

A walk of im/possible snails: A tender tracing of a mother/child 'us'

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Abstract

Guided by an axiology as methodology, this article speaks to two periods of research. The first part conveys an art-based collaborative inquiry into mothers' experiences of holding their children. During holding and when making sense of holding, three key understandings emerged from the research: 1) Relational purpose was engaged and appeared to be co-created by mother and child; 2) significant but malleable relational stories were co-developed by mother and child; 3) a cherished, generative, and supportive experience of expansion into the relationship occurred. Interwoven through these understandings was a visceral, imaginal, and profound experience of intersubjectivity that I refer to as the mother/child 'us'.

The article then conveys new developments in the research after the completion of the doctoral inquiry as I lean tentatively into the spaces of post-qualitative inquiry (PQI). Here the mother/child 'us' expands to include human, but also more-than-human agency as I offer a tender tracing of the human-snail researcher alongside and with the 'us'.

Keywords

Mother/child 'us', mothering, intersubjectivity, intra-action, purpose, storying, art-based

I acknowledge and pay my deepest respect to the Boonwurrung people of the Kulin Nation, including their Elders past and present. The Country on which this work was formed is embedded within known and unknown meaningful relationships that they have woven and continue to weave to the benefit of us all. This land was never ceded.

Note: Consent for imagery, recording of, and reflections on experiences with my partner and son were obtained with full approval of the article, imagery, and video.

A beginning

It starts...

It starts with long silences and a car driving nowhere in particular. The air between punctuated by exasperated sighs and generous glimpses of worlds now private.

It starts with his cries and a storm pelting a hospital window. I'm holding him against my skin, but the barrier of self I once knew, is immediately strange and wondrous.

It starts when I'm too little to know what starting is. Nan passes me a Tic Toc biscuit and lets me sit on her lap. And I know love.

It starts...



Figure 1. Ariel Moy, *Snailings*, 2022, felt-tip pen on digital photograph, 100 × 160mm.

In every erupting start of love, the possibility of a diminishment; in every recollected moment, a malleability prone to change. On the page, we often give experiences linear structures because that's how we "instruct their imagination" (Dor, 2015, p.2). Yet, as Ursula Le Guin (2004) notes: "Words are events, they do things, change things. They transform both speaker and hearer" (p.199). There is a price for the words we use and how we use them. Offering you a linear representation, I may provoke assumptions about time and place that don't capture the 'sense-fullness' (d'Emilia et al., 2020) of experiencing. So I also layer and interweave multimodal aesthetic stories (Lett, 2011), to invite you into a more 'alive' offering.

This article begins with a distillation of an art-based inquiry. This was undertaken with the MIECAT Institute and generously guided by my supervisors, Dr Jan Allen and Dr Stacey Bush. At the article's end, I invite you into my tentative movements from a qualitative paradigm to a post-qualitative space of unfoldings where we move away from subject–object binaries to an intra-active ethico-onto-epistem-ology (Barad, 2007, p.185). But first, a guide...

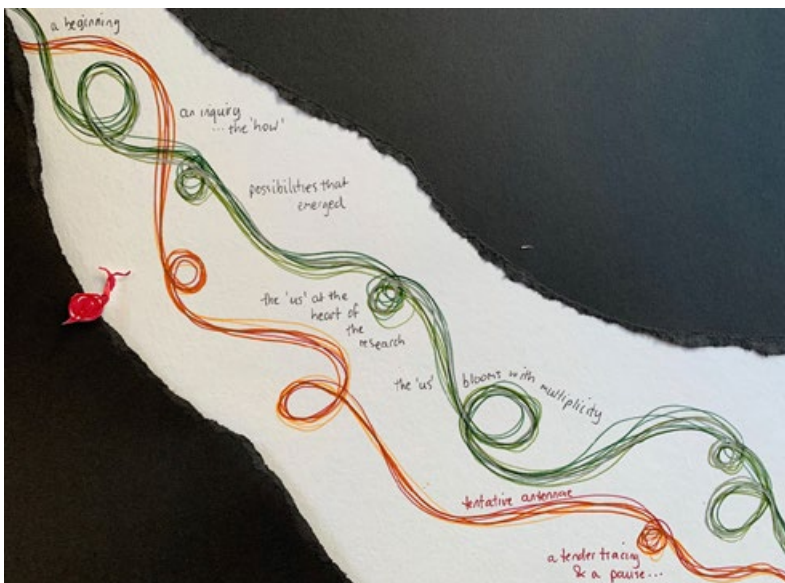


Figure 2. Ariel Moy, *A snail's mapping*, 2023, felt-tip pen on paper, 295 × 420mm.

An inquiry into mothers' experiences of holding their children: The 'how' of the research

Three mothers and I co-explored and co-created responses to the question: *What is it like to hold your children?* These art-based inquiry sessions mostly took place within their homes between late 2012 and early 2015. Sessions lasted approximately two hours each for Rosanna (eight sessions) and Kitty (six sessions), and between three and four hours for Leni (four sessions). Experiences ranged from mothers holding newborns to mothers holding their adult children who had newborns of their own; from squeezing hugs to maternal warmth communicated through digital spaces; and from a powerful pushing away of maternal affection to blissful moments of intra-becoming (a profoundly relational co-development).

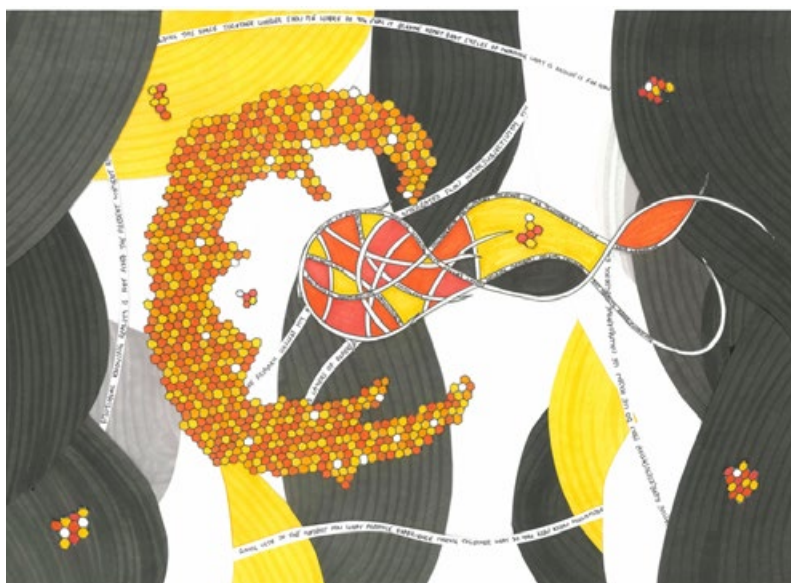


Figure 3. Ariel Moy, Working with an axiology: Moving, crystalizing, changing, growing, 2013, felt-tip pen on paper, 295 × 420mm.

Karen Barad (2009) notes that “values are integral to the nature of knowing and being” (p.37), and in the design and journey of this inquiry an axiology led the way. From the original question, through the processes and presentation of the final ‘product’ of the thesis, these three mothers and I were guided by a particular set of values. This was a choice based on an acknowledgement that our ways of being (ontology), ways of knowing (epistemology) and ways of doing (methodology) were entangled with what *mattered* to us and was alive for us in each moment. Barad (2007) describes this evocatively when she writes that an ethico-onto-epistem-ology recognises that “the becoming of the world is a deeply ethical matter” (p.185).

While qualitative research includes ethical practices, our inquiry repeatedly foregrounded an ethical stance as we explicitly engaged with our values. Before we began sessions, we worked with what the three values, described below, meant for us and for our inquiry, and I regularly checked in with our axiology as it unfurled over the processes and presentation of the research.

Axiology as methodology and values in action (methods)

Valuing and enacting intersubjectivity

Throughout the inquiry we attended to the ways we were in relationship with one another but also with art materials, the spaces we shared, memories, imagination, senses, thoughts, and artworks.

We privileged *intersubjectivity* as an ontology. My understanding and research now take this relational ontology further, referring to it as intra-activity (Barad, 2007). This term explicitly acknowledges our shifting complexities within multiple relationships before we impose definitions and categorisations.

At the beginning of the research, I elected to inquire into an experience of significant personal importance. With the birth of my son, I felt a singular joy when holding him, poignant given I also experienced a devastating post-natal anxiety. The chaos, agitation, and blindness of this lived diagnosis was soothed for me as well as for my son when I held him, and he leaned into me. I knew in the sinews of my being that the inquiry topic simmered with values that were intensely personal and relationally lived with my son.

Given the long-term and intimate nature of the research, I elected to work with friends. Kitty, Rosanna, Leni and I discussed the benefits and disadvantages of that throughout the inquiry process. Our spaces of identification mattered and were acknowledged. All of us are of Australian European heritage, identified at the time of the research as heterosexual, and are educated to, at minimum, secondary level. We are the biological parents of our children. We come from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds (working to middle class) and histories (including immigration, trauma, abuse, chronic and acute pain, and single parenting). One mother's experience with their children was from a place of marginalisation, but she did not want the textures of that conveyed in the presentation of the thesis. I was not a practising art therapist or art educator at the time of the research.

It feels important to note that our focus was on mothering as a practice more than mother as identity – this was in keeping with our intersubjective ontology and present-moment focus. However, the powerful intra-actions of mothering and identities are recognised, and I speak to these later in the article.

My experiences of being mothered include my paternal grandmother and aunt, my stepmother, and my biological mother. They include fictional characters that speak to mothering and 'childing' for me (female, male, non-binary, animal, and 'other'), as well as historical and mythical portraits and imagined assemblages of mothering. Mothering is an abiding passion, and these real and im/possible mother/child relationships are interwoven, layered, and explicitly as well as implicitly present in my research.

We openly welcomed the agency of materials and art expressions (McNiff, 2011) in relationship with us and our explorations of holding. They repeatedly elicited surprise and wonder. As Rouhiainen (2017) writes: "Materials too have agency and both tacitly and explicitly inform what the artist does, so that in the end it is difficult to discern exactly who is producing a work" (p.69). We would begin many of our sessions with a focus on art-making as the primary form of exploration before we brought in verbal exploration. This included leaning into potential relationships with materials and opening ourselves to what the materials, in relationship with us, might produce.

Some materials elicited strong responses. For example, when Leni later added brown and blue pastel to her collage (Figure 4) she noted that pressing the pastels hard into the paper highlighted and reinforced a sense of the relationship for her between dependence and damage. The pastels captured this for Leni but, in the process of using them, she learned more about the intensity and anger underlying these issues.



Figure 4. Leni, *Representation 3A*, 2014, collage on paper, 295 × 420mm.

Working in a way that values relationship requires a significant level of transparency, both with participants and with those engaging with the research during and after completion. Finlay (2011) notes that “rigorous and transparently” conveyed research is “what we look for when evaluating other people’s work” (p.261). I attempted at all stages to be clear about my active involvement in the research, about the ways that our relationships with one another, – and the ways that the process, materials, art and literature, theories, hopes, and imagery –shaped what emerged.

Valuing and enacting multimodality

Throughout the inquiry we worked with arts as a multimodal form of being, knowing, and doing. We engaged varying creative and experiential modes with various strengths, limitations, and familiarities enriching the kinds of information we might unearth or co-produce in our working.

Art can capture some of the stinging-soothing-fast-slow-solitary-networked cacophonies of experiencing and knowing. To paraphrase Marina Abramovic from her 2010 performance *The Artist is Present*, art is arrestingly animate when we engage with it directly or in our imagination (2013). Art can act as a shortcut to memory and experiencing without imposing a singular meaning (Moy, 2019b, 2022). The art made by participants and myself, then and now, invites me into *direct relationship* with the being and knowing of the inquiry topic (Franklin, 2012; Sousanis, 2015), the art-making process, and the memories we ‘re-membered’. Each encounter with multimodal expressions is new, immediate, multilayered, and relational, continuing an intra-acting of past, present, and future.

During the inquiry we also simultaneously engaged with other multimodal forms of being and knowing, including experiential, conceptual, and relational/active modes (Heron & Reason, 2001). We sensed in our porous bodies what materials and ways of working with them might ‘fit’ in any given moment. We explored with writing, interviews, and wide-ranging discussions as well as movement and forays into memory. We attended to our senses and to relationships alive in our shared space – human and more-than-human (Abram, 1996).

When generating and later working with ‘data’, I continued to engage multimodal forms of sense-making. This meant that as I began forming up some consonant understandings (for our small

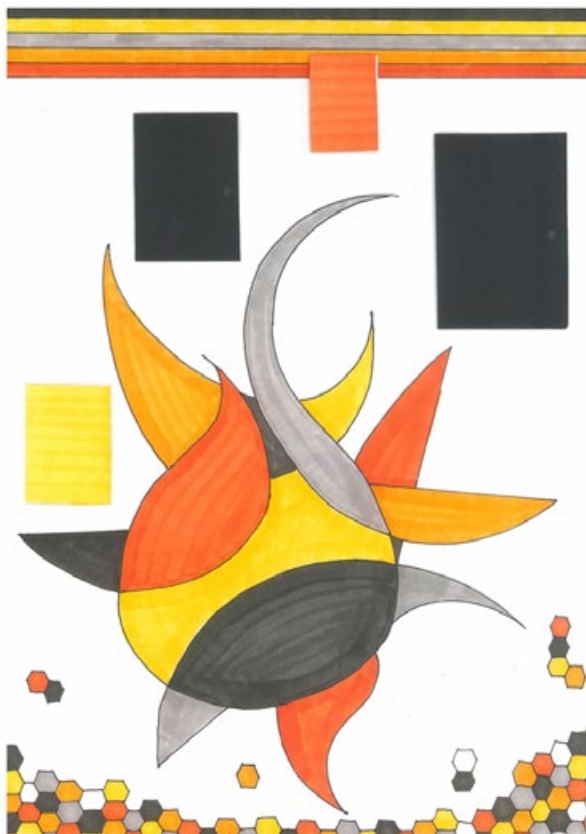
group) around maternal experiences of holding and, later, as presentation of data, I engaged creatively with the material produced. I was led by sensorial as well as art-making processes to imagery and concepts that provided ‘sense-fullness’. I conveyed these images and understandings to participants and then, with their feedback, worked towards further nuancing our ‘findings’ for us, for now. Working multimodally required a radical openness to many ways of being and knowing.

Valuing and enacting a present moment focus

We drew our attention to the present moment, delighting and sometimes recoiling from the prickly information in the intra-active spaces of emergence (Barad, 2007; Bush, 2018; Stern, 2004). We iteratively understood that the present moment and the memories we were exploring mutually formed and reformed one another (Coyle & Fischbach; 1997; Kuhn 2002; Lohmeier & Pentzold, 2014). We noticed what occurred as we moved soft pastels across the page, made collages and installations, leaned in and away from one another and our art; spoke definitively and loudly, and with hesitation and whisper. We zigzagged our way into, within and around our experiencing and knowing, always asking: *What is it like to hold our children? And what is alive for us right now, in this?*

Working in a way that brings focus back to the present moment requires a flexible and adaptable methodology, and our axiology enabled that. As Lett (2011) writes: “the use of procedures of inquiry emerges through the interactions, and creates a methodology suited to their particular concerns. There is no predetermined or fixed form of inquiry” (p.8).

We paused when sensing radiating warmth or goosebumps; we sat with surprising sadness and experiences so strong and strange that they at first resisted language. We noticed our relational space; offered thoughts and imagination and played with art materials to form up expressions.



From these encounters and creative dialogues, multiple curiosities and stories played out in our artworks, embodied interactions, conversation, and emergent knowing. Delving into memories as source material, we opened ourselves to experiences of holding our children across time. On some occasions this required time travel of 30 years or more, on others, the holding occurred five minutes before I had arrived at our sessions.

This approach appeared to be received well by participant mothers. As Kitty noted: “I’m actually really surprised at how powerful this has been, and how interesting because I’ve been to lots of therapists... or counsellors and very rarely had an ‘oh wow’ moment” (Moy, 2019a). Privileging our axiology supported new and meaningful information to emerge across all mothering experiences explored.

Figure 5. Ariel Moy, *My methods: Co-creative, emerging, simplifying, enacting values*, 2016, felt-tip pen on paper, 295 × 210mm.

Possibilities that emerged from the research

Throughout our sessions and after, as I continued to engage with art expressions, materials, and transcriptions of our conversations, qualities of being and knowing about maternal holding emerged. We quickly recognised that holding was not limited to physical intimacy, but included emotional and psychological holding that may be enacted and understood across distances and times (Zoom hugs and texting photos, for example). By expanding our abilities with the use of technology (Brey, 2000; Clark & Chalmers, 1998; de Preester, 2011), particularly relevant during the Melbourne Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns, we unearthed multiple ways of holding our children in the absence of physical touch but with a strong history of it. As Kendrick Lamar (2022) writes in his song ‘The heart part 5’: “I can’t stress how I love y’all, I don’t need to be in flesh just to hug y’all”.

Three qualities of holding emerged as meaningful for the mothers and me, the core of which are summarised below:

1. Maternal holding is relationally purposeful.

Purpose manifested as an ongoing attention to and navigation of needs. At first, purpose was identified as attending to children’s needs. However, it quickly became apparent that the mothers’ needs were just as present as they emerged in artworks and embodied experiencing. This tacit knowing – clarified in our dialogues – described a sense that the needs emerged from, were about, and returned to the mother/child relationship, though they might be experienced as individual needs at first. Both mother and child gave and received in an intimate entangling of rewarding and challenging dyadic experiences. As this became identified in our sessions, we increasingly spoke about and multimodally explored the possible locations of needs and purpose during holding.

In her last session, Rosanna created a collage that spoke explicitly to holding her daughters, and some of the imagery she associated with them. In the bottom centre she placed a red postcard with the words: “I can’t live without you” (Figure 6).

“I can’t live without you” is actually about me... like a red light... I let myself come in there. My daughters would throw their hands up and say: “Of course you have a role!”... I imagine it is developed in children as part of their survival, an awareness of their mother’s needs... that’s part of loving. (Rosanna, quoted in Moy, 2019b, p.225)



Figure 6. Rosanna, *Representation 4A*, 2014, felt-tip pen and collage on paper, 295 × 420mm.

2. Acts of holding form, develop, reinforce, and challenge significant stories of the mother/child relationship that speak to relational patterns of being together and shared history.

Initially, mothers shared stories multimodally and verbally that centred on descriptions of the ‘personalities’ of their children. As we explored, these stories morphed into a recognition of the ways we understood and experienced our children from within our relationship. We knew them always through the lens of our relationship. One of the central acts mothers and children participate in when shaping their evolving understanding of one another is the co-construction (often tacit, but sometimes explicit) of stories that ‘showcase’ this knowing. These stories highlighted significant shared moments and spoke to relational patterns of being together. For example, Leni noted that “Lucy’s not fun loving... quite reserved, unemotional to a certain extent but taking it all [in]” (Moy, 2019b, p.209), and quietly added that she, too, was like this. Her understanding of Lucy in this story was one of familiarity. In other stories there were instances of difference in how they acted/thought/felt. The stories were always born of and with reference to the relationship. One of the significant consequences of co-creating stories that shape and are shaped by the relationship is that while stories are powerful, they are also malleable. For example, in Figure 7 Leni acknowledges fast and slow qualities that speak to surface (recent) and deeper (older) stories of ways of being together. These stories, whether fast or slow, continue changing over time.

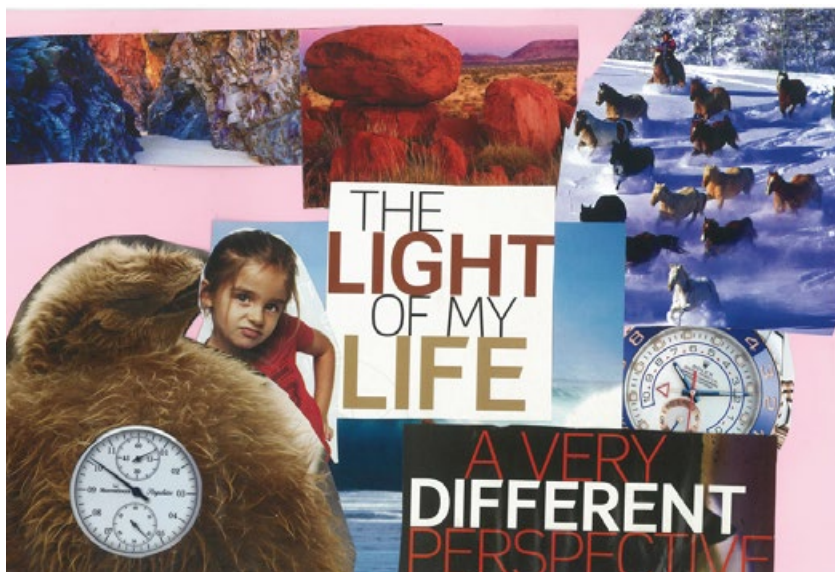


Figure 7. Leni, *Representation 3A*, 2014, collage on paper, 295 × 420mm.

3. Holding can provide moments of strange and exquisitely valuable experiences of expansion into being-in-relationship, or what I term the mother/child ‘us’.

Holding offered a pause in the ‘doing’ of the relationship. During ‘golden’ moments (identified as highly meaningful and pleasurable), this pause afforded a sense of deep connection and a relational widening (without a thinning) across senses, emotions, minds, bodies, time, and space. It may be likened to a ‘flow’ state (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), a Buddhist ‘non-self’ or ‘oceanic’ feeling.

There was a meeting of mother and child in these moments that moved them outside of everyday understood and sanctioned boundaries, to something more than themselves and more than mother plus child. It was an experience of being-in-relationship. It did not easily lend itself to language and was identified and described in creative and embodied expressions.

[Holding] is amazingly so much more than this little place that we hold them... I can feel the connectedness and like maybe it's nature, being... in this universe and of this universe and having something that's big enough to fill it. (Kitty, quoted in Moy, 2019b, p.214)

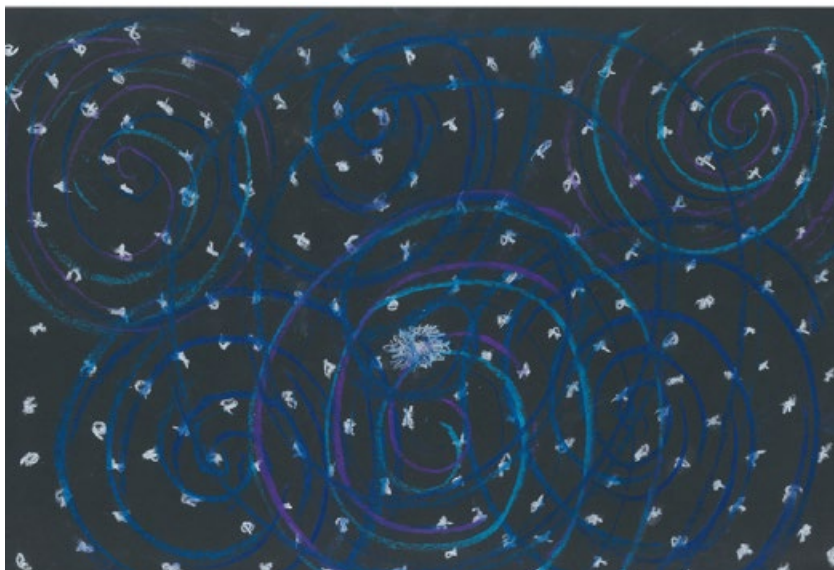


Figure 8. Kitty, *Representation 4A*, 2014, soft pastel on paper, 295 × 420mm.

The expansive experience of holding was cherished and moved mothers into a 'strange new world' unlike their everyday relationship. At times they would actively seek this connection, though they had never articulated this to themselves prior to our co-inquiry. Kitty, an avowed atheist, referred on multiple occasions to religious imagery and a new understanding of love: "I didn't know what love was until I had Harley, and now I can see why there's poetry, and why there's art and why there's Bible stories and, you know, all this stuff" (Moy, 2019, p.214). This expansive love spoke to a profound connectedness.

The 'us' at the heart of the research

Threading through these ways of experiencing and understanding maternal holding was a simple word: Us. As Leni said, softly and with satisfaction, when describing the felt quality of relationship with her children, it is "Us. Just. Us" (Moy, 2022, p.96).

The mother/child 'us' emerged as a highly valued maternal experience of being-in-relationship. This spoke to a breathtakingly intersubjective experiencing and knowing. It might be painfully fleeting or soothingly long. The English language struggles to convey this non-conforming, culturally challenging and yet deeply felt state of being. Fears coalesce around the possibility of equating a mother and child's intersubjective experiencing as a merging, enmeshing or a loss of self. In the research, however, the 'us' spoke to experiences of expansion, where the mother momentarily inhabited a self-within-relationship, which was bigger than the 'I', or 'I' plus 'other'.

Art enabled us to form material expressions that captured this understanding of 'us' before a conceptual tendency toward a bounded-self intervened. Agency, historically equated in the Western world with autonomy and an irreducible self, is complicated when relational agency is considered. Relational being speaks to the power and potential of the mother/child 'us' as a single agential entity in the world.

Textures of a mother/child 'us'

The mothers in this inquiry have all been involved in their children's lives from pregnancy through to the present day. Nevertheless, the qualities that characterise this maternal 'us' are not limited to biological mothers or periods of infancy. The 'us' focuses on mothering as both action and feeling across time and relational development. It begins with significant experiences of embodiment and interembodiment (Lupton, 2013), whether the child has arrived from the mother's womb or not. This may involve feeding, cleaning, soothing, physical safety, affection, and supporting the child's development. Relational needs originate in embodied, conscious, subconscious and unconscious enactments, reactions, and resonances in an often dissimilar and unequal manner that includes a mother's primary responsibility for their child's survival.

There are significant, often blanket, assumptions, expectations, and prescriptions around commitment to this relationship. These speak to how the relationship should be enacted and develop. These 'rules' are numerous and often conflicting: consider 'attachment parenting' and authoritative parenting; intensive mothering or the permissive mum in modern mothering myths. While most relationships are layered with expectations and prescriptions, the mother/child relationship is particularly vulnerable. These spoken, unspoken, sensed, repressed, and challenged rules are born of familial, organisational, social, cultural, economic, political, religious, and historical forces. In other words, they are not easily dismissed. Rules remain unrelaxing across the lifespan of the relationship. This mother/child 'us' is a being-in-relationship of a very particular kind.

While our focus may have been on maternal holding and the mothering it emerged from, our entangling identities as 'mother' in this research played a key role as well. Because we all identified as cis-gendered, heterosexual, and economically stable at the time of the research, if not necessarily well supported in our environments, there were many experiences we could not explore. For example, no mothers identified as trans male, gender fluid or gender independent. Asha Zappa (Linnell & Zappa, 2021) is a mother who "isn't a woman" (p.166) and who experiences mothering with pressures, challenges and tensions cis mothers do not encounter. As Roz Bellamy (2023) notes:

...my reality includes things like trolls on the internet saying disgusting things, getting used to people misgendering me, it's hearing them put gendered roles and assumptions onto my baby at such young age and realising that things haven't changed. All of this weakens me.

In a study that looked at Australian Indigenous mothers' experiences of an early-intervention program and their ideas of motherhood, one mother noted: "I have purpose now" (Ussher et al., 2016, p.5). Another noted: "We want to give our kids a better life and that needs to be recognized" (p.5). While it is possible that there may be overlap in maternal experiences of purposeful holding here, there are many intersecting and intra-acting identities and experiences that contribute to self-as-mother and what holding may mean. These nuanced and dynamic experiences of maternal holding have not been captured in the inquiry and the 'us' may be experienced very differently, if at all, across and within different entanglements of identities.

Further, the mother/child 'us' incorporates and develops the co-creative agency of mother, child, and their relationship. There is a well-established context of emphasising the maternal role in the development of the child. In attachment research, where holding is a key practice, the mother/child relationship is considered fundamental to the child's physical, psychological, and social development, and their ability to engage in future relationships (Ainsworth et al., 1978/2005; Bowlby, 1958; George et al., 1985; Moore et al., 2017; Siegel, 1999; Winnicott, 1960).

However, the role of the child or relationship in the *mother's* development is not emphasised in this earlier attachment literature. Kraemer (1996) writes:

...recognizing the mother's subjectivity requires that we recognize the ways in which the baby serves as an object to the mother's needs. This includes fully acknowledging the critical ways in which the mother is nourished by her baby's confirmation of her usefulness. (p.781),

It also includes fully acknowledging the ways in which the mother is nourished by their relationship with their maturing child. More-recent attachment research has recognised that significant relationships can be developed within *non-maternal* relationships and across the life span (Field, 1996). The mothers in this inquiry, including myself, experienced intense and beneficial relational reconfigurations with our children.

Importantly, we did not explore our holding experiences through the lens of attachment. In *Annihilation*, Jeff VanderMeer (2014) writes:

The first astronomers to think of points of light not as part of a celestial tapestry revolving around the earth but as individual planets had had to wrench their imaginations – and thus their analogies and metaphors – out of a grooved track that had been running through everyone's minds for hundreds and hundreds of years. (p.113)

As art-based researchers and therapists, we have a distinct opportunity to 'wrench our imaginations' from an attachment narrative to something embracing and moving within the multiplicities of identities that intertwine with *mothering*. As Linnell & Zappa (2021) note, there is a "linear narrative [that] smooths over and threatens to erase the complexities and contradictions of non-conformity and queerness, restoring normative order to what might otherwise disrupt the time and place of 'our' lives" (p.167). Working with and valuing arts expression supports us in interrogating assumptions and identifying ghostly and unimagined conceptual, experiential, and relational threads in our weaving of maternal holding.

The qualities of the mother/child 'us' vary in intensity, duration, and manifestation at different stages of the relationship. Their living textures, shifting areas of attention and tension, as well as joys and understandings, continuously form the history of the relationship and actively drive the present and the future.

It is important to note that mother/child intersubjective experience was not always blissful or desired. The 'us' was also experienced as devastating, frustrating, boring, frightening, threatening, chaotic, and confusing. The relationship was frequently challenging and painful, sometimes even immediately after an expansive moment of 'us'. Holding could be physically restraining and engaged with anger. It emerged quickly that there were qualities of holding that we cherished and that these felt central to our experiences of holding overall, and so we chose to focus our inquiry into these. An inquiry into restrictive holding, for example, may produce a sense of being-in-relationship, but that 'us' might be very different from the one described here.



Figure 9. Ariel Moy, *A porous us*, 2017, felt-tip pen on paper, 37 × 12.5mm.



Figure 10. Ariel Moy, *Relational intensities*, 2020, felt-tip pen on paper, 37 × 12.5mm.

At the time of the research, our experiencing of the ‘us’ generated benefits for participants and me, suggesting possibilities in therapeutic practice. For example, when working with a mother around their relationship with their child we will likely encounter the mother’s own childhood experiences as they play out with their child, in other relationships, and with us. All of the mothers in this inquiry had difficult experiences with their own mothers. When love has been equated with fear, suffering, ambivalence, anxiety, or dissociation, it can be painful to attend to the love that is present between mother and child. As practitioners we may compassionately point out where and how we see that love, but this can be received by mothers as confronting, shaming, and/or confusing. When we attended to the mother/child relationship and combined that with a non-conceptual, creative approach, mothers were given the opportunity for spaciousness around that love. We were speaking with and to a third entity, the relationship, as well as the art expressions of that relationship. When it is painful to give or receive love, our first forays around that bond can be mediated by attending to something that is of both of us and more than us: the relationship and how it is expressed.

In this inquiry we came to a recognition that both mother and child give and receive, contribute to and benefit from, relational purpose and co-navigation of needs. Both mother and child co-create malleable and supportive stories of relationship. Both mother and child may experience, in their own ways, expansive moments of profound connection. Our research offers the possibility that mothers might consider the ways they are not alone, radically so, in what can be a very challenging, heartbreaking, and meaningful lifelong relationship. A turn to relational experiencing and knowing can complement and enrich our sense of self-as-mother, and self-in-relationship, and help us identify precious moments of ‘us’.

Our 'us' blooms with multiplicity: Leaning into a new way of inquiring

My experiences and understanding of the mother/child 'us' have evolved since the initial inquiry. The possible snail-trails of exploration appear multidimensional and infinite, and this brings deep satisfaction with it. In the remainder of this article, I seek to trace some of the rich, rapid, rhizomatic, and at times overwhelming, experiencing that has emerged along new snail-trails of inquiry into maternal holding and the 'us'.

I began inquiring through drawing in late 2020 with an attention to what felt alive in the 'us' – whether enacted, dreamed, anticipated, imagined, or feared. This corresponds with my son becoming an adolescent, the Coronavirus pandemic, inhabiting online spaces and, and, and...



Figure 11. Ariel Moy, *Love* (# 17 in the *Maternal holding* series), 2021, felt-tip pen on paper, 210 × 295mm.

The snails and antennae in my drawings invited me into a 'what' and 'how' of becoming 'us' by slowing me down. The 'walk' of im/possible snails inhabiting my imagination is silvery with life, bristling with generativity and progressively alien to me in the best of ways. In this pausing, I engage with emerging artworks in co-agential 'snailing'. We meander, lean into and away from experiential and imaginal horizons. Our human-snail antennae feel into our worlds as a ponderous tracing. This appeared in the process of selecting inks to create intricate outlines and patterns, and then imagining into possible colours to fill those spaces.

I am aware of whether the local snails are in shade on hot days or erupting in slow motion from flooded drains. I look, think, and question differently, moving from my original qualitative approach to a dilatory dance with elements of post-qualitative inquiry (PQI). St Pierre (2017) notes that working from a grounding of PQI asks the inquirer to be "truly experimental" (p.3), to stay with what is always moving, to be open to surprise and explore difference.



Figure 12. Ariel Moy, *Our expanse* (# 20 in the *Maternal holding* series), 2021, felt-tip pen on paper, 210 × 295mm.

In this new ecosystem I feel myself as snail at the edges, looking out/in/around. I expand from valuing intersubjectivity to intra-activity; from the possibility of durable truths to intensities of being and knowing that emerge within human and more-than-human relationships at different times and in different configurations. I choose to ‘read’ experiences through multiple ‘texts’ to find places of overlap, newness, intensity, and difference that interrupt and problematise my questions and assumptions. This latter may be captured in the practice of diffractive analysis (Barad, 2007; Hill, 2019; Mazzei, 2014). As Mazzei (2014) writes:

A diffractive analysis functions to move me away from habitual normative readings that zero in on sameness toward the production of readings that disperse and disrupt thought... it takes a rhizomatic (rather than hierarchical and linear shape) form that leads in different directions and keeps analysis and knowledge production on the move. (p.743)

Today I work toward a “thicker account” (Akomolafe, 2017, p.118) – an increasingly rich and textured description or “gathering” (Todres, 2007, p.28) of what we notice about holding from within our multiplicities of relationships and time. I am increasingly aware that what my son and I bring to our ‘us’ vibrantly knots around and within our many other relationships in the world. The unfolding differences alive in our developing relationship combine with spaciousness to include a tentative joy and curiosity. The sometimes accretive, sometimes eruptive development of ‘us’ happens micro- and macroscopically. My son, our relationship and I all contribute and receive, but I notice and value our porosity more now. Even so, in my drawings I play with detail and spaciousness, staying with the struggle inherent in my continued choice of felt-tip pens to try and show overlap and entanglement. This feels meaningful, as Haraway (2016) notes: “It matters what thoughts think thoughts... It matters what stories tell stories” (p.35). And it matters what materials and their humans come together to make art.

I am immensely privileged to have had these experiences and opportunities and to be able to continue exploring our ‘us’. The topic is as urgent for me now as the day I first held my son. It might be that this changing approach to research and living also reflects the way our ‘us’ is now alive with young adulthood. The holding is very different.

Ted Chiang (2002) writes, in *Stories of Your Life* (on which the 2016 movie *Arrival* was based):

It won't have been that long since you enjoyed going shopping with me; it will forever astonish me how quickly you grow out of one phase and enter another. Living with you will be like aiming for a moving target; you'll always be further along than I expect. (p.138)

I assumed we'd feel rapid relational changing most keenly during the explicit physical development from infancy to childhood, the lengthening of limbs, the mobility, the acceleration of language, but the ethico-onto-epistem-ological evolutions that accompany adolescence are explosive. I did not understand this or have language for this until it intensified in my everyday awareness.



Figure 13. Ariel Moy, *Us entangling past present future* (# 23 in the *Maternal holding* series), 2021, felt-tip pen on paper, 210 × 295mm.

My drawings formed as a way of sense-making and as micro-resistances to cultural prescriptions of mother/son distance equated with agency and well-being (Dooley & Fedele, 1999). They emerged from conversations with others and in the tidal waves and ripples of interactions with my son. In this maelstrom of mattering, I began asking new questions in relationship with materials and spaces, with body and sense. I recognised that any answers may be fleeting in the mad fluidity of our times together. I invited a cacophony of 'voices' from the shuffling of my son's foot to the pain in my neck, from tiny words speedily shared to the silent appreciation of Frank Ocean's music on drives. I'm starting to notice qualities of holding that feel different – elusive, not formed, fugitive, rhizomatic and underground. I try to be okay with being a human-snail when I least expect or desire it.

I reconsider the 'data' that emerged in the research and how the 'us' that occupies me in this moment emerged with it. As Rautio and Vladimirova (2017) write: "The study of interdependencies between our researcher-human selves and the other humans, nonhuman beings and things, events, ideas and materials cannot but change us" (p.28). Their suggestion that data be considered a 'companion' resonates strongly, as from this understanding "more emotions, affects and complexity is added to research practices" (p.31). In relationship with "befriended" (p.24) data I inquire differently, aware of new relational fields present and possible. Data, as Denzin (2017) writes, "are verbs, processes made visible through the performative acts of the inquirer... data have agency" (p.90). I wonder about the agency that is building here between you and me, reader, what might that bring?



Figure 14. Ariel Moy, *Iterative choices in the unknown* (# 25 in the *Maternal holding* series), 2021, felt-tip pen on paper, 210 × 295mm.

Tentative antennae: Offerings from a place of 'us' for now

A small me, sitting with Nan in Aunty Nelly's house. Floral wallpaper, ceramic swans and heavy wood side-tables accompany us as we watch the 1967 Dr Doolittle movie on the small telly. I can only remember the thrall of the giant pink sea snail, a living home both snug and spacious and, most importantly, slow...

Me now pregnant with space; human-snails leaning in and son-creature leaning out.



Figure 15. Ariel Moy, *The space we create* (# 39 in the *Maternal holding* series), 2022, felt-tip pen on paper, 210 × 295mm.

The poem, *A Tracing of Us*, below is formed as my son and I shed some of the shapes of our relationship so far. Images arise around what appears and ‘subterrains’ in our shared spaces – brief conversations, extended silences, tense standoffs experienced across different rooms and followed by hours of *détente*, and *sometimes that familiar camaraderie*. I want to understand or perhaps acknowledge these spaces.

I sit with my laptop on our living room floor and Google search images as they spontaneously emerge into awareness. My antennae let me know when an image feels right, a pause in consciousness. I copy and paste images until the cycling stops and I am still. I finish with imagery from the movie *Arrival* (Villeneuve, 2016), and I know that it speaks to something about pain and longing and wanting to translate a strange new language of ‘us’.

I select words through a process of recording myself describing the images, and from these words and imagery, I cluster. This is a MIECAT procedure of reducing the wealth of data generated in art-based research to groupings according to a felt sense of resonance and relationships in the moment. This includes consonance, dissonance or in between; relationships of colour or texture, shadows, shapes; emotional tones; semantic sympathies or antagonisms; sensations that arise in response to them and to their possibilities. I cluster numerous times so that space is allowed for differences and relationships to emerge. I’m sensing through my human-snail.

When I experience a pause with this, I work to capture significant or key qualities, imagery, sensations, emotions, or words to hold these clusters as a form of reduction for now. From this process the poem emerges... here it is, at the moment...

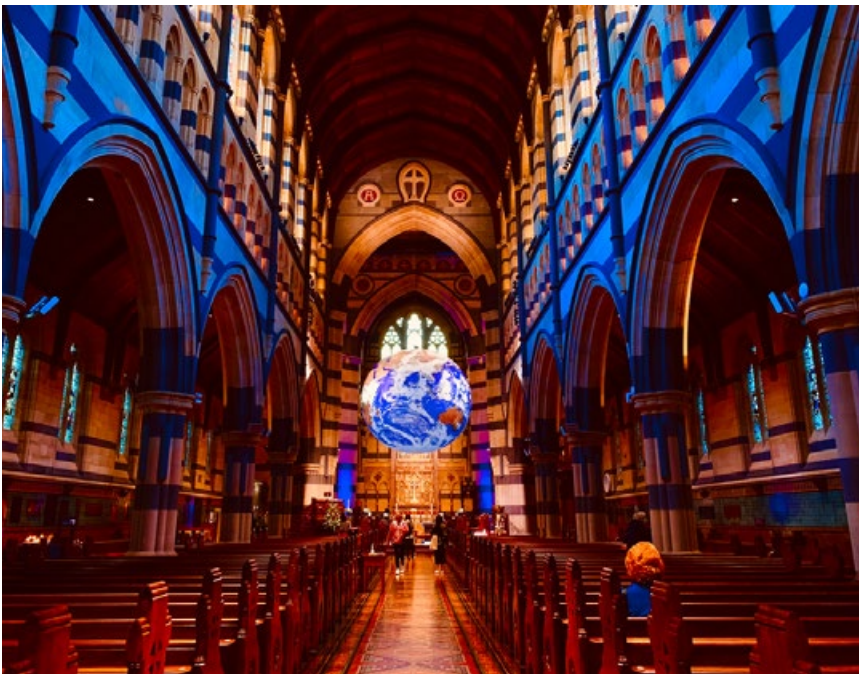


Figure 16. Ariel Moy, Luke Jerram's Gaia at St Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne, 2022, digital photograph.

A Tracing of Us

In our time these shared walls,
Blossom into windows,
We see now, a vaulted ceiling,
Of our making.

Breathing in an endless orange,
Of sunset all at once.
We shimmer out of this temple,
Into the cooling dusk.

On a shared horizon, an event,
We view together.
Our senses overlapping,
Heightened so briefly and stretching back in time.

An atmosphere,
Crackling with us.
We tread spaces, temporalities, wilds,
Far from cities.

A quiet language speaks:
'We are necessary here' and,
'Stay with the trouble,' [1]
It is who we are.

We are massive and particulate shiftings,
Within, around, and away,
From other vitalities,
We pause for a moment.

With iron, stone, coloured glass
Across our palms,
We are still ribbons of dust,
Leaning into and leaving a mother/child 'us' anew.

We are just this:
A flux of contact,
A creation electric,
A slowing we form for each other.

Within corridors of our present moment,
We exhale.
In the pause between our breaths,
Our 'us' closes their ponderous doors.

Our destinations plural again,
Paths igniting,
Away from mother and child,
To other orbits.

Fleeting figurings,
The gravities of you and I,
My son,
Are achingly different.

We are brilliant with,
Separate filaments,
Lit by vibrant matterings,
Again, and again, and again.

And here, a night's snail trail...
A tracing of us.



Figure 17. Ariel Moy, *There is space we make for us anew* (# 42 in the *Maternal holding* series), 2022, felt-tip pen on paper, 210 × 295mm.

Holding our 'us' in flux and ambiguity...

While these expressions are meaningful to me and fluctuate in intensities of value, I am aware that there is a familiar quality to them, and I want to encourage unfamiliar practices to see what might appear. I was at home within the qualitative paradigm but now that I have a beginning language for the vitality, dynamism, and openness bubbling in the PQI paradigm – an approach that appears to speak directly with our experiencing – I want to walk with/in it for a while.



Figure 18. Ariel Moy, *Slow down*, 2022, felt-tip pen on paper, digital photograph from behind, 55 × 120mm.

I decide to head out into choppy waters to see if I can describe the ephemerality and intra-activity in the present moment of our mother/child 'us'. I recognise that I am off the map... and this feels appropriate to the ongoing 'making it up' of mothering and childing.



Ariel Moy, *A walk of im/possible snails*, 2023, video, 4:20 min.

Note: This video incorporates sounds by Nigel Good (Simply Space) and Marcel Gnauk (World Sounds) accessed from 99Sounds.org.

This video can be viewed on the *JoCAT* website:

<https://www.jocat-online.org/v-23-moy>

A tender tracing and a pause...

Bayo Akomolafe (2018) says that “ideas are not cognitive things, thoughts are not cognitive, they’re ecological things”. The mother/child ‘us’ is deeply ecological; we thrive and shrivel within a cartography of porous relational terrains. We’re a flux within fluxes, a communion and repulsion within other intra-actions. We trace im/possible paths.

I imagine that the experience of expansion that first alerted the mothers and me, through sensation and artmaking, to the ‘us’ will continue in a multiplicity of configurations far outside our present understanding. I’ve attempted to illuminate some of the bits of experiencing and knowing that have caught my attention and allowed me, ‘us’, and the human-snail to pause with them awhile. I recognise that this has left in shadow millions of other possible matterings. Perhaps you will touch these and perhaps we’ll meet and share stories of holding, mothering, being or not being mothered, childing, and ‘us’.

As I bring this article to a close, I’m alerted (with thanks to Maria Popova’s *The marginalian*) to Olga Tokarczuk’s speech *The tender narrator* (The Nobel Prize, 2018). In it, I find rich commonalities with my abiding passion. Tokarczuk writes of photographs, mothering, childing, and antennae. The words that stick are right near the beginning, where as a child Olga asks her mother about a photograph taken before she was born. Her mother always responds by saying that “she was sad because I hadn’t been born yet, yet she already missed me” (para.2). This gave Olga the gift of mattering, and for me, I see an extension of the ‘us’ across space and time.

The traces that remain from my walk of im/possible snails might say this: Expanding into ‘us’ requires tenderness but also a willingness to not know where you’re going, what you’re doing, and why you’re doing it. It is exquisitely hard. What matters is how we ‘us’ and how an ‘us’ can hold mother and child in multiplicity. Even when we’re running headlong into the unknown... very un-snail-like.



Figure 20. Ariel Moy, *Running*, 2022, digital photograph.

Endnote

[1] From Donna Haraway's *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene* (2016).

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