groups matter *now* because the conditions of academic life in Canada are being reshaped by a converging set of pressures that intensify precarity—especially for Black scholars whose work and lives are already positioned outside of institutional norms. Long-standing constraints on operating funding and tuition policy have contributed to widening deficits and cost-cutting that show up as restructuring, heavier workloads, and reduced supports for students and faculty (Council of Ontario Universities [COU], 2025; Government of Ontario, 2025). Additionally, federal caps and tightened rules on international study permits (an increasingly central revenue stream for many colleges and universities) have reduced projected enrolments and accelerated budget shortfalls, with impacts on important programs (many are humanities and social science programs that have an orientation toward social justice), staffing, and student services (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2025). This is happening alongside a visible politicization of equity work, including growing criticism and backlash toward EDI initiatives in higher education (Liddle, 2025). In this context, Black mothers’ writing groups are not merely helpful social spaces; they become *important infrastructure*: spaces that sustain research and authorship when institutions contract, and that provide collective analysis, mutual accountability, and shared strategies for refusing extraction so that Black maternal scholarship can remain possible, legible, and alive under intensifying financial and political strain in higher education.

Matrescence, Madness, and Colonial Academic Norms

Matrescence is not just an adjustment to motherhood. It is a radical reorganization of identity, relationships, and time. According to Athan (2024), matrescence is characterized by

psychological, social, cultural, and existential transformations that redefine how mothers see themselves and their place in the world. Such changes are rarely recognized as legitimate aspects of scholarship in the academy. Rather, matrescence disrupts norms of productivity and professionalism conditioned by whiteness, ableism, and the masculinist myth of disembodied intellect. When Black mothers change their capacity as a result of pregnancy, postpartum healing process, sleep deprivation, or caregiver duties, these realities are frequently interpreted as personal failures and not consequences of the structural design of academia.

Studies of academic motherhood continue to show that the structure of institutions— in this case higher education—is not compatible with caregiving or mothering. James et al. (2021) demonstrate the experience of academic mothers who face the ingrained expectations that prioritize uninterrupted productivity and make care work counterintuitive to success. These conditions do not happen by accident. They reflect institutional histories that assume scholars are subsidized by feminized labour elsewhere and can sustain unlimited output.

If matrescence interferes with attention, sleep, or emotional bandwidth, it is attributed to a deficit on the part of the mother as opposed to the conditions of institutional life (Noxolo, 2024). For Black mothers, these pressures are compounded by racialized and gendered stereotypes that portray Black motherhood as irresponsible, excessive, or suspicious. These stereotypes influence the understanding of the needs and behaviours of Black mothers by supervisors, peers, and administrators. Accommodation requests can be interpreted as excuses or evidence of an inability to perform. Signs of distress or frustration (which are almost always part of the journey of doctoral studies) can be interpreted as instability.

Writing groups emerge within this gap as socially situated sites of knowledge production, where Black mothers can collectively reframe their experiences, name structural harm, and avoid

internalizing institutional discourses about productivity. Gere (1987), who wrote the foundational book on writing groups, notes that writing is not an individual act but a social practice shaped through dialogue and community building. Feminist scholarship further explains how writing groups are spaces that validate multiple modes of knowing and various perspectives, enabling women to produce alternative narratives (Morris, 2017).

Anti-Black Sanism and Being “Normal”

Anti-Black sanism names how institutions govern and interpret the mental and emotional lives of Black people through racialized norms of “professionalism” and “stability.” Meera et al. (2016) describe sanism as a form of oppression that naturalizes normativity by marking some affective and cognitive styles as “normal” and others as deviant. The norms of calmness, coherence, and emotional restriction are deeply racialized and gendered in the academic sphere. Aligned with whiteness and middle-class respectability, these norms leave Black mothers vulnerable to being perceived as volatile, unprofessional, or unfit (Cowlings, 2025).

In academic settings, a Black mother’s reaction to structural violence (stress, depression, anxiety) can be misread as incompetence or instability rather than recognized as a legitimate response to patterned institutional harm. The issue with institutional mental health discourses is that they usually focus on individual resilience, self-regulation, and coping, and leave intact the conditions that generate harm. This produces a paradox for Black mothers: we are expected to absorb institutional violence without protest while also managing its psychological consequences without violating norms of affective restraint. Valdovinos et al. (2023) sum up this tension by insisting that a return to “normal” is inadequate for BIPOC women and mothers in academia, because exclusion, overwork, and surveillance were already embedded in that normal (Showunmi, 2023).

Writing groups disrupt this logic by producing collective interpretations of distress that refuse sanist pathologization and place emotion within its institutional context. In these counterspaces, Black mothers come to understand—and are affirmed—that their reactions are not personal failures but valid human responses to hostile academic environments. This reframing shifts the question from “What is wrong with me?” to “What conditions are producing this, and what collective strategies reduce harm?” By naming how “professionalism” regulates affect and comportment, the group refuses institutional readings of emotion as disorder and instead treats distress as evidence of structural misfit—an opening for collective care, refusal, and negotiated accommodation.

Counterspaces and Counter-narratives

Counterspaces can operate as safe spaces, but more precisely they are sites of resistance and meaning-making. According to Solórzano et al. (2000), counterspaces are those spaces in which the deficit understandings of marginalized people are challenged affirming forms of community are cultivated. Case and Hunter (2012) also hold that counterspaces facilitate psychological well-being since marginalized people are able to challenge dominant narratives and develop affirming meanings of their experiences. It is in this manner that writing groups of Black mothers operate. They are spaces in which members can name patterns of harm—meetings scheduled during childcare hours, supervisory surveillance, and invocations of “professionalism” that punish vulnerability while rewarding self-erasure.

In writing groups, Black mothers write narratives challenging institutional common sense, like the notion that mothers are less serious, that distress indicates incapacity, or that needing support is a sign of weakness. According to Fearon (2023), storytelling can affirm Black mothers as epistemic authorities and position them as knowledge bearers, rather than the subjects of

evaluation. By writing collectively, Black mothers assert control over the meaning of their experiences and reject deficit-based interpretations imposed by institutions (Campa et al., 2025). Writing groups are, therefore, places of epistemic justice in which lived experience is regarded as legitimate knowledge. Matrescence can hold multiple tensions. It carries love, resentment, pride, grief, ambition and exhaustion all at the same time. Writing groups offer a shared space in which these tensions can be safely held without requiring any solution or without judgement. Anti-Black sanism marks particular emotional, behavioural, and cognitive experiences as abnormal (Meerai et al., 2016). It can provide room to talk about the experiences of madness without being punished or criminalized.

Practice-Based Reflection: What It Feels Like to Write Together

This practice-based reflection draws on my situated participation in the group and on iterative noticing across repeated writing sessions (e.g., what we name, refuse, normalize, and sustain together). Rather than claiming generalizability, I treat the group's routines and language as evidence of how counterspace is made in practice. My analysis therefore attends to recurring practices of care, refusal, and re-framing as they emerge through collective writing. For example, when we check in at the beginning of each session I often talked about my kids, my busy schedule, feeling exhausted, feeling isolated, stuck in the process of writing, reading creating or executing tasks—some of this related to my disability, but much of due to the institutional pressures and neoliberal ideas of productivity in academia. Many (if not all) of the other women in the group either empathized with my experiences because they too feel the same way or provided advice and support to navigate various issues. Much of the time I was met with encouragement and excitement when we shared our successes, our milestones, or our dreams. When a colleague of mine told the group that she had secured her dream job, I literally sobbed. We all sobbed. It was tears of

collective joy. Carpenter et al. (2026) explain that “racialized bodies experience collective joy differently, both in terms of intensity and meaning” (p. 40). In Black spaces you will often hear “my cup is full” or “my heart is so full”. That is, engaging with one another (even virtually) there is a specific kind of love and joy that gets cultivated in these spaces that is unexplainable. In *Black Joy and the Evolution of Collective Effervescence*, Carpenter et al. (2026) state that “Black Collective Effervescence (BCE) as a culturally specific, embodied, and communal form of emotional energy experienced as Black joy”. They state:

Have you ever attended a concert, church ceremony, or family reunion where everyone seemed to be on the same emotional wavelength? You might not consciously recognize it, but that feeling of being part of an emotional moment where you share the same emotions with those around you is known as collective effervescence (CE) (Durkheim, 1912). Coined by French sociologist Émile Durkheim, CE is described as an “exceptionally powerful stimulant. [Where] once the individuals are assembled, their proximity generates a kind of electricity that quickly transports them to an extraordinary degree of exaltation” (Durkheim, 1912). In our study, 31 Black graduate and professional students discussed experiencing this collective emotional intensity and unity as Black Joy (Carpenter et al., 2026, p. 39).

Indeed, proximity to other phenomenal Black women can cultivate Black collective effervescence. (Carpenter et al., 2026). In Black academic circles that deal with maternal writing, recurring practices made the counterspaces tangible in everyday academic life. Check-ins serve as counter-mechanisms, which enabled us to label exhaustion, grief, joy, or overwhelm, which are frequently denied or personalized by an institution. Check-ins allowed us to name our exhaustion,

joy, or grief without viewing it as a barrier to productivity. Thus, writing groups consider these issues as essential information regarding structural conditions of the spaces we collectively occupy (Mbonde, 2025). It is an anti-disciplinary practice that holds on to the embodied knowledge that would be quickly erased.

Writing groups are seen as counterspaces that actively disrupt institutional norms by means of implementing different ones. Slower pacing, shared responsibility, and solidarity are not compromises of the systems of power but denials of colonial logics, which make the lives of Black mothers incompatible with linear academic processes. Strategic refusal is another key practice. In Black maternal writing circles, refusal is not framed as opting out of intellectual life; it is framed as an ethical stance against extraction, surveillance, and sanist readings of distress. Refusal can look like declining unrealistic timelines, setting boundaries in harmful mentoring relationships, or rejecting the demand for emotional “composure” in the face of harm. Practiced collectively, refusal becomes less risky and less isolating. Thus, counterspaces are built through practices of refusal and function as intellectual and affective infrastructures that do not require self-erasure.

These counter-practices also cultivate collaboration and joy, *filling our cups*. Peer feedback is a mode of counter-evaluation grounded in protection, affirmation, and collective investment to *really* support each other rather than competition. Practices of joy—laughter, prayer, witnessing, celebration—sustains connection over time. These practices are not incidental “extras”; they are survival strategies. Consistent with counterspace theory, they disrupt deficit narratives and reinforce strength-based understandings of Black maternal life (Case & Hunter, 2012). In doing so, they expand what scholarly engagement can feel like: slower, more relational, and less aligned with colonial productivity regimes.

Implications for Institutions and Scholarship

Black maternal writing groups reveal the insufficiency of existing institutional resources. Their ongoing necessity is not, in itself, evidence of resilience; it also signals structural misfit. Institutions should stop treating motherhood and mental health as private inconveniences to be managed through individual coping (Christopher, 2024). Instead, they should address structural conditions through transparent workload distribution, predictable scheduling that accounts for caregiving, and enforceable anti-racist and anti-sanist accountability. Scholarly work on Black mothers' writing groups should not frame them as informal support alone, but as intellectual and survival-sustaining spaces that generate theory, method, and critique. These groups produce collective wisdom, relational ethics, and alternative ways of producing scholarly knowledge that disrupt dominant epistemologies. Further, writing groups that support the mental health and well-being of their participants expose the limits of individualizing "resilience" discourses that can conceal structural harm (Campa et al., 2025). They lean toward collective and relational approaches to well-being.

Conclusion

Black matrescence within colonial academic institutions begins involves navigating with institutional demands for invisibility, affective restraint, and overproduction—alongside limited recognition of care, interdependence, and embodied knowledge. Under anti-Black sanism, Black maternal distress is framed as deviance rather than a reasonable response to racialized precarity, surveillance, and exhaustion (Meerai et al., 2016). At the same time, neoliberal productivity ideals devalue caregiving and cast mothering as incompatible with scholarly legitimacy unless it is hidden, privatized, or sacrificed. In this context, Black mothers are required not only to produce knowledge, but to do so without revealing the conditions under which that production occurs. Writing is therefore both a site of survival and a site of excavation, but it can also be reclaimed on

different terms. It is not only the work that is produced by Black mothers that make them powerful, but also the worlds they construct by mutual practice (McDonald, 2025). Co-writing interrupts the isolation, redistributes intellectual labour, and can create the access intimacy describes by Mingus (2017), challenging the academic individualism one which academic life is often organized. Black mothers' writing groups therefore become spaces of resistance, care, happiness, joy, love and collective survival.

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