

Wendy Hollway

*Mum's over the Moon: Rough Verse and Surprise of the Real.*

### **Reflections relating to my own maternal experiences**

I am of the generation when my daughter, now in her late twenties and soon to marry, talks with me about what it might be like for her to become a mother for the first time. She knows that I think it is a life changing, profound and contradictory experience – an identity upheaval – for which no words nor training can prepare us. Yet becoming a mother is also commonplace (including high levels of post-natal depression) and women are expected just to get on with it, preferably with others' support, especially that of the new mothers' mothers, whose own maternal experience runs like a thread through the generations, whether recognised or not.

Bracha Ettinger (2006b) asks whether we can be open to the 'fragilization' which accompanies this 'trans-subjective' connection that defies language, when women in and after pregnancy – perhaps for ever – are, at one level, neither/both two/one. I remember feeling shocked by the change from being an autonomous woman who felt safe travelling the world, to a mother with a bundle of baby in a sling who was nervous about crossing the road. Such examples arose frequently in the research data (see Hollway 2011b). In my own experience, this fragilization was in one respect temporary; in another I lost forever the sense of having no responsibilities beyond myself (over time this extended beyond my daughter). Ettinger's perspective on fragilization captures this, albeit in a theoretical language, and puts it in an ethical perspective: 'a feminine-matrixial fragilizing self-relinquishment in the human, in terms of some kind of in-tension and ex-tension toward vulnerability, founds an ethical dimension by which the almost-Other infiltrates the subject' (2006a, p.111).

The 'Real' in Lacan's sense is impossible because it cannot be brought to symbolisation, and therefore the attempt to represent it is strictly a contradiction in terms. I use the idea loosely here, more close to what Kristeva means by the 'semiotic', something embodied that infuses speech through affective vitality. Nonetheless, Ettinger makes the idea of the Real more accessible to expression:

Extrapolating the latest revisions Lacan made to his theory of the Real and phantasy towards what seems its potential yet subversive continuity, Bracha Ettinger has been working to give form to a subjacent, sub-symbolic stratum of subjectivization that, nonetheless, has the effect of altering or expanding the symbolic itself (Pollock 2004, p.10).

According to matrixial theory (Ettinger 2006b; Pollock 2004; 2008), we are knowledgeable in this ‘feel-knowing’ way by virtue of starting out our lives in a trans-subjective mode of ‘subjectivity as encounter’ (Pollock 2004, p.6). This is never erased by the later development of an individualised stratum and the desires for autonomy that usually accompany it, especially in contemporary Western societies and Western gender relations (Layton 2004).

### **Methodology and method**

The ineffability of the stratum of embodied experience is also a challenge for research methodology. Ettinger describes its origins in terms of resonances, rhythms, strings, imprints, waves and vibrations, but how to research and communicate the unspeakable? This returns us to the surprise of the Real.

Ted Hughes, English poet, discovered that it was ‘rough verse’ that best preserved ‘the fresh simple presence of the experience’. When, in his journal, he ‘happened’ to write in rough verse:

I discovered something that surprised me. In verse, not only did I seem to move at once deeper and more steadily into reliving the experience, but every detail became much more important (Hughes 2008).

I wanted to preserve the ‘fresh simple presence’ of Juhana’s experience, not smooth it over with an expert researcher voice that risked losing its aliveness. Likewise, Laurel Richardson explained why, as a social science researcher, she switched to poetry in writing about her participants. Before, ‘even when the topic was ostensibly riveting, the writing style and reporting conventions were deadening’ (1992, p.131).

Writing Juhana’s story in this form was only one part of my attempts, methodologically, to preserve the ‘fresh simple presence’ and with it the surprise of the Real. In the project from which Juhana’s story derives, free association narrative interviews, recorded and transcribed in the way typical of qualitative research, were supplemented by reflective fieldnotes. As well as detailing the setting, these carefully noted the interviewer’s emotional responses to the encounter. In the case of six of our twenty participant mothers, including Juhana, we also had detailed notes based on the psychoanalytically-informed observations that took place weekly over the course of a year<sup>i</sup> and notes from the weekly observation group seminars that reflected on these notes (see Urwin 2007 for a full account and Hollway 2011c for epistemological considerations). The observation seminar sessions started with a spoken reading of the most recent notes pertaining to the mother in focus on that occasion, a practice which

was more evocative than silent reading (a phenomenon noted by Ted Hughes also). The emotional charge comes from the ‘voice’ of that unique participant, her idiosyncratic use of phrases and words, the changing emotional tone of her speech and actual voice on different occasions and different subject matters.

Because as a researcher I am aiming for a ‘valid’ representation (fair, faithful, disinterested), ‘objective’ in the post-positivist sense (see Hollway 2013), I consider also the dangers of this approach to research data. In social sciences, the kind of knowing that draws on emotional experience has historically been derogated on the grounds that it compromises objectivity. Researchers, notably feminist, qualitative and psycho-social researchers, are putting the emotional experience back into research, in field work, data analysis and in the writing process. We also aim to make more transparent how using and reflecting on our emotional experience can enhance the validity of our meaning making, so that we do not distort the lived experiences of our participants (Elliott 2011; Elliott et al. 2012; Hollway and Jefferson 2013). I did not directly affect the data Juhana produced, but she nonetheless affected me. Even at a distance I felt identified with the various family members. A listener’s or reader’s feelings are part of an (inter)subjective process through which meaning is achieved, a recognition basic to the Humanities. Ted Hughes’ development of rough verse was in pursuit of just this.

In writing *Mum’s over the Moon*, I was using my imagination to convey the lived experience of a real live other person whom I can never know completely: Juhana’s experience is multiply mediated by the time it is set down here as rough verse. I ended with Juhana’s reflection on the experience of the research project so as to remind us that her account was conditioned by a setting, relationships and frame provided by the purposes and design of the research. In the final verse of the last scene, Juhana’s words are taken from the transcript of the third (final) interview, conducted by Ann Phoenix. The lines were part of the reply to a question close to the end of the interview in which Ann asks ‘what was it like taking part in this study?’ Juhana’s immediate reply was ‘um it was nice, it was someone el – it was like someone to talk to that I don’t get to talk to’. I rendered this as ‘It was nice to have someone visit, someone to talk to’ (tidying it up, leaving out a hesitation and some repetition) finishing the verse with Juhana’s exact words: ‘I don’t get to talk to my Mum about being a mother/ It did make me think about it a lot more/ Because you don’t actually think about being a mother/ You just do your role play, your role/ And that’s it.’

In the preceding interchange (not included in the audio recording), Ann asks ‘did being part of the research change the way you felt about being a mother at all?’, Juhana replies ‘no but it did make me think about it a lot more, ’cos I get to speak about it so I get to actually think about it. Let’s say you’re gone now, I’ll think about everything I’ve said and it just makes me think about being a mother a bit more than I would.’ So the research visits encouraged Juhana to reflect more than otherwise on her changing – and difficult – experience. Within our psycho-social methodology such effects are part of research ethics: reflection on experience through the containing presence of another mind was a supportive feature of the research visits, a way to bring raw emotional experience to thought (Bion 1962).

Writing data in the form of rough verse does not do the required analytic or theoretical work of writing up a research project, but it does, I hope, move listeners – and therefore change you in a small way – by a form of communication that preserves the affect in experience. How does listening to *Mum’s over the Moon* leave you feeling? Communication based on such principles is foundational to Arts and Humanities but not to Social Sciences. *Studies in the Maternal*, which aims to transcend those disciplinary boundaries, is therefore a helpful place for this experiment.

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<sup>i</sup> I am indebted to Sarina Nyechoray Campbell for the full and evocative observation that she conveyed in her notes. Her case analysis of this mother can be found in Woograsingh 2007.

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