

# 25th Anniversary Issue on Mothering and Motherhood

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## Maternal Conversations in Paper, Drawing, and Poetry: A Changing Mother-Child “Us”

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*As a small arts-based inquiry, this article speaks to the production of a collage that prompted a poem exploring mothering transitions as a child becomes an adult. The intense relational changes alive within the mother-child “us” (Moy, *An Arts* 134) are amplified in these artworks to approach sense-making differently. A maternal experience of privilege, unknowing and awe unfurls within the changing mother-child “us”. This is contextualized within a new materialist ethico-onto-epistemology (Barad 185) and the expansive field of mothering studies.*

Researching mothers’ experiences of holding their children across the lifespan and working therapeutically with mothers and mothering experiences of my own drew my attention to the intensive relational changes alive within what I call the mother-child “us” (Moy, *An Arts* 183; Moy, “A Walk of”). The “us,” which is neither a merging nor a diminishment of mother or infant, speaks to a strange sense of expansion across bodies, space, and time that can be experienced during pleasurable moments of mother-child intimacy. The “us” provides a felt glimpse into a fundamental relationality.

Inhabiting an arts-based professional world, I find that its underlying work values, practices, and conceptualizations regularly exceed their place, spilling randomly into my personal life. With my son approaching adulthood (and becoming an adult during the making of this work), my hands gravitate to old magazines and scraps of paper with urgent questions about our relational identity now. This work has produced a collage (Figure 1), which also resulted in the poem “homes.”

I employ a multimodal arts and emergent inquiry approach (Lett 27) across my various living contexts. This approach may conjure notions of intellectual doings in the professional realm and affective bodily doings in domestic spaces as if these spaces could be separated. A new materialist or posthumanist

worldview interrupts the distance between the two, instead exploring how the discursive and material, the cultural and natural, and the present, past, and future are wildly entangled (Barad 28; Braidotti *Posthuman Knowledge* 47; Haraway 13). I experience this entangling in real-time and colour as I try to explore an elusive and inarticulate shifting in my relationship with my son while next door the young twins protest their bathtime. The infants' noise takes me out of my forward thinking and back to my warm new son held carefully in his little bath. In those moments, in that holding, we were more than mother and son; we were fleetingly an "us." What intrigues me is that while this kind of holding has changed—I see less of my growing son and hear even less about his world—the feeling of "us" remains. This "us" is relationally active, agitating, awesome, and not quite known.

I invite you to engage with this article in any order. You might like to linger with some of the conceptual, practical, or contextual agencies at play in constructing the collage and poem. Or you might prefer to spend time with the artwork alone. However you choose to approach this work, I hope that you'll lean into sensing the strange relational experience of a mother-child "us"—the "us" of my son and me or the "us" of you and the many other possible "us" experiences alive in your world as a child or mother.

### **New Materialism and an Ethico-Onto-Epistemology: Holding the Inquiry**

New materialism is a term that loosely gathers diverse approaches to being, becoming, and knowing that nevertheless have significant understandings in common (Sanzo par. 1). Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin note that the new materialist movement "traverses and thereby rewrites thinking *as a whole* ... redirecting every possible idea according to its new sense of orientation" (13). This is well captured in Karen Barad's concept of an "ethico-onto-epistemology" (185). For Barad, being and knowing are fundamentally entangled. As such, when we consider cultural or discursive practices like language, aesthetic representation, and politics, we are producing realities instantaneously. There is an entangling of discourse and matter that sees language, writing, artmaking, and conceptualization, for example, as matterings—that is, material acts with material consequences. This idea has been partially explored in postmodern social constructionist feminism (Hekman) with meaningful gains in our political understanding and activism in feminist, LGBTQIA+ and antiracist movements. However, Barad troubles the hierarchical binaries between meaning and matter, mind and body, human and nonhuman, culture, and nature (185) by removing culture from its privileged position in postmodern approaches. If we accept the claim, for example, that motherhood is an institution serving patriarchal and capitalist desires (Rich), it shapes how we understand motherhood (an epistemology) and what we agree is real and possible for mothers (an ontology). Knowing comes to matter.

Conversely, embracing an ethico-onto-epistemology means that material realities—such as the kind of food, shelter, financial stability, transport, health, and education a mother has access to—construct what they come to know and imagine is possible of mothering. The consequence of such a radically entwined ontology and epistemology is that every act of knowing is an act of being and becoming and therefore an ethical doing (Barad 185).

Another aspect of new materialist thought relevant to this article is the contention that “matter is produced and productive, generated and generative ... [it] is agentive, not a fixed essence or property of things” (Barad 137). Materiality is taken seriously in this approach, and I, as a human, interact with the more-than-human in mutually agentive ways. For example, the materiality of the houses and hands on the collage, the paper, scissors, and adhesive, as well as the table I worked with and the lighting in the room, produce a collage that, in turn, can matter. Barad’s “intra-action” describes the entangling of multiple phenomena to produce agency—in this case, the agential collage. This collage can do things; agency does not remain with the artist. The agencies that intra-acted to produce the collage are human but also include the more-than-human. Consonant with Sara Ahmed’s queer phenomenology, I recognize that these material more-than-human agencies oriented me as much as I oriented them (3). We engage in a cocreative intra-action to produce what unfolds now on the page (or screen).

With the term “posthuman,” Rosi Braidotti passionately shifts our conceptual grounding from the “centrality of the human—as Man and as *Anthropos* ... the old dualities” (*Posthuman Knowledge* 8) to experiencing and becoming “materially embedded and embodied, differential, affective and relational” (*Posthuman Knowledge* 11). This resituating of human agency within multiple relationalities picks up again on a new materialist intra-active ontology, which speaks powerfully to my conceptualization, experience, and practice of a mother-child “us.”

Intimate moments with my son have consistently materialized a felt experience of an expansive, more than mother and child identity. Our moments of loving holding have dissolved the binaries of self and other and provided a glimpse into our relational becoming as “us” across space, place, and time (Moy, “A Walk of”). This does not refuse or obscure the many other experiences of self across multiple other relationships, including relationships with other humans and the more-than-human. For example, my son has a living and durational experience of self-with-camera that is not fully knowable to me, as he inhabits another entangling of relationalities as a photographer. Knowing and ethics are viscerally active in the relational mother-child “us” without collapsing a generative awareness of difference—within our evolving “us,” between our “us,” and the many other possible relationships we may inhabit.

## The Importance of the Gerund: Creative Explorations in Mothering

Mothering is a relational unfolding of tangible, daily importance for me, as it entangles with my doing, thinking, feeling, sensing, hoping, fearing, and making. It did not start well. Experiencing a brutal and debilitating postnatal depression (Moy, “Experiencing” 32), the only book I had access to at the time was Brooke Shields’s *Down Came the Rain: My Journey through Postpartum Depression*. That more-than-human agency was a lifeline, an umbilical cord to another mother’s voice in the absence of my mother. Mothering erupted my sense of self, place, and time and alerted me to the extraordinary load motherhood as an institution (Rich) placed upon those who mother across personal, familial, social, cultural, and historical dimensions.

The chaos, despair and possibility I experienced as a new mother are powerfully evoked in Lisa Baraitser’s writing on “interrupted” maternal subjectivities (67). My sense of sovereign being was irrevocably interrupted by fragmented and minimal sleep, breastfeeding, hormonal fluctuations, altered practices across domestic and professional spheres, and the frequent experience of responding to the needs of my infant. These interruptions produced a tangibly different way of being with and in the world. As becoming a mother “with all her multiplicities and intensities” (Baraitser 158), my formerly agential “I” became a fluctuating subjectivity of “viscosity” but also “heightened sentience” (Baraitser 4). Regularly interrupted, I experienced beyond a single self to think, feel, act, and sense from a startlingly different subjectivity: the relational “us.”

As we emerged from those early months of newness and strange relational configurations, I progressively explored—from a place of intense need—many artistic and academic voices that agitated and enriched my vision of mothering. I examined and remade my experiences through maternal lenses touching on Donald Winnicott’s “good enough” mother/ing; Abigail Palko and Andrea O’Reilly’s “monstrous mother/ing”; Lisa Marchiano’s “dark mother/ing”; Sharon Hays’s “intensive mother/ing”; Erich Neumann’s “archetypal Great Mother/ing”; and my mothering from an “us” standpoint. In *Acts of Creation: On Art and Motherhood*, Hettie Judah writes of the different uses and imaginaries of motherhood through Western history, including depictions speaking to mothers as sensuous, virtuous, happy, fallen, political, anxious, working, racialized, and sexualized (47–80). In the artworks offered to amplify these uses, I see my maternal entanglements leaning towards and resisting multiple prescriptions and images of mothering. At times, these have been generative and at others, painfully reductive.

As the internet became more accessible, I discovered the books and articles of Demeter Press (founded a year before my son was born in 2006) and purchased O’Reilly’s *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings* published a year after

my son was born. These were accompanied by mothering blogs, books and articles, Instagram reels, advertising, and deep dives into such topics as third-wave feminism, maternal health campaigns, John Bowlby's attachment theory, and O'Reilly's matricentric feminism. Tatjana Takševa writes that matricentric feminism develops through a "critical consciousness allowing those who mother to achieve greater degrees of autonomy, agency, and authenticity in their motherwork" (191). In my therapeutic practice, lived experience, and research, motherwork emerges from and returns to a particular relational mother-child "us" that continues to evolve in intra-actions with cultural and material more-than-human agencies.

Over the last eighteen years, I have attempted to make sense of conflicting, fascinating, impenetrable, hopeful, and blatantly manipulative and enticing images of mothering through drawing, collage, and writing. The collage I created in this article is indebted to the many voices and images celebrating and rejecting my mothering, offering respite, meaning, disruptions, and challenges.

Exploring matrescence, Lucy Jones reflects on quantum entanglement, the same phenomenon that inspired Barad's ethico-onto-epistemology. She writes: "Quantum entanglement involves two or more particles becoming connected to each other in such a way that their properties cannot be described individually anymore" (220). This speaks to the strange, frequent, and fleeting experience of the mother-child "us" perspective that emerged from my research on maternal holding. I cannot refer to my son without the lens of my mothering; my son cannot refer to me without the lens of his "childing." I can speak and conceptualize the many other worlds we inhabit separately from our relationship, but I cannot describe us as a mother or child individually anymore. We are entangled in this unique relationship without diminishing our many other relationships. Art has helped me understand that.

Stories—visual, spoken, written—are where I find myself and our mother-child "us" most alive so, I have offered two kinds of stories here. These are invitations rather than representations—an act I find impossible now. Experiences and agencies (like the phenomenon of my 'self') are dynamic and relational unfoldings that resist representation (Vannini 1) in a new materialist worldview. As Angela Garbes writes: "I see the unfurling of tissue and viscera, the way our placenta, unravelled, would occupy miles of space ... we're unfolding, always. It's a dialogue that will last a lifetime, maybe longer" (231). It is a conversation that has never been static and never will be.

## Collage as Inquiry

Along with many artists who work with visual possibilities, I sensed myself slipping outwards, incorporating and being incorporated by the materials, which could only find expression in the collage. As Erin Manning writes, “The medieval definition of art  $\frac{3}{4}$  defined as ‘the way,’ ‘the manner’ (locates) art not at the level of finished object but in its trajectory” (53). I stay with the stream of many creative possible trajectories worlding different worlds (Haraway 58). This is a mattering entangled with the more-than-human that is porous and populated with “productive zig zagging” (Braidotti, “Posthuman” 8) and unexpected outcomes. I cannot take charge.

The choice to collage as inquiry was prompted by its ability to “address complex intersections, work simultaneously with varied data, allow for contradictions, and reconfigure knowledges and norms” (Rijke 305). Like my experience of mothering as a strange expansion of subjectivities, I needed a medium that could incorporate different imagery and media to stay with the vast and complex not knowing of maternal love.

I wanted to explore, in relationship with materials, those things that were felt, subterranean, and not yet amenable to words, consonant with Victoria Scotti and Nancy Gerber’s exploration of the “beyond words” phenomena experienced by first-time mothers (1). I trusted that multimodal arts exploration would, for example, concretize “abstract content or statement(s) into a tangible form that can be physically perceived, experienced, and related to” (Witte et al. 17). I understood that the artwork would be capable of holding multiple and evolving meanings (Leavy 27). I knew from experience that attending to the process of making would bring relationalities and textures into my awareness, enriching the work’s generativity (Woodford 142).

I selected each material and shape by paying attention to my embodied experience and leaning into the relationalities of the moment through sensorial, haptic, kinaesthetic, and affective affordances. Les Todres notes that the body “inhabits situations intimately” (20). It is a source of Eugene Gendlin’s “felt sense”—a “single (though often puzzling and very complex) bodily feeling” (33) of the present moment. If we give ourselves space to attend to our felt sensing at the moment, we can form something in multiple modalities, generating sense-making, insight, significance, or meaning. We can move something from inchoate human and more-than-human intra-actions into a shareable and expressive form. I listened for a felt sense of rightness as it moved along my arms, the scissors, the pencil, paper, magazines, and the collage base.

Collage as inquiry was also embraced because of its enormous capacity to “uncover the problems themselves, suggestive of a ‘readiness’ for emergent learning and knowing” (Rijke 305). I did not know the question to ask about the changes in our mother-child relationship; I only had a feeling of needing

to find out more. As Jerry Rosiek notes, “The practice of art involves the cultivation of a receptivity to a phenomenon or an experience which brings with it a condition of vulnerability to being changed by it” (640). That ability to invite, support, and agitate for a change of being and knowing is part of the client’s and researcher’s process in arts-based fields of inquiry.

Some of the collaged houses are built of memories as they arise in the present, and some are built of desire. I do not know whether the hands reach towards or away from one another in this two-dimensional space. I do know that my son and I are “only one of many forces that compose the distributed agency of an event” (Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* 134), the event of mothering and “childing” on the brink of adulting. This relational unfolding reaches into the past and the future. As Christina Sharpe writes, “I learned to see in my mother’s house. I learned how not to see in my mother’s house. How to limit my sight to the things that could be controlled” (85). I imagine my mother’s house where I might have learned if we had shared a roof longer than my first eighteen months. I consider the absence of that house and what it has taught me, and I encounter the house I mother in now as an invitation and a limitation for myself and my son.

Bringing words to the collage is another zigzag on this journey of sense-making, getting lost, inviting, and being invited by materials to make and be differently. The process is hard to shape in words, perhaps because it acknowledges the ongoing process of becoming a mother. Nora Bateson’s description of aphanipoiesis meets this experiencing generatively: “The idea of a constant coalescing of perceptions and experiences that are not distinguished from one another but rather form a hum or a resonance of meaning-making into which a new sensation or idea lands” (173). My poem “homes” brings linguistic shape to the hum, alive with new sensations and ideas.

Poetry is an act of remembrance and creation that takes up only a little space, considering the potential power of its presence. I can form a poem in fragments of time, and I can offer it to you without asking for hours of your day. It is an art modality respectful of the discombobulating interruptions and elongations of mothering. As Audre Lorde writes, poetry “is the one which is the most secret, which requires the least physical labour, the least material, and the one which can be done between shifts, in the hospital pantry, on the subway, and on scraps of surplus paper” (97). Yet “poetry is not a luxury” (7); it is a form of survival, strength, courage, articulation, dream, and risk.

Through collage and poetry, I become, for a moment, intelligible to myself. Bayo Akomolafe evocatively writes: “Intelligibility is an ontological performance of the world in its ongoing articulation. It is not a human-dependent characteristic but a feature of the world in its differential becoming” (379–80). This world of our mother-child “us” has many ecosystems, homes, temporalities, spatialities, hands, and pearls. Some of these I know, and many lie just across the threshold of a house we have not yet lived in.



**Figure 1.** Ariel Moy, *A Homing Instinct*, 2024, Mixed media collage, 11.7 x 16.5 inches.

## homes

It took longer  
For the infant hand  
Drawn with lead pencil for night  
To meet the collage.

Layered carefully,  
On a magazine Milky Way,  
Each imagined fingerprint,  
Traces Nan's old pearls.

Mother and child,  
Housed uncomfortably,  
in the infrastructure,  
of identities.

I was too fragmented to even  
silhouette a home.  
Wayward memories puffed up,  
And spiked certainty.

Now here shaped and taped,  
on an expanse of white,  
A mama less than archival,  
But making space, place, duration.

We are imperfectly seeded,  
many actions and cycles before,  
Always exceeding ourselves,  
Lingering michrochimerisms, DNA.

Sweet and sour infancies,  
Ghosed as we grow.  
Now ginger buds through floorboards,  
Scent histories over tea.

Drop-offs and pick-ups,  
Ruptures and repairs,  
as the traffic lights relinquish their,  
red and orange to a green glass, go.

A parliament of doings,  
Now stretched in multiverse,  
meeting and loosening,  
no promises given.

I can't hold this smoke  
undulating or noxious  
carbon and particulate misting  
Into a dim unknown.

Textures of "us"  
Sprout and decay,  
A false mitosis as we become,  
Wide and gliding.

I want soft landings  
For you, atmospheres,  
Spiced for making kin,  
Simmering possibility.

Gazing through the window,  
When the visit is over.  
Resisting the cold cups,  
Unlearning the past.

Our “us” is,  
straw, wood, and brick,  
Microbial matterings,  
More-than Polaroids.

On A3 canvases,  
I map artifacts of you,  
but you tear these anchored portraits,  
And I am fierce with awe.

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