

Apple Threads: Holding Past and Present

Ariel Moy

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Apple Threads

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He ate the seeds,
Those orchards,
Autumn through you,
Now.

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*ethico-onto-
epistemology,*

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loss

Gold-fed fruits,
Nurture your gaze,
Swift sweet moments,
Once held in a red box.

Suitcases murmur,
A hint of becoming,
Plums blossom and rouge,
Our cirrus clouds.

Pages rustle through all the stories,
With mops swept across concrete floors,
Worlds at war,
Still, our books kept safe.

Glass and mirrors,
Occupy your grown hands,
Light captured and drawn,
Threaded with apples and dragons.

Citation Link

We are vibrant,
now.

Abstract

Apple Threads explores a mother's relationship with her newly adult son through poetry. The past and the present, self and other, are encountered through a non-binary lens. The poem is contextualised personally and alongside theoretical conceptualisations that privilege a relational, material and process ethico-onto-epistemology. This work hopes to evoke and provoke a thinking, doing and being differently. Significant relationships with loved ones who have died or who are no longer infants/toddlers/children, remain vibrant and agential in our present experiencing.

Holding Past and Present

Binaries compartmentalise experiencing, packing it away into two discrete piles, implying a single kind of tension dwelling between. The binaries unthreaded and loosened in this poem speak to a felt sense of living relation with those who have died and the luscious memory-senses animating infancies and childhoods long left behind. Ghosts thread with presence, suggesting a temporal and experiential immanence.

I wrote this poem for my son on his 18th birthday. Normally poems emerge and are captured in fragments on my phone, on the move, doing ‘all the other things’; a cacophony of briefly arrested present moments. Audre Lorde (2017) wrote:

Of all the art forms, poetry is the most economical. It 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 (p. 97).

On this occasion the words unspooled in a rapid burst of feeling, as if we met in the middle of the action. When Haraway (2016) writes that we should ‘stay with the trouble’, becoming thickens into a honeyed present and affords experiencing within ‘speculative middles’ (Springgay and Truman, 2017). This poem troubled my normal rabbit-holing mind; it made space in the scattering of experience and not/knowing, it stretched itself with me. The words were ripe.

Writing does things, it possesses a more-than-human and material agency (Barad, 2007, 2012; Bennett, 2010). For me, this poem animates the apple orchards and gold rush soils of my paternal grandmother and grandfather, both of whom worked in hospitals – my Pop as a psychiatric nurse in an asylum shut down long ago, my Nan as a cleaner. ‘Apple threads’ speaks also to the youth of my father and mother-in-law back in Malaysia, one an engineer, one a librarian. Their/our Taishanese surname means Plum Blossom but was Anglicised on arrival. In pinyin, it would be written *Mei*.

In *A Decolonial Feminism* (2021) Françoise Verges includes a portion of a collective text written by 30 artists and activists (including herself). They write: “We want to implement utopian thinking...a gesture of rupture: to dare to think beyond that which is presented as ‘natural,’ ‘pragmatic,’ or ‘reasonable’” (p. 83). I want to irritate the taken for granted notion that once a person or period in time has passed, that relationship loses its vitality. Both my nan and pop have passed and yet their being continues to become in me: Rippling across the face I see in the mirror, echoing in gestures I make towards arthritic hands no longer there to hold.

My son’s infancy is a lifetime away, entangling with both matrilineal and patrilineal lines. I still sense the softness of his infant onesie and feel the shaking floorboards as he careens down the hall finally released from toddlerhood and into my arms. These intercorporealities (Tanaka, 2015) are as present for me today as they were 18 and 16 years ago. They speak of embodied communications that informed and still inform our understanding of one another. I take these long ago “moods, atmosphere, and ambience of the interpersonal field” (Tanaka, 2015, p. 469) and weave them in the now, this is not intentional but spontaneous.

Threading words together here touches on my doctoral and ongoing research inquiring into the strange and precious expansion that can be felt when we hold our children. During what are experienced as positive moments of physical, psychological and emotional holding, the mothers in my

inquiry glimpsed a larger sense of self, a self-in-relationship or what I call the ‘mother/child us’ (Moy, 2022; Moy 2023). This experience is enriched by the understanding that the events from which identities percolate and emerge are fundamentally relational (Braidotti, 2019; Gergen, 2009) or intra-active (Barad, 2007). It is a visceral knowing and accessible, though hard to articulate within a cultural and historical yarning so tight that relational-being/becoming doesn’t make sense. We remain anchored conceptually in a binary of self and other.

Valorising agency as independent, as individual and separate, obscures this relational, somatic, affective and situated knowing. As Braidotti (2019) notes, humans are “materially embedded and embodied, differential, affective and relational” (p. 11). Our experiencing of autonomy and individuality is authentic, a story we live across all modalities of being and knowing, but it is a product of a reality that is deliciously intra-active. We make ‘agential cuts’ (Barad, 2007; 2014) so quickly and overwhelmingly that we forget what it is to become in/of/as the world. As Haraway notes, it matters what stories tell stories (2016, p. 35). The mother/child ‘us’ emerging from my research resisted the binaries of self and other and imagined instead agency emerging from relationships. When I write ‘our cirrus clouds’ and ‘we are vibrant’ I refer to the ‘us’. Autumn orchards, apples and dragons trouble past and present to offer an aliveness of then in the now.

Arts-Based Research can collage the ‘stories we live by’ (McAdams, 1997) bringing us into dialogue with materials and moments that matter (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Finlay, 2011; Leavy 2019; Lett, 2011; Moy, 2023, Rosiek, 2018). In the construction of this poem, imagery, scent and sound; touch, taste and movement are cut from experience, typed on a phone, converted to binary code and pasted into this document. Memories of stories, photographs, and a battered suitcase; linguistic practices, the composition of a camera and enduring desire shift complexly from me to you, a new co-creation of us.

The poem and I become together. This brings to mind Claire Carlisle’s (2011) evocative description of Spinoza’s metaphysics: “Each wave has its own shape that it holds for a certain time, but the wave is not separate from the sea and cannot be conceived to exist independently of it” (para. 7). Spinoza offers an affirmation of difference, each wave is a unique unfolding. This refuses a frozen dualism. Differences unfold as phenomena, a relational happening emerging from multiple histories; a genesis inseparable from the whole and yet always new. As Braidotti (2024) describes, we are “non-unitary...non-fixed, non-binary” (2023, p. 7 of 12). Further, the differences between the art and the artist are not hierarchical - human trumping the more-than-human. With this poem, I sense old loves differently, as flows, interruptions, and pauses in an ocean of us.

This poem holds a haunting that extends into the future, ghosts not only of those loved, lost and loved still (Moy & Szydlik, forthcoming 2025) but also of those of ‘us’ that once were and now are different. I recall my son as a child and myself as a first-time mother, his infancy warm and weighted against my chest, a blooming of the DNA and worlds of his/our ancestors as they moved across countries and time. These reveries are experienced as a present moment (Stern, 2004), carried along with the oxygen that keeps my heart beating. They are felt *now* and I am saturated in vitality contours (Stern, 1999), in the living relational experience of this moment. At the level of the present moment, there is no divide between past/present/future. Here we are spacetime-mattering, as Barad (2017) writes:

As a result of the iterative nature of intra-active practices that constitute phenomena, the “past” and the “future” are iteratively reconfigured and enfolded through one

another: phenomena cannot be located in space and time; rather, phenomena are material entanglements that “extend” across different spaces and times...Neither the past nor the future is ever closed (p. 389).

Relationships that are no longer material, come to matter. They have the capacity to do things. I wonder if this agency would constitute a valid production of knowledge in an old empiricism that conceptualises static, essential and anthropocentric ‘facts’ (St Pierre, 2004)...Or might these words and images instead resonate with/in a reader whose experience of a relationship no longer present remains tangible and meaningful for them? This resonance can cause cracks in the binaries of life and death, self and other. Bayo Akomolafe (2024, para. 6) writes:

Architects don't design \cracks\, don't anticipate \cracks\. \cracks\ are not part of the furniture; they are the excessiveness of the frame. Design's ecstasy...They are not 'solutions', not guarantees, not final answers. But something about 'them' marks deterritorializing tensions, and obliquely trace out new realities.

Through these cracks we taste fruits, sweet and tart, blooming and decaying; gritty irritants that pearl into an ‘us’ then, now and further.

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About the author

Ariel Moy, PhD, is an Art Therapist as well as an academic teacher, doctoral supervisor, author, and researcher. Her book *An Arts Therapeutic Approach to Maternal Holding* (Routledge) is tailored to clinicians working with mothers to develop their sense of self and relationship with their child. It introduces the concept of the mother/child 'us' and its practical applications.

www.holdingmatters.com

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