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# **power, partnership, and pussy**

women's experiences of sex and consent  
in abusive relationships

a thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements of the degree of  
Doctor of Clinical Psychology

at Massey University, Whanganui-a-tara/Wellington,  
Aotearoa/New Zealand

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**CONTENT WARNING:** This thesis is about women's experiences of sex and consent in abusive relationships. It contains graphic content about sexual abuse, manipulation, and violence against women and children, including me.

This thesis contains images and discussion of animal abuse.

The part *freeing butterflies* located near the end of this thesis contains sexual content about me, including stories, art, and images of my recent sexual adventures. If you feel it is inappropriate for you to read this part for any reason including your relationship to me, personal values, etc..., please feel free to skip it. Engaging with sexual material should ALWAYS be your choice.



# dedications

## **kelsie**

*thank you for teaching me about anarcha-feminism,  
and what solidarity and community really mean in practice.  
I am sorry it took me a decade to understand deeply*

## **alice and the caterpillar**

*thank you for helping me find wonder in my body and in life  
I love you*





*imagine what we could accomplish if  
we didn't have to spend our energy  
protecting ourselves from  
society's rapist problem*  
- Rupi Kaur (2020, p. 39)



## about this thesis

This thesis draws on feminist post-structural theory, and the work of Nicola Gavey and Evan Stark, to bring to light the ways gendered sexpectations and coercive control work together within women's stories to shape them towards catering for *his* (sexual) pleasure, rendering the women's ability to say yes, no, or maybe to consensual sex, and meaningfully shape their sexual experiences, (virtually) non-existent. These gendered power relations produced women who were desperately, compliantly, and/or fearfully sexual within abusive heterosexual relationships.

My thesis has sought to resist neoliberal postfeminist individualisation of women's abuse in favour of the feminist mantra *the personal is (STILL) political*. From this feminist activist stance and in the spirit of conscientisation, I have creatively resisted institutional expectations of a doctoral thesis in favour of accessibility and the engagement of women (and our allies) outside the ivory tower of academia. If you are an academic reader this may be challenging to your hegemonic understanding of what a thesis "should" be like, especially in terms of content, style, language, and structure - ok basically everything! But I have taken this approach because I think it embodies the social justice aspirations of critical feminist psychology. In this sense, the presentation of this thesis is a form of academic activism, consistent with the theory and politics I have been immersed in over the last five years as I journeyed into the depths of our (sexual and relational) abuse.

Finally, I have undertaken my own healing and conscientisation because of this research, which has led to a transformation of

self and the reimagining of (my) relating and fucking towards safety, equity, and pleasure for all involved. I offer my reflections on this journey at the end of my thesis as resistance to the dominant expectations of women and OUR sexuality, and as hope that things can be different.

In love and rage

Jasmine

**Keywords:** women, coercive control, intimate partner violence, domestic violence, sexual violence, consent, grey area, rape, feminist post-structuralism, discourse analysis, heterosexual, Aotearoa/New Zealand

# the feminist social change agenda

*the “radical possibilities” of feminist psychology surely lie in its historical commitment to doing work that matters – to work with a social change (not individual change) agenda*  
– Rutherford (2018, p. 636)

My research specifically wonders<sup>1</sup> about how wider social expectations of women and their sexuality interact with ongoing coercive actions of men to influence women’s experience of sex and their ability to consent to sex within abusive relationships<sup>2</sup>. The fact that I am even studying psychology, let alone a subjective interrogation of how patriarchal<sup>3</sup> power is enacted within our most intimate of experiences is because of the efforts of the women who entered the academy before me and our allies. They have fought to validate our ways of knowing, to support women to speak that which has been silenced, and to deconstruct and make visible those social structures that contribute to our ongoing subjugation. My project seeks to

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<sup>1</sup>This would usually be referred to as a research question, though within the context of the theory that underpins this thesis, feminist post-structuralism, it is not really possible to answer a specific question definitively in the way empirical science might attempt because this theory asserts that there are multiple realities, and thus there would be multiple ways to address a research question, and make sense of, and discuss, the “data” precluding a definitive truth or answer (Weedon, 1987). It is within this context that I refer to the focus of this research as *my research wondering*, which I explore in conversation with the women who participated in this thesis, alongside the theory and literature about this topic, and my own lived experience. My thesis is an attempt to set out my current thinking about both the individual women’s experiences and the broader gendered social power relations that enabled these experiences to happen, supported by detailed explanation of the personal and theoretical knowledge that informed my thinking.

<sup>2</sup> Within this thesis abuse is defined as ‘any intimate relationship where there has been on going psychological, physical, sexual and/or emotional harm by one partner towards another’.

<sup>3</sup>Patriarchy has traditionally been used to refer to the political, and thus legal system that saw women as the property of their fathers and then their husbands. Within so called western democracies, such as Aotearoa/New Zealand, there has been a progressive movement towards legal equality between men and women and as such it could be argued that we are no longer living under patriarchal conditions. However, in a social and cultural sense there is still an entrenched patriarchal flow to gendered power relations, which enables maleness, male pleasure, male strength, and male needs to be understood and supported as inherently more valuable, desirable and important in the domain of romantic relationships and sex, as this research will demonstrate.

build on these foundations and contribute to our ongoing fight for safety, equity, and sexual satisfaction. In that context, this is a proudly political piece of work that aims to contribute to feminisms collective efforts to deconstruct and bring to light the ways that unequal gender power relations are enacted through women's engagement with heterosexual relationships and sexual practices. In doing so it is hoped that the taken-for-grantedness, or "normalising" effects of gendered power will be decentred to enable space for other, more safe, equitable, and pleasurable, ways of relating and fucking<sup>4</sup>.

While (middle class, white) women might have fought their way out of the kitchen and into the world (of paid work), or at least for the right (for some women) to choose, any notion that women are now equal to men needs to be suspended. If we had equality, we would feel safe walking alone at night (Harris, 2021), we would not be taught to hate our bodies and "choose" to have them mistreated in that vain hope that the attention is some substitute for love (McKinley, 1999), and we would not hold

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<sup>4</sup> I use the word "fucking" through this thesis somewhat interchangeably with sex primarily, but at other times as an expression of dissatisfaction or annoyance - context is important to rendering its meaning. It is uncommon to find the word(s) fuck(ing) in academic texts (outside participant quotes); indeed, "in most cases [the word fuck(ing)] will prevent publication or presentation within all but the most academic radical academic arenas" (Brooks, 2018, p. 34). However, I have intentionally chosen to use this term: it was used by the women I spoke with to refer to sexual practices and it is them, and other women like them, that I wish to engage most through this thesis, thus my use of the term is responsive to their talk; I think it reflects a generational shift in language use towards the term fucking rather than sex, perhaps reflecting a turn towards more active (sometimes even (problematic) rough and forceful porn style) fucking rather than more, procreative missionary (position) sex; I have found I am personally resistant to terms like "making love" - they literally make my skin crawl and make me shudder (just like it did even writing this), and while "sex" does not illicit as strong a reaction in me, it does *feel* old fashioned, clinical, and sexually unsatisfying - I want to fuck, I don't want to have sex; use of the term fucking seems to also situate several of the women *and myself* more within our working class roots, resisting the politeness and formality of middle class society (and academia); and finally, I like the provocative nature of fuck, holding the power to confront, shock and challenge. To be fucked has sexual, emotional, mental, and physical connotations as Brooks (2018) comments, "to say fuck, is to ask the other to contemplate the possibility of being fucked: confronted, titillated, rendered unintelligible, perhaps joyous, perhaps destabilised, and at worst, emotionally and physically suffering" (p. 34). Academic authors (Bell, 2009; Brooks, 2018) have been asked to remove the word fuck from their work, with editors citing readers offense as a possible concern. Given the nature of my research and our stories showcasing how the patriarchy has fucked us in some of the worst ways possible, if my use of the term fuck (and its derivatives) is even close to the top of the list of the most offensive and confronting items contained within this thesis I would be surprised, and probably politically and ethically concerned.

in our mind<sup>5</sup> that the person we share our bed with is statistically the most dangerous person in our lives (Stark, 2007).

**A THIRD OF WOMEN WILL EXPERIENCE PHYSICAL VIOLENCE  
FROM AN INTIMATE PARTNER WITHIN THEIR LIFETIME**  
(NZFVC<sup>6</sup>, 2016,2017)

**IF EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE IS INCLUDED  
THE LIFETIME PREVALENCE RATE OF ABUSE RISES TO  
OVER HALF OF ALL WOMEN**  
(NZFVC, 2016,2017)

**A QUARTER OF ALL WOMEN WILL EXPERIENCE SEXUAL  
ASSAULT IN THEIR LIFETIME**  
(NZFVC, 2017)

**OVER HALF OF ALL WĀHINE MĀORI WILL EXPERIENCE  
PHYSICAL AND SEXUAL ASSAULT WITHIN AN INTIMATE  
RELATIONSHIP WITHIN THEIR LIFETIME**  
(Fanslow et al., 2010)

**OVER HALF OF ALL TRANS AND NON-BINARY PEOPLE HAVE  
EXPERIENCED SEXUAL AND/OR INTIMATE PARTNER ABUSE  
WITHIN THEIR LIFETIME**  
(Dickson, 2016)

For those of us who have experienced sexual abuse as children, rape, and sexual assault, and/or violence in our relationships, the impact of such abuse on us personally *can* be immense, exhausting, and ongoing<sup>7</sup>. It becomes potentially forever intertwined with how we are in the world (van der Kolk, 2014). Similarly, those who have not had these experiences personally likely have a mother, sister, daughter, or close friend who has;

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<sup>5</sup> When I use the term mind within this thesis, I am using it somewhat colloquially to mean a person's thoughts and emotions, as well as conscious and subconscious faculties. Mind is likely a contested term within psychology, the discussion of which is well beyond the focus of this research.

<sup>6</sup> NZFVC – New Zealand Family Violence Clearing House

<sup>7</sup> That is not to say that there is only one way that people can and do react to abuse (Gavey & Schmid, 2011), however this has been the consequence for the women in my family and the women who participated in this thesis.

they have likely seen news reports or social media posts of women like them who have been hurt or killed by men in their lives; they have seen women have their stories disbelieved, questioned, or ripped apart on court room stands (Gavey, 2019), and in the media (Hines & Fileborn, 2019), suggesting that women who dare to be sexually active get what they deserve (Nguyen, 2013). These experiences of abuse and disbelief are known by many women and contribute to a collective terror that many of us carry (Mendes, Keller & Pengrose, 2018), taking our energy, reducing our potential, and limiting our ways of being in the world (Gavey, 2005). As Boyle (2019) said, "the threat of rape is the context in which women routinely make decisions about everyday life whether or not they have experienced rape" (p. 54).

The very personal experiences of sexual violation, and relational abuse, and their ever-present threat have political origins, enabled by (western) social, cultural, and legal structures that legitimate, condone, and make excuses for the egregious treatment of women, and further permit male entitlement to our bodies, mind, spirit, and labour. For generations feminism has *acted* to help women make links between their personal experiences and these political roots, to challenge misogynistic structures within society, and create space within society where women are able to explore the fullness of their being. We have engaged in consciousness raising, political lobbying, protesting, building women centered institutions, academic and non-academic theorising, and have stimulated public discussion and critical thinking about the role of women in society and our treatment in the private sphere (Chamberlain, 2017; Dunbar, 1970; Grimshaw, 1972; Kaltefleiter, 2016; Nguyen, 2013; Wollstonecraft, 2004). Feminism is not solely political theory within the academy, feminism is *also* political *action* upon the world (hooks, 2000). Feminism has

always been by its very nature activism, with a clear agenda to make change for women, and those marginalised within society.

## **the politics of feminist science**

*as an institution, science is complicit in governing, classifying and controlling populations by producing particular “truths” about certain people/groups – truths that are far from being neutral, but are complicit with colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal structures and which ultimately reinforce an unjust status quo*  
- Wigginton and LaFrance (2019, p. 4)

During my confirmation presentation<sup>8</sup> I was asked by an examiner how I would know if I was making decisions for political or theoretical purpose. At the time I answered that reflexivity<sup>9</sup> would assist in this, however as I come out the other end of this research journey, I think I would answer that question rather differently, resisting the inherent assumption that the feminist (the political) and the researcher (the theoretical) are separate identities, with different goals. I would now suggest critical feminist psychology has a clear social change agenda and thus the political and the theoretical have a shared focus and identity that intentionally seeks to produce research for women that describes our world and acts to serve the goal of women’s liberation<sup>10</sup>, not just be about women (Riger, 1992). In this sense, critical feminist psychology is “an ethical and political endeavor as well as intellectual project” (Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2019, p. 216) with a strong commitment to social

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<sup>8</sup> A confirmation presentation is where the research candidate defends the proposal for their research to an academic panel.

<sup>9</sup> Reflexivity involves the critical and ongoing reflection about how the researcher’s values, assumptions, social location, political commitments, emotions, and theoretical decisions influenced the research from design to dissemination (Jones, 1997; LaFrance & Wigginton, 2019; Nilson, 2017; Wilkinson, 1988).

<sup>10</sup> I realize that using words such as freedom and liberation, in the context of feminist post-structural theory are a challenge because we can never live outside of discourse and thus can never be totally free or liberated (Gavey, 1989). That said, I think that if we were to destabilize the dominance of certain discourses, we could create more space for diverse ways of being in the world. Thus, it is not freedom and liberation from discourse that I am concerned with, but freedom and liberation from oppressive and unequal social power relations that render some social groups, animals, and the earth less important than others.

justice (Bay-Cheng, 2010; Guimaraes, 2007; LaFrance & Wigginton, 2019; Rutherford, 2018; Wigginton & LaFrance, 2019). As such, there is no conflict, no contradiction in my feminist researcher identity because theory and politics are not in conflict within this (sub)discipline. We intentionally harness theoretical tools that support our agenda to make our ways of knowing, our experiences, considered, authorised, and important (LaFrance & Wigginton, 2019). That is not to say that critical feminist psychology is not scientific, rather it is the case that we believe by being transparent, or attempting to be, in our assumptions, allegiances, and aims, we are better attending to the human biases inherent within our creation of scientific knowledge.

While there is no consensus on what would constitute a feminist research method, there is general agreement that it should be contextual and interactive (Riger, 1992), giving consideration to how the researcher influences the research through their social positions<sup>11</sup> and personal experiences, as well as the theoretical decisions that they make in the research from conceptualization through to dissemination (Wigginton & LaFrance, 2019), attending to how language and discourse are

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<sup>11</sup> I am pākehā (with roots in England and Scotland, as well as Poland - though assimilation into New Zealand following immigration in the 1890s has meant I know nothing of Polish cultural knowledge and practices), I am working class on both sides of my family and early in my life my parents were beneficiaries at different times, I would probably say I was queer (demi-pansexual, non-monogamous and kinky specifically, but we will get to that in *freeing butterflies*) but *definitely* mono-heterosexual passing, I am cis-gendered and always felt at home in feminine ways of being, and I have been rural much of my early life but urban much of my adult life (until the last couple of years when I returned to the country). These social locations have had a great impact on how I have come to make sense of my research wondering; they have influenced my decisions to try and make this research more accessible outside of the academy, they explain why I listen to the women's stories as a survivor of abuse, and why I have the privilege to engage in this study at all. But I have also had a lot of sub-cultural influences that shape my perspective and ways of being. Throughout my life I have been surrounded by anarchists, people involved with parliamentary and local government politics and people who regularly break the law, punks who are into do-it-yourself and a bit feral, tattooists and the tattooed when it was still stigmatised, activists who want to change the world and do, *lots* of vegans, bogans who love drinking, smoking, and loud rock music, straight-edgers who do not do any drugs or alcohol (and sometimes do not even drink coffee), and hippies who are whimsical and connected to nature. I have also been influenced by a broad range of spiritual and religious practices and knowledge from people around me including those within Te Ao Māori, Rastafarian's, Buddhists, Hare Krishnas, Satanists, Muslims, Pagans, Hindus, re-covering Catholics, some Christians, but mostly committed atheists or people who are agnostic.

used throughout the process of the research (LaFrance & Wigginton, 2019), attending to the power within the researcher and participant relationship (Guimares, 2007; Jones, 1997) and with the reader (Riger, 1992), and as well as how the research can be mobilised for social change.

I have attended to the principles of critical feminist inquiry within this research through the choice of research topic, the theoretical orientation (discussed in *feminism, foucault and fucking*), ethics process<sup>12</sup>, "data" collection process (discussed in *the political is STILL personal*), the use of personal and theoretical reflexivity, and writing style, presentation, and proposed means of disseminating the research findings<sup>13</sup>.

## **writing my thesis differently**

*[academic] writing often operates through masculinised forms of communication which involve writing in an emotionless, rationalistic, and masterful fashion. Writing in a masculine way excludes, among other things, emotions, fluidity, violence and messiness*  
- Weatherall (2019, p. 104)

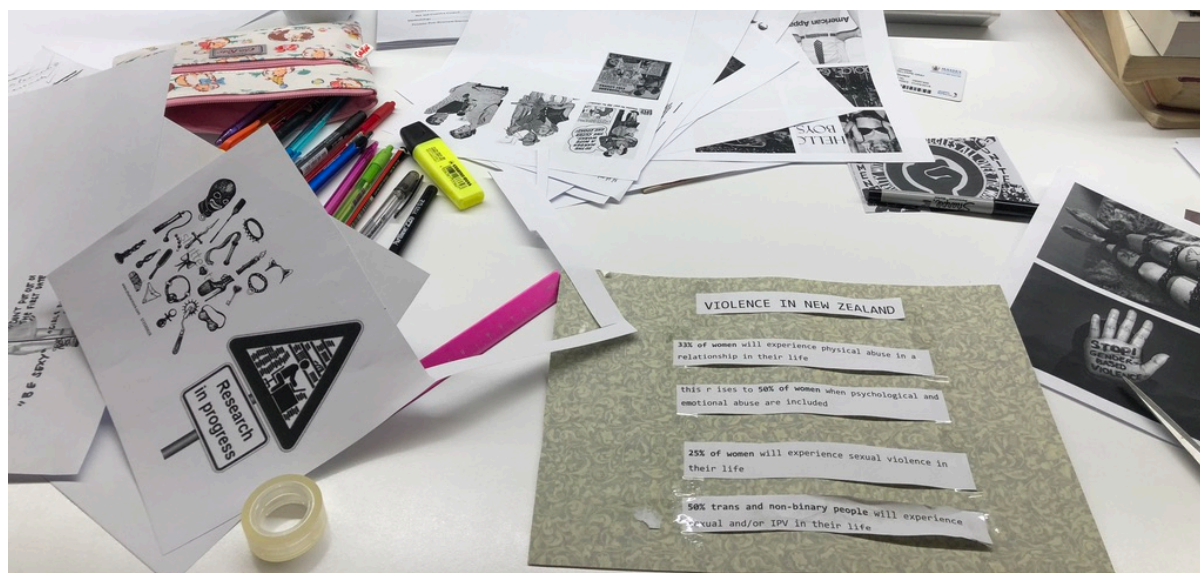
I should have known this thesis was destined to be different, to follow its own course (much like myself) because I felt the same tensions and mental blocks when trying to develop my confirmation presentation as I did writing this thesis. The standard PowerPoint format did not seem right and despite hours of trying to make it work I just couldn't. There was something about the rigid presentation formats that felt decontextualised and lacking emotion, like it was an objective observation of feminism and women, rather than crafted from within feminism; subjective, bold, colourful, emotive, thoughtful, and perhaps

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<sup>12</sup> This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, Application NOR 17/61.

<sup>13</sup> In addition to the publication of academic journal articles from this thesis, I would also like to create a series of zines that convey the theory, literature, findings, and my own journey in a conversational manner that might be even more accessible to an even wider non-academic audience.

confronting, or at least questioning - of what it is to be academic, of how messages are conveyed, of what it is to be a researcher - and more engaging to a broader audience.



*Figure One: A photo from when I was creating my confirmation presentation slides.*

Women have had a long herstory of sharing their stories for social justice (Stark, 2007), of self-publishing (Marcus, 2010; Grimshaw, 1972), and using creativity to convey a social message (LaFrance & Wigginton, 2019). With this herstory in mind, I created my confirmation presentation slides by hand, literally cutting and pasting them in the style of the feminist, and other political, zines<sup>14</sup> I encountered when I became an activist in the early 2000s (see figure one). I then photographed them and inserted the images into PowerPoint. For me this felt more authentic, deeper in meaning, and gave a nod to my political roots and influences.

I felt the same tensions writing this thesis: that I was trying to force our stories to be told through a linear, somewhat “objective” and detached, authoritative, and bounded

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<sup>14</sup> Zines are “self-produced magazines or pamphlets, in which the politics of everyday life are reflected, refracted and (re)appropriated to create new meanings and representations” (Kaltefleiter, 2016, p. 811).

hegemonic masculine lens (Weatherall, 2019; Wigginton & LaFrance, 2019), which ran counter to culturally feminine ways of knowing and communicating, and the aspirations of feminism inside and outside the academy. Again, it felt like I was an observer of feminism and of the women's experiences; an outsider, rather than someone who had been surrounded by feminist discourse and activism since her early 20s<sup>15</sup>, and someone who had also shared some of the experiences the women spoke about.

Furthermore, (re)producing a thesis in the traditional academic style for writing, presentation, and content felt like it further entrenched the unequal class power relations that restrict access to knowledge, and its creation, to those with economic and social privilege (hooks, 2000; Rutherford, 2018; Weatherall, 2019). This privilege runs counter to the aspirations of critical feminist psychology to enable our research to reach beyond the confines of the academy's 'ivory tower' (Wigginton & LaFrance, 2019). In Foucauldian terms, those who control meaning and knowledge creation hold power (Foucault, 1979) and as Weatherall (2019) reminds us, academic pursuits have traditionally only been for the very wealthy - those who could afford to pay others to grow their food, tend their homes, mend their clothes, and watch their children. In other words, upper middle class, heterosexual, able-bodied, cis-gendered, neurotypical white men. From those foundations grew an academy that seeks to validate, support and (re)create western, wealthy, heterosexual, masculine ways of knowing and being in the world (Wigginton & LaFrance, 2019).

From a feminist post-structuralist perspective, these men's understandings of the world are likely partial, specific to

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<sup>15</sup> Although, admittedly I think it has taken this thesis to feel more comfortable in my understanding and practice of a multiplicity of feminist ways of knowing and being.

their particular cultural, social, temporal, and spatial locations (Gavey, 1989). These men's limited perspective is not able to fully understand the experiences of those who exist within a different social and/or cultural group, and/or in a different time and place. Yet, the limitations of traditional and conventional academic writing act to maintain the dominance and legitimacy of this elite; their values, and their perspectives, controlling what is known, how it can be spoken about, and by whom. As Weatherall (2019) said, "the thesis is much more than a product of the work; it is a process of (re)establishing the boundaries of knowledge in academia" (p. 104). And thus, in choosing to replicate a standard thesis, it would be (re)producing elitism as the standard to which other theses should aspire because it is our performance of normal, of the expected, that reifies and perpetuates these norms (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1979). Thus "how we write is just as important as what we write" (Weatherall, 2019, p. 102).

Critical feminist psychology asks us to think deeply about the research we are doing and take up Fine's (2016) question of "to whom are we accountable" (p. 362). Ultimately for me, the women<sup>16</sup> who had contributed to this research were whom I felt most accountable to and the aspirations of critical feminist

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<sup>16</sup> "The women" is how I speak about the women who participated in this study. To refer to them as participants felt too clinical, too distant and detached from the women who are largely known to me and who shared such personal things with me. I wanted to honour their stories and role in this research, rather than refer to them as what felt like a place to harvest data. I interviewed seven women, they were all cis-gender and pākeha, except Jessica who is white South African, a couple identified as non-heterosexual, the other women did not comment on their sexual identity/orientation:

Danielle: early 30s, from low socio-economic background, professional, sexually abused as a child

Nancy: mid 40s, lower middle-class background, professional, sexually abused as a child

Roxanne: mid 50s, low socio-economic background, currently low socio-economic status, sexually abused as a child and raped as a teenager and adult, bisexual

Elizabeth: mid 40s, lower middle-class background, currently low socio-economic status, raped as a teenager and adult

Catherine: early 30s, low socio-economic background, professional, raped as a teenager

Angela: early 30s, lower middle-class background, post-graduate student, pan/bisexual

Jessica: mid 30s, from a lower middle-class background, currently low socio-economic status, sexually abused as a child and raped as an adult.

psychology that seeks to share power with research participants (Jones, 1997) and make sure the researcher's understanding of the participant's stories is accessible to the participants (Jennings et al., 2003). My commitment to making my research accessible to the women<sup>17</sup> who shared their stories with me, and those who wanted to but couldn't, was probably the "most significant influence on my decision to write differently" (Weatherall, 2019, p. 106).

Taking feminist ethics and our commitment to social justice seriously necessitates trying to write in a style that is engaging for a broader audience (Rutherford, 2018). For me this has meant the use of emotive language, colloquialisms<sup>18</sup>, and defining words and concepts that might be considered jargon by the women in the footnotes, as well using the footnotes to explore any academic aspects more thoroughly while favouring readability in the main body of text. These stylistic changes are also more reflective of my roots, as an academic, as an activist, and as someone from within a lower socio-economic background. My voice oscillates between these three different ways of being and knowing. As such, I do not have consistent voice through the thesis; but then feminist post-structuralist theory would suggest that we are not consistent beings, but rather we are contradictory, plural, and messy influenced by many different ways of making sense of the world (Gavey, 1989). I do not know that I have been fully successful in my endeavour to write more accessibly, as the terminology and writing of feminist post-structuralist work is often critiqued for its inaccessibility (Gavey, 2005), but I think I have made a start at it, and this work is generally more accessible, digestible,

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<sup>17</sup> Riger (1992) suggests that in feminist research it is important that the participants' contextual information is shared with the reader, including their social positions.

<sup>18</sup> I have utilised the website Urban Dictionary to define some terms that are in used within my social circles and by the women but have not made their way into academic use, which tends to be a slow process (if this thesis is anything to go by).

and engaging than if written for a specifically scientific audience.

I also wrote personally, visible through the flow and journey of the thesis, known to the reader rather than positioning myself as a detached, invisible puppet master. I intentionally comment on the emotional, sexual, and life impact of the research for me (Charmaz, 2014; Farvid, 2010; Weatherall, 2019), as well as where I shared a similar experience to the women, resisting the researcher-researched binary and positioning myself as both a researcher and someone with lived experience simultaneously. Sharing such personal experiences and interactions with the research is becoming more common within feminist academic writing, as Charmaz (2014) comments, "increasingly, we appear in our text as thinking, acting - and *feeling* - participants rather than as disembodied reporters of collected facts" (p. 475; emphasis added), and this can be seen as adding authority rather than bias like it once did.

The research process has taught me that there are assumptions, values, expectations, and power in everything, and especially in the way we speak, write, and transmit knowledge, which influences how we understand and can be in the world (Foucault, 1979; Gavey, 2005). There are assumptions about what a thesis looks like and how it is structured, about what is acceptable as academic knowledge, what is regarded less seriously, and even with suspicion (Weatherall, 2019). Certain fonts, colours, and layouts that typically suggest "professionalism", emphasize a more masculine tone with crisp, sharp fonts like **Helvetica** or **Calibri**, colour limited to black, or white, rather than a rainbow of colours and glitter which would likely be considered "too feminine", "too girly", "too gay", that they could not possibly carry the authority and power of monochrome; the layout should be linear with a clear hierarchy of titles and structure, keeping

the reader at a distance, thus ensuring the power of the author(ity).

When it came to how I have presented this thesis, I have made some intentional choices to stray from typical conventions for writing a doctoral thesis. I chose the curvy, "groovier" font **aharoni** for the titles and headings as it reminded me of the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. I used **courier new** for the main body of text as it reminded me of typewritten font women of the 1990s riot grrrl movement used to create their zines. And finally, I used **Bradley Hand** in purple for parts of my own story as it has a more personal, handwritten tone, and purple is a colour close to my heart as it is my mum's favourite. Within the personal reflexive pieces I have also shared poetry, my own art and photographs to convey meaning, emotion and express my creativity in a way that helps the reader make more sense of me. Maybe by feminising and queering<sup>19</sup> our academic correspondence it will enable us to share more emotion, and personality, as well as enable creative engagement with the reader in a deeper way, beyond words (Charmaz, 2014; Weatherall, 2019). It might make the work more interesting, engaging, more accessible, and relevant to readers outside the academy (Charmaz, 2014).

To maintain the complexity and messiness of gendered power relations in our most intimate areas of life, this thesis does not present information in a typical and expected linear fashion - theory, literature, methodology, method, analysis, discussion, and conclusion, replicating a report style with clear headings, more appropriate for quantitative, experimental (masculine) psychology. However, I believe the expected contents of a thesis

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<sup>19</sup> "Queer theory and theorists share a commitment to destabilising concepts and dismantling binaries and categories that seem natural. The aim is to open up possibilities of agency and difference, by drawing attention to the normalising processes which govern legitimised ways of being and acting" (Weatherall, 2019, p. 107).

are present but situated differently throughout the text. I have privileged readability and engagement, story and emotion as I unpack my research wondering and the personal experiences, literature, and theory that informed my understandings. I have also tried to discourage the reader from dipping in and out to find "technical" information, in favour of the reader staying immersed in the fullness of our stories and feminist discourse about how our sexual and relational realities are shaped. As such, this thesis is intended to be read in its entirety and considered together to make sense of how I understand our experiences of sex and consent in abusive relationships and the social conditions and interpersonal actions that constrain the possibilities of sexual safety, equality, and satisfaction in our everyday lives. This work is necessarily dark in places but our stories need to be heard and the way power shapes our lives needs to be understood. I hope that in helping others to understand our stories academically, and feel them emotionally, we will be able to shed some light on the darkness and come out the other end with hope for a safer, equitable, and pleasurable world.

While I believe this work ticks the boxes for demonstrating research ability, it is also intended to provoke discomfort, thought, and challenge assumptions about what a thesis should be, how it should look and sound, as well as stimulate consideration of about the ethics and realities of relating and fucking, and maybe even possibly the wider social conditions in which we live. Maybe reading this work will make you think about aspects of your own life, relationships, or the social circles in which you move. Maybe it will make you uncomfortable; I think this is ok - too often we go through life without thinking about the dynamics at play and live without intentionality. Stopping to consider how things are, the reasons why, and the possibilities for something different is being mindful,

reflexive, and curious, and it could also be the path to liberation. As bell hooks (2000) reminds us, feminism is not solely something you believe, it is something that you do. In critiquing the power at work in our lives and then proactively taking steps to challenge this power personally and in the wider social world, we may end up making intentional decisions to live our lives differently, to interact with ourselves and others in radically different and equitable ways, built on values of compassion and freedom for everybody. While such a journey can feel uncomfortable, even threatening, at first, it is necessary if we want to dismantle the systems of inequity that shape our realities and build in their place a society that is safe and pleasurable for all!

## **the lack of contents page**

The *feminist social change agenda* has been intended to set out the political and ethical ideology that underpins this research, as well as offering an explanation for my departure from typical doctoral thesis structure and writing conventions (Weatherall, 2019). Hopefully, I have been successful in my arguments and intrigued the reader enough to progress further. The rest of my thesis consists of four parts which I have outlined below. This overview is offered in lieu of a standard contents page because my headings and structure would likely be non-sensical, much like how Alice found Wonderland<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup>*Alice in Wonderland* is a children's novel depicting the adventures of a girl (Alice) who falls through a rabbit hole and finds herself in a fantasy world in which common-sense understandings are turned upside-down" (Wigginton & LaFrance, 2019, p. 14). In many respects Alice's journey into Wonderland is much like this research process, turning common-sense understandings of fucking and relating upside-down in search of different ways of being in the world that enable women to find wonder and fantasy in their lives. Little (1976) and Lloyd (2010) argue that Alice is a feminist hero because she is curious, confident, speaks her mind, she challenges herself, embraces the life and adventure around her, challenges the motherhood mandate, takes up space and invites herself to the all-male tea party, she freely speaks her mind, eats and drinks what she likes, and she challenges with rude remarks. "Alice, unlike other fairy-tale heroines, requires no fairy godmother, huntsman, or good fairy - just her own wits and ingenuity - to navigate through Wonderland successfully, keeping her head intact" (Lloyd, 2010, p. 8). Alice is literally an "underground image of a woman resisting the "system"" (Little, 1976, p. 204),  
**continues over page**

*fairy foundations* (page 31<sup>21</sup>) is a collection of personally reflexive pieces introducing the reader to where I have come from and the values I hold about the world, my motivations to do this work, and the personal experiences that have been front and centre for me during this process. I have endeavored to make comment about how I think these might have impacted this research, however invariably there are things I am unaware of as meaning making is an ongoing, unfolding process. The inclusion of these reflections was important because as time has gone on, I have become deeply enmeshed with this research.

I have always been interested in the process of reflexivity since I entered feminist psychology, perhaps because I had never really explored my own internal experiences or the consequences of my decisions greatly. As such reflexivity "was important for the process and outcomes of the research, but I soon realised that it was a very important journey of self-discovery" (Nilson, 2017, p. 121). I made an intentional decision during my internship year (2019) to let go of the neoliberal (and academic) grind culture<sup>22</sup>, and make space for healing, messiness, depth, and emotion. In fully submitting myself to the reflexive

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Lloyd (2010) argues that "faced with continuing mistreatment and stereotypical expectations, today's young women would do well to ask themselves, what would Alice do?" (p. 17). Through this research journey I have often taken up Lloyd's suggestion to ask what Alice would do when faced with uncertainty, lack of confidence, or been lost in patriarchal conditioning. Alice has been my guide back to finding wonder and beauty in the world. <sup>21</sup>The contents of *fairy foundations* and *freeing butterflies* are typically excluded from thesis documents, despite the importance of examining the researcher's motivations, personal values, and social locations within (critical) feminist research (Jones, 1997; LaFrance & Wigginton, 2019; Nilson, 2017; Wilkinson, 1988). I have found other feminist theses share the author's social location - their ethnic, gender, sexuality etc - as a means of bringing attention to the socio-cultural norms and understandings that might inform their research, without really talking about what this means for the research, or really helping the reader to know the values, personal experiences, and motivations that influence the research. I think that reflexivity demands a more considered, deeper interrogation of who the researcher is as they have engaged in the research process. As such, I have endeavoured to share a deeper and more personal reflexivity with both of these two parts. I have also set them out in the fashion of zine's rather than traditional academic text to further differentiate these parts from the formal thesis as well as to bring greater depth to making sense of me as a person and psychologist. I am a very visual and creative person, and I believe that imagery, layout, and colour can convey meaning and feeling more fully than text alone.

<sup>22</sup> That is, an obsession with productivity and work.

process, I have been able to explore myself, my sexuality, my politics, my relationships, and my healing. Because this process has been so all encompassing and has seen me embody the learnings and politics of critical feminist research, I felt it necessary to share myself more thoroughly. Inevitably, my understandings of the women's stories are bound to my understandings about my own. I hope that in sharing these reflections, it also destabilises the notion that those working in the clinical realm have not personally experienced similar troubles to the people they work with. And finally, I want to join other women within the academy who are talking more freely about their own personal experiences (Barley, 2020; Gildea, 2020; Ozalas, 2020) and consider what learnings can be made from these. It is my hope that my efforts to be known and seen by the reader enable them to come to their own conclusions about my research wondering and my understandings of the women's stories.

***feminism, foucault and fucking*** (page 57) sets out the theoretical foundations and literature base that informs my understanding of how power operates within heterosexual sex (heterosex) and backgrounds my sense making of my conversations with the women. I give an overview of Foucauldian understandings of power and feminist post-structuralist theory of knowledge and language, which have been taken up by (some) feminist academics (including me) to enable a critical interrogation of gendered power and the normalisation processes that act upon white, western, cis-gendered women's fucking and relating with men. I then discuss critical feminist understandings of hegemonic heterosex and how gendered social power relations shape expectations of women and their sexuality within the context of (our current) neoliberal, post-feminist society. I end with a discussion about sexual ethics shaped by Nicola Gavey's (2005) theory of the cultural scaffolding of rape and her conclusion that women frequently engage in unwanted "consensual" sex.

***the personal is STILL political*** (page 131) sets out my (de)construction and sense making of the women's stories. I first discuss Evan Starks (2007) theory of coercive control which underpins my understanding of how individual men enact abuse within relationships. I then discuss how (and why) I (de)constructed the women's stories before exploring the way social, cultural, and political structures (discussed in *feminism, foucault, and fucking*) and the actions of individual men (through technologies of coercive control) came together within the women's abusive relationships to shape their experiences of sex and consent.

***freeing butterflies*** (page 251) returns focus to me and reflects upon how this research process has impacted my own sexual and relational practices<sup>23</sup>. This thesis has (necessarily) painted the possibilities of heterosex as marked by unequal power relations and abuse because this is the reality for many women, and certainly was for myself and the women who participated in this research. However, through the consciousness raising and reflexive process of this research, and informed by trauma theory, I have moved away from this male-centred way of fucking. My decision to share in-depth reflections of my intimate

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<sup>23</sup> I thought about the consequences of including these reflections given their erotic nature and that through the library they will be available to anyone - including employers, clients, people administering research grants etc. - who stumbles across this thesis, googles me or who specifically seeks this work out. While there may be negative consequences for myself in the future given the way women's sexuality is scrutinised within western society (Brooks, 2017; Farvid et al., 2017; Kelly et al., 2017; Jackson et al., 2012) I believe these reflections are important given the context of this research and the profound changes that I have undergone as a result of it. It is rare that we consider the consequences of research for the researcher (Farvid, 2010). Furthermore, if we want to open the possibilities for fucking, then those of us to practice fucking beyond hegemonic norms "must write ourselves into being" (Crawley & Willman, 2017, p. 161). While this part may titillate and challenge, that is not its *sole* purpose. I have had to fight hard to remove patriarchal power and the impact of trauma from my mind, body and spirit (and the process will likely be ongoing). I have had to fight hard to be able to fuck in ways that are embodied and to my liking. I have had to fight hard to have a voice in sexual situations, and to have a voice in the world. I am not going to silence myself by not sharing this journey; instead I wish to honour how I have transformed my pain and found (lots of) moments of pleasure, connection, and safety. Being a researcher, being a clinical psychologist, being an advocate for women, is not at odds with me being someone who finds pleasure in fucking, nor is it at odds with me writing about it. In fact, I think it could actually be quite the opposite. It is important to share these experiences from the perspective of feminist research ethics, and I think it adds weight to my understandings, my practice, and my activism (Charmaz, 2014).

transformation was because I did not want to produce another project that catalogued the horrors women face in the most intimate areas of their lives without offering hope that things could be different. It was important to me to make visible the possibility that we might experience our bodies, our sexuality, and our relationships in more pleasurable ways, as equal participants in the creation and practice of fucking and relating. I was influenced by Cahill's (2016) call for feminist politics and ethics of sex to be able to account for the possibilities of meaningful sexual action not determined by systemic injustice, and Brown's (2019) hope that our activism is bound in pleasure and the future we hope to imagine. I wanted to show that women could fuck in ways that challenge and eliminate inequity, even when men were involved. I hope that in sharing my experiences, I am opening up space for the possibilities of fucking and relating to be different, and more responsive to women's healing and authentic (erotic) desires<sup>24</sup>.

**expressions of gratitude** page 287

**references** page 293

**appendices** can be found *from* page 321. The appendices include my case study *power, politics, and practice*, which is a personal reflection about how this research has impacted my clinical practice.

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<sup>24</sup> Given that my sexuality is intertwined with others who enjoy playing with me, sharing my experience necessitates sharing something of other people's experience, as such I have shared this part with those I speak about for their feedback and permission to share our collective stories and images. Undertaking such a process was import for the sake of ethical fucking and respecting those who I am privileged to fuck with. I think this encompasses consent, in so far as it is asking their permission to share sexual content related to them, but it is also more than that, it is also about values, respect, and honouring the relational space we occupy.

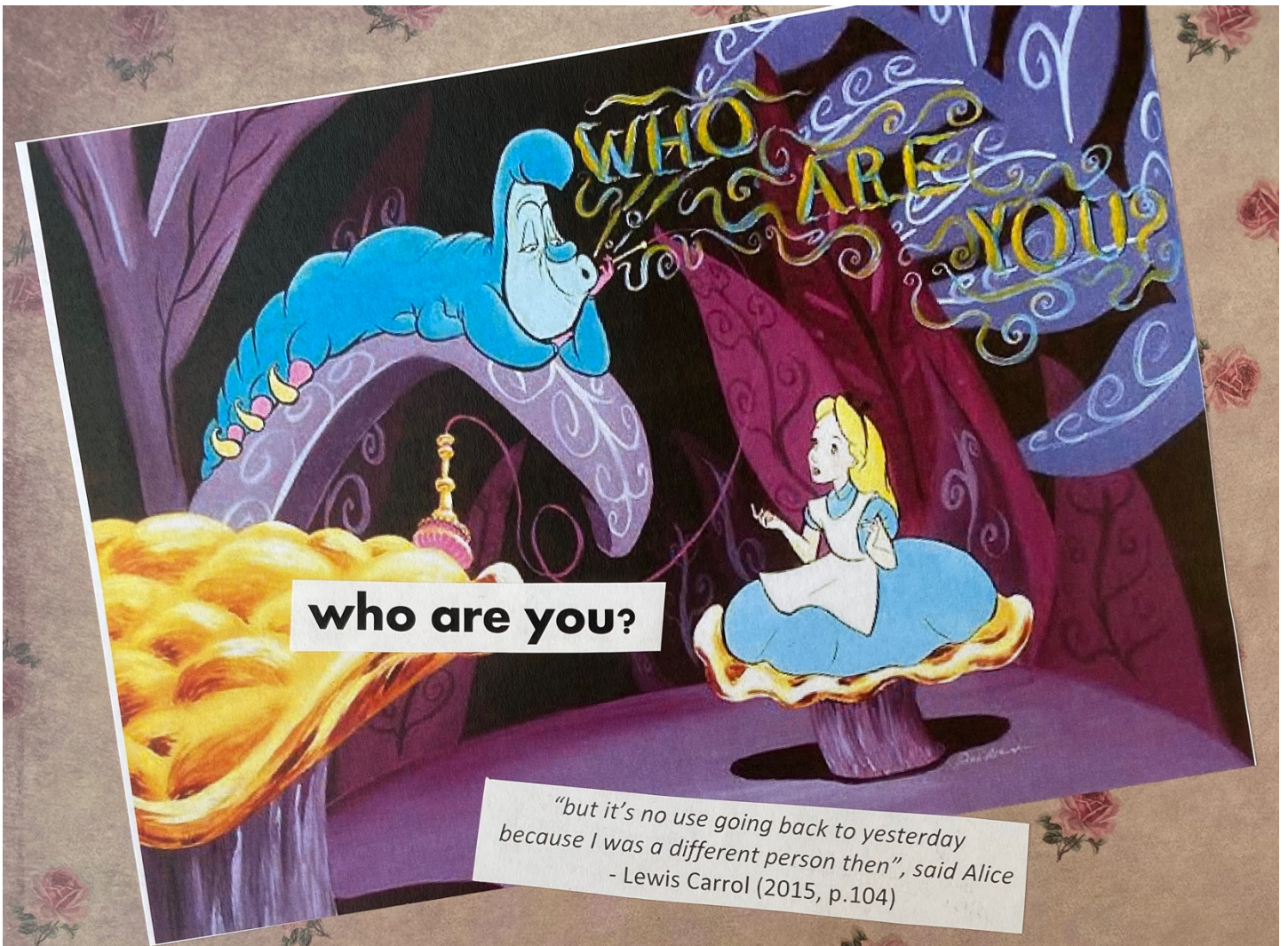




**fairy**

**foundations**





My late teens and 20s were characterised by several crises in my family and friendship group, alongside years in an abusive relationship, and full immersion in the deeply painful fight against animal abuse, all of which led to me becoming unwell emotionally, relationally, physically, and spiritually. Near the end of my 20s entering psychology gave me a focus and good grades (as positive re-enforcement) which saw my wellbeing start to improve. By the time I commenced this research at 32 I was happy, but I was not myself at the core. I had become caught striving for middle class markers of success - hegemonic heterofemininity, financial and material security, the marriage - which lacked the depth, meaning, and authenticity that I was bought up to aspire to. This research bought me back to myself.

## magical roots

I was born into a world of music, of fairies, a love of nature, bold social ideas and colour. These magical roots, while certainly **romanticised** at times, have shaped my aspirations for life. Surrounded by messages of peace and love and imagery of the 1960s counterculture, I have been guided towards thinking quite deeply and emotionally, and to embracing creativity, optimism, and whimsy. It has meant that I have always been hopeful that things could be different, that humanity could recognise the shared pain created by our current system and choose to forge a new, more equal, and colourful future. My little sister and I were bought up to be connected with nature, show compassion for others (including animals), to respect te tiriti and ally with tangata whenua, to find nourishment in art, culture, and music, to be creative and playful, to value learning and education, to **socialise**, question everything, and have a healthy disrespect for authority and organized religion<sup>1</sup>. We were encouraged to let our freak flag fly, as Jimi Hendrix put it, to be ourselves, embrace our difference, to follow our own path<sup>2</sup> guided by values and ideals, rather than rules.

JIMI



PART OF MY FIRST HOUSE

I LOVE SEA FOAM GREEN BECAUSE IT WAS THE INSIDE COLOUR OF MY FIRST HOUSE



A POEM MUM WROTE AFTER I WAS BORN

Make Love Not War  
Water bouncing over rocks  
Striving to join the sea  
Eventually doing so  
What and will there be  
To the foolish feud  
Of Russia and the U.S. of A.  
  
I complete my days chres  
Enjoy the sun, the walks  
Help Jasmine learn her life  
The roots we have to offer  
Yet we are innocent victims  
Trapped by this war  
  
Shielded from it I am  
By the distance and my gravity  
Still am I aware of those bombs  
Yes, they linger in the mind  
  
Try to understand why we are targets  
Helpless but free  
Yet if you buy the bomb  
We still have aids.

my first home  
a workers  
cottage in  
motueka



LITTLE SIS



ME

<sup>1</sup> Collectively, my parenting team (mum, Paul (my dad), John (my late stepdad) and Mike (mum's late partner) have never had much time for Christian ideology and while I think the church community does a lot of beneficial charity work and provides a sense of belonging and peace to a lot of individuals who might feel lost otherwise, at an institutional level I believe they have a lot to answer for. The church has been a driving force behind colonisation efforts which have seen attempted genocide and attempted destruction of indigenous knowledge, practices, and ways of being. They have spread ideas of domination, white supremacy, homophobia, and patriarchy throughout the world resulting in harm to the earth, animals and anyone who was not straight, white, cis-gendered, and male. And of course, the horrific and entrenched practices of sexual abuse against children within the Catholic church. As far as I can see, the church has not done enough to acknowledge and rectify these harms against large portions of those who inhabit this earth.

<sup>2</sup> I appreciate now how such advice and follow through is only really possible when I am the recipient of vast amounts of privilege that, for the most part, protect me from any significant harm of transgressing social norms.



Parliament Buildings  
WELLINGTON  
19 June 1984

Mr P Gillespie  
C/- D A Cameron  
Central Road  
LOWER MOUTERE

Dear Paul

Many thanks for your letter. I stand corrected on the wage rates of horticultural workers - but I am glad you agreed with the point I was trying to make. In fact I think Bill Rowling made it even better when he spoke after me and on the following day. He referred to a number of examples from his own electorate and particularly mentioned horticultural workers.

No, the Party doesn't have a cannabis policy. In fact, the announcement of the snap election came before we had had a chance to announce the justice policy that we have developed. Whilst not specifically referring to cannabis it did call for a general review of penalties which I personally was hoping would allow us one day to deal with the cannabis question. My personal view that mere possession of cannabis could safely be decriminalised and I don't doubt that that view would be shared by a number of younger MPs on both sides of the House.

Perhaps you might like to ask Ken Shirley his view on that at some stage. I am sure he is going to be elected as the new MP for Tasman and a very fine representative he will be. Let's hope he is part of the Fourth Labour Government!

Thanks again for your letter - and the poem.

Warm regards

David Caygill  
David Caygill  
MP for St Albans

from my family photo album...  
campaigning for horticultural  
workers a cannabis law reform  
before my birth



Paul - my dad

A mural I did on Paul's wall as a teenager



Getting Crafty →



me around 17



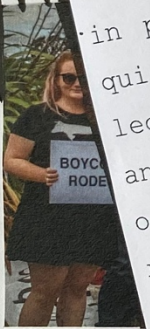
MURIWAI WHERE I GREW UP



# rage against the machine



The influence of my own experiences, and the images, sounds, and values of the countercultural influences around me, growing up to be a thinker and a rabble rouser seemed like a birth right: Ever since I was young, I have been attuned to social justice and environmental issues. I went vegetarian<sup>3</sup> when I was 10 years old and I still remember the feeling of power and righteousness as I threw all my leather shoes out<sup>4</sup>. When I was at primary school I wanted to grow up and be a scientist for Greenpeace so that I could expose and shut down polluters (anyone else watch Captain Planet... go the Planeteers!). My eco-warrior tendencies saw me do my first degree in biology and conservation ecology. It was natural that when I got to university at 17 I got involved in politics and hung out with weird and wonderful people. I quickly became involved with the Green Party on campus, which led like a gateway drug to animal rights, anarchism, feminism, and direct action. Soon my life was all about activism, organising, meetings, protests, clandestine action, and revolution. I felt a place of belonging that looked like how I imagined my adult life. Activism became my place of belonging and purpose. While the clinical program has seen me take a step back from grassroots activism, that has been a necessary but temporary decision. I wish to return to grassroots and community organising, as well as see my psychology praxis move towards one that encompasses my activism as well as academic and clinical work.



DEATH TRADE





<sup>3</sup> Within western culture to my mind there is a clear oppressor and oppressed within the human-animal binary, with animals having little chance for resistance or liberation without human intervention. The scale of habitat loss, torture, incarceration, manipulation and mass murder that animals face is almost incomprehensible, yet it is so normalised and our society is so detached from the natural world that most people barely even notice it. The separation between humans and nature has seen us treat the natural world and its inhabitants as resources, stock, life to be commodified and transformed into profit. Bringing to light that “transformation” process within New Zealand’s factory farms, pastoral farms and slaughterhouses, and helping the public to see animals as sentient individuals deserving of a safe and pleasurable life was my purpose for nearly 15 years. Being immersed in such suffering on a scale difficult to even comprehend was simultaneously heart-breaking and rage inducing. My experience in the animal rights movement saw me enter this research with a more Marxist understanding of power (that is that there is a clear top-down power structure, with a clear oppressor and oppressed group) which influenced me to see the black and white of issues, not the fine grained, the subtle or the coercive. I saw good and bad, right or wrong, there were no nuances of power, no understanding that people could hold both power and privilege at the same time. I think I also saw the (human) oppressed as almost without the possibility of resistance, the way animals often are. Foucault (1979) and Feminist-Post Structuralism (Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1987) gave me a new, nuanced understanding of how power operates through our society, enabling a more complicated and messy relationships between the oppressed and the oppressor, and possibilities for resistance.

As a sidenote, I would like to acknowledge that I am speaking specifically about industrialised animal agriculture, use of animals in scientific research, and animals used for clothing and entertainment. When the treatment of animals is considered with respect to indigenous peoples - who still live as part of nature and not above it, or who were forced to give up their traditional ways of living through the process of colonisation and imperialism and were made to ascribe to Christian doctrine that god gave humans dominion over all non-human animals - our arguments for animals’ rights become more complex. I do not have answer for this because no answer makes me fully comfortable, but perhaps this complexity is best navigated by those who live in both vegan-animal rights *and* indigenous worlds, as they hold both sets of values and ways of making sense of the world. Maybe that is a cop out, I don’t know.

<sup>4</sup> It has now been 27 years, and I can report my vegetarianism was a phase, but only in the sense that 20 years ago I realised the error of my ways and removed all animal products from my life, choosing veganism as a forever choice.

**fairies & fire**



I have changed so much during the journey of this research and in many respects, it has been a process of returning home to myself. The previous few years have seen me cocooned in the worlds of critical and clinical psychology interrogating the political and personal consequence of sexist ideology, making sense of the impacts of my own trauma experiences, and developing the foundations of practice to support healing the trauma wounds of others. I have come to understand the social and personal experiences that have shaped my life deeply and sought to change that which no longer served me. The research became deeply embodied, shaping the way I experience, make sense of, and perform in the world. I feel like I have been in a constant state of flux, subject to constant examination, and transformation. As my thesis wraps up, (and covid winds down, she says optimistically), I am emerging into the world a very different person to how I went in.

I feel wiser but that I take myself less seriously. I understand our suffering more, but I am less angry. I am simultaneously more sexual and less concerned with sex. I have reconnected with my creativity in terms of artistic expression, home décor, and the way I dress. In my non-work time, I can be found walking in the bush, floating in our outside bath or the local stream, listening to music, reading, drawing, and fucking. I organise my activities around the seasons and Luna phases rather than the Gregorian calendar - inspired by the recent exploration of pre-Christian pagan practices of my English and Scottish ancestors. And I embrace a peaceful lifestyle built around reducing my (negative) impact on myself, other humans, animals, and the earth. I have taken up yoga, meditation, and simple healthy (vegan obviously) eating that is responsive to what my body is

telling me. I can finally listen to my body rather than seeing it as a source of disappointment. Being so settled, embodied, and present is new for me, and I have not really settled into who I am in this new incarnation yet.



7  
SUMMER SOLSTICE CELEBRATIONS



MY ALTAR TO THE NEW LIFE OF SPRING



THE LOCAL STREAM WHERE I CAN BE FOUND

I have found I need both the magical world of fairies, and the fiery rage for a better world. The hippies and the activists of the counterculture who have so strongly influenced my life embedded in these paths of love and rage; each useful and problematic, both necessary (for me at least) and intimately intertwined. Influenced by the teachings of Ram Dass, Mother Earth and Alice in Wonderland alongside critical theory, anarchism, and boots on the ground activism, I have found a multifaceted, colourful, and deep framework for making sense of the world in a way that finally enables me to move between the various conflicting but related parts of me.

I think this metamorphosis was inevitable and really part of what it is to truly embrace feminist practice and trauma theory<sup>5</sup>. They both encouraged me to question the society and circumstance that I grew up in and the impact it had on me, as well as encouraging me to make changes in myself and our world in pursuit of a safe, equal, and pleasurable future. I am hopeful that these personal changes and healing I have undertaken will help me navigate the world in a radically different way, reducing my chance of perpetuating harm and inequality. As Tamdgidi (2008) wrote, "radical transformation of an inner habit, as minute as an attitude, feeling, and bias, may potentially have significant butterfly effects and repercussions for larger, global, social processes" (p. 315). That as I change myself, I simultaneously change the possibilities of the world, echoing the feminist mantra *the personal is political*.

<sup>5</sup> I include this because this is a part of the Doctor of Clinical Psychology and alongside this research, trauma theory has been a constant companion personally and professionally. Both the politics of my research, and trauma theory have been integral to my growth as I engaged with this research wondering. Aside from making a note of its company on my journey, I will not discuss it in any great detail as space does not allow this AND it is a very clear personalisation of abuse and does not fit with this thesis's focus on the social power relations that shape women's experiences of abuse. My experience suggests to me that combined, trauma theory and consciousness raising are powerful tools for healing, resisting, and preventing the harms of sexual and relational abuse.

## why I write

*I am a product of the system I was born to destroy*  
- Soundtrack to the Struggle (Lowkey, 2011)

In his essay, *Why I Write*, George Orwell (1946) comments that there are four motives for writing - sheer egotism, aesthetic enthusiasm, historical impulse, and political purpose. He concluded that his own motivations for writing were both political, in his case "against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism" (Orwell, 1946, p. 8; emphasis original) and for aesthetic enthusiasm. He wanted his political writing to be art, enabling him to maintain his childhood enthusiasm for the earth, objects, random facts, and prose style. When I consider my own motivations for this research and its write up, and my whole psychology journey really, it has always been underpinned by a political purpose.

I entered psychology curled up on my boss's empty office, crying. I was six weeks out of an abusive relationship, oscillating between relief that he left and feeling devastated about being unwanted. For over two years prior, I had been crying at my desk most days as I struggled with feelings of loneliness, worthlessness, and disgust (for myself). My workplace had become concerned about my ability to continue in my role and wanted me to see a clinical psychologist for an assessment to "see what was wrong with me". I now know that they would have likely diagnosed me with Persistent Depressive Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), but there was no fucking way that was happening. Curled up in that office between tears I tried to figure out what to do to change things for myself and others. I wanted to advocate with, and for, other women, to help

stop the violence we experience so routinely. I was sick of women being treated like shit and being left to pick up the pieces. I was on a mission to understand what had happened to me, to other women, and find some way to changing it. I handed in my resignation that day and enrolled in psychology. Nine years later, as a card carrying feminist psychologist, I would also diagnose myself with having an abusive arsehole problem (but maybe in more delicate language).

### **shared experiences**

Listening to the women's stories I heard those of myself, of mum, of women I know. Sometimes I would sit at my desk sobbing, for the women, for myself, often for mum. Collectively, the women's stories helped me reflect on my own personal experiences and my relationships. They encouraged me to allow myself to take up space, to be important and make time for my own healing as well as changing the world. As Roxanne said, "I think it is really about acknowledging that we [women] matter". As I reflected on my own story, I noticed links between my own experiences and the aspects of the women's stories that I paid attention to, such as the impact these experiences can have on women, the minimisation of abuse that is not-physical, about the harm of the thin ideal, and the role that gas-lighting can have within a relationship. As feminist psychology points out, the experiences, assumptions and values of the researcher at a personal level play out through the research (LaFrance & Wigginton, 2019; Riger, 1992) and that has certainly been the case for me. In this section I want to set out the personal experiences that have been front and centre for me during this research. Where I am aware, I have endeavoured to reflect on how these have impacted the thesis.



My conversations with Roxanne and Elizabeth took place over one weekend away from home and had a profound impact on me. It was evident from our conversations that both women greatly valued their role as mothers and had a strong desire to keep their children safe and heal from the violence they had shared. Collectively these interviews made me think a lot about how things might have been for mum, and how as a mother, and early childhood teacher, children and their wellbeing are very important to her. I remember driving back from Roxanne's sobbing in response to her story and wondering what experiences mum had had. They had both lost children, put children ahead of their own wellbeing, they still both struggled with fear, but they also both have an inner fortitude, perseverance, and naturalness.

my first memory (and that of my little sister) is getting on a bus at night and leaving Taranaki to escape mum's boyfriend...I remember stopping in Kirikiriroa /Hamilton around midnight and eating pies in the front seat...from my perspective at the time we were on an adventure to our grandparents...now having learnt that leaving a relationship can be so dangerous it was probably terrifying for mum...it was also an act of resistance against captivity, a demonstration of strength in the face terror...sometime later ~~censored~~ found us in Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland and mum took him back<sup>6</sup>

I do remember good times during my primary school years but I also remember hiding in the bushes with mum and my little sister...~~censored~~ was angry and yelling for mum to come back so he could hurt her...I remember mum screaming, waking up to a torn book and blood on the bathroom wall...I remember the Police coming and doing nothing to help...I remember holes in the wall and door...I wonder what more happened, what I don't remember or don't know about...I have struggled to understand how anyone could do that to my mum who is wholesome, loving, creative, gentle, smart, and down to earth

<sup>6</sup> During the research journey I found myself interested in my own story. I spent a month writing about my own experiences and making sense of them. The paragraphs in purple in this section and in *freeing butterflies* are excerpts from my story.

I know that these things happened, I remember them, I was there and I can make the impression of an image in my mind but I am missing all feeling from the situation...there is nothing, just a blankness

I find myself wondering what mum's experience of all this was, how it impacted her as a person, and a parent, stories we have never really spoken about. But also, I wonder if I could bare to know, if it is worth bringing up. Maybe focusing on the present is what we need after so long drowning in the pain of these experiences. Sometimes the weight of these experiences for mum, and the women, made engaging in with their stories hard and in my research wondering, my brain would refuse to work.

### **fucking (with) little jasmine**

Roxanne, Danielle, Jessica, and Nancy spoke about being sexually abused as children and offered their experiences as part of their explanation for their later abusive relational and sexual experiences. Their stories found me thinking about my own introduction to fucking abuse as a child.

when I was 11 years old, my first boyfriend broke up with me because I didn't want to kiss...I remember walking home and telling mum that I had been sexually abused...I do not know why I connected these two events in my head but I did...we have never really talked about it much since then

I have seven separate memories of my abuse (more than I used to have)...I am not sure when the abuse happened, mum said my behaviour changed abruptly around 4 and it likely continued until when ~~censored~~ left, maybe around 7 or 8...my memory of childhood is limited ...I remember ~~censored~~ getting me to put my dressing gown on with nothing underneath and sit on my kiddie sized chair at my kiddie sized table as he **slid a big toe** into my vulva...I remember getting a few pubic hairs and him kissing them ... I remember him sitting on the edge of my bed and making me perform oral sex ... I remember him putting my hand in his pocket and getting me to touch his penis through a hole...I remember him trying anal sex because my vagina would not accommodate him...I remember him getting into my bed when my sister was asleep in the same room and making me be quiet while he touched me...and I remember him threatening me that if I told mum he would kill her...I have no feelings about these experiences at all...I am numb to them

While I have come to understand the threat mum's boyfriend made is a common statement made to silence victims<sup>7</sup>, as a young child aware of how badly he was capable of hurting mum already, I had no reason not to believe him. His threats acted to silence my inner world until very recently, making it hard for me to understand myself and causing me great discomfort sharing myself properly with anyone. I remember when I got my period, around 10 years old, I remained quiet and free bled for a couple of days until mum noticed and helped me with sanitary items. I remember choosing blue and red shorts because the blood would be less visible, and how cold and heavy my shorts felt soaked in blood. It was just too hard acknowledging myself, my body, and my experiences, and even harder still speaking them out loud to someone else.

My difficulty connecting with my inner world and bringing it into the spotlight made reflexivity for this research challenging, especially in the beginning and with respect to more personal aspects. As this project became more personal the writing became more challenging, leaving me feeling exposed, uncertain about the validity of my thoughts and my "right" to have something to say about anything. But, feminist ideology helped me challenge myself to claim my voice, within this project, within my relationships, my work, and life in general. It turns out, I have a lot to say!

<sup>7</sup> Secrecy is part of the burden of abuse, this comes from our abusers who tell us to stay quiet and non-abusing family who find it painful to hear about (Greydanus & Merrick, 2017; McAlinden, 2006, 2012), as well as society who would rather pretend it was not happening (Barley, 2020).

he never hit me BUT ...



I came across this photo of myself recently; it is from the big G.E. Free NZ march when I was 17 years old. It was my first year of university and I remember being happy within myself and about the way my life was going. When I look at that picture of me, I pondered what Angela said about how she changed so much during her abusive relationship and how no one really noticed or commented. Over the decade that proceeded this photo I went from being happy, confident and independent, into someone who always looked at the ground, was deeply sad, and nervous that *everything* I did was wrong.

from early on he was critical of me, he did weird things like didn't invite me into his parents' house even though he and I lived together and I worked with his mother, so I had to wait in the car sometimes for hours ...he critiqued most of my friends and family heavily and I ended up spending less time with them, causing a breakdown in relationships that have still not healed...he called me names under his breath like 'bitch'...he would leave me at home and go away with his friends and get really annoyed if I called or text...yet he told me he loved me and I started getting very confused by how his behaviour and words did not match up..I felt and acted crazy...he lied to me about the nature of his relationships with other women and would yell at me if I asked too many questions...near the end of our relationship he started throwing things near me, which sometimes broke...I would curl up on the floor frozen and he would yell at me...it was like the more broken I got, the more he was disgusted by me, the more he felt able to dehumanise me and mistreat me...  
it was like I was no longer someone to him

**mum's**  
**boyfriend's** threats had made me scared to talk about sex...I could do sexual things but I could not talk about them... being in a bigger body made me embarrassed about being sexual, which was not helped by my (ex)partner telling me he did not like touching me because he could feel that fat under my skin...I remember one time he got angry at me because I had a 2 centimetre red scar on my knee, he claimed it was unsightly...I never felt confident being proactive in our sexual interactions and struggled to be sexual unless I had been drinking<sup>8</sup> and he did not like that...from his perspective having sex with me was like "fucking dead meat"<sup>9</sup>...I now understand that I was dissociated, disconnected from my body, not wanting to feel my body and notice how I felt threat **cos** someone was touching me...but at the time this was normal, and didn't know it could be different

it became difficult to answer the phone, I had gained 40 kgs, I could not make decisions for myself like what to wear...I stopped being able to take care of myself...I couldn't sleep without medication, I worked myself into the ground through activism to prove my worth...I remember looking in the mirror and pushing at my stomach wishing you could cut fat off...there were times where I didn't want to exist, but I didn't want to be dead either

<sup>8</sup> Danielle, Catherine, Angela, and Elizabeth all spoke about using substances to engage in sex that they did not necessarily want.

<sup>9</sup> See Carrol Adams (1990) for an argument for why vegetarianism and feminism are related.

by the end of our relationship I could not make a cup of tea without crying because I thought I was doing it all wrong...after we separated I remember tidying up our shared house so we could move out and he got angry about something I said and broke a piece of wood on the washing line pole near my face...when I spoke to him about it later I said that the look in his eye made me feel like he could have killed me...he said he had felt that way...his revelation was chilling and only then did I realise the danger I could have been in if our relationship had continued...

Despite what I can now understand as clear indicators of coercive control (Stark, 2007) within that relationship, during the research journey I have found it hard at times to claim these experiences as abusive in comparison to some of the violence the women endured. At the same time, I have been aware this contradicted my political and theoretical analysis that it was unjust for the women to minimise their abuse (Frazier & Falmarge, 2014; Karlsson, 2019) because what we experience is so normalised in our day-to-day reality. I have constantly challenged myself to remember that none of what the women, mum, my sister, and I experienced was acceptable, even if it is so fucking ordinary.



## time is all we have here

*wake up  
life is transient  
swiftly passing  
be aware of the great matter  
don't waste time*  
- Buddhist proverb (Alexander, 2008, p. 1)

The finite nature of our time on earth has become ever more present for me with the cancer diagnosis of mum's partner Mike. He had been undergoing treatment almost the entire time I have been studying psychology and in 2020 Mike was told the cancer would claim his life. I can't imagine what it was like to sleep each night next to a person you love, knowing that they are dying and there was nothing you could do. When I think about this I cry (like I am now); sometimes I have looked upon my own love while he is sleeping and find myself crying thinking about mum and Mike. I feel love for Mike and gratitude for the love he has brought into mum's life. After years of abuse and challenge, their relationship has given mum (and Mike) a safe, loving and fun home, something not all of us find. I worry how they will both cope being parted, especially when mum is already hurting so much.

Mum stopped work at the end of 2020 to care for Mike at home and enjoy what time they had left together. He was in and out of hospital with infections and delirium, and each time he returned home his care was becoming more and more complex. But the hospital was not where Mike wanted to pass; he found it overwhelmed his senses, would get pissed off with the constant interruptions from medical staff, and he could not indulge his

remaining pleasures. He longed for the comfort and safety of the home he loved so much, surrounded by his treasured possessions. When Mike nearly died in hospital in April 2021, I relocated to Tāmaki Makaurau to support Mum with his care and death. We were so lucky to also have had wonderful support from the DHB, Hospice, and home carers to enable Mike to die as he wanted - a privilege not all are afforded and we were very fortunate.

I felt privileged to be able to be there for them both, but I also found the reality confronting at times. It was hard remaining open to the emotions of the experience when I also needed to be caught in the "seriousness" of academic theory. Over time, finding energy in the increasingly quiet and slow pace of the house was difficult as Mike got quieter, slept more, and his consciousness moved between worlds. Yet, there were also challenges finding time in the near constant comings and goings of medical people and support workers. I felt constant tension between working on my thesis and being with mum and Mike. And at times it is sad being far from my love, missing months of shared little moments and touch that we enjoy every day, away from my support networks, from fun, from my treasured possessions and the plants, animals, and water I have befriending in the countryside where we live. But I also felt fortunate that I had this to return to when mum's future remained uncertain.

MIKE  
TAKE YOUR  
NEXT  
JOURNEY  
SURROUNDED  
WITH LOVE  
♡



## mothers & daughters

whatever its nature, the mother-daughter relationship  
is invariably significant and intense  
– Alison Gray (1993, p.8)



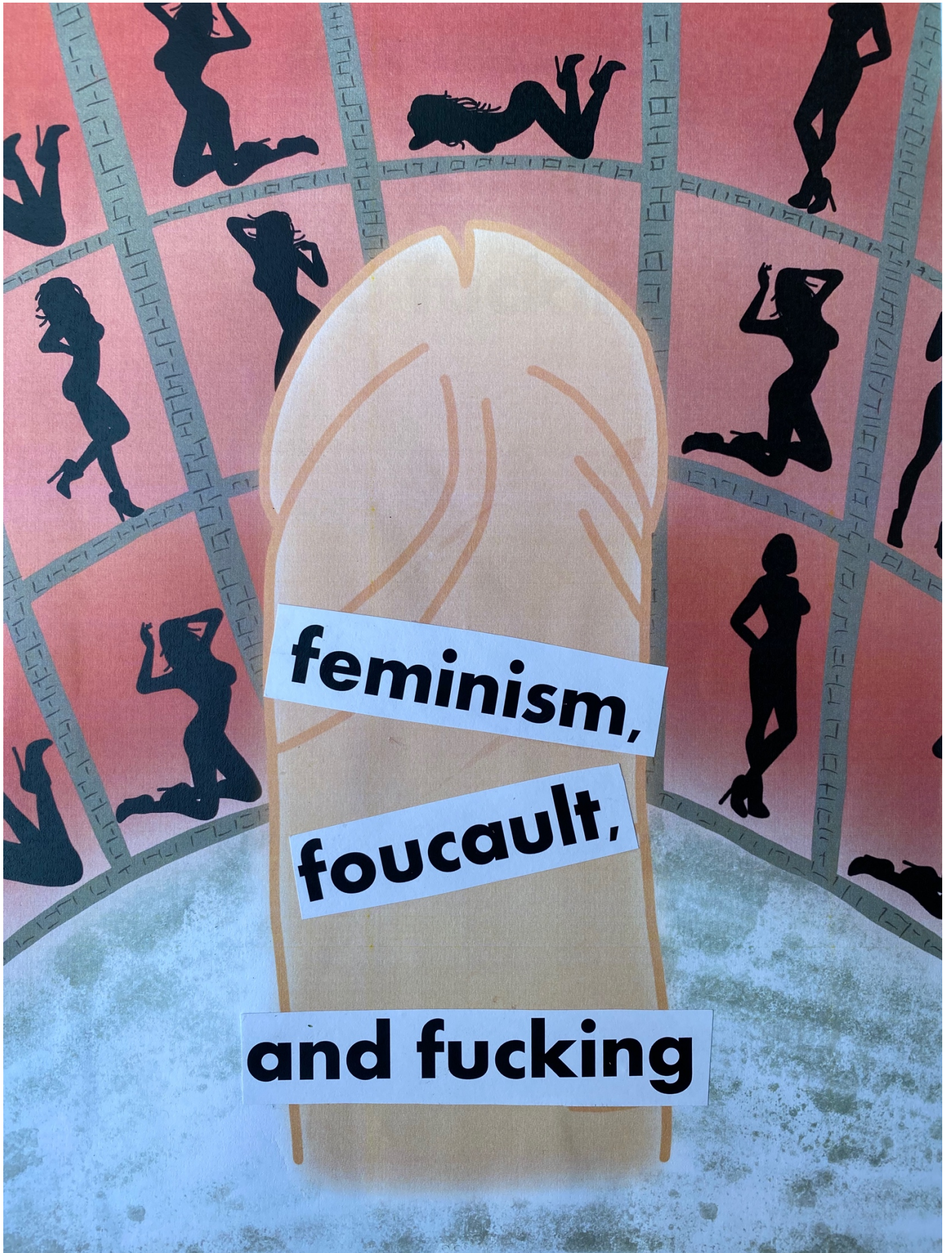
As all this was happening with Mike, mum and I were trying to re-connect after the impact of the abuse we have both experienced kept us disconnected for nearly 20 years. We have always loved each other but our relationship has been strained and at times we have both taken our hurt out on each other without realising it. Living under the same roof again for six months was challenging, there were arguments, BIG emotions, misunderstandings, uncertainties about how to interact, and a sense of walking on eggshells with each other at times; but we also increasingly found shared interests, emotional openness, and the odd laugh. Unlike when I left home the first time at 17, this time when it did come time to leave it was bittersweet. I was happy to see my love and immerse myself in the peace of our wee fairy cottage, but also sad to leave mum in lockdown, uncertain when I would be able to come back, and missing our daily interactions, our routines, and moments of connection.

Since reading excerpts from *Mothers & Daughters*<sup>10</sup>, by Alison Gray (1993), in my Psychology of Women paper and my conversations with Elizabeth and Roxanne, I have been sensitised to how things could have been for mum during her abuse and particularly to the pain of emotional distance between us. Many aspects of my psychology journey have propelled me to want to be closer to mum. Alison Gray (1993) spoke of being thankful that she was able to find friendship with her mother in later years, but that it was too late to explore deeper issues. I hope mum and I have time to find closure to our pain and even come to know each other through friendship. I am sad and angry at how much time we have lost together, the way our abuse and associated trauma has taken our ability to be together and taken from us the potential of what our life together could have been. The people who caused this harm have been out of our life for some time, yet the effects have endured. My grief at lost time and lost possibilities was something I noticed coming through my conversations with all the women. Time lost to dwelling in pain, time lost to needing to heal, time lost with loved ones because of fractured relationships he caused. When our time on this planet is finite, I am fucking angry about how much time men take from us with their abuse.

<sup>10</sup> *Mothers & Daughters* explores that relationship between 26 pākehā mothers and daughters spanning two generations that saw major changes to women's roles within Aotearoa/New Zealand society. Their stories detail tensions, pain, love, sometimes friendship, and understanding gained through time and reflection.







**feminism,**  
**foucault,**  
**and fucking**

*the pen(is)opticon*

*I created this image to speak to the phallogentric nature of heterosex and the disciplinary power of hegemonic discourses of fucking and femininity within raunch culture that shape women towards being sexy in a particular porn type fashion (Evans & Riley, 2014) constantly concerned with being pleasing to the penis, and the male attached*

# shape our mind, shape our lived reality

*knowledge is power through which you control our mind,  
our spirit, our bodies, our soul*  
– W.I.T.C.H. in 1969<sup>25</sup>

*power now seeks to transform the minds of those individuals who might be  
tempted to resist it, not merely to punish or imprison their bodies*  
- Bartky (1990, p. 79)

Making sense of how power operates is fundamental to my research wondering. In Foucauldian terms, power acts as a diffuse and flexible force, operating through dominant ideologies to shape what people understand to be common sense and normal ways of being and making sense of the world (Weedon, 1987). Foucauldian rendering of power suggests that it is *productive* in that it has an effect, *unstable* because it shifts as dominant ideas about what is normal change over time and place, *unequal* because not all understandings of the world or ways of being in the world are equally dominant, and *relational* because it is enacted between people (Ashton, 2016; Foucault, 1979).

Unlike previous top-down power structures, such as monarchies, which saw power concentrated in a visible group of people or an institution who controlled and punished the bodies of their subjects, modern power is theorized by Foucault (1979) as held within our ideas of what is normal, because being and appearing normal by the current societies' standards is emphasised as being very important (Gavey, 1992; Gavey et al., 1999). This

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<sup>25</sup> These words are from a hex the Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell (W.I.T.C.H.) placed on the University of Chicago on January 16<sup>th</sup>, 1969 (Dore, 2014).

normalising type of power disciplines our mind and behaviour<sup>26</sup> without force and without an obvious and discernable source, rendering power difficult to see because it is everywhere and nowhere (Foucault, 1979). Foucault termed this incarnation of power 'disciplinary power', and suggested it produced "subjected and practiced bodies, docile bodies" (Foucault, 1979, p. 138). The theory of disciplinary power suggests that dominant ideologies of what is normal shapes our minds towards regulating ourselves to appear as close to the "mythical norm" as we can. We achieve this normality through surveillance of how we look and behave, transforming ourselves into what is expected<sup>27</sup> (Bartky, 1990; Daveaux, 1994). We also enforce these norms on society by policing others, through our gaze, commentary, and acceptance or exclusion (Bartky, 1990; Butler, 1990). Those who fail to meet these normalizing standards can find themselves punished by being looked at sideways, mocked, marginalized in specific social circles or by wider society, and/or subject to psychological and physical violence (Butler, 1990).

Foucault (1979) used Jeremy Bentham's design of a prison, the Panopticon, as a model for explaining how disciplinary power works within society. At the centre of the prison is a guard

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<sup>26</sup> Throughout this thesis there is a constant tension between attending to the social *and* the individual as links are made between the personal and political. This tension is necessary if we are to resist neoliberal depoliticization, and enable women to (re)connect their personal experiences with the patriarchal power structures that enable misogyny and sexism, and discipline women's ways of understanding and being in the world towards the desires of men and heterosexual femininity. As I move between the individual and social, I have tended towards wording that enabled ease of understanding for a non-academic audience, such as mind and behaviour, rather than words such as sense making, subject positions or subjectivities. The wording I choose is possibly more limited in scope at times but to me it seems a necessary compromise for broader readability and to account for individual level experience. In considering this compromise, I am reminded of the comments Gavey (2005) made about how writing informed by feminist post-structuralism is often accused of elitism due to the complexity and obscurity of the language. The challenge I set myself through the process of bringing the women with me in this thesis as we move between individual and social level considerations and weave them together, has made for a challenging writing process that is never able to sit comfortably within the fully academic and socio-political, or the colloquial and individual.

<sup>27</sup> An example of disciplinary power is explored in the documentary *Embrace* (Brumfitt, 2016) which investigates "body loathing" around the globe. The documentary discusses (in part) how the globalised (Americanised) media influence of ultra-thin women on popular American TV shows was implicated in the emergence of eating disorders among Fijian women for the first time, as they tried to reduce their body size and conform to these new thin ideals.

tower with wide windows that look out on to a ring of cells. The cells have a window looking on to the guard tower and another looking outside. This design acts to backlight the cells so the guards can see everything happening in the cells, but the prisoners cannot see the guards. Foucault (1979) suggests that the effect of this is to make the prisoners conscious that they are always visible to authority, leading them to police their own behaviour whether the guards are present or not. This means that disciplinary control is now operating in the mind and body of the prisoners, and they have essentially become their own jailer. The panopticon is the ideal structure to control the population, with the micro tactics of power becoming so normalised that we cannot see how expectations, responses, advertising, the way we talk about things, what we do, think, and even feel shapes what is understood to be the truth, the right way of doing things, of being, and reacting. We do not notice ourselves being shaped towards the norm and we do not (generally) resist it (Bartky, 1990; Bulter, 1990; Foucault, 1979).

## **power = knowledge**

*meaning is produced within language rather than reflected by language*  
– Weedon (1987, p. 23)

Power is always tied to knowledge, because what we understand to be truth, or the natural way of things has the power to shape 'normal' (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). Knowledge is not neutral, rather it is related to the historical, social, political and cultural context in which it is developed and thus is subject to change and instability (Weedon, 1997). Knowledge creation and truth are regulated by those in power in a manner that maintains their material advantage and power (Gavey, 1989) because "constructions of reality are intimately related to the interests of particular institutions that occupy positions of

power within society" (Bright et al., 2008, p. 136). When knowledge is dominant it can be understood to be true, and accepted as 'common sense' (Weedon, 1987). The idea of common sense implies there is some kind of essentialist nature to the knowledge, that it is 'just the way it is' and that it is neutral. In this way, dominant knowledge hiding behind the guise of neutrality, renders invisible the social meaning that it holds, and the social structures and power relations that it upholds (Bright, et al., 2008).

Knowledge is understood through discourses, which Holloway (1984) defines as "a set of assumptions which cohere around a common logic and which confer particular meanings on the experiences and practices of people in a particular sphere" (p. 63). Discourses are able to "produce objects of our knowledge (and) govern the way a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about (they) also influence how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others" (Hall, 1997, p. 44). These discourses constitute and are reproduced within our social institutions, modes of thought and in individual ways of being (Weedon, 1987). There are multiple discourses co-occurring, offering different and potentially competing ways of making sense of the world (Gavey, 1989). Overtime the availability and power of different discourses changes. As discourses become dominant they appear natural, common sense and often go unseen while they structure society in ways that maintain existing power relations and produce material effects in society (Gavey, 1989; Rutherford et al., 2015). Dominant discourses are "widely accepted by the majority of people within society" and become the ways in which we understand the world (Bright et al., 2008, p. 136).

## **considering gender**

*the transition from sovereign authority to modern, disciplinary forms of power is seen to parallel the shift from more overt manifestations of the oppression of women to more insidious forms of control*

- Deveaux (1994, p. 225)

Feminist theorists have critiqued Foucault's theory of disciplinary power for gender neutrality, arguing that women's bodies are subject to disciplinary power in different ways to men, rendering women's bodies more docile than the bodies of men (Bartky, 1990). Foucault's inattention to the gendered nature of power is suggested as perpetuating "the silence and powerlessness of those upon whom these disciplines have been imposed" and thus reproducing the prevalence of sexism in western knowledge (Bartky, 1990, p. 79). That said, feminist theorists have used the concept of disciplinary power to explore the ways women are socially and self-controlled to look and behave in certain ways, including how they engage with femininity, sex and participate in heterosexual relationships (Bartky, 1990; Butler, 1990; Gavey, 2005).

Judith Butler (1990) is one such scholar who has drawn on the theory of disciplinary power to articulate her theory of performativity. When specifically considering gender, Butler (1990) argues that it is in our performance of gender norms, and our policing of our own, and others' performances that we (re)produce and maintain these norms. And that it is this repeated performance of the way we talk, walk, and act that consolidates an impression of being a particular gender (Butler, 1990). Gender then, according to Butler (1990) is produced through repeated practice of being whatever the current norms are for that gender. Kelly et al. (2017) suggests "gender is perhaps therefore best conceived of as a set of social processes rather than an attribute of individuals" (p. 241).

Butler (1990) argues that the performance of gender impacts our ability to exist within society in a functional and safe manner. Gender norms dictate how and in what way we can appear in public and only some people's performances are recognized. Those who do not meet the norms may not be acknowledged, and even those who meet the norms of gender expression may only do so at great cost spiritually, emotionally, physically, financially, and/or with respect time and energy. If people change their performance, if they contest, challenge, and test the boundaries of established norms, they may shape the performance of gender over time. But that is not without risk, because those who fail to perform in the expected manner may face sanctions in the form of judgment, negative comments, looks, even violence. As such, many of us (re)produce gender performances in particular ways because it is dangerous not to (Butler, 1990).

### **with power comes resistance**

When we unpack cultural norms and discuss alternatives, we open up the possibilities for being. By critically examining the impact different discourses have on people and understanding how they open up or foreclose the possibilities of our lives, we can illuminate possible unequal social power relations associated with structures that support the interests of some social groups over others (Aston, 2016). Discussions of alternative ways of being enable us to generate change (Gavey, 2011). Despite the appearance of limited possibilities, Gavey (2011) reassures us that "discourses or particular standards of cultural common sense are rarely, if ever, overdetermining" (p. 185). Where there is a gap between the interests of the individual and the ways of being offered by a discourse, then there are possibilities for resistance (Weedon, 1987). For example, dominant understandings of fucking position women as needing to

favour the sexual wishes of men, at the expense of our own pleasure. This sexual inequality is not in the interests of women and had led to feminist demands that we fuck more equitably and are responsive to women's desires and pleasure. Discourses hold differing amounts of social power, but even those that are not dominant can have a social effect if they have some visibility. Feminist discourses are generally in direct conflict with how femininity is dominantly defined and enacted (Weedon, 1987). While feminist discourses do not hold a dominant position, which would enable their knowledge to be realised widely and institutionally, they are able to offer women subject positions from which they can resist dominant patriarchal discourses. Resistance is the first step in the production of alternative forms of knowledge, followed by a gradual increase in the number of people taking up these positions and increase in the social power of these alternate understandings and ways of being (Weedon, 1987).



# **the neoliberal post-feminist “reality”**

*what neoliberalism in particular encourages is thus  
the individualization of the social*  
– Türken et al. (2016, p. 34)

*postfeminism is involved in the undoing of feminism*  
- Gill (2016, p. 613, emphasis original)

The feminist post-structuralist ideas that underpin this research lend great weight to the importance of social, cultural, and political contexts in shaping what we understand to be the normal and natural way of things, at particular times and in particular places. In this section I shall outline the neoliberal post-feminist context that backgrounds the literature and lives of the women who contributed to the creation of this research, including myself.

The rise of neoliberal economic policies and philosophy throughout the west has obscured the imbalances in social power relations and structural inequality. In this depoliticised environment, there has been a move away from collective responsibility towards an ethic of individual responsibility and personal achievement (Türken et al., 2016). For example, rather than critiquing the nature of capitalism and seeking social welfare solutions for poverty, the rise of neoliberalism saw the poor heavily critiqued for the circumstances they found themselves in, and increasingly responsible for working harder and finding employment to remedy “their situation” (Türken et al., 2016). It is “the task of the neoliberal subject to work on and transform themselves so as to be maximally successful and

productive" (Rutherford, 2018, p. 629). It is now expected that we can make autonomous choices (free of structural constraint) and live with the consequences of our decisions. We are morally obligated to overcome barriers to our success (with success framed in terms of capitalist, middle class aspirations of material wealth and social power), we need to continually be working to improve ourselves and we should draw confidence from within to cope with challenge, rather than expecting support and help from others (Türken et al., 2016). The neoliberal focus on continual transformation is tied with capitalism and consumption, as we are presented with an endless array of products and services that we are expected to buy to support our self-development (Gibson, 2014; Rutherford, 2018).

Within this neoliberal context, gender inequality is hard to recognise and is typically framed as an individual issue disconnected from other social inequalities, making systemic level critiques near impossible (Gill, 2016). This depoliticisation is evident in research with high school students in Aotearoa (Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2016) that found that sexism was discussed in gender neutral terms with gender roles and stereotypes said to be impacting males and females equally, rather than something that impacted women disproportionately. Despite this framing of sexism and the emphasis on how men were also impacted, any impacts on men were largely spoken about in hypothetical terms. It was only young women who reported real life experiences of physical and verbal sexual harassment, and had to manage rape jokes. In this sense there is a gulf between neoliberal rhetoric and lived experience for women (Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2016).

The invisibility of gender inequality within the current neoliberal climate has led to the theorisation of post-feminism. Post-feminism suggests that we have achieved gender equality

following the efforts of the women's liberation movement and that women are now empowered to make free, unencumbered choices (Fahs & Gonzalea, 2014; McRobbie, 2011; Rutherford, 2018). Post-feminism and neoliberalism are intertwined with their emphasis on individualism, choice, and agency alongside limited conversation about structural inequality and the influence of culture (Gill, 2016). The gains of the women's movement have seen some women (usually those who are white and from a middle-class background) able to achieve "success" and thus are held up as evidence that there are no longer barriers preventing all women from the same achievements. Within the neoliberal context, we are encouraged to work harder, develop ourselves and then we too could have this success. hooks (2000) suggests that when capitalism seduces some women with the illusion of power, and rewards them with consumer products, it makes collective struggle more challenging because some women do not want to dismantle the system and risk losing the benefits they have gained from it. As Crispin (2017) put it, "now that women are raised with access to power, we will not see a more egalitarian world, but the same world with more women in it" (p. 57). In this environment, without a strong, collective women's movement, gains of the past, such as abortion rights, are being undone<sup>28</sup> (Dore, 2014).

Within post-feminism, feminism is positioned as unnecessary, unfun, and "associated with the past and with old and unglamorous women" (McRobbie, 2011, p. 180). When a more collective feminism does rear its head, its messages are co-opted by media and pop-culture, re-packaged into a non-threatening form, and literally sold back to women in the form of consumer goods and services.

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<sup>28</sup> The undoing of feminist work can be seen in Texas, where in September 2021 the state has passed the most restrictive abortion laws in the United States of America, making abortions past six weeks illegal. This effectively makes abortions illegal because many women do not know they are pregnant until around or after the six-week time period. This decision reverses the hard fought for abortion rights of the famed 1973 Supreme Court decision in *Roe vs. Wade* case that enabled legal abortions in the USA (Marimow, 2021).

An often-cited example relevant to the contextual background of this thesis is the coopting of riot grrrl into girl power™. In the early 1990s, young women fed up with the male dominated punk scene developed their own movement, riot grrrl, to make music and share political ideas that impacted young women's lives and challenge patriarchy (Jackson et al., 2012; Kaltefleiter, 2016; Marcus, 2010). The movement grew out of background of anarchism, activism, and a do-it-yourself ethic (Lusty, 2017). The lyrics of riot grrrl bands (and queer feminist punk) discussed themes of incest, violence against women, and homophobia, and encouraged sisterhood, non-malecentric fucking, and bodily autonomy:

**I WANA BE HER FRIEND**

Rebel Girl by Bikini Kill

**ITS MY BODY, MY FUCKING CHOICE**

Touch Me Again by Petrol Girls

**YOU HAVE GOT A HARD CASE OF HOMOPARANOIA**

Lezbophobia by Tribe 8

**DON'T NEED YOUR DICK TO FUCK**

Don't Need You by Bikini Kill

**WHEN I TOUCH MYSELF I GET ORGASMIC**

**finally some satisfaction**

I Love to Love Myself by Riot Grrrl Sessions

Similarly, the riot grrrl manifesto is highly political and outlines a clear anti-capitalist agenda that seeks to find non-hierarchical ways of being that draw on the collective strengths and abilities of girls and women. It encourages the creation of an intersectional community that sought to not replicate social

hierarchies but rather encouraged internal exploration of how these mainstream ideologies were embedded within their own psyches. As they said in their manifesto, “we need to figure out how bullshit like racism, able-bodiedism, ageism, speciesism, classism, thinism, sexism, anti-Semitism and heterosexism figures in our own lives” (Bikini Kill, 1991; Lusty, 2017). In Sara Marcus’s (2010) herstory of riot grrrl, it is clear that riot grrrl activists and musicians were cautious about the impact mainstream media could have on their movement and how it could warp their message: “Mass media turned real life into a spectacle in order to sell it back to people as a meaningless, glammed up, depoliticized version of their own lives” (Marcus, 2010, pp. 220-221). Their fears were realised when their imagery and ideas were taken by mainstream media and watered down into a de-politicized message of girl power™ championed by the likes of the Spice Girls, who sang uncritically about sex and love with men: “It was presented as a feel-good pro-girl position that was non-threatening to the status quo and emphasized individualism and personal responsibility over collective action” (Rutherford, 2018, p. 628), in stark contrast to the aspirations of riot grrrl:

**I’M GIVING YOU EVERYTHING (I’m giving you everything)**

**ALL THAT JOY CAN BRING (all that joy can bring)**

**THIS I SWEAR (yes, I swear)**

**ALL THAT I WANT FROM YOU (all that I want from you)**

**IS A PROMISE YOU (want you to promise to)**

**WILL BE THERE (always be there)**

Say You Will be There<sup>29</sup> by the Spice Girls

**CAUSE TONIGHT IS THE NIGHT WHEN TWO BECOME ONE**

2 Become 1 by the Spice Girls

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<sup>29</sup> This chorus sounds very reminiscent of ideas of monogamy, compulsory heterosexuality, and the have/hold discourse, which collectively support the notion that women *need* to be in relationship with men.

## ALL YOU NEED IS POSITIVITY

Spice Up Your Life by the Spice Girls

The new girl power™ focused on the reclamation of femininity and women's "overt sexuality as a means of expressing independence, individuality and confidence" (Rutherford, 2018, p. 623) rather than working to understand (and dismantle) the patriarchal origins that regulated their sexual expression. Within the new girl power™ women could claim to be feminist and empowered by purchasing the right products and displaying the right kind of (sexualised) confidence without having to do anything differently in their personal lives or demand anything different from social and political structures (hooks, 2000). Claiming a form of feminism that requires no social or political change has also been labelled lifestyle feminism (hooks, 2000) or consumer feminism (Gill, 2008), for its focus on the promotion of empowerment through consumer habits and sexual expression. This form of post-feminist freedom is only really available to those with the material and structural privilege that enable them some power to meaningfully shape their lives (Rutherford, 2018). And arguably, privileged access to the commodification of feminism through consumer lifestyle choice is really more about selling women a *feeling* of choice (through products she can purchase) and enabling a superficial sense of control within one's life, while also acting to undermine feminist ideals of gender equality by seeing women in competition with each other (McRobbie, 2011), a hyper focus on their physical presentation (Gill, 2016), and enacting an "empowered sexuality" that just happens to look quite similar to what is seen in mainstream pornography<sup>30</sup> (Rizos, 2012).

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<sup>30</sup> Day (2009) defines mainstream pornography as sexualised images and video that "consistently maps binary gender roles to dominant and submissive power relations" (p. 1).

It is within the context of this neoliberal, post-feminist social "reality" that we will explore the gendered expectations of women's relating and fucking, and our ability to consent, throughout the rest of this thesis.



# the monogamous heterosexual social order

In 1914 anarchist Emma Goldman wrote:

*from infancy, almost, the average girl is told that marriage is her ultimate goal; therefore, her training and education must be directed towards that end. Like the mute beast fattened for slaughter, she is prepared for that*  
- Emma Goldman (1969, p. 230)

Despite the successes of the women's liberation movement, which enabled the expansion of (some) middle-class white women's lives from the domestic sphere into the public arena, advances in women's reproductive rights, increased permissibility of women's sexuality and a decline in the institution of marriage the monogamous, heterosexual social order still underpins our society as the most acceptable and normal way of establishing sexual and romantic relationships and organising family (Farvid & Braun, 2013; Farvid et al., 2017). Within this social context the rules for women are still largely the same as when Emma Goldman wrote over a century ago. Women are still trained to need a man and women must be desirable to men to secure them in a relationship (though what counts as desirable changes with time). In this section I will set out some of these expectations.

## **you NEED one (cis)man**

While the rainbow movement has gained greater acceptability in the public consciousness and increased political and media representation, it is still assumed that most people are heterosexual, that is that men and women are sexually and romantically attracted to each other. Our fairy tales are filled with attractive young women being rescued by a prince charming, our television shows and movies prominently showcase boy-girl

relationships and families are largely depicted as a (cis-gender) mum and dad with a small number of children, and the music we listen to is often about love, lust or breakups with the opposite sex (Rich, 1980). Those who deviate from this script need to offer some kind of explanation or "coming out" (Rich, 1980). This state of almost compulsory heterosexuality<sup>31</sup> is upheld by heteronormativity, which privileges heterosexuality as the ideal and "invisible norm against which all other identities are judged" (Mulholland, 2011, p. 123).

Monogamy, like heterosexuality, is seen as the most natural and normal way of relating, so much so that it is taken-for-granted that people will only be in a relationship with one person at a time. The normalising of monogamy is referred to as mononormativity (Farvid & Braun, 2013) and is reinforced by the law that only enables marriage and civil unions between two people, forms that only have space for one partner's details, and almost all representations of relationships throughout all media. Non-monogamy is usually positioned as infidelity (Robinson, 1997) and rarely do we see examples of open relationships, polyamory, and other forms of ethical non-monogamy within mainstream society. The taken-for-grantedness of monogamy forecloses the possibility that we might be openly committed sexually and/or romantically to more than one person at the same time. Within this monogamous, heterosexual social order women are directed towards being in relationship with one (cis)man.

There is a hierarchy of relating that privileges relationships that are more emotionally involved and committed (Farvid & Braun, 2013). Monogamy with "the one" is idealised as the best way for a sexual and romantic relationship (Farvid & Braun,

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<sup>31</sup> Compulsory heterosexuality is the "assumption that one *must* be heterosexual" (Fahs & McClelland, 2016, p. 394, emphasis original).

2013), which sees us focusing our attention on lifelong love, over other types of relationships, such as friendship and familial ties. Secondary to "the one" is a committed monogamous relationship "with committed heterosexual coupledness heavily tied to notions of happiness and contentment within the private sphere" (Farvid et al., 2017, p. 547). Dating to find "the one" sits next on the hierarchy, followed by long term casual sex<sup>32</sup> relationships, one-night stands, and finally booty calls<sup>33</sup> (Farvid & Braun, 2013).

Despite the expectations that women also now gain an education and establish their own successful career, it is in relationship with men that women ultimately find their existence validated (Pickens & Braun, 2018). Pickens and Braun (2018) spoke with heterosexual women (between 25 and 35 years old) about their experiences of being single. They found that the 20s was framed as a time for exploring and studying. During this decade the women were able to be happily single, but when they entered their 30s they experienced pressure to settle down and start having children. Being single after this point was considered a failure. During the dating process to find "the one" the women reported having to allow men to control the level of commitment to the relationship. Thompson (2018) similarly found that men expect to control the negotiations of heterosexual.

When women enter heterosexual relationships, they are still bound by traditional norms to put the needs of their partner, and children, before themselves (Bay-Cheng, 2010; Farvid & Braun, 2013). As McKinley (1999) comments the ideal woman is constructed as a nurturer of others and not herself. The relational expectation of women's roles sees them typically

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<sup>32</sup> Casual sex is defined as "brief or one-off sexual encounters or ongoing sexual arrangements among individuals who are not in a 'committed' romantic and/or longer-term relationship" (Farvid et al., 2017, p. 547).

<sup>33</sup> A booty call is defined as "a call or text late in the evening or in the early hours of the morning, purely for the purposes of meeting for sex" (Farvid et al., 2017, p. 557).

responsible for the emotional labour of maintaining the emotional and sexual connection within their relationships (Gavey, 1992; Kelly et al., 2017), and doing a larger share of domestic labour and childcare responsibilities than their male partners even when they both work outside of the home<sup>34</sup> (Farvid & Braun, 2013). Bay-Cheng (2010) argues that these gender norms within non-sexual domains, such as household labour, socialise girls and women into relational roles that keep them subordinate to men and can act to re-affirm compulsory heterosexuality.

The privileging of cis-gender, heteronormative, monogamy as normal and right can be seen in a recent media article about a billboard erected in central New Plymouth in celebration of rainbow diversity in the region. The organisation behind the billboard, Safe Space Alliance, received complaints about “the rainbow community being shoved in their faces”, about two dads holding a baby and about the depiction of an open relationship or throuple (three people in a relationship) “going too far” (Mcilraith, 2021) from privileged norms.

## **you MUST be desirable (to men)**

Women learn from an early age that others evaluate them in terms of their appearance (McKinley, 1999) and, as women get older, attractiveness is linked to gaining the interest of a man (Pickens & Braun, 2018) and keeping him (Kelly et al., 2017). The responsibility to be desirable is not new for women but it has intensified within the neoliberal context with the globalisation of media and reality television, alongside the rise of social media, and celebrity and influencer culture. The

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<sup>34</sup> Hochschild (1989) referred to (paid) working women’s disproportionate domestic responsibilities as the second shift. Fahs and Swank (2016) refer to the emotional work women are expected to do to maintain a good sexual relationship as women’s third shift.

messages carried through these mediums constantly remind women that their natural bodies are deficient and unattractive, that there is always something to work on, and that there is (conveniently) a range of products and services available for purchase to help create a better, more desirable, version of ourselves (Bartky, 1990; Gibson, 2014; Picken & Braun, 2018; Radner, 1999). In fact, due to the neoliberal emphasis on choice and transformation, taking up these tools of transformation is "both entitlement and obligation" (Braun, 2009, p. 236) and choosing not to means "ugliness [has become] our choice and our responsibility" (Tait, 2007, cited in Braun, 2009). In this way, the patriarchal standards used to measure women's desirability are intimately tied to capitalism and consumption, rendering heterofemininity (and its associated privileges) highly classed because it is more available to those women with the money (and time) to access the products and services needed to produce the required look. Heterofemininity is also tied to cis white supremacy in that it is often cis white women who are presented as desirable women.

Women internalise homogenized "ideal" standards for heterofemininity as a measure of how they should be. They judge themselves harshly, carrying shame (McKinley, 1999) and "a pervasive sense of bodily deficiency" (Bartky, 1990, p. 72) when they do not measure up, which inevitably they won't. Women police themselves, constantly surveilling their bodies, grooming and behaviour (Bartky, 1990; Donaghue et al., 2011; McRobbie, 2011), and comparing themselves to other women to ensure they (as the observer) are performing their heterofemininity in the right way (Evans & Riley, 2014). Women are directed towards punishing beauty standards, diet and exercise regimes (Bartky, 1990), self-improvement projects, and make overs, to try and achieve the prescribed beauty standards (McRobbie, 2011). Interestingly, Picken and Braun (2018) argue that while women have to have the

skills to produce the required femininity, these skills and the effort women put into their looks are also devalued. If women fail to take up the prescribed femininity and sexiness they will find themselves facing sanctions such as negative looks and comments, the loss of potential or existing relationships, and threats or actual violence (Bartky, 1990; Fahs & McClelland, 2016).

### **be feminine**

Bartky (1990) suggested that women adopt practices - referred to as technologies of femininity - to produce a body which is recognisably feminine in appearance and gesture, such as practices that produce a body of a certain size and comport, specific details for producing an ornamented surface, and specific gestures, postures and movement. When Bartky (1990) wrote her groundbreaking article, "the waif", was the ideal standard for women's bodies. She had to be rail thin, with small breasts, narrow hips, and an overall prepubescent appearance. At this time, dieting was encouraged through the media, especially in women's magazines, to help women achieve the desired thin body. When it comes to ornamentation, in addition to needing to manage their hair, nails and make up in line with current trends, women also must maintain soft, hairless, supple and smooth skin that does not give away their age (Bartky, 1990). To achieve these standards, women need to develop skin routines, remove hair, and know how certain activities may impact skin. Failure to comply with norms of femininity can result in sanctions; for example if women display body hair, they can face negative comment from others such as "disgusting, manly, unattractive, and gross" (Fahs & McClelland, 2016, p. 402). When Swedish model, Arvida Byström, posted photos on her social media of herself posing with hairy legs for an Adidas Originals shoe advertising campaign she received rape threats and other abuse (Siddique, 2017) Bartky (1990) suggested that women are

expected to adopt postures, gestures and movement that take up less space than men, to make themselves small, narrow and harmless while also displaying some (but not too much) eroticism.

## **be sexy**

Society has become more sexualised in the decades following Bartky's (1990) article and while women are still required to be feminine in the ways she set out, they are *also* required to be sexy. Increased commodification and commercialisation of sexuality during the 1990s saw sexualized styles and imagery become normalised and mainstream within western media (Rizos, 2012). The pornification of society led to raunch culture<sup>35</sup>, which focused on women's sexual expressions and images (Donaghue et al., 2011), producing a new sexualised femininity for women to achieve. While the practices that underlie technologies of femininity remained, the form women were trying to achieve was different. The new sexy style drew inspiration from women in pornography and demanded a more curvaceous body with pronounced tits and long limbs, no body hair including in the pubic area, a permanent tan and long glossy hair, long painted nails, and heavy makeup (Barton & Mabry, 2018; Gibson, 2014; Mulholland, 2011). The homogenised portrayal of women in mainstream pornography has also led to beauty standards for cis-women's cunts (Perry, 2019), with women increasingly taking up cosmetic surgery options to achieve the "designer vagina" seen in porn (Braun, 2009), alongside a proliferation of other products that *should* be purchased to maintain public hair and mask natural cunt aroma. The products and services "needed" to produce the "right" sexy body and style highlights how capitalism has commodified women's bodies and sexuality for commercial gain (Braun, 2009). It became necessary for women to take up the new

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<sup>35</sup> Raunch culture "describes a hypersexualized climate that oversexualizes women while encouraging women to sexualize other women and themselves" (Barton & Mabry, 2018, p. 608).

practices discussed above - Evan and Riley (2014) refer to these as the technologies of sexiness - to present themselves in the expected sexy manner if they wanted to show that they were sexual and desiring (Radner, 1999) and attract the male gaze<sup>36</sup> (Gibson, 2014). Alongside this new look, women were also encouraged to adopt more sexualised behaviour, reminiscent of male sexuality while being very feminine looking (Rizos, 2012). It was "no longer enough for women to be beautiful or thin to be considered desirable, but must also be considered sexy and comfortable with an open, exhibitiv sexualit" (Whitehead & Kurz, 2009, p. 228). An open attitude towards sex was now considered 'sexy' and 'cool' and there has been an uptake of sexualised activities, such as pole dancing, under banner of choice and empowerment, with an emphasis on fun and fitness, while also reinforcing societal ideas about women's bodies, heterosexual desirability, and performative sexual eroticism (White & Kurz, 2009).

These technologies of sexiness are not really about women's sexuality or pleasure and instead are about projecting the right image for the male gaze (Gibson, 2014). As Gill (2008) suggests, "heterosexual femininity as a project [is] concerned with making oneself desirable rather than with feeling and expressing sexual desires" (p. 37). Similarly, Rizos (2012) suggests that porn images "instruct women that their sexuality should be a series of performances, displaying their appearance in the most favourable light" (p. 41) rather than being about the felt sexual experience.

### **definitely NEVER be fat**

While the details of the ideal woman have changed over time, something that remains consistent for expectations of women's

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<sup>36</sup> The male gaze "originally denoted film production techniques that reproduce the voyeuristic and eroticized perspective of the assumed male heterosexual protagonist, which was internalized by the audience" (Glapka, 2018, p. 87).

bodies in the west is that they should not be fat (Bartky, 1990; Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Thompson, 2018). McKinley (1999) comments that "our attitudes towards fat women are clearly unambiguously hostile" (p. 110) and fatness is associated "with everything from being ugly to being weak-willed and morally impaired" (p. 98). The stigmatisation fat women face ensures that western, heterosexual women monitor our bodies and get the message that "women *must* be thin to be loved" (McKinley, 1999, p. 110; emphasis added). The importance of the thin ideal comes through clearly in a "not hot enough" discourse found within the context of online dating (Thompson, 2018). Thompson (2018) found that when women ignored messages or communicated disinterest with potential (male) online suitors the women's appearance was commonly targeted, with a particular focus on their weight. Fat women in these interactions were positioned as having no bargaining power and could not afford to be choosy. In one response, a woman who was considered fat and ugly was described as not even being a person. Such dehumanising commentary highlights the social sanctions that women face if they are considered to have somehow failed to meet the expected norms for our bodies and sexuality.

It is within the context of these expectations of cis, monogamous, heterosexual femininity that women's sexuality is shaped towards male pleasure, which we will discuss next.



# gendered sex expectations

*the way sex is represented to us has implications for sex  
as it happens on a material level*  
– Braun et al., (2003, p. 242)

*sex for the modern woman is not so much an enjoyable release of stress  
and tension, or a time to simply do whatever the fuck she wants, but  
another sphere in which to evaluate her performance*  
– Barmark (2016, p. 78)

The stories we hear about sex through talking, reading and images, create unspoken rules for what we understand to be the right or normal way of doing sex, and shape our behaviour to enact a normative performance (Farvid & Braun, 2014; Gavey, 1992; Opperman et al., 2014). With time, what is normalised changes subtly in how it is presented or what is idealised. However, what is always consistent in these changes is that there is a normalised way - not all ways of fucking sit equally alongside each other in terms of visibility and acceptance. In this section, I will offer a brief overview of these changes in recent history, before going into detail about the gendered norms that govern modern heterosex.

## **fucking through time**

Within the Victorian period of the west, the church largely shaped the nature of sex towards procreation within the institution of marriage (Dowling, 2017). As science replaced the church's power to shape the minds of the population, research established "norms" of sexual behaviour and functioning that then categorised sexual difference as a disorder and dysfunction for those who did not meet the contemporary social norms (Dowling, 2017). For example, men who could not maintain

erections and women who did not orgasm easily were understood as having a medical and/or psychological problem. As women of the post-war era became dissatisfied with the gender norms of their generation, sexologists such as Kinsey, and Masters and Johnson, produced research that encouraged heterosexual marriage and re-enforced penetration and male orgasm as the way "normal" sex should be enacted (Dowling, 2017; Potts, 2000). Masters and Johnson (1966) proposed a human sexual response cycle that entailed four phases: excitement, followed by plateau, orgasm and resolution. While their research did afford women some sexual agency, in that it established that women could also experience sexual pleasure, feminists have critiqued this work for reflecting a male version of sexual experience<sup>37</sup> (Potts, 2000) and assuming heterosexuality is natural, re-enforcing a biological, procreative model of sexuality that privileged men (Jackson, 1984).

As the women's liberation movement grew in the 1960s, sex became an increasingly public matter (Dowling, 2017). As women campaigned for access to contraception and safe and legal abortions, sex became separated from reproduction and the scope of socially acceptable sexual practices broadened (Jackson, 1984), including increased sexual activity outside of marriage (Holloway, 1984). In the 1980s the AIDS epidemic became feared and led to a conservative turn with respect to sex (Heldman & Wade, 2010), which emphasised health and safety through condom use and limiting the number of sexual partners (Dowling, 2017). During this era, Gayle Rubin (1984) developed the Sexual Hierarchy Circle to capture the types of sexual practices and contexts that were accepted and normalised at the time, and those practices that were deemed deviant, bad, and perverse. The most highly regarded sexual practices and identities involved

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<sup>37</sup> Cis-women's sexual arousal has been reported to occur more responsively to external cues, rather than manifesting spontaneously as it often does for cis-men (Kelly et al., 2017; Nagoski, 2015).

heterosexual, monogamous sex, that took place within a marriage for the purposes of procreation. Sexual practices and identities that were considered less good but still acceptable included sex that was free, occurred at home, was between two people of the same generation and who were in a relationship, that only involved bodies and sexual practices that were considered vanilla<sup>38</sup>, and that did not involve pornography. Sexual practices and identities that were considered deviant included homosexuality, sex in sin (aka outside of marriage), promiscuity (understood as non-monogamous sex) and casual sex, sex for non-procreative purposes, sex for money, sex that occurred alone or in groups, between people of different generations, sex in public, and sex involving pornography and toys (manufactured objects) and/or sadomasochism. Rubin (1984) outlined some sexual practices (and identities) that were being contested within broader society during this time, including sex between unmarried heterosexual couples, promiscuous heterosexuals, masturbation, long-term stable homosexual couples, lesbians at a bar and promiscuous gay men meeting for sex in bath houses and in the park. Sex that was firmly within the category of bad sex (at the time) was sex involving transvestites and transexuals, fetishists, sadomasochists, sex involving money and sex between people of different generations.

Mulholland (2011) revised Rubin's (1984) Sex Hierarchy Circle to reflect the cultural changes over the decades since its publication. Sex that was heterosexual, good, fun and frequent, had a "respectable" amount of raunch, and involved conventional gender scenarios was considered to be the most valued sexual practices and identities. Sex that was vanilla, casual or promiscuous, non-procreative, within the same generation, involves mainstream pornography and/or sex toys (manufactured

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<sup>38</sup> Vanilla sex refers to sex that is normalised within a particular culture and does not include subcultural elements of BDSM, fetishism or kink (Rubin, 1984).

objects), and stereotypical homosexuality sat outside the idealised permissive, heterosexual norm but were generally considered acceptable forms of sexual practice and identities. She placed sex alone and/or within groups, public sex, and sex for money within a contested space between acceptable and bad sex. "Bad" sex included the use of non-mainstream pornography, non-stereotypical queer sex, sex between generations and BDSM<sup>39</sup>. Mulholland (2011) argues that while the particulars of the sexual acts being performed might have changed, the dominance of heterosexual, cis-gender people doing the fucking remains the idealised norm.

As the AIDS epidemic came under control with increased awareness, medication and condom use, a more sexualised society grew out of increasingly globalised media that used sex to sell almost everything and mainstreamed pornography as a normal, even "healthy", part of sexuality (at least for men; Gavey, 2005).

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<sup>39</sup> BDSM is an acronym for a range of sexual practices that incorporate bondage and discipline (B/D), sadism and masochism or sadomasochism (S/M), and dominance and submission (D/s; Taormino, 2012). BDSM activities are carried out in the context of a *scene* when two or more people come together to 'play'. Scenes take place in private spaces, such as at someone's home or in a dungeon, or in public places, such as at play parties, demonstrations or clubs (Taormino, 2012). BDSM practices are extremely diverse but they include restraint (through the use ropes, cuffs and/or chains), impact play (including whipping, flogging, and spanking), role playing (including *acting* out rape scenes and kid kidnapping), sensation play (including the use of nipple clamps, hot wax, and cutting), rough play (including hair pulling, biting, scratching, and punching), discipline (including orgasm control), genital touching (including coitus, cock and ball torture, and anal fisting), and service where the submissive person/people serve their dominant's needs be they domestic, sexual or otherwise (Pitagora, 2013; Taormino, 2012). On the surface, BDSM might appear to be all about sex, and some of the time it is, but at its core, BDSM is about the *purposeful and consensual* exchange of power between those involved. This power exchange can be experienced physically, erotically, sexually, psychologically, spiritually, or most often, in some combination (Taormino, 2012). What distinguishes BDSM activities from abuse is the emphasis on an active process of consent. In mainstream sexual interactions (known as 'vanilla' sex in the BDSM community) consent is assumed rather than asserted, but in the BDSM community consent needs to be expressed actively and on an ongoing basis (Pitagora, 2013). BDSM involves two important practices: pre-play negotiations, and the use of safewords or signals to indicate the withdrawal of consent during a scene (Beres & MacDonald, 2015). The dominant in a scene is expected to check in with their submissive throughout the scene to ensure on-going consent. At times the submissive can enter a psychological state of mind, 'subspace', where they might not be able to use their safe word. In these cases, the dominant needs to proceed very cautiously and use previously agreed upon limits. All scenes should be completed with aftercare to ensure all players are good physically, emotionally and mentally. Aftercare can include talking about how things went, cuddling, and tending to physical needs such as food, or needing a blanket. Debriefing about the scene at the end, or in the days following, is an important part of the consent process to see what went well, what didn't and what can be learnt for next time (Beres & MacDonald, 2015).

From the mid 1990s, sex (and porn) was everywhere, in our movies, TV shows, magazines, music and advertising. The sexualization of culture produced the new sexy standards for femininity that women tried to re-produce (Gibson, 2014). Mainstream pornography has increasingly become the abitur of what is considered the normal way of doing sex<sup>40</sup>. Mainstream pornography presents a homogenized picture of what a sexual body looks like and how to fuck, which is typically a cis-gendered heterosexual couple (or a cis-man and two cis-women) with toned and tanned (white) bodies moving through a pattered sequence of oral sex for him, followed by vaginal or anal penetration and "the money shot" ejaculating on a woman's face or body (Mulholland, 2011). By replicating male dominance and women's submission during sex (Day, 2009), gendered positions are taken up within pornography as a guide for how to relate and perform sexually<sup>41</sup> (Antevska & Gavey, 2015; Sun et al., 2016).

Within this sexualised environment where sex is seen as something we all need (Farvid & Braun, 2013), a hook up culture<sup>42</sup> developed, normalising engagement in casual sex (Farvid et al., 2017; Heldman & Wade, 2010). Alongside hook up culture, people have started getting married and having children later in life (and yet, heterosexual marriage still remains the ideal way of relating and fucking) (Farvid & Braun, 2013; Farvid et al., 2017), in favour of establishing careers or travelling first (Heldman & Wade, 2010). The practice of heterosexual casual sex

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<sup>40</sup> Feminists have long debated the role of pornography society. During the so called "sex wars" of the 1980s, some women argued that pornography would maintain patriarchal power in heterosexual, while others argued pornography could be a vehicle for diversifying sexual practices and identities (Gavey, 2013). It has probably done both because while a homogenized, detached and at times violent heterosexual has been normalised and shapes actual sexual practice (Sun et al., 2016), at the margins of pornography there is a diverse presentation of sexual bodies, practices, and identities (Mulholland, 2011), which is opening up some space for different ways of fucking and being sexual (Day, 2009).

<sup>41</sup> One of the longstanding feminist concerns about mainstream pornography was that it would normalize sexualised violence against women. Antevska and Gavey (2015) found (in conversations with male pornography users) that the men were detached from, and normalised, depictions of violence against women in pornography.

<sup>42</sup> Hook up culture was the normalization of casual sex (Heldman & Wade, 2010).

typically involves some kissing and touching, and followed by intercourse (Gavey et al., 1999) shifting focus away from sexual activities that women find more pleasure in, resulting in an orgasm gap (in casual sex), where men are more likely than women to experience an orgasm. Women generally report finding more sexual pleasure in sex with a regular partner, compared to casual sex. However, they considered casual sex more exciting because it is novel and they enjoyed the build-up of sexual excitement, as well as feeling freer than they do with a regular partner (Farvid & Braun, 2017).

Despite the socio-cultural changes over the last 150 years leading to changes in sexual and relational practices, dominant understandings of sex and ways of doing sex are still largely centered around cis-men and their penis. For example, a discourse analysis of self-help books and online advice about casual sex found that women were encouraged to prioritise men's sexual gratification through undertaking sexual practices they might find unpleasant or painful, such as deep throat oral sex or anal sex<sup>43</sup> (Farvid & Braun, 2014). Our current phallocentric model of sexuality re-enforces the idea that good, natural and common-sense ways of fucking are for cis-gendered bodies, in heterosexual pairs, who enact a patterned series of sexual acts culminating in penetration and his orgasm (Gavey, 2005; Kelly et al., 2017; Potts, 2000). Phallocentrism links specific genders to specific sexual organs and specific sexual acts to the exclusion of those who do not conform to the cis-gender binary, and obscuring the possibilities of homosexual, group, and solo sex. People who do not conform to the expected bodies

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<sup>43</sup> That is not to say that all women find these particular acts painful or don't want to do them. Fahs and Gonzalez (2014) found that some women enjoy the physical sensations from anal sex. What is concerning about this "advice" is less the sex acts they advised and more that they were encouraging women to engage in sexual behaviour that they may not want to do and/or that they found painful, and that they should do so to please men and portray a type of sexuality that was not their own but rather a construction intended to showcase the "post-feminist sexual agent" who is always up for it, ready to fuck in any way men want (Bay-Cheng, 2015).

and ways of relating and fucking can find themselves excluded from having the language to articulate their sexual experiences, excluded from access to sexual pleasure, and subject to social and legal discrimination and violence. Similarly, because of this "primacy of the penis" (Jackson, 1984), cis-women can find the possibilities of their sexuality curtailed, feeling obligated to perform sexually for men, and unable to resist male advances (Gavey, 2005).

## **men "need" sex, women want relationships (women can now be sexual but there are limits)**

Wendy Holloway (1984) proposed that there are three dominant discourses that shape our sexual practices: a male sex drive discourse, a have/hold discourse and a permissive sex discourse. The male sex drive discourse holds that men have a strong need and insatiable biological drive for sex which is widely normalised within western society (Gilfoyle et al., 1992). The male "need" for sex is referenced daily on television and in other forms of media, alongside portrayals of women as passive recipients of men's sexual interest (Crawford et al., 1994; Gavey, 2005). Holloway (1984) cautions that the normalisation of the male sex drive discourse as naturally and biologically driven is an attempt to render it unquestionable rather than what it is, an "expression of power that is conferred to men in a patriarchal society" (p. 63). It is further cautioned that the male sex drive discourse can lead to excuses for sexual violence (Holloway, 1984) because once aroused men are no longer responsible for the "penis-with-a-life-of-its-own" (Rich, 1980, p. 645). Recent research continues to find support for the dominance of the male sex drive discourse (Dowling, 2017; Kelly et al., 2017).

The have/hold discourse suggests that women want to have sex with men to draw them into a relationship (traditionally marriage) to then "settle down" and have children, rather than having an interest in fucking for their own pleasure (Holloway, 1984). Within the have/hold discourse women's sexuality is only enacted within the context of a relationship (Gilfoyle et al., 1992) and is used as a means of maintaining intimacy and a loving connection within a relationship as well as pleasuring the male partner (Gavey, 1999). Like the male sex drive discourse, the have/hold discourse normalises monogamy and heterosexuality, and gives primacy to biological and reproductive drivers for sex. As with the male sex drive discourse, research continues to support the have/hold discourse, finding that women are directed towards intimacy and emotional closeness rather than sexual satisfaction within relationships (Beare & Boonzaier, 2020; Kelly et al., 2017) and using sex to ensure healthy relationships (Brown-Bowers et al., 2015).

Since the 1970s feminists have argued for women's rights to sexual pleasure<sup>44</sup> leading to what Holloway (1984) called the permissive discourse which holds that women and men are now assumed to be equally sexual with comparable sex drives and desires. The permissive discourse positions women as active and autonomous sexual beings who can and will engage in sex freely and willingly, for fun and pleasure, as much as for love and intimacy (McPhillips et al., 2001) and thus it has been suggested that this discourse challenges the principle of monogamy (Gilfoyle et al., 1992).

Burkett and Hamilton (2012) suggest that white, western, economically privileged cis-women are more likely than previous generations to consider themselves sexually liberated and free

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<sup>44</sup> Something men were in favour of if it meant they got more sex (hooks, 2000).

from gender imbalance. Certainly, the permissive turn has enabled women some acknowledgement as sexual beings. However, feminists have highlighted limitations of the permissive discourse within contemporary post-feminist western society as it expects women to perform their femininity in a way that appears "empowered", confidently sexual and up for anything sexually (Farvid et al., 2017). Under the permissive discourse, women are expected to say yes to sex, and their ability to say no to sex, or certain sexual practices is limited (Gavey, 2005; Thomas et al., 2014). Where women used to be able to say no to sexual advances from all men, except their husband, now women are expected to be eager to have sex with any man who expresses an interest. Just like before the "sexual revolution", women are expected to cater for men's sexual "needs", and they are also now supposed to at least appear to enjoy doing so enthusiastically (Gavey et al., 1999). McRobbie (2011) suggests that behind this apparent freedom for women there is yet another means of controlling women. Rather than allowing women space to explore and experience sexuality on their own terms, masculine style sexuality has been normalised for all (Jackson, 1984). Heteronormative ideals still dictate the standards for what is considered sex, and how women are supposed to look and perform sexually.

### **you MUST fuck**

Within our permissive and sexualised culture where sex is all around us, there is an assumption that we should fuck if the opportunity presents itself. Farvid and Braun (2013) refer to this as the "sex imperative". Within the context of a romantic relationship, sex is an assumed natural part of the relationship that remains unable to be questioned (Gavey, 1992). As such it becomes part of a woman's job (Gavey, 1992), something else that requires time and motivation on top of childcare, maintaining the house, being a partner and possibly also working (Kelly et

al., 2017). Sex is another chore women have to tend to, monitoring the frequency and quality of the sex within the relationship (Gavey, 1992), with bad, infrequent or absent sex assumed to mean that the relationship is not going well (Kelly et al., 2017) and that it will likely meet its end (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012).

The sexual imperative is also found in the context of casual sex and online dating where it is assumed that sex is the whole point of "hooking up" via dating apps such as Tinder (Thompson, 2018). If women participate within the online dating environment, they should expect that sex will happen and that saying no will see them positioned as a "prude" (Thompson, 2018) and possibly open to sexual violation. At the same time, women who engage with dating apps are considered "cheap" for seeking casual sex and thus cannot expect to be respected, leading to (some) men interacting with women in a sexually aggressive and threatening manner. Thompson (2018) suggests permissive discourse assumptions position men as having free access to heterosex on dating apps and occupying a position of domination over women.

### **don't be a slut OR a virgin**

Despite the sexual imperative demanding that sex be taken up whenever possible, women's openly desirous sexuality, or lack thereof, is still heavily policed. Traditionally the virgin/whore binary distinguished between "virtuous" women who had not had sex or only done so within marriage (virgins) and those women with loose morals who had sex outside of marriage (whores; Farvid et al., 2017). In the sexually permissive social environment where casual sex and sex outside marriage are more socially acceptable (Mulholland, 2011), Bay-Cheng (2015) argues that the virgin/whore binary has been destabilized and replaced with a virgin - whore continuum. Now women are expected to learn

to manage public perceptions of their sexual behaviour so that they fall within the acceptable middle of the continuum rather than be positioned negatively at either end (Pickens & Braun, 2018). At one end of the continuum, the “virgins”, also referred to as prudes or frigid, are perceived to be sexually uptight and not embodying the expected sexy aesthetic and sexually active, knowledgeable persona demanded by the permissive discourse (Farvid et al., 2017). At the other end are whores or “sluts<sup>45</sup>”; women who are perceived to be too openly desirous and sexually active (Farvid et al., 2017; Kelly et al., 2017). There remains a sexual double standard, within which the term slut is applied *negatively* and specifically to women, while men who are perceived to have a lot of sex are likely to be considered *positively* as a “player” (Farvid et al., 2017).

Women must choose between conforming to the sexual double standard at the cost of their sexual autonomy or cope with the consequences of being labelled a slut (Kelly et al., 2017). Within the context of casual sex, women navigate the double standard by engaging in surveillance of their casual sex practices, limiting who they speak to, managing their sexual dress and behaviour to avoid getting a “reputation”, and positioning other women as more “slutty” than themselves (Farvid et al., 2017). Young teenage girls (within Aotearoa/New Zealand) are also aware of the sexual double standards and work to manage their sexual reputation through their fashion choices, being careful to avoid clothing that could see them positioned as “skanky” or the wrong kind of girl, while also styling themselves so they were considered attractive and appropriately sexy (Jackson et al., 2012). Like adult women, they also policed the

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<sup>45</sup> Bay-Cheng (2015) suggests the usage of slut has changed from being used to label a woman who had any sex (outside of marriage) to being used to label women whose sexual behaviour is considered out of control, not discerning, or as way of evaluating how “easy” someone is.

choices of other girls and mocked those they perceived as being too overly sexualised in their dress.

## **fucking is all about cock and orgasms**

When it comes to the way sex is actually “done”, heterosex has a sort of paint by numbers feel with research consistently finding a patterned sequence of sexual acts that focus on achieving the desired goal of an orgasm, preferably for both partners, but definitely for him (Braun et al., 2003; Opperman et al., 2014; Potts, 2000; Thomas et al., 2017). The sequence generally starts with kissing and cuddling followed by mutual masturbation, oral sex for her (and possibly an orgasm), oral sex for him, ending with intercourse and the male orgasm (Braun et al., 2008; Gavey et al., 1999; McPhillips et al., 2001; Opperman et al., 2014; Potts, 2000). Within the context of casual sex, oral sex for women might be omitted (Gavey et al., 1999). So entrenched is this way of fucking it is almost unthinkable that the sexual interaction might take another path, might end before he has ejaculated or continue afterwards, or that there might be no orgasms at all, making it difficult for women to disrupt a sexual interaction before a man was reached orgasm (Gavey, 2005; Thomas et al., 2017).

## **penis in vagina sex**

Early feminist research about heterosex identified penis-vagina penetrative sex (also referred to as coitus) as the defining feature of sexual activity between men and women (Gavey et al., 1999; Jackson, 1984; McPhillips et al., 2001; Potts, 2000). This is so much so that sex is generally understood to mean intercourse and penetration (McPhillips et al., 2001). More recent research supports this understanding of sex as intercourse, and the taken-for-granted importance of coitus

(Dowling, 2017; Kelly et al., 2017; Opperman et al., 2014; Ussher et al., 2013).

Gavey et al. (1999) explored the meaning of intercourse for people engaging in heterosexual relationships and casual sex. They found that within relationships intercourse held contradictory meanings, making context important. In some cases, intercourse was represented as "the ultimate sexual experience" (p. 45) and highly intimate, in contrast to mutual masturbation and oral sex which were experienced as fun and playful<sup>46</sup>. In other circumstances, intercourse was described as the least intimate, least meaningful and easiest sex act. Engaging in intercourse enabled some women to avoid unwanted intimacy and prolonged sexual experience by bypassing any other sexual activities. Men who reported not wanting intercourse also reported their partners questioning their (lack of) attractiveness as the reason for the men's lack of desire (for intercourse).

While some may frame sex in broader terms, and include a range of sexual activities under the banner of sex, intercourse is the critical feature of what sex is (McPhillips et al., 2001). Sexual activities that occur prior to coitus, including those that women derive more pleasure from<sup>47</sup>, are labelled "foreplay" and thus distinguished from the "main act" (Gavey 2005; Jackson, 1984). Popular illustrations of sex in film and television, and in research about everyday experiences of sex, suggest that the exclusion of coitus is uncommon (Gavey, 2005). The absence of coitus from sexual interactions was considered almost

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<sup>46</sup> This understanding of mutual masturbation and oral sex as fun and playful trivializes sexual activities that women typically derive more sexual pleasure from (Gavey, 2005).

<sup>47</sup> This is not to say that women do not experience any pleasure from coitus. Gavey et al. (1999) found that some women spoke about desire to be penetrated and the authors referred to this as a "sort of 'body-wanting' for penetration" (p. 46).

unthinkable (Gavey, 2005; McPhillips et al., 2001). So central and important is the role of coitus in heterosex that it has become labelled the "coital imperative" (Jackson, 1984). Coitus in this discourse is suggested as the most universally natural form of sex with its ties to reproduction. Jackson (1984) argues through social institutions, such as the media, to enjoy sex this way despite its emphasis on male pleasure shows how the coital imperative trains women.

Sometimes coitus is de-centered within heterosex. McPhillips et al. (2001) interviewed men and women about the place of intercourse within heterosex. They found that some participants tried to talk about sex in terms of reciprocity and pleasure, rather than specific sex acts. Given the dominant understanding of the male sex drive discourse and the coital imperative, men spoke about their partners' difficulties recognising their obligation to meet their needs without intercourse. Participants in this study suggested that examining feminist and non-heterosexual texts were helpful in exploring alternative ways sex could be. In their work with cancer patients and their partners, Ussher and colleagues (2013) found that coitus was the way the participants understood 'real sex' and that it was only after a cancer diagnosis and change in physical ability that enabled them to renegotiate what sex was and explore non-coital sexual practices, including the use of sex toys. Heterosexual men with cancer in their study acknowledged that their partners were enjoying more pleasure from non-coital practices they had previously overlooked. Lesbian women in their study engaged in less renegotiation of sexual practices following their diagnosis because their sexual practices already emphasised non-penetrative sex.

## **orgasm - the reason for fucking**

Fucking is typically goal driven towards achieving an orgasm, which is considered a normal and important part of the sexual experience<sup>48</sup> (Opperman et al., 2014; Potts, 2000). Masters and Johnson (1966) located an orgasm as the natural “peak” of the human sexual response cycle and the “orgasm is considered by many to be the most satisfying aspect of sex” (Chadwick et al., 2019). The absence of orgasms is considered unsatisfactory and if it occurs regularly the absence can be classified as a sexual dysfunction (Opperman et al., 2014). While the fucking can still be experienced as pleasurable, it is also described as being less intense and having a sense of being “unfinished<sup>49</sup>” without orgasm (Opperman et al., 2014; Potts, 2000). The orgasm has become a measure of what a good sexual experience is, leading to Béjin (1986, cited in Potts, 2000) coining the term “orgasm imperative” to signify its importance and necessity in sex. That said, this imperative is largely related to the man’s orgasm, which is often considered to signal the end point of sex. Thomas et al. (2017) found it was inconceivable to some women that they could end sex before his orgasm. A woman’s orgasm however, is not afforded the power a man’s orgasm holds to end sex.

Not all orgasms are considered equal, and research has found a clear hierarchy of orgasm experiences. The simultaneous orgasm, where both partners come to orgasm together is the “ultimate mutuality” (Braun et al., 2003, p. 245) or “merging of souls through orgasm-via-intercourse” (Potts, 2000, p.63). Potts (2000) found a hierarchy of women’s orgasms that positioned a

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<sup>48</sup> Within a neoliberal emphasis on self-improvement, society is encouraged through the media to seek “better, more frequent, and more mind-blowing orgasmic experiences as a way to improve their sex lives, maintain relationship satisfaction and promote overall well-being” (Chadwick et al., 2019, p. 2435).

<sup>49</sup> Potts (2000) found that completed and uncompleted orgasms could be understood in contradictory ways. That while the orgasm left participants with an immediate sense of pleasure in their bodies, they could also be anti-climactic because the “sexiness” and desire was gone, replaced with an exhausted body. Where there was no orgasm, a sexual interaction could leave the person with an ongoing sense of desire, “it keeps the body and mind in play” (p. 69). She suggests that “desire is thus disruptive in the sense that it challenges the prioritization of – the higher *presence* associated with - orgasm” (p. 69, emphasis original).

woman's orgasm with ejaculation as the most valued experience. Potts argued this indicated a privileging of the (ejaculative) male orgasm experience as the ideal<sup>50</sup>. Non-ejaculative orgasms that women achieved through intercourse were considered the next best type of orgasm, over those achieved through manual stimulation with another. The emphasis on the superiority of orgasms via intercourse re-enforces the coital imperative and a couple imperative, where orgasms achieved through solo sex<sup>51</sup> are not as good as those achieved in a couple.

The orgasm imperative works with the coital imperative to ensure a focus on male pleasure within heterosex (Dowling, 2017; Kelly et al., 2017), despite research finding that that cis-women do not reliably experience orgasm through coitus (Kelly et al., 2017; Nagoski, 2015; Potts, 2000; Opperman et al., 2014). Kelly and colleagues (2017) found that women did not expect to orgasm in partnered sex and would use sex toys and masturbation to achieve their orgasms alone. In this way, they placed less emphasis on their own orgasms and downplayed the importance of other sexual activities that they derived more pleasure from (Kelly et al., 2017). Similarly, Dowling (2017) and Potts (2000) found that women privileged coitus and men's pleasure and orgasm over their own desire.

The orgasm imperative underpins a discourse of reciprocity within heterosex where women and men are expected to share in an exchange of orgasms. Originally this was framed as the "pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse" by Gilfoyle et al. (1992) where women gave themselves to men for sex and in return men gave them orgasms. They argued the pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse re-enforces norms of male activity and female

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<sup>50</sup> This dominant understanding of men's orgasms obscures that some men can orgasm without ejaculation (based on personal experience).

<sup>51</sup> Potts (2000) found that masturbation was discussed in contradictory terms, being both too intimate to do in front of another and lacking emotional connection that can be found in other forms of sex.

passivity and held men up as the source of all pleasure, foreclosing the possibility that women could experience pleasure on their own, with each other, and without orgasm. Men were positioned favorably within this discourse as being egalitarian and modern for thinking of women's pleasure (Gilfoyle et al., 1992), and as skilled lovers for being able to achieve the "difficult" female orgasm (Potts, 2000).

The pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse was then reconceptualised by Braun et al. (2003) as a "discourse of reciprocity" where women were afforded more agency to claim their orgasms in heterosexual interactions, but comment that if a woman's orgasm was absent for some reason, it was not considered as important as if the man didn't come. They suggest this gendered difference could be because women are seen as getting other things, such as love (reminiscent of the have/hold discourse) out of the interaction. While the discourse of reciprocity has the potential to produce a more egalitarian heterosex, it also produces obligations for women to orgasm and ensure that their partner does as well, potentially leading to coercion within sexual interactions because women feel pressure to orgasm (Braun et al., 2003) and may engage in faking orgasms for their partner's pleasure and to protect their ego (Chadwick et al., 2019; Opperman et al., 2014). When women do not orgasm, it can impact negatively on their male partners perceived sexpertise and thus faking it "rewards and validates *his* performance" (Potts, 2000, p. 69, emphasis original). Women also report faking orgasms to end unwanted sex more quickly (Opperman et al., 2014; Thomas et al., 2017). In faking orgasms, women are suggested to be simultaneously acting with agency because their orgasm has some power to shape the sexual interaction, and engaging in emotional labour that upholds dominant ideas about heterosex (Beres, 2010; Thomas et al., 2017). Opperman et al. (2014) found that heterosexual women and men in their study

reported feeling responsible for their partners pleasure and orgasm. They questioned if the gendered nature of the reciprocity discourse was relaxing somewhat.

It is assumed that all orgasms are good, but Chadwick et al. (2019) found that "orgasm does not necessarily equate to consent, enjoyment, arousal and/or positive affect" (p. 2452). They found that when sex was coercive and/or orgasms were demanded by a partner, participants reported that their orgasms were experienced negatively and were less pleasurable than in non-coercive experiences. The orgasms were reported as less intense and solely physical reactions that lacked the emotional connection and at times could be painful due to lack of arousal. These "bad orgasms" had a negative impact on their relationships and psychological health as they were left a sense that their bodies had betrayed them, they felt their partners believed the sexual encounter was wanted all along, obscuring the coercive behaviour they experienced. The authors noted that in some instances, the participants reported positive orgasm experiences during compliant, coercive or pressured sex.

### **the rise of anal**

Over the last two decades, there has been an increase in anal sex<sup>52</sup> between heterosexuals (Benson et al., 2019; Fahs & Gonzalez, 2014; Heldman & Wade, 2010) and a decline in intercourse (Heldman & Wade, 2010) as it is considered "old-fashioned" (Wamoyi et al., 2015). The rise of anal sex is attributed to the increased accessibility of pornography which commonly depicts this sex act between heterosexual couples (Fahs & Gonzalez, 2014; Wamoyi et al., 2015).

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<sup>52</sup> The research cited in this section about heterosexual anal sex is talking specifically about penetration of a woman's anus with a man's penis. They do not extend their analysis to other anal play or anal eroticism (Benson et al., 2019; Fahs & Gonzalez, 2014), which is understood to be the use of anal sex toys, manual and oral anal stimulation and the absence of anal penetration (Fahs & Gonzalez, 2014).

Fahs and Gonzalez (2014) and Benson et al. (2019) found that anal sex was normalised as part of heterosex and women engaged with anal sex to please male partners (despite women's experiences of pain) and for their own pleasure (motivated by sexual experimentation and curiosity), as well as to avoid pregnancy, maintain virginity, to enable sex while on their period, to appear normal, and because of coercion and rape. Benson and colleagues (2019) found that women were more likely to engage in anal sex if they felt they generally had the power or agency to guide sex within the relationship and thus anal sex was not something they would do within a casual sex situation. Fahs and Gonzalez (2014) found that women engaged in anal sex as a gift to long term partners within a permissive discourse of sexual exploration.

The addition of oral sex into the pattern of heterosex, and the rise in practices of anal sex highlights how normalised sexual practices change with time. However, these changes have not destabilised the phallogentric model of heterosex; fucking is still largely all about the cock and male pleasure, and it still ends with his orgasm. The social conditions and context set out in this section have created a culture that regulates women's sexuality and ways of relating in a manner that is *at best* limiting the possibilities of our experiencing pleasure and developing sexuality on our own terms. At worst, these social conditions afford men privilege to rape and kill us, and then blame us for it, as was very evident during the Grace Millane murder trial, when the defense lawyers used women's sexual histories against them (Gavey, 2019). In March 2021, a protest against sexual violence was organized in Whanganui-a-Tara/Wellington under the hashtag #letuslive (Harris, 2021). To me this mantle highlights just how desperate and dangerous western society is for women (and gender minorities). While a

Tinder date can have such great gender disparity in the “worst case scenario” - where cis-men might risk rejection and a solo wank at the end of the night, and women and gender minorities have to worry about whether they will be raped or even be alive the next morning - we are nowhere near safety, let alone equity, or sexual satisfaction. Culturally embedded practices that normalize male entitlement to our sexuality, our bodies, even our lives, blurs the line between “just sex” and (sexual) violence (Gavey, 2005), which we will explore in the next section.

# sexual ethics

*what we are able to articulate and label as sexual violence is dependent upon the language we have available to name and make visible certain harms*

– Hinderes and Fileborn (2019, p. 3)

*by focusing almost exclusively on the wrongs involved in nonconsensual sex, we risk overly legitimizing sex that is consensual*

– Woodard (forthcoming, p. 301)

Popular understandings position sex and rape as a binary with consent acting as the line between ethical and legal sex, and unethical, problematic, and potentially illegal sexual assault or rape (Cahill, 2016). Feminism has long debated this binary, querying if sex and rape are distinct, with sex being sex and rape being violence (Brownmiller, 1975), or if sex and rape exist on a continuum where the practice of rape and our ideas about rape act to shape women's experiences and limit possibilities in sex (MacKinnon, 1989).

Gavey's (2005) theory of the cultural scaffolding of rape blurs the sex/rape binary, in favour of a continuum with a grey area in the middle where consensual sex is ethically problematic but maybe not quite rape. She argues that this grey area is possible because dominant gendered discourses of heterosex, sexual imperatives and the patterned nature of these interactions (sexual scripts<sup>53</sup>), and myths about rape (re)produced by/within our cultural environment act to create a structure (a scaffold) that makes rape and unwanted sex possible, prevalent, and accepted. Gavey (1992) has drawn parallels between Bartky's (1990) analysis of women's self-surveillance of their appearance

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<sup>53</sup> Sexual scripts are the "cognitive schema that instruct people how to understand and act in sexual situations" (Masters et al., 2013, p.409).

and the way women self-police their sexual engagement with men, suggesting that women comply with normative expectations of heterosex, irrespective of their desire to do so, or not. The disciplinary power within these interactions creates coercive sexual engagement at the social level, even if there is no overt coercion within interpersonal interactions. In this environment it can be difficult for women to say no to unwanted sex<sup>54</sup> because they feel obligated to perform sexually for men (Gavey, 2005). Failure to perform in the expected manner can result in sanctions from negative comments, through to loss of the relationship, and sometimes violence to enforce compliance. Gavey's theory raises questions about what sex is, and if consent can ever be given freely within a cultural environment where dominant ways of relating sexually are intended to maintain the cis-gender, heteronormative, monogamous social<sup>55</sup> order for the benefit of (cis)men.

In the following section I will outline rape myths and the conversations within feminist literature about consent and agency, before discussing recent theorizing about sex as both consensual and unwanted.

## **rape myths**

Rape and sexual assault of women came to widespread public attention as a result of the vocal women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s (Gavey, 2005). Women meeting in consciousness-raising groups during this time talked about their experiences of sexual assault and began to understand how common the experience was

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<sup>54</sup> Gavey (2005) suggests that unwanted sex in the grey area is where women do not feel like they have a choice about doing it because there is a sense of obligation and pressure, and that this is distinct from sex where women do not have any desire for the sex but agree to it within some mutually recognised ethic of reciprocity and giving, and is entered into willingly in a way that does not compromise a strong desire not to have sex.

<sup>55</sup> This also interacts with other social power relations that collectively act to support a middle class (Bay-Cheng, 2019; Bay-Cheng & Bruns, 2016), white supremacist (hooks, 2000) and able-bodied (Fahs & McClelland, 2016) social order.

for women. In doing so, the women came to understand their sexual assault as political and related to unequal social power relations, and not the result of any personal deficits. MacKinnon (1989) argues that from a woman's point of view, rape is not legally prohibited, rather it is regulated by societal norms. The way society has defined rape has historically been to constrain what "counted" as rape, who could be raped, and by whom. Rape that did not meet these definitions was more likely to be dismissed by the justice system and wider society as an "instance of sex rather than rape, or as simply untrue" (Gavey, 2005, p. 18). Burt (1980) called the stereotyped, prejudicial, false beliefs about rape, rape victims and perpetrators of rape 'rape myths'. These myths enable a culture that minimises, normalises and excuses sexual violence, and tolerates a high prevalence of rape, leading to the creation of a society that is hostile towards victims of rape by downplaying and dismissing some experiences and blaming women for others, and providing perpetrators of rape socially acceptable excuses for their behaviour (Burt, 1980; Edwards et al., 2011; Hindes & Fileborn, 2019). Rape myths are perpetuated by social institutions such as the law, psychology and media that condition society to accept the myths through processes of normalisation (Brownmiller, 1975). The culture that tolerates, and at times justifies, aggression and sexual violence towards women is referred to as "rape culture" (Gavey, 2005; Gay, 2014; Klement et al., 2017; Sills et al., 2015).

Despite rape being most likely to be perpetuated by someone known to a woman, such as an acquaintance, friend, or partner<sup>56</sup> there is still a strongly held understanding that "real rape" is committed by strangers who are likely unhinged and perverted (Gavey, 2005; Ryan, 2011). "Real rape" is also understood to

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<sup>56</sup> In 1986, the New Zealand parliament passed a law criminalizing rape within marriage and de facto relationships.

involve physical force to overpower the woman, that she should be physically resisting his advances (Gavey, 2005; Ryan, 2011), and that a "real rape" victim is left emotionally distraught (Gavey & Schmidt, 2011). Support for rape myths can be seen in research looking at perceptions of sexual assault scenarios. Findings suggest that people were more uncertain about labeling something sexual assault if the people involved had a previous or existing sexual or romantic relationship, or if alcohol had been consumed (Baldwin-White & Bazemore, 2020; Tamborra et al., 2014). Edwards and colleagues (2011) found rape myths are supported by substantial segments of the population and within institutions in the United States of America (USA). Support for rape myths and the minimisation of sexual violence can be seen in Australian media coverage of sexual violence claims against comedian Aziz Ansari<sup>57</sup> (Hindes & Fileborn, 2019), New Zealand media coverage of the Roast Busters<sup>58</sup> (Sills et al., 2015), and in our court rooms during the Grace Millane murder trial (Gavey, 2019). Rape myths can make it hard for women to identify and understand their own experiences as rape (Gavey, 2005).

Alongside rape myths is a strong victim blaming discourse that scrutinises women's behaviour, with people asking questions like 'why they were walking alone in that place at that time?', 'why they were dressed like that?', 'had they been drinking?', 'did they resist enough?' (Baldwin-White & Bazemore, 2020; Edwards et al., 2011; Ryan, 2011) and questions about their lifestyle and sexual past (Gavey, 2019; Mendes et al., 2018). This victim blaming places the responsibility on women to keep themselves safe, rather than on men to not rape in the first place. Victim blaming sits within a discourse of violence prevention where

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<sup>57</sup> Hindes and Fileborn (2019) used a feminist post-structuralist framework to analyse the Australian media reporting of sexual violence claims against Aziz Ansari of ongoing coercive sexual behaviours against a woman on a first date. They found that much media reporting on the case used language that minimized sexual violence.

<sup>58</sup> In 2013, the Roastbusters (a name the teenage boys involved gave themselves) were boasting on Facebook about drunk underage girls they had sexually assaulted. They recorded the events and shared them online.

women are expected to enact safety behaviours to reduce the risk of violence being perpetrated against them (Frazier & Falmagre, 2014) and are responsible for behaving in a 'commonsense' manner and for not putting themselves in potentially dangerous situations (Lea, 2007). An example of women's responsibility for the violence perpetrated against them can be seen in Massey University's response to reports of a man attempting to sexually assault women around the Wellington Campus. The university made available tips for women about how they could avoid being sexually assaulted, including carrying a whistle, avoiding dark areas, walking in groups and wearing running shoes (Shadwell, 2014). The university did not provide tips on how men could stop raping women.

Western society currently demands women are sexualised in their dress and interactions with men, yet such sexualisations are also understood as risky and inviting rape, leaving women with the challenge of navigating contradictory messages about how to perform their gender and sexuality "appropriately". We are expected to present attractively and be friendly, but not too attractive or too friendly in case men get the wrong idea and expect/take sex from us. Women who are sexually assaulted are understood as having some desire to be raped (Gavey, 2005; Ryan, 2011). Lea (2007) interviewed perpetrators of sexual violence and professionals who worked with them. She found perpetrators blamed victims for their attractiveness and professionals blamed the women for risk-taking through sexualised dress and actions. Both the professionals and perpetrators positioned women as responsible for causing men to become aroused (drawing on Rich's (1980) penis-with-a-mind-of-its-own and the male sex drive discourse) and (at least partially) to blame for the sexual assault that took place. These victim blaming ideas are predicated on the myth that women want to be raped and use conventional displays of feminine sexuality through dress and

performance to turn on the strong biological male sex drive. Once aroused, men understand our 'no' as token resistance, as a way of women remaining "virtuous" but also getting sex (Gavey, 2005; Ryan, 2011).

## **complicating consent**

Consent is an increasingly important part of the conversation about sex and sexual violence. How we understand consent has implications for how we fuck and what we understand to be sexual violence and coercion. Currently, the absence of consent is the defining characteristic of sexual violence (Beres, 2007; Cahill, 2016). Yet what we mean by consent is rarely defined or questioned. Dominant ideas about sex and consent stem from a neoliberal philosophy that assumes we are free from social power relations, rendering us all equal and able to freely make, and take responsibility for, choices in life. It then follows that any sexual activities between consenting adults cannot be abusive. However, Jackson (1984) and Graybill (2017) challenged this idea of unproblematic consent cautioning that it does not take into account the power imbalances that exist between genders, ethnicities, classes and how social inequalities impact sexual interactions, making sex more dangerous for those are not white, middle class, able-bodied, cis-gender men. As has been set out above, women are highly regulated in heterosexual relationships, suggesting that despite neoliberal assumptions, social power relations do impact us and this throws into question our ability to genuinely consent to heterosex.

An analysis of the sexual consent literature by Beres in 2007 found that the concept of consent was generally under theorised and relied largely on assumed 'taken-for-granted' understandings of what consent was. The lack of consensus about what consent is and how it should work appears to still be largely the case.

In a review of literature about consent with university students, Muehlenhard et al. (2016) found that consent was conceptualised as: an internal state that was difficult for others to know; the product of explicit negotiations for particular acts (such as in BDSM); or inferred or implied, where someone's willingness can be inferred from their behaviour or language. Within this review, consent was discussed as an event and as a process. As an event, the sexual activities following initiation is are assumed to be consensual unless consent is retracted. As a process, consent is assumed where those involved in the sexual interaction were aware of the other people's responses on an ongoing basis and were looking for signs of active and enthusiastic participation. There was a general sense that consent was not assumed between non-dating people, whereas within an existing sexual or romantic relationship consent was assumed, though (generally) the right to refusal remained (Muehlenhard et al., 2016). Under conditions where a person was incapacitated by substances, pressures or coercion, and where the person did not have enough knowledge of what they were consenting to, a yes to sex was not necessarily to be considered as a yes. Finally, they found that consent tended to be communicated with a combination of verbalisation and body language, with verbal indicators more likely for novel sexual activities or (oral, vaginal and anal) penetration. Brady et al. (2018) argue that consent should not be communicated solely through body language or verbalisation, but rather the concurrence between the two. For example, if someone is saying yes but their body language is pulling away or frozen, then the incongruence between the two might be indicative of someone not wanting to engage in the sexual interaction.

Beres (2007) posits that assumed definitions of consent have led to contradictory uses in the literature (sometimes within the same piece of work) and a diverse range of often unexplored

implications<sup>59</sup>. These may include reproducing heteronormative discourses of sex, where men pursue women for sex, and where women are the gatekeepers who set the boundaries and give the consent to sex (Beare & Boonzaier, 2020), to the exclusion of the possibility of sex among multiple people, same-sex sexual activity, and women initiating sex (Beres, 2007). Consent is generally considered an agreement between a man and a woman, but there is no consensus in the literature about what the parameters of that agreement are. Consent is discussed as being something that should be given freely but there is no consensus on what freely means. MacKinnon (1989) argues that social forces restrict women's freedom to give consent to sex with men, because the patriarchal system enables men to maintain power over women, restricting their ability to act as free subjects. West (2002) on the other hand contends that whether or not sex is consensual depends on the interpersonal relationship, rather than broader social forces that impact our sexual behaviour. Gavey (1989) proposes that both social forces and interpersonal relationships can result in coercive sex and rape, but the difference between the two is related to the legal system and how it defines sexual violence. By considering both gendered social power relations and interpersonal coercion it opens up space for a more complex understanding of consent and why people might consent to sex they did not really want (Beres, 2007). In this sense, consent is about the negotiation of sex at a particular time with particular people and the negotiation of gendered social expectations (Beres, 2007): "It creates spaces for sex that are neither consensual nor criminal or violent, although they may

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<sup>59</sup> Within the literature I used for this research Beare and Boonzaier (2020, who drew on the ideas of Halley, 2016) were the only research article that defined consent explicitly. They used two different terms for different types of consent: (1) *positive consent* was used to refer to those occasions where consent was given without hesitation and with sexual desire for the interaction; and (2) *constrained consent* was used to refer to consent that was given because it is preferable to the other options and the individual may not wholly want it. They critiqued constrained consent as not compatible with a comprehensive understanding of consent that accounts for the role of context and power.

be socially problematic" (Beres, 2007, p. 99), as Gavey (2005) has established in research and in theorizing grey area sex.

Early feminist campaigns focused on the message of 'no means no', to resist the myth that women wished to be sexually overpowered and that their 'no' was merely token resistance. No means no demanded that men notice and respect when women said no at any point during sex. Beres (2007) suggests that while this framing of consent was useful for resisting the rape myth, it re-enforces the idea that men are the active initiators of sexual activity and that women act as the gatekeepers to sexual access, and focused male attention on looking for signs of resistance to sex, rather than willingness. No means no assumes those participating in a sexual interaction have the same social power and can equally assert sexual autonomy and choice (Harris, 2018). Furthermore, in focusing on the 'no' we are emphasising the dangers of sex, rendering pleasure invisible (Harris, 2018), and upholding the neoliberal tenets of individual responsibility because it is up to women to resist unwanted sex (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). In recent years, the conversation about consent has turned to the idea of affirmative consent, which can be defined as consent where the initiator is responsible for ensuring that consent has been granted (Beres & MacDonald, 2015) rendering consent as more of an ongoing and active process that seeks positive and enthusiastic responses to the initiation of (subsequent) sexual activities. Harris (2018) argues that affirmative consent is about the embodiment of pleasure and emphasises "that people - particularly women - know, request and pursue their desires" (p. 158). She does caution that a focus on pleasure could act to re-enforce ideas of individual transformation, rather than effecting change at the social level.

The current framing of consent in yes or no terms suggests that consent can be given simply and does not leave room for ambiguity (Fahs & McClelland, 2016), or the contextualisation of negotiations within a milieu of unequal social power relations (Harris, 2018). The yes/no of consent produces a binary where sex is either wanted or unwanted, rather than sex being potentially wanted under some conditions such as with the use of contraception, but not wanted in others such as without contraception (Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2005). Haines (2007) refers to this ambiguous sex as *Maybe Sex*. At a broader social level, the yes and no of consent are considered to simply mirror someone's sexual reality, rather than being embedded in gendered (classed, racialised) sexual expectations that impact the ability to give, negotiate, or refuse consent (Harris, 2018). Harris (2018) argues that unpacking the ambiguity, and the role of broader social structures, should be part of an ethical consent process.

### **sexual violence the result of miscommunication?**

The miscommunication theory of consent assumes that most sexual violence stems from misunderstanding in communication between men and women. Drawing on traditional heteronormative assumptions about sex where men initiate sex and women are the gate keepers saying yes or no, miscommunication theory positions women as potentially ambiguous in their communication. Since men and women are thought to respond to sexual situations in different ways, it is asserted sexual assault may be the result of misreading each other's cues (Beres, 2010; Beres et al., 2014). Within this theory two forms of miscommunication are reported: men over estimating women's interest in sex; and women displaying token resistance to sex (i.e. saying no when they mean yes; a rape myth). The miscommunication theory is the basis upon which consent education and sexual violence prevention programs have been developed, that encourage men to notice

women's "no" and signs of resistance to sex, and encourage women to communicate more clearly in sexual interactions. Graybill (2017) raised concerns that within capitalist conditions, the conversation about consent is at risk of being commodified into consent trainings, apps and resources that enable men to have a language of consent available to justify their behaviour and avoid any social sanctions. These concerns are supported by Metz et al. (2020) who found that while men who attended consent education learnt that men could stop rape by not raping people, it also re-enforced paternalistic ideas of men needing to protect women, and that it was important to avoid being accused of rape and to protect their male friends from being accused. Brady and colleagues (2018) also found that consent was important to some young men because they did not want to be labeled as rapists. These findings suggest while the men learnt the language of consent, they don't yet embody a sense that women are deserving of equal say, safety, and satisfaction within sexual situations.

Furthermore, there are several studies that call the miscommunication theory into question<sup>60</sup>. Beres et al. (2014) gave university students in Canada and Aotearoa/New Zealand a scenario of a heterosexual woman who refused sex and then the man and woman ended up having sex. The participants were asked to write a narrative of what happened in the interactions in between the refusal and the sex taking place. The stories largely spoke to the woman's ambivalence, having some desire and some reservations. In these particular narratives, the woman's ambivalence was resolved through: increasing non-sexual conversation, slow increases in physical intimacy, self-reflection, conversations about sex and relationships, and

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<sup>60</sup> Beres et al. (2014) critique the methodologies in studies that support this theory, suggesting that they do not include rich contextual information of real life interactions or the time within which to resolve misunderstandings.

increased sexual arousal. A small number wrote stories that included increased use of alcohol to make it easier to say yes to sex. The authors argue that these forms of resolution "strongly suggest" that men and women both understood the woman's 'no' rather than there being miscommunication and that the majority (90%) of the stories had narratives of ambivalence being resolved. Ten percent of the stories had narratives of coercion which were in response to the refusal or resistance to having sex, rather than miscommunication. Brady and colleagues (2018) found little support for the miscommunication theory in their study of how young people in England negotiate sexual activity. They concluded "there was little widespread evidence of misunderstanding, but instead a recognition that it was an embodied contextualised process which required intimate understanding and respect for their partner's feelings<sup>61</sup>" (p. 47). In the context of casual sex, Beres (2010) found men and women used similar tools for communication and understand each other. The participants spoke of a tacit knowing, where based on the context of what was happening, they "just knew" if the other person wanted to engage sexually. She commented the participants also had awareness that even in these situations where the context (such as going back to someone's house) implied sex was wanted, there was still room for refusal. She argued that these findings debunk the miscommunication myth. The participants spoke of sex being refused through subtle body language, such as stopping kissing, moving away from the person and their body stiffening, as well as saying no or being non-responsive. Active participation, such as someone pulling you towards them, was used as an indicator of willingness to have sex. She concluded that there was not widespread miscommunication.

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<sup>61</sup> The authors did caution that the people in their study were educated and may have greater access to conversations about consent, compared to those of lower socio-economic groups.

Jeffrey and Barata (2019) conducted interviews with men who had recently, or were currently, using sexual violence (defined as sexual activity without consent) in intimate relationships. They found that men normalise their behaviour by insisting that women were responsible for continuing with sexual activity until the man had ejaculated. Others have also found support for the idea that women “shouldn’t lead men on” if they are not going to follow through (Brady et al., 2018). This idea draws on the male sex drive discourse, the patterned nature of heterosex, the coital and orgasm imperatives and the have/hold discourse to legitimise the understanding of their insistence on sex as normal and expected. The men insisted that they “would never force her” which they used to position themselves and their behaviour as good men. This study suggests that the men did recognise their partners’ desire to stop the sexual interaction and chose to override it by continuing to pursue unwanted sexual activity. Taken together, these studies suggest that miscommunication within consent negotiations is not only less frequent than the theory purposes but that generally men and women communicate in ways that are understood by each other. What is concerning from this research is that men do knowingly disregard women’s disinterest that is clearly understood, while using the norms of heterosex and rape myths to justify their persistence.

### **“acting” with agency**

It has become clear within the literature that consent is problematic as a marker of ethical sex because fucking is frequently coerced either through interpersonal interactions and/or by social norms that make it common for women to consent to unwanted sex (Gavey, 2005). The problematic nature of consent has seen feminist theorists turn to other processes or frameworks for determining the ethics of sexual interactions. Agency has been one construct under consideration over the last

decade. The conversation about agency, similar to consent, involves debate about how agency should be understood and consideration of how it is enacted within sexual interactions. Fahs and McClelland (2016) found that within the literature 'agency' is used in several different ways; for example, to mean the ability to enact agency and protect oneself from unwanted sex, the ability to request the use of contraception to protect from STI's and unwanted pregnancy, as sexual confidence and being in control of sexual situations, and as a critique of neoliberal ideology of personal responsibility in decisions made about sexuality.

Bay-Cheng (2019) defines agency as an "individual's efforts to influence their immediate experiences and/or the larger courses of their lives through sexuality" (p. 463). She urges us to consider all women as having agency inherently, and that the ability to use it is shaped by the constraints that act upon us differently, because of differences in social location (i.e. age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, attractiveness, etc.). Her research highlights how the choices of low-income women in sexual situations might have specific limits to agency. For example, when low-income women pursue monogamy and marriage from an early age it might be framed as a less progressive choice compared to the expectation that women will have a career and prioritise personal growth over men and relationships before a "certain age" (Bay-Cheng, 2019; Pickens & Braun, 2018). Bay-Cheng (2019) suggests that these women might be making active and agentic choice to pursue stability and financial security through the relationship. Her framing of agency in this sense is broader than the dynamics of a particular sexual situation and relates to the women's abilities to use their sexuality to shape the trajectory of their lives.

Bay-Cheng (2019) argues that our failure to recognise agency in whatever forms women enact it, risks (re)producing a specific norm of agency and renders invisible girls and women who do not conform to normative standards. She suggests that researchers expect to see agency performed in a particular way, such as saying no to sex they don't want and yes to their sexual desires, for insisting on condom use and other actions that appear to be in the women's best interests. As outlined by Bay-Cheng (2015), the modern agentic woman is "ambitious, independent, unencumbered, autonomous, self-serving, in command, calculating, and unapologetic...she is perceived to be in complete control of her sexual conduct and under the control of no one" (p. 283). When women act in ways that contradict this, their agency (or rather their performance of agency) is questioned, rather than the social conditions that may have constrained or influenced her choices. The representation of an agentic woman that has grown out of neoliberal, post-feminist ideology perceives women as no longer being subject to gendered power relations and instead that they are free (and obligated) to make autonomous choices. In this social milieu, the rise of raunch culture and the permissive sexual discourse demand women be confident in their sexuality<sup>62</sup>. Burkett and Hamilton (2012) comment that this "contemporary sexual agency underscores an awkward blend of feminist and anti-feminist elements in which women view themselves as empowered yet continue to reproduce the terms of sexuality set by heteronormative discourses" (p. 817). Bay-Cheng (2019) further argues that much of the focus on women's agency is about how much control women have over a situation, rather than recognising what is getting in the way of women

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<sup>62</sup> This post-feminist sexual agent can be found in how women are represented in the media and advertising. Gill (2008) found three representations of this type of agency in advertising, which she termed the midriff, the vengeful woman and the hot lesbian. The hot midriff was presented as an attractive, heterosexual woman who confidently and knowingly uses her sexuality, with her "sexy" body a main source of identity. The vengeful woman is presented as "powerful, feisty and in control" (Gill, 2008, p. 46) as she held the upper hand over her boyfriend. And the hot lesbian was designed to titillate men by displaying stereotypically (heterosexually) attractive women intertwined.

having control. It is the structural barriers to agency and their material consequences that Bay-Cheng (2015, 2019) urges us to focus on, rather than on how women can improve their agency<sup>63</sup>.

Within a neoliberal environment, where there is so much emphasis on being agentic, on making your own rules, being positioned as a victim is shameful and something to be avoided (Rutherford, 2018), because it implies weakness and a lack of control (Bay-Cheng, 2015). Bay-Cheng (2015) proposes there is an agent-victim binary (Bay-Cheng, 2015) - in addition to the virgin-whore continuum (described earlier) - that women need to navigate. In the agent-victim binary, women are evaluated along what Bay-Cheng (2015) calls "the agency line" - between being fully agentic or a victim, which intersects the virgin-whore continuum to produce an agency matrix with four quadrants. Women are expected to manage their position along both of these lines so that they are enacting the right amount of sexuality, with the right amount of sexual agency. Those who fall below the agency line (and closer to the virgin end of the continuum) are those who cannot find a sexual partner because they are deemed undesirable due to not being attractive enough. Those deemed unattractive are not seen as viable romantic options but maybe acceptable for sexual encounters if men perceive an increased chance of getting the sexual activity they want, for example anal sex, because unattractive and fat women are considered desperate for whatever sexual attention they can get. Those who fall below the agency line (and closer to the whore/slut end of the continuum) are regarded as having out of control sexual standards, and being at risk of STIs, unwanted pregnancy, and

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<sup>63</sup> This focus on women's internal agency is at the heart of education programs that teach women to be more assertive about their sexual desires and boundaries. Bay-Cheng's (2019) comments support calls for such education programs to include a critical focus on how power shapes sexual situations and how unequal gendered power can act as a barrier to women enacting agency.

sexual assault, which in neoliberal terms they are personally responsible for.

## shades of grey

There are no consistent definitions of what constitutes ethically problematic sex or that could be labelled as sexual violence or even rape<sup>64</sup>. Cahill (2016) comments that:

*to corral the multiple ways in which sexual violence is experienced into all-encompassing definitions is inevitably to fail to illuminate the complex and varied meaning of sexual violence, and the attempt is more likely to perpetuate rather than undermine the interlocking systems of inequality and injustice that result in acts of sexual violence” (p. 752).*

Similarly, Boyle (2019) argues that attempts to clearly categorise sexual violence risk creating a hierarchy of violence, where some experiences are considered more acceptable than others. That said, in recent years, there has been some theorising about sex within the grey area and what separates it from just sex (Cahill, 2014), from sexual violence (Cahill, 2016) and how social and interpersonal coercion might operate differently within the grey area (Woodard, forthcoming). Cahill

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<sup>64</sup> In addition to Woodard’s (forthcoming) definitions included in this section, I have seen a variety of definitions used to speak about different processes or experiences of sexual violence within the literature including:

- *Problem sex*, refers to “all accounts of sex that participants did not describe as enthusiastically consensual and wanted” (Thomas et al., 2017, p. 285).
- *Unwanted sex*, refers to “partnered sexual activities to which one consents but may not desire sexually or otherwise” (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008, p. 387).
- *Compliant sex* refers to “a sexual encounter where an individual consents to unwanted sex, but is not explicitly pressured by their partner (Chadwick et al., 2019, p. 2437).
- *Sexual coercion* refers to “a continuum that can range from forced sex through to women “giving in” to persistence or pressure” (Beres et al., 2014, p. 771).
- *Unjust sex* refers to sex marked by “the presence of an ambivalent or split will on the part of the woman (Cahill, 2016, p.753).
- *Sexual assault* refers to “a sexual interaction where one person (the assailant) either overrides the stated will of another (the victim) or exploits a situation wherein the victim’s will is inoperative (in some cases of course the assailant has ensured that the victims would be rendered inoperable)” (Cahill, 2016, p. 753).
- *Verbally coerced sex*, refers to “a form of force in which the perpetrator attempts to verbally wear down or convince the recipient to engage in sex by being manipulative, persistent, and/or applying verbal pressure in the hopes that the recipient will eventually cease to offer verbal objections or physical resistance to sex” (Tamborra et al., 2014, p. 228).

(2014) suggests that the lack of desire cannot be used to distinguish ethical heterosexual from grey area sex and sexual violence because lack of desire assumes a masculine norm where desire precedes sexual interactions, which may not be the case for women. With this in mind, she argues it would be unethical to arouse a woman's desire where she did not want that, thus it is desire for desire<sup>65</sup> (or not) and the ability of that desire<sup>66</sup> to contribute to (rather than determine) the overall nature of the sexual encounter that is important for ethical sex (Cahill, 2014).

Cahill (2016) suggests that sex in the grey area includes examples of sex where women felt significant pressure and where the sex was the least bad option, or it helped women get other needs met. This grey area sex is marked by hesitation, reluctance or an ambivalent kind of unwillingness (for example, the women do not want the sex, but they do want the benefits of the sex such as the relationship) (Cahill, 2016). She comments that what distinguishes this from sexual violence - including coercion, physical force and rendering women incapacitated with drugs and/or alcohol - is the way that the woman's agency is deployed within the encounter. Within the grey area, women's agency is heavily curtailed by social and interpersonal circumstances, but she is encouraged to offer consent, or to at least acquiesce, to the desires of her male partner. In this way, her agency is important to the interaction, as it can give the encounter a *perceived* ethical veneer. Beyond rendering the encounter not rape, her (stunted) agency lacks the ability to meaningfully

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<sup>65</sup> Cahill (2014), like Gavey (2005) also makes space in her argument for the possibility of sexual partners willingly, and ethically, engaging in sexual interactions that they do not necessarily (sexually) desire themselves but were happy to gift to their sexual partner(s), commenting that "acquiescence is distinct from generosity; giving in is distinct from giving" (p. 316). This distinction is about a sense of duty/obligation/pressure vs "desire-to-provide" which is recognised as a generous act.

<sup>66</sup> Cahill (2014) acknowledges that awareness of personal desire and ability to articulate it might be difficult within our current sexual environment but comments that this is not surprising when the quest for ethical sex is at odds with our current ways of understanding and doing heterosexual.

shape the nature of the sex. In sexually violent encounters, the woman's agency is also important, but as something to be overcome (Cahill, 2016). Quashing agency in this way "is a central element to the phenomenon of sexual violence" (Cahill, 2016, p. 758).

Woodard (forthcoming) further interrogates sex in the grey area<sup>67</sup> and separates it into three broad categories of ethically problematic sex: social coercion, psychologically pressured, and epistemically unsafe<sup>68</sup>. Woodard (forthcoming) understands socially coerced sex as resulting from pressure to adhere to cultural and social norms<sup>69</sup> of fucking, such as a woman feeling like she has to follow through with sex because she interacted with a man in a sexualised manner; or, because of worry about the implications of not adhering to these norms, such as being thought of as a prude for not engaging in sex in a permissive sexualised culture. For Woodard (forthcoming) situations where social norms contribute to unethical sex occur when there is something "non-ideal about the situation" (p. 15). Psychologically pressured sex is defined as using non-physical threats or threats of unfavorable emotional responses if sex is withheld (for example, getting angry and threatening to find sex elsewhere). Woodard (forthcoming) also includes "calculated trade-offs" where women decide to have sex as a way of getting other needs met, such as getting to sleep earlier. Calculated trade-offs are likely to be in conjunction with psychological pressure but could also be the result of social coercion. Woodard (forthcoming) suggests that generally within cases of psychologically pressured sex and calculated trade-offs, women's agency is curtailed to limit their options. Epistemically unsafe sex is understood as sex where women consent as a way of avoiding

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<sup>67</sup> Woodard (forthcoming) uses the term *bad sex* to refer to sex in the grey area, meaning sex that leaves you feeling bad afterwards, rather than bad because of a lack of pleasure or bad technique. She critiques the term grey area, suggesting that it might act to minimize the violence in this type of sex.

<sup>68</sup> Woodard (forthcoming) suggests that these different categories of ethically problematic sex can co-occur.

<sup>69</sup> Woodard (forthcoming) also includes rape myths within social norms.

rape because they feared that their “no” would not be respected and that sex (rape) would happen anyway.

## **fucked in the grey area**

There are a number of studies that have been conducted with women, exploring their experiences of grey area sex and their explanations for why the unwanted, but consensual, sex happened (Bay-Cheng, 2015<sup>70</sup>; Bay-Cheng & Bruns, 2016<sup>71</sup>; Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008<sup>72</sup>; Beare & Boonzaier, 2020<sup>73</sup>; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012<sup>74</sup>; Gavey 1992<sup>75</sup>; Gunnarsson, 2017<sup>76</sup>; Kelly et al., 2017<sup>77</sup>). These studies support Gavey’s (2005) theory that unwanted consensual sex in the grey area is the product of gender norms and rape myths. In a social environment where women are expected to please men and are socially sanctioned if they do not (for example, they can face accusations of being a cock tease, a prude, or a dyke), women’s ability to navigate their sexual interactions safely and to their liking is limited (Bay-Cheng, 2010). In this way, “unwanted sex might also be seen as normal, in so far as it is deemed socially acceptable” (Bay-Cheng & Bruns, 2016).

Within existing relationships, women spoke about consenting to unwanted sex because it was part of the job as a ‘good girlfriend’ to be positively responsive to their boyfriend’s sexual advances, despite their own desire not to do so (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008). The women put the needs of their partner and the relationship first, framing sex as being about

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<sup>70</sup> With young women from the USA.

<sup>71</sup> With young women from various class backgrounds within the USA.

<sup>72</sup> With undergraduate women from within the USA.

<sup>73</sup> With women university students from South Africa.

<sup>74</sup> With young women from Australia.

<sup>75</sup> With pākehā women from New Zealand.

<sup>76</sup> With women from Sweden.

<sup>77</sup> With women from Australia.

their partner's happiness and enjoyment (Beare & Boonzier, 2020; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). Unwanted sex could be enacted willingly (despite their own lack of sexual desire) as an act of love (Beare & Boonzier, 2020) within a discourse of reciprocity and compromise that renders sex a gift that women share with men (Bay-Cheng, & Eliseo- Arras, 2008; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012); but sex can also act as a requirement (Crawford et al., 1994).

When there was a commitment to the relationship (rather than in the case of casual sex) women spoke of consent being understood as not required (Brady et al., 2018) because saying yes in the beginning of the relationship became automatic consent to all future sexual experiences (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008). In this way initial consent acts as an all-access pass to sex for the duration of the relationship. Crawford et al. (1994) argue that this is, at least in part, because it is assumed that each partner knows how the other feels (and cares to pay attention to the emotional relationship) and that sex in long term relationships occurs out of familiarity, with a series of expected and automated moves that are "more or less predictable to both parties" (p. 584).

Women also spoke of difficulty negotiating consent when their sexual partner was aroused and keen to engage in intercourse in relationships and in casual sex situations (Bay-Cheng & Bruns, 2016; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). Similarly, within casual sex encounters, women thought they had implicitly consented to the sex if they engaged with a man in a sexualised manner, through sexy talk or behaviour, and/or when going home with someone (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). In both cases women felt it necessary to follow through with unwanted sex until it reached its "natural" conclusion (the man orgasmed; Potts, 2000).

In situations where the sex may have been wanted - if a condom was used - women found that they were not able to negotiate contraception use and ended up consenting to unwanted, unprotected sex. Women suggested their acquiescence was because of fear that it might suggest mistrust (in long term relationships) and might negatively impact the relationship (Kelly et al., 2017). The women also reported concern about condoms negatively impacting male pleasure, that insistence on condom use might render them "abnormal" (Kelly et al., 2017), and that their partner might respond negatively if they asked for condom use (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008).

Women also spoke of being compliant with unwanted sex because of pressure from their sexual partner, which existed on a spectrum from sweet talk through to explicit threats (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008). Consenting to unwanted sex in these situations was because women were talked into it (coercion) and/or because the women experienced fear in the situation and wanted to avoid being yelled at, and/or were protecting themselves from violence or rape (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Beare & Boonzaier, 2020).

While the gendered social conditions that limit women's ability to decline unwanted sex might be felt in terms of the material impact they have on women's sexual encounters, the political origins are generally not understood, named and brought into the open. Burkett and Hamilton (2012) noted women's lack of awareness of the contradiction between their claims of sexual agency and their feeling unable to influence sexual encounters. Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras (2008) suggest this type of contradiction is the result of neoliberal, post-feminist presumptions that women have complete control over their life circumstances and that those who are victims are so because of a personal weakness or lack of self-respect. They found that

women would blame themselves for leading men on and letting them believe the sex was wanted. When there was clear force in the situation that meant women could not say "no", women blamed themselves for being passive.

Thus, rather than holding to account perpetrators and interrogating social conditions, it is women who are blamed for the sexual violence perpetrated against them. With a neoliberal emphasis on transformation and growth, personal responsibility is accepted by using the unwanted sexual experiences as learning opportunities and enabling personal development (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Gunnarsson, 2017; Karlsson, 2019; Lamb, 2015) enabling women to avoid being positioned as victims (Bay-Cheng, 2015), and to maintain a sense of control and agency over the situation (Beres et al., 2014; Lamb, 2015). Frazier and Falmagre (2014) suggest that women's responsibility for their safety creates a situation where women "occupy the tension-filled position of the empowered victim, enabled as individuals to take charge of their own safety, while destined to victimhood by virtue of their gender" (p. 483).

Bay-Cheng and Bruns (2016) found that there was a class difference to understandings of unwanted consensual sex. Their study interviewed women from three different classed circumstances: affluent university students, low-income university students and low-income women (non-students) within the United States of America. Within these groups, political awareness and framing of the unwanted encounters differed. The affluent students readily took up neoliberal ideas of unencumbered individualism where traditional gendered expectations are thought to have been overcome. They framed their experiences of unwanted sex as generally harmless and drew on developmental discourses to explain them as part of youthful experimentation that led them to learn boundaries and grow as

people. Bay-Cheng and Bruns (2016) suggested that these women were invested in appearing “together” and did not want to appear vulnerable or like victims. The low-income students framed their experiences of unwanted sex as a product of vulnerability due to their gendered and classed position in society. And low-income non-student women engaged in unwanted sex frequently and saw it as a necessary part of relationships that helped them achieve other goals, such as material and emotional security<sup>78</sup>. The differences between the groups were attributed to class privilege, in the case of the affluent students, which acted to obscure inequality. Education about consent, critical thinking and reflection on personal experience through university enabled low-income student women to conceptualize their experiences through a political lens. And for low-income non-student women, unwanted sex was an accepted and pragmatic choice (within restricted social conditions) made to maintain social and material support, rather than for egalitarian or romantic compromise.

Gunnarsson (2017) suggests that there is a lack of fit between women’s experiences of sex in the grey area and rape myths which make it difficult for women (and society) to recognise their experiences as abuse. She analysed autobiographical stories of sex in the grey area, shared in Sweden as part of a Twitter campaign #prataomdet (#letstalkaboutit). The campaign aimed to create a public conversation about unwanted consensual sex and create a new language for discussing it. The Twitter campaign was in response to victim blaming discourses used by the media against two Swedish women who accused WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange of sexual assault. The stories shared spoke to the construction of rape and rapists in monstrous terms that could

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<sup>78</sup> Bay-Cheng (2019) found that poor women used “unwanted sex as a means to wanted ends” (p. 468). In this way, their sexuality is a valuable resource that could help them achieve life goals beyond sexual satisfaction, such as material security.

feel too strong for the situation and some women actively avoided these charged terms because they did not want to see their partner, or someone they knew, understood as a rapist<sup>79</sup>. She also found that the idea of being a victim of sexual violence was an equally charged label that conveyed ideas of being totally overpowered and being powerless in a way that did not reflect the women's experiences. The lack of a more nuanced language saw the women make sense of their experience through a neoliberal lens of personal responsibility and transformation, rather than as sexual violence resulting from unequal gender power relations that afford men social consent to take sex from women when and how they want.

Despite the claims of neoliberal post-feminism that women now have equality with men, it is clear from the literature I have explored that women's sexuality is highly regulated and shaped towards the sexual interests of men, at the expense of our safety, equity, and pleasure. In this socio-cultural environment women are routinely unable to authentically know and share their sexual wants, ambivalences, and boundaries, *and* know that these will be welcomed and respected; rendering it ordinary, in terms of commonness, that women are engaging with fucking they do not want. This ordinariness does not make our experiences ethical, instead it highlights the *huge* problem we face in terms of our safety and autonomy.

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<sup>79</sup> Ryan (2011) refers to this as the myth of the "obviously different rapist" (p. 779).





*The images on the previous page were taken at various feminist protests I was involved in organising over the years.*

# the coercive control context

*the victim's agency is their principal target*

- Stark (2007, p. 206)

*the core tactics in coercive control build on practices that are governed by  
gender norms in relationships*

- Stark (2007, p. 210)

My research explores how the normalising processes that shape heterosexual fucking and relating - discussed in *feminism, foucault and fucking* - are experienced by women in abusive relationships and how this impacts their ability to engage in a meaningful consent process about the nature of their sexual experiences. Before we can unpack the women's stories, I need to set out Evan Stark's (2007) theory of coercive control<sup>80</sup> as it underpins my understanding of abusive relationships, and the specific processes individual men utilise to coerce and control women. As I understand it, my research is among the first *qualitative* research projects to explicitly seek to make sense of women's sexual experiences within the context of *abusive* relationships.

Despite the role that sexuality plays as a defining feature of hetero-femininity, at least within the current permissive era (Evans & Riley, 2014; Gibson, 2014), there has been limited focus on how coercive control impacts women's sexuality. In his book, Stark (2007) suggests that coercive control enables men to "dictate the when, how, where and even the with whom of sex" (p. 243) and sets out several examples where this is the case. Beyond this, I have only come across one article that

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<sup>80</sup> Stark (2007) developed his theory of coercive control based on 30 years experience as an advocate, counsellor and forensic social worker with men and women.

specifically looks at fucking within the context of coercive control, but this was quantitative in nature and focused on men's behaviours rather than women's experiences. Mitchell and Raghavan (2021) sought to examine the relationship between coercive control and sexual coercion within heterosexual couples. The authors administered self-report questionnaires (that measured the use of coercive control and sexual coercion tactics) to 136 men who were mandated to participate in an intervention program due to violence against a female partner. They found that men who used aggression and coercive controlling behaviours towards their partners were (three to six times) more likely to also use tactics of sexual coercion to obtain unwanted sex from a partner. The tactics the men used ranged from threats to find another "willing" partner through to arguing as a way to challenge requests from women to stop a sexual encounter. The authors suggest that their findings "indicate that sexually coercive tactics may be used in conjunction with other coercive relationship behaviors to establish pervasive patterns of compliance" (Mitchell & Raghavan, 2021, p. 198).

The theory of coercive control posits that as women have gained more legal equality with men and their lives have expanded into the public sphere, women's performance of hetero-femininity in the private sphere as wife, mother and sexual partner has come under greater scrutiny<sup>81</sup> (Stark, 2007). Stark's (2007) argument

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<sup>81</sup> I have limited my understanding of coercive control to Stark's explanation of the theory as I have found the literature that draws on coercive control is largely focused on how coercive control could be, or is, taken up within legal regulation and enforcement (Burman & Brooks-Hay, 2018; Day & Bowen, 2015; Storey, 2019) including in New Zealand (Tolmie, 2018), or attending to the use of coercive control in specific areas such as children's experiences (Callaghan et al., 2018; Katz, 2016), the family court process (Ellis et al., 2020; Elizabeth, 2015); firearms use (Jackson et al., 2020), strangulation (Thomas et al., 2014), digital technology (Dragiewicz et al., 2018; Harris & Woodlock, 2018; Woodlock et al., 2020), same-sex relationships (Frankland & Brown, 2014), femicide (Johnson et al., 2019), reproduction and post-partum (Buchanan & Humphreys, 2020; Gou et al., 2018), help seeking (Sharp-Jeffs et al., 2018; Wydall & Zerk, 2020), seeking shelter for companion animals (Hardesty et al., 2013) and risk assessment (Myhill & Hohl, 2019). Where coercive control is discussed more broadly the literature appears concerned with operationalising and measuring coercive control (Brennan et al., 2019; Hamberger et al., 2017). With the exception of mothering, strangulation and the use of digital technology that I will discuss more through specific women's stories, these topics or approaches to coercive control sit outside the focus and theory that underpin this research.

is that "men have devised coercive control to offset the erosion of sex-based privilege in the face of women's gains, filling the void created as institutional support for male domination is disassembled, by installing patriarchal type constraints in personal life<sup>82</sup>" (p. 171). The gendered expectations of women's roles easily become the means through which men control and coerce their partners without being noticed or questioned, because women are already disciplined to perform through dominant discourse of heterosexual relating and fucking, and mothering.

Coercive control can render women compliant with their partners wishes, inhibiting what Stark (2007) refers to as women's own personal life projects; that is working towards their own dreams. Coercive control acts to focus women's energy, resources, and time on meeting the demands of her partner, and in the process limiting the possibilities of her life, something that society currently encourages women to do as we have already discussed. In these conditions, women are essentially captured in an invisible cage, unable to live full lives. Stark's (2007) focus is not on the emotional and psychological impacts of women's experiences of abuse, but on how it limits women's ability and capacity to fulfil their life projects, to engage in the very things from which they derive meaning, inspiration, and purpose: "The "wrong" of coercive control involves depriving partners of their liberty, dignity and equality, as well as violating their physical integrity" (Stark, 2012, p. 202).

Coercive control enables the interpersonal enforcement of patriarchal social norms that emphasise men's power and pleasure, leading women to becoming docile, dependant and

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<sup>82</sup> This focus on limiting women's power within the private sphere is similar to Pickens and Braun's (2018) suggestion that as women have gained more power and visibility outside of the home, the emphasis on women's looks and sexuality has intensified markedly to ensure that they are still produced as feminine subjects, with a focus on securing male desire.

sometimes even desperate, in their desire to please. By harnessing non-violent fears and expectations to control and coerce women, these processes are able to curtail the agency<sup>83</sup> of women - indeed that is the intended target for control - without the use of physical violence or even overt threats (Stark, 2007). As Stark (2012) says, "Most people still imagine that the broken bones, black eyes, and bruises that mark the abused women shown on television or on posters during "Domestic Violence Week" are typical of abusive relationships. Nothing could be further from the truth" (p. 203).

Stark's (2007) theory de-stabilises the dominant focus on physicality as a marker of abuse, as it departs from the long-standing legal<sup>84</sup> understanding of intimate partner violence as discrete violent incidents (referred to as the violent incident model) where harm is judged in terms of viciousness and the visibility of the wounds inflicted, as it would be for violence that occurs between strangers (Stark, 2007). Stark (2012) argues that applying an understanding of violence between strangers to violence within the context of intimate relationships misses the ongoing, persistent, and non-physical nature of intimate partner

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<sup>83</sup> Stark (2009) argues that his focus on women's agency is not to suggest that they are victims, but rather seeks to move beyond the victim/perpetrator binary, towards understanding how the possibilities of women's lives (their life projects) are constrained or reduced by their partners' use of technologies of coercive control. Stark's (2007) understanding of agency is similar to Bay-Cheng's (2019) focus on how gendered and classed social power relations act to limit women's agency within sexual situations. Stark's focus, like Bay-Cheng's (2019) is on the structural constraints of women's lives and the power afforded to men, rather than framing women's limited agency as being the result of any personal failing on the women's part. In this way, they both resist neoliberal personalisation of responsibility for the consequences of social and political inequality.

<sup>84</sup> Stark (2007) affords a great deal of space in his book and subsequent work (Stark, 2012; Stark & Hester, 2019) to broadening the legal definitions and understandings of what should constitute illegal abusive behaviour within heterosexual relationships. While the law holds great institutional power to shape how we understand what is right, moral and ethical within society, I do not think it should be the only arbiter of what is considered acceptable within relationships or fucking. Like some ethically problematic sex within grey area, some aspects of coercive control, while ethically problematic, are probably not well suited to being bound in law. Thus, I am focusing more broadly upon how the processes of coercive control act to limit the possibilities of women's (sex) lives, in addition to the obvious physical, emotional and psychological harms they cause the women. Within the context of this research, I am interested in the actions of individual men that are ethically problematic (in terms of how they foreclose women's agency within their (sex) lives) and more broadly to how power circulates within the relationship, supported by gendered (and classed) social power relations, rather than being concerned with the legality of these behaviours.

violence. And while this focus on physicality may reduce the instances of extreme cases of physical abuse and fatalities, it does not help to reduce women's experiences of abuse because it does not take into account the broad impacts of ongoing emotional and psychological abuse women experience (Stark, 2007). Stark (2012) suggests that the minimisations of what 'counts' as intimate partner violence leads to the normalisation of less severe forms of abuse against women, re-enforcing unequal social power relations<sup>85</sup>. He cautions that the way we define intimate partner violence also changes how women understand their experiences, suggesting that the focus on physical assault renders other forms of intimate abuse invisible, to the point where women who do not experience severe assault may not recognise the abuse perpetrated against them<sup>86</sup>.

That is not to say that the focus on women's physical safety is not also important; of course women's bodily integrity is important. Men do badly injure, rape, and kill women with their physical control and violence, and we should work to prevent, *and* intervene with, physical attacks on women (or anyone). But limiting our concerns to women's physical safety is not enough. Coercive control is concerned with how men can harm women in a holistic sense; spiritually, emotionally, personally, financially, as well as physically. And in this way, Stark's (2007) theory is demanding more for women than physical safety; it is demanding financial, mental, emotional, spiritual safety,

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<sup>85</sup> This speaks to the normalizing power of dominant ways of understanding, talking about and doing anything and the unequal social power relations that can be afforded to particular understandings. Stark's (2012) understanding echoes Foucault's (1979) concept of the knowledge-power nexus to suggest that dominance of particular knowledges, known through language, hold greater power to shape the ways we understand and experience things; in this case, intimate partner violence.

<sup>86</sup> This is similar to how the dominant understanding of what is normal and natural within the context of heterosex obscures the prioritisation of men's sexual and relational interests leading to women regularly engaging in sex, or ways of fucking, that they do not want, with or without the presence of overt coercion and/or violence (Gavey, 2005). Similarly, rape myths that frame rape is a physical overpowering experience perpetrated by strangers renders rape that occurs between people known to each other and that does not involve overt overpowering difficult to be understood as rape (Ryan, 2011).

equal participation in life and the ability to pursue dreams, pleasures, and wonderings. Bodily integrity is not even close to enough for women to flourish, to be at peace and experience pleasure in the world.

## **doing coercive control**

Stark (2007) proposes that the gender strategy of coercive control has three dimensions: (1) a *gender ideology* based on societies current beliefs and values about what it means to be a man and a woman<sup>87</sup>; (2) a *gender technology* made up of social practices (that Stark refers to as tools, techniques and tactics); and, (3) an *action plan* which is the way these technologies are applied within specific relationships in accordance with the man's particular beliefs and preferences. The specific way men combine and enact the technologies of coercive control are the result of the particular interests and desires of the individual men, and their personal knowledge of their partner's movements, fears, responses, and life history (Stark, 2007).

Stark (2007) examines how men actively shape women to their desires, either replicating or enforcing social demands and expectations of women, or more personal rules or desires. These technologies of coercive control involve dynamics intended to hurt and intimidate, enabling coercion; and dynamics intended to isolate and regulate, enabling control (Stark, 2012). Coercion within this theory is understood as the use of force

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<sup>87</sup> Stark (2007) comments that the values and beliefs that underpin men's sense of power over women is beyond the scope of his book and thus speaks loosely about the expectations of women as mothers, partners and lovers, but does not go into the evidence for his understanding of women's roles. In the case of this research, the dominant understanding of heterosex, outlined in *feminism, foucault and fucking*, acts as the gender ideology for what is expected of women's sexuality and ways of relating to men they are in relationships with. I have not gone into the expectations of women as mothers in great detail, though I have discussed this briefly within Elizabeth's story and in more detail within Roxanne's story as it was quite pertinent. I have not discussed the expectations of men's sexuality, ways of relating or parenting as they are outside the scope of this thesis, though of course are relevant to the broader picture of how these experiences of abuse arise.

or threats to compel or disrupt a particular response, which can give rise to immediate fear, injury, or death, as well as long-term physical, psychological and behavioural consequences. Intimidation works by instilling fear, dependence, compliance, loyalty, secrecy, and shame in the everyday lives of women. Stark (2007) suggests that these effects are induced through threats<sup>88</sup>, surveillance, and degradation by making women engage in degrading acts and/or denying women any sense of self-respect. Collectively, intimidation dynamics act to deflate women's sense of self and psychological power.

Control is understood as the use of deprivation, exploitation, and command to compel obedience (Stark, 2007). Control is often enacted indirectly through the monopolisation of resources, isolation from support structures, microregulation of behaviour<sup>89</sup>, limiting options and dictating choices (Stark, 2007). The use of the dynamic of control constrains women's ability to act independently and can be more difficult to detect than coercion as control can be confused with the many gendered social expectations that already act to shape women's behaviour, making context very important to illuminating the process of coercive control at work.

Stark (2012) suggests that use of technologies of coercive control only become apparent when considering their use over time, as an interwoven pattern (or as I understand it, as a process) of behaviour and responses that are backgrounded by women's fear of what will happen if they do not obey their partners demands. Given that violence may not be used, or may

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<sup>88</sup> Stark (2007) includes the use of gaslighting within the scope of threats. Porter and Standing (2020) define gaslighting as "a form of emotional abuse that makes someone question their own feelings, memories and version of reality" (p. 2). Gaslighting is supported by discourses that position women negatively as hysterical, irrational, and overly emotional (Sweet, 2019).

<sup>89</sup> Stark (2007) suggests that the main targets of microregulation are women's default responsibilities for housework, childcare, and providing sexual pleasure.

be limited, "it is not always easy to distinguish coercive control from voluntary compliance with traditional gender roles" (Stark, 2012, p. 203). When coercion and control are combined, Stark (2007) suggests that over time there is a cumulative impact where women experience entrapment; that they become imprisoned in a hostage-like situation within their everyday lives.

# storying fucking in abusive relationships

*to understand coercive control means to reengage the interaction  
between the systemic and the interpersonal*  
- Stark (2009, p. 1514)

*stories are a pervasive, emotionally engaging, and persuasive way for  
social movements to convey complex information about their problem  
to target audiences*  
-Stark (2009, p. 1522)

Before we read how I have made sense of the women's stories through the lens of Gavey's (2005) cultural scaffolding of rape and Stark's (2007) technologies of coercive control, I will share how the women's stories were gathered and (de)constructed. The conversations, upon which the women's stories and the subsequent discussions are based, took place in a one-on-one context at the location of the women's choice<sup>90</sup>. The locations included their homes<sup>91</sup>, university buildings, and in parks. These conversations were audio recorded, and lasted between 1 hour and two and a half hours<sup>92</sup>. Our discussion was centred around their experiences of sex within abusive relationships, without a set

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<sup>90</sup> The women were engaged in this research through snowballing (Polkinghorne, 2005); I gave my information sheet to people I knew and asked if they knew anyone who might be interested in participating in my study. If they did, they passed on the information sheet to the women and the women got in contact with me. Some of the contacts I asked offered to participate in the research themselves. The information sheet can be found in the appendices. Criteria for participating in this study were:

- Being over 18 years old
- Self-identifying as a woman
- Having been in an abusive intimate relationship previously, but not at the time of the conversation.

<sup>91</sup> Our conversations were conducted in a room separated from other house members to maintain confidentiality.

<sup>92</sup> The women signed a consent form at this time to confirm they were wanting to participate in my research; this form can be found in the appendices.

of specific questions<sup>93</sup>. I did tend to start by asking the women about themselves, and inevitably the women offered demographic information such as their age, where they grew up and currently lived (but interestingly not their ethnicity, a privilege of being white I guess), as well as an overview of their relationship(s) they felt was of interest to the nature of the study. The conversations were then guided by my understanding of the topic of inquiry<sup>94</sup> and what the women wanted to share. This approach enabled me to be flexible and responsive to what the women were saying and to establish rapport<sup>95</sup> between us.

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<sup>93</sup> The content of these conversations was quite varied, and I wonder if this was in part due to their unstructured nature as much as the variety in their experiences. That said, this unstructured approach also meant that I gained a broader view of women's experiences of sex and consent within abusive relationships, such as how attacks on mothering as part of coercive control can lead to rape and unwanted termination, which may have not been illuminated with a more structured approach.

<sup>94</sup> Upon reflection of our conversations and the questions I asked, I can see that I was not comfortable at the time pressing the women for specific details of their sexual practices, likely reflecting that women often do not directly talk about how they have sex (Kelly et al., 2017) and my own discomfort talking about sex at the time. Were I to conduct these interviews now, I would be inclined to ask more specifically about what formed part of their "normal" way of fucking, as well as why they engaged in these practices and any practices that might have deviated from dominant understandings of fucking. I have noticed that my understanding of consent at the time was largely focused on the use of verbalisation, and did not make specific inquiry into the broader verbal and non-verbal ways the women communicated their interest, or not, in sexual activity. Some women volunteered this information, and Catherine in particular made a point of noting her physical resistance to sex she did not want. I also wonder if I assumed pleasure was not possible within these relationships and did not really ask directly if the women experienced sexual pleasure within their abusive relationships. The transcribed conversations suggest that pleasure was not something that occurred, and if it did it was not a regular experience or something of note. However, the framing of the information sheet and topic of the conversation may have meant that women did not think their pleasurable experiences warranted comment. Were I to conduct these conversations again, I would ask the women explicitly about their experiences of sexual pleasure. That said, from what the women have described it seems as though any pleasure would have been incidental rather than the product of their ability to shape the interactions towards their desires. Finally, the possibility of the women initiating sex did not come up greatly in our conversations. I asked Nancy about this explicitly but not the other women. I wonder now if the other women ever initiated sex within these abusive relationships.

<sup>95</sup> Nilson (2017) in her article about reflectivity and cultural competence talks about attunement with aboriginal women participating in a health initiative she was involved with. Over time, she found that she became more present in the relationship with the women, rather than being task driven (likely reflecting a white, western, capitalist focus on productivity rather than relatedness as a marker of achievement). Nilson's (2017) article made me wonder about my own attunement to the women while in the conversations, and beyond. When I think about who I was when the conversations took place (six in 2018 before my internship, and one in 2020 after my internship) I feel like I was more task driven, focused on trying to secure the "data" and retaining some objective separation as a researcher, rather than showing up as a fellow survivor, as a woman, as someone who wants this patriarchal bullshit to fucking end. When I read through the transcripts I sense I knew when I had hit upon something "useful" and followed that line of questioning, not necessarily fully connecting with the felt experience of the women, or acknowledging our shared experiences. Despite my political commitment to doing feminist research, to engaging in our shared humanity and trauma, my own trauma meant I engaged with my mind and not my heart, which acted as a barrier to the felt experience of their stories (my own and those of my mum). I do not think I *fully* got, at the time, how the end product is not the only thing that can enact political benefit and change; that the very way we conduct ourselves, the way we interact with **continues over page**

I transcribed the audio recordings of our conversations word for word<sup>96</sup> and then anonymised them, removing identifying information such as real names and locations. The anonymised transcripts were then returned via email to the women for their approval<sup>97</sup>. The women were given the opportunity to withdraw from the study, change or remove anything they wanted. Only Roxanne requested that something about her children be removed, which I did. After the women had reviewed their transcripts, a Release of Transcript Form (found in the appendices) was signed and returned to me via email or in person.

## **story (de)construction**

My (de)construction of the women's stories<sup>98</sup> was informed by the theoretical underpinnings of feminist post-structuralism with respect to power, knowledge, language and discourse, and

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others, in the way the research is undertaken, discussed and presented, all have the potential to create moments of change (especially if we think in terms of Butler's (1990) theory of performativity and Foucault's (1979) theory of power). As such, I do not think I did enough to reduce the power imbalance between the women and myself as the researcher. Since these interviews I have changed a lot, deepened into myself and my ideas and the experience of the conversations would be different, more personal, more open, more attuned.

<sup>96</sup> Burns (2003) argues that feminist researchers should attend to the embodied experience within their research and reflectivity, irrespective of the research topic or modality, because the meanings we make are not the result of "disembodied 'intellectual' interactions" (p. 230) but are the product of physical exchanges between the researcher and the participant. Upon reflection, I have realised that I totally neglected bodies in my interviews unless of course it was about how they were the recipient of violence and violation. I did not notice much in the way of my own internal responses to what the women were saying, nor notice much in the way of body language during the conversations. How something is said can convey information and had I been more attuned to bodies, it might have changed what, how and when I asked questions, the answers that the women gave, and/or my interpretation of what (and how it) was said. I think that this is probably reflective of my own disconnection from my body at the time. When I think about this now it seems ridiculous to omit knowledge held in the body, but this understanding has only come in the last couple of years learning about trauma theory and practice (van der Kolk, 2014) and embodiment theory (Fahs & Swank, 2015; Holland et al., 1994; Tolman et al., 2014), and subsequently taking up yoga (Rhodes, 2015; van der Kolk, 2014) which has seen me learn to reconnected to my body and those around me.

<sup>97</sup> Approval meant it was an accurate representation of our conversation and that consent was given to use anonymised extracts from the transcripts in subsequent publications that arise from this research.

<sup>98</sup> While working with the women's individual stories makes theoretical sense in this instance, story is also a useful tool for change from an activist perspective, as capturing the felt experience of someone's story helps move us more towards joining the collective action to dismantle and change systems of oppression (Riensborough & Canning, 2017; Stark, 2009).

subjectivity<sup>99</sup> (as set out in *feminism, foucault, and fucking*) and ideas of discourse analysis, which Gavey (1989) suggests has no specific method. Instead, she argues it is about paying attention to “the social context of language and to its function in relation to structures of power” (p. 466) when closely reading texts (which can include transcripts of conversations as this research does, as well as documents including literature, and more general social practices) to identify “patterns of meaning, contradictions and inconsistencies” (p. 467). It is typical for a discourse analysis to then discuss the implications of these findings for broader gendered social power relations and the bearing this has on women in a broad sense (Gavey, 1989).

I first deconstructed the women’s stories by repeatedly listening to the audio recordings of our conversations and reading each women’s transcripts several times. In each close listening and reading, I made notes about the dynamics of the relationship(s) and the use of technologies of coercive control (as discussed in *the coercive control context*), identified the discourses of heterosex (as set out in *feminism, foucault and fucking*) as well as noting any constructions of sex, sexual practices and consent practices that were different to, or not accounted for, in the literature. It was integral to my research wondering that I was able to demonstrate *how* the women were shaped towards compliance with their partner’s sexual desires through the interrelationship between hegemonic understandings of fucking and relating *and* processes of coercive control. The typical manner of writing up a feminist post-structural discourse analysis took the women’s quotes out of the context of the coercive control processes. When I considered how to address this I thought more about the women’s stories and the literature, and decided another approach was necessary. One that

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<sup>99</sup> Subjectivities are “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” (Weedon, 1987, p. 32).

was responsive to the content of my conversations with the women, to their desire to help other women by illuminating the processes of abuse, and the need of feminism to reconnect women with the political origins of their experiences.

The women appeared to blame themselves (at least in part) for what transpired within the relationships. Given our neoliberal, post-feminist social context where the political origins of all society inequalities are obscured (Rutherford, 2018), it is not surprising that the women were only able to see fault in themselves, rather than the near invisible patriarchal power that shapes our lives (Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2019), as Elizabeth said:

*Elizabeth: the longer I have been out of it (the abuse), the more clearer I see it, and the more I just want to be able to help other women to see it*

Her comments and those of Roxanne, who said "*part of doing this with you is to be of service to others*", encouraged me to use this opportunity to offer something back to the women (Jennings et al., 2003), and any others who read these stories. It was an opportunity to help the women make sense of their experiences politically, illuminating the way gendered power relations shape our lives. In doing so, I hope these stories and the discussion act as a form of consciousness raising<sup>100</sup> (Towns & Adams, 2018) in the spirit of Paulo Freire<sup>101</sup> (1970) and feminist consciousness raising (Hanisch, 2006; hooks, 2000).

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<sup>100</sup> Calder-Dawe and Gavey (2019) said that the interview process itself can act as a point of consciousness raising, during the conversations I had with the women I didn't really feel comfortable contesting their interpretations of events at the time. As my comfort with (academic) feminist understandings has grown I have felt as if my silence in our conversations was a lost opportunity in some respects, and in light of Roxanne and Elizabeth's comments above, something I felt ethically and politically driven to rectify, in keeping with the spirit and values of feminist psychology (Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2019; Jennings et al., 2003, Riger, 1992; Rutherford, 2018).

<sup>101</sup> Radical educator Paulo Freire (1972) argued that "one of the gravest obstacles to the achievement of liberation is that oppressive reality absorbs those within and thereby acts to submerge men's consciousness. Functionally, oppression is domesticating" (p. 27-8). In many respects, his ideas sit well alongside the Foucauldian power-knowledge nexus and disciplinary power, in that the social power relations embedded in dominant knowledge shapes the minds of the oppressed towards being docile/domesticated, reducing the possibility of resistance (Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2019). Freire (1972) proposed that **continues over page**

In my second attempt, I re-organized the experiences within the women's transcripts into a temporal manner that enabled me to convey how technologies of coercive control were being used over time, and in conjunction with the discourses that underpin hegemonic heterosex, to shape women's sexual experiences and their ability to consent within the abusive relationship. In essence, I inverted the typical discourse analysis process to enable the women to see my interpretation of how broader political structures are implicated in enabling their individual experiences, thus enabled links to be made between the personal, the interpersonal and the political.

A detailed political interrogation of the women's personal experiences allowed me to demonstrate how gendered sex expectations and technologies of coercive control work together to constrain the possibilities of women's sexuality in these relationships. This attention to the political *and* individual was helpful to build on Stark's (2007) suggestion that gendered expectations of women obscure the use of coercive control in heterosexual relationships.

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oppressive social structures could be resisted and changed through a process of *conscientisation* – that is, engaging in critical thinking about the causes of oppression *and* taking action shape social reality differently.

# the production of a hot fuckbot

*pornography is not simple fantasy; it is an easily accessible  
template for actual sexual behaviour*  
– Sun et al. (2016, p. 985)

Within Danielle's story I noticed a dynamic where the normalising power of dominant expectations of heterosex were coming together with and through technologies of coercive control to create a situation where she was trying harder to be attractive and sexually available to maintain the relationship. Within this dynamic, she was produced as a hot fuckbot<sup>102</sup> like the women seen in pornography; attractive and willing, with no sexual or relational demands of her own.

## he found me hot and wanted to fuck me

The social norms of heterosexual ways of relating and fucking, outlined in *gendered sexpectations*, can be seen playing out in the beginning of Danielle's relationship:

*Danielle: basically, just started, did it (sex) for the first time and started doing it when we saw each other and it would be him coming on to me and saying you look really hot or whatever and then yeah it just sort of happened I guess*

Danielle's recollection speaks to the traditional sexual script, where the male is active as the initiator of a sexual interaction and the woman is the passive recipient of sex (Beare & Boonzaier, 2020), amplified in her comments that the sex "*just sort of happened*". Her recollection that they had sex each time they saw each other also speaks to the sexual imperative operating (Farvid & Braun, 2013), which demands men and women fuck whenever the opportunity

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<sup>102</sup> Urban Dictionary (2022) defines fuckbot as "Slang for sexbot - any device designed to stimulate genitals to simulate sex with no or limited human input".

presents itself. When this sexual imperative combined with the expectation that people within a romantic relationship will fuck (Holloway, 1984; Kelly et al., 2017), it creates a situation where sex is an obligation that cannot really be questioned (Gavey, 1992).

Within Danielle's account, there is no mention of consent as a consideration, it could be that Danielle's experience was wholly wanted and her behaviour and body language clearly demonstrated desire for the interaction, rendering verbalisation unnecessary. As Beres (2010) found, sometimes there is a tacit understanding where people just know the sex was wanted or not. That said, Beres (2010) research read to me as if the participants valued consent and were paying attention for signs of consent, or not as the case may be, and were choosing to be responsive to these messages while fucking. Danielle's comments read as though consent, and her desires, were not given consideration, as evident by comments she made later in our conversation: "*I just can't believe it thinking back, like it was never what do you like, what don't you like*". I understand this comment to mean there was no meaningful communication about the nature of the sexual interactions or consideration that they could be unwanted, or that Danielle could have a proactive role in shaping how the fucking unfolded.

At the time of Danielle's relationship, white western society was in peak raunch culture where "hotness" and fuckability were being pushed through advertising, media, and pornography (Gibson, 2014; Gill, 2008; Mulholland, 2011). Danielle performed these raunchy sexual norms, encouraged by his apparent sexual attraction to her looks, which acted as a source of validation and reward for performing our hetero-femininity in the social proscribed manner:

*Danielle: it was again about me (being) validated and enough as a girl and as a person because I was really stoked that he found me hot and wanted to fuck me, sort of thing*

At the same time, I read this comment as Danielle speaking negatively about herself because she wanted, or needed his validation. In our current post-feminist environment with its focus on (performative) agency, we are supposed to *feel* sexually empowered for ourselves and thus to suggest that you gain validation from men's interest is to position yourself negatively as falling below the agency line (Bay-Cheng, 2015). There is a tension in meeting the demands of competing dominant discourses that on one hand demand our sexuality for ourselves and on the other demand our sexuality for men. If we fail to obtain and maintain men's interest then we are positioned as undesirable and failing in our femininity (Pickens & Braun, 2018). At the same time if we seek male interest we are not being an empowered (post-feminist) woman and are failing in our femininity (Bay-Cheng, 2015). The overall message seems to be that women are always failing.

Fucking in the context of raunch culture is about obtaining male interest and looking right during sex; as Rizos (2012) commented, porn images "instruct women that their sexuality is a series of performances displaying their appearance in the most favourable light" (p. 41). Women's enjoyment is not the main objective of fucking, as Danielle comments:

*Danielle: it was always more without thinking about it, it was always about him, his pleasure, keeping him interested in me*

Danielle's comment that her focus on pleasing him was "*without thinking*" speaks to how normalised this type of male centred sexual interaction is (Gavey, 2005; Kelly et al., 2017), so much so that at the time she did not question it or consider that there might be another way of doing sex. She then reflected "*it was not often about enjoying an act with someone you love or anything like that*", suggesting

that in the time since this relationship she has gained a different perspective, one that suggests there is a difference between love and sex, and that sex should involve mutual enjoyment.

## **i had to be ...**

Danielle paid attention to the media that her partner consumed, specifically pornography and so called "lads magazines"<sup>103</sup> to get ideas about how to look and perform sexually to his tastes. When I asked her if she compared herself to the women she saw, she said "*all the time and that used to make me really insecure*". Up to this point I think that Danielle's experience is clearly shaped by the dominant norms of heterosex (Gavey, 2005), which act as a form of social coercion to limit the possibilities of how Danielle can be within these interactions (Woodard, forthcoming). Where I think this relationship moved from social coercion into interpersonal coercion is when her partner started critiquing Danielle's physical appearance, including when pregnant:

*Danielle: In the beginning he actually commented on how pale I am and went to hold my hand once and went eww ... and made me really insecure about my skin tone and stuff because he was really tanned and would tan really easily and was always going on about fucking tanning and yeah the hair ... it was all about myself worth I think and trying to get that from him, for me. But yeah he would say if I had put on weight or whatever, again like flippant remarks, like even when I was pregnant, like even about my belly, like look at the size of that thing, sort of thing*

His verbal critiques (and obvious reactions, discussed below) act as enforcement of technologies of sexiness that demand thin, tanned bodies as a marker of attractiveness in line with the women performing in mainstream pornography at the time (Gibson, 2014). The demands of this media and her partner were inscribed in Danielle's mind as how she thought she had to look:

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<sup>103</sup> Lads magazines are magazines aimed at a male audience that contain sexualised images of women (Rizos, 2012).

*Danielle: I thought I had to be really skinny, really tanned, like I was obsessed with fake tan, um, all blonde at that point because he liked blondes, I actually did, when I met him I had blonde hair and I remember dying it brown and wanting to go back brunette and he was just like his reaction was like not, not good sort of thing so I instantly wanted to go back blonde, it was all about what he found attractive*

Her focus on what pleased her partner also extended to the way she dressed, adopting the uniform of raunch culture, small, tight and sexy, highlighting the disciplinary power of sexualised norms which demand women engage in technologies of sexiness to achieve the desired aesthetic and demeanour (Evans & Riley, 2014):

*Danielle: figure hugging clothes, small clothes, um, bright, sort of you know the silky sort of I don't know, hot clothes that probably looked like lingerie or something*

Reading this, I can sense Danielle actively shaping herself to meet not only the dominant femininity at that particular moment and place in history but also being acutely aware of the specificities of her partner's responses to the way she presents herself and actively making sure she is pleasing him. Though of course, his interests appear highly shaped by the social and cultural context in which he finds himself. Given that western women are pushed towards a hyper focus on our looks and displaying the appropriate femininity of the times (Bartky, 1990), her boyfriend is easily able to mobilise these messages from wider social expectations of women to enforce them more closely in his intimate relationship. While his critiques could be unintentional I wonder if this is enough to consider them acceptable, given that he is reaffirming the requirements of raunch culture that produce women as "hot" and gagging for cock. That said, given how intentionally Danielle appeared to perform her femininity in these accounts I struggle to believe that he did not notice how responsive she was his interests, comments and reactions, and wonder if he knew he had some power to shape Danielle.

## mind games and monogamy

The presence of interpersonal coercion is more obvious when her boyfriend started lying to Danielle about his whereabouts and the nature of his relationships with other women. Feminist theorists have suggested that we are sold the idea of monogamy through notions of romance, companionship and soul mates who will be able to meet all our needs, leading to us focusing all our attention and energy on the man we are in a relationship with (Rich, 1980; Robinson, 1997). The normalising of monogamy sees us experience our partners sexual interest in other people as a threat to the stability of this relationship that we centre our lives around, leading women to feel a sense of loss, vulnerability, and jealousy (Gass & Nichols, 1988):

*Danielle: he would just go out all the time, always crossing the line with other girls in my opinion. He wanted to go out without me, he would want to go out with the guys but then there would be, there would always be girls there who I didn't know, or he wouldn't tell me about*

*Danielle: (he was) just very touchy feely, and I think hooking up, I don't know about sex, you know just lots of rumours, and pictures I would see when he told me he was somewhere else but then he would never ever admit anything or say like, you know*

Lying is a form of gaslighting that acts to conceal and falsify facts of what is going on, and in doing so distorts Danielle's reality to convince her that there is no infidelity and she is over reacting and crazy<sup>104</sup> (Gass & Nichols, 1988), causing her to distrust her own thoughts and blame herself:

*Danielle: I don't know what sort of came first me not trusting myself or me not trusting him because sometimes I would be blindly lied too and I would feel like we have had this big meaningful chat or he sort of opens up to me or he's being honest or even told me what he is doing that day and then I would find out the complete opposite and I don't know if that came from*

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<sup>104</sup> There is literature about "crazy making" (Corbett, 2013; Hancock, 2017; Hayes & Jeffries, 2016; Stark, 2007,2012) that explores mind games within coercive and controlling relationships. I choose not to go into this because I wanted to focus on making links between the technologies of coercive control and the cultural scaffolding of rape to outline the power structures that influence the women's experience of sex and ability to consent, rather than exploring the inner workings of specific processes too deeply.

*me already sort of being unbalanced internally and bring that into the relationship and because of the ways I was acting he was scared of how I react so lying or I'm questioning myself because I didn't feel, I know what he like what he was, he was my main person and I didn't know whether what he was saying was true or not and so maybe then I don't know if I am feeling justified*

*Danielle: it started feeling like everyone thinks I am crazy, I look crazy, um, yeah, I started flipping between these sort of like, believing my feeling and my thoughts about the situation and breaking up or getting angry about the situation or whatever. Um, to then being like full of anxiety and fear that I had completely made the wrong the decision and completely over reacted and I didn't know what side of me to trust I guess*

Gaslighting works because our society favours rationality, particularly within neoliberalism (Türken et al., 2016), and associates "femininity with irrationality" (Sweet, 2019, p. 856). If women were not conditioned to believe they were already too emotional, too complicated, and unbalanced, we would not be so easily convinced that we were being oversensitive, and we would not be so quick to distrust ourselves. Our social and cultural environment shapes us to readily accept being (considered) crazy. Being positioned as crazy in an environment that favours rationality also serves men's interests because it gives them a legitimate reason to blame us for our failings and further justify their behaviour. In her comments, Danielle offers her perceived "emotionality" as justification for his behaviour rather than questioning that maybe his actions and society had shaped her to react this way:

*Danielle: (he would take) whatever he was doing even further then because I had a go at him or questioned him or nagged at him type thing um, and then if it blew up and we would fight and break up and a have talk and (he would say) "I well I need to come home because you were going nuts at me over the text" or something or I was going to invite you but then you started going fucking mental at me*

Gaslighting incorporates an element of victim-blaming embedded within its dynamics which makes the woman feel crazy and then blame herself for it (Stark, 2019). This blame is further entrenched by women's constant self-surveillance of our

responses to ensure we are not responding in a manner that is overly emotional, or at least accounting for our responses if we do stray from the confines of objective rationality. In my experience we are quick to blame hormones in an effort to excuse our misstep.

After finding out that her boyfriend<sup>105</sup> was interacting with other women in a sexualised manner, Danielle worked harder to maintain his attraction, despite the cost to other areas of her life:

*Danielle: it made me more insecure so it probably yeah it made me try harder and more neglect other areas of my life and person, like and be all about my looks to keep him*

*Danielle: I think I thought if he was like attracted enough to me and like with however I looked and sex and stuff like that that he would not want anyone else, that would stop*

Here Danielle is suggesting that men “stray” from the confines of monogamous heterosexual relationships because women fail to perform their femininity well enough to tame men’s insatiable need for variety (replicating the male sex drive discourse; Holloway, 1984). Her rationale for working harder to achieve the proscribed technologies of sexiness is drawn from social conditions that link women’s physical attractiveness and

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<sup>105</sup> This is not to say that her boyfriend becoming involved with other women is abusive in and of itself, but rather that it can produce a strong, conditioned emotional response for women (Tsoulis, 1987, cited in Robinson, 1997). In the midst of this compulsory mononormativity (Farvid & Braun, 2013), I wondered about the ethics of non-monogamy without a partner’s knowledge and/or consent. In their book *The Ethical Slut* Dossie Easton and Janet Hardy (1997) suggest that ethical non-monogamy involves the consent of romantic partners, even where the partner(s) is/are not participating in the sexual activity in question. On one hand when the cultural conditions are such that your partner being sexual with someone else is likely to illicit feelings of jealousy and loss (Gass & Nichols, 1988; Tsoulis, 1987, cited in Robinson, 1997), consideration of everyone’s wishes and the potential impact of such activities seems an important aspect of ethical sexual and relational practice. It ensures all parties are fully informed about the dynamics they are participating in and offered care and support for any challenging feelings that come as a result, and the ability for people to decide if that is the kind of situation they would like to participate in. On the other hand, this affords another person(s) control over your sexual expression and autonomy, in a way that you might not agree too if it was possible to question such demands. I think that both positions are important with respect to ethics but are put in conflict by a system that demands monogamy. We need to work towards a future where we are all able to openly, fully and intentionally, co-create the parameters of the relationships and sexual interactions we have with other people, otherwise we risk our sexual autonomy being restricted in ways we do not want, or that do not feel right for us, and we risk hurting others and restricting the possibilities of their lives.

fuckability to our ability to keep a man (Kelly et al., 2017; Pickens & Braun, 2018). In this context, her boyfriend's attraction outside the relationship was understood as a negative evaluation of her performance as a partner, likely failing to "be enough" to satisfy his sexual needs. These ideas are underpinned by the demands of the have/hold discourse that tasks women with the job of keeping her partner happy domestically and sexually, in exchange for monogamy (Holloway, 1984).

Danielle later said that she also thought she had to be the "cool girlfriend" in order to be an attractive partner:

*Danielle: thought by being a hot, cool girlfriend that it would stop and I would probably suppress, all so many of my needs going unmet, intellectually, emotionally, feeling secure, like financial, um, growing together in life, none of it was being met*

For Danielle being a cool girlfriend was a performance to mask her discomfort with, and emotions about, how her boyfriend was behaving with other women:

*Danielle: I tried to be cool girlfriend and take myself out and do something by myself or with friends, I couldn't get through a night basically without texting him frantically at some point or trying to call him and catch him out*

When this performance broke down, Danielle had her concerns minimised and she was sanctioned ("*oh stop whinging*"):

*Danielle: I felt crazy, like completely sort of brushed aside or told that I'm just being, oh stop whinging at me, I'm allowed to go out, stuff like that*

Her account suggests to me that the "cool girlfriend" is independent, attractive and sexually open, uncomplicated and easy going. The cool girlfriend accepts any behaviour from her boyfriend without question, without "nagging" him to do something differently. The cool girlfriend essentially has a masculine approach to fucking (at least with respect to her acceptance of his behaviour. The cool girlfriend does not appear

to allow her to be sexual beyond the bounds of monogamy<sup>106</sup>). This masculine approach to sex is combined with a super hot exterior and the physical posturing of a porn star. The cool girlfriend is similar to the framing of an ideal woman Rizos (2011) found within men's soft porn magazines, which she describes as being in touch with masculinity and the ideals of lad culture<sup>107</sup> while being very feminine looking. I wonder if for most women, the cool girlfriend is a performance, drawn from within raunch culture to enable *men* greater sexual options without sanction within monogamous relationships. Women who express dissatisfaction or an emotional response to these behaviours find themselves sanctioned for being crazy, dramatic and difficult, as Danielle was.

## **fucking for connection**

For Danielle, the relationship became a cycle of fighting and broken promises of reform:

*Danielle: It was just a cycle of fighting, having a big talk about it, even going to counselling and stuff like that, um, and him being like I'm not gonna do that anymore, whatever, and it would just happen again within a week or so*

Within the turmoil of this cycle, sex was desired by Danielle for what it meant as an indicator of calm in the relationship and a point of connection:

*Danielle: at points it was, we had had a good day or a good week, and we hadn't fought and you know we would do that it (sex) would be like a connection thing with him*

Her comments appear shaped by cultural knowledge that sex is an important indicator of how well a relationship is going and its

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<sup>106</sup> I wonder if there may be an allowance for the cool girlfriend to transgress monogamy if she is involved in a threesome with him and a lady of his choosing or engaging in performative lesbianism, like the "hot lesbians" Gill (2008) found in advertising who perform for the male gaze.

<sup>107</sup> Rizos (2012) suggests that 'laddism' was the masculine expression of raunch culture, in which "lads" were not gender sensitive and instead sort to reclaim patriarchal masculinity, including a focus on the objectification of women. Laddism was a response to the rise of more self-reflective, sensitive masculinity.

longevity (Brown-Bowers et al., 2015; Kelly, et al., 2017). In this context, his sexual interest is after all the reward for her trying harder to perform the right way, as a girlfriend who is attractive, sexually available and does not make his life difficult in any way. Within these sexual encounters she focused on his sexual pleasure, as expressed through orgasm (drawing on the orgasm imperative; Potts, 2000) rather than deriving physical pleasure from the interactions herself:

*Danielle: it never, there was never a conversation, I never cared if I came or not, everything would be like as long as he was fine it was fine*

*Jasmine: so what would make him fine*

*Danielle: having an orgasm.*

*Jasmine: so if he ejaculated then that was good*

*Danielle: yup*

*Jasmine: you felt like you had done well*

*Danielle: yes, yup, yes, so weird um yeah. And this was me, he was not saying it's about only me or he was not, not trying to give me pleasure or he was not all about himself at all. I genuinely didn't care about myself it was just about that*

*Danielle: I didn't even want it to be about my pleasure, it was such a black hole inside of me that I was not in touch with, yeah. So I would do certain things it was always really because I thought he wanted that I guess*

While these sexual interactions were wanted on one hand, for what they meant about the relationship, her comments also suggest that they were not wanted from her sexual perspective as her sexuality (at the time of this relationship) was something difficult for her to experience, possibly even something she feared<sup>108</sup>. She said “*there was never any like sexual abuse,*” and while I agree that is the probably true in a technical sense, I do not think that makes Danielle’s experience within this relationship

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<sup>108</sup> I am not suggesting here that she was physically fearful of her partner because of his actions but rather that childhood sexual abuse left her disconnected from her sexuality, and thus it was sexual activity itself that was feared.

ethically unproblematic. The importance of hegemonic sexualised femininity was really evident throughout our conversation and at first reading her account did not reveal "sexual abuse" as it is typically understood (ie. physical, forced, obviously coerced), as she said herself "*he never forced me to do anything*" but what always follows in my head is "he didn't need to". Her account could easily be understood as a relatively "normal" heterosexual relationship for people in their early 20's, shaped by gendered power relations, but this in and of itself would raise ethical concerns for me. As Gavey (2005) has established, women routinely engage in sex that they do not want as a result of highly coercive social norms. But closer reading of Danielle's experience illuminates processes of microregulation and gaslighting enacted by her boyfriend that to my mind amount to coercive control (Stark, 2007). When his actions combined with dominant discourses - that require monogamous heterosexuality, emphasise the importance of women's desirability and sex in relationships, and privilege male pleasure through fucking - it produced a situation where Danielle was disconnected from her own sense of reality and life projects, and focused all her energies on maintaining the relationship through performing sexualised femininity and willingly, almost desperately, trying to encourage sexual encounters that she did not desire for herself.

# assumed access

*a woman may sometimes end up having unwanted sex with a man because it either does not occur to her to question it, or it does not seem within the realm of possibility that it is a truly negotiable point*  
- Gavey (2005, p. 142)

The focus on physical abuse and violence acts to obscure other forms of problematic relationship behaviour that also harm us and limit the possibilities of our lives (Stark, 2007). Commonsense understandings of heteronormativity, and the violent incident model of intimate partner violence collectively obscured Angela's ability to notice and critique how her boyfriend was able to shape her life towards his desire and interests, without the use of physical violence, or even threats. A process of critiques, isolation and gaslighting intertwined with gendered sexpectations to shrink her world and diminish her ability to meaningfully shape her life, and ways of fucking. Within these dynamics, his sexual access was assumed and unquestioned by Angela, whether she wanted it or not.

When Angela met her first boyfriend, she was outgoing and social, but not far into the relationship she was diagnosed with depression. By framing her experience in diagnostic terms, like depression, we personalise the problem, obscuring the gendered power relations that shaped her experience. While she now questions how she was able to change so rapidly without anyone (including her) wondering about her relationship, at the time all she knew was that women should not accept *physical* abuse and as such did not (could not) question the relationship:

*Angela: no one ever told me about people being emotionally manipulative of you. It was always that oh you could never put up with someone hitting you but there was no nuances beyond that*

The idea that a relationship is ok so long as you are not being hit was further entrenched by people's support for her parent's relationship, despite her father's meanness towards her mother and herself:

*Angela: my parents were together, but they would fight a lot, or what I saw as a lot, and my dad would be mean to me and my mum would be upset a lot of the time ... but then I was told I was lucky because my parents were together and so many other people's parents were divorced*

These messages about the importance of an intact family inform us that we should maintain our relationships with men even when they make us unhappy, unless we are being hit, reifying the demands of compulsory heterosexuality, and the centrality of physical assault to understandings of abuse. In essence, social norms suggest women should count themselves lucky if they have a male partner, irrespective of how he makes you feel and the impact he has upon your life (unless they are hitting you).

## **he just wore me down**

Compulsory heteronormativity demands that women focus their attention on obtaining a male partner (Goldman, 1969; Pickens & Braun, 2018), as is evident in Angela's account of high school where the focus of her friendship group was on getting a boyfriend:

*Angela: I think that was a goal, like having a boyfriend, especially with um my friend group, they always had lots of boyfriends, and not me so much, but that was always really an exciting and admirable thing when they got a boyfriend and that would be something we all talked about a lot*

*Angela: I was like really stoked that I had found like this love right that like was ok to have and everyone told me that I should have been like striving for*

Angela's initial excitement at having secured the much-coveted male partner and her comments about how much focus her friendship group placed on boyfriends, suggests that a boyfriend is a marker

of social success, rewarding women for their (re)production of heterosexuality (Gavey, 1992). These rewards, relationship goodies as my supervisor Leigh calls them, include feelings of validation, the sense of being normal, desirable, and having someone to belong to (Bay-Cheng, 2019; Gavey, 2005; Kelly et al., 2017). However, it is not necessarily the relationship itself that offers a rewarding experience; sometimes the fact that you have a boyfriend and can tick off that social expectation is where the benefits end (Gavey, 2005). The actual relationship between the people involved might not be a source of safety, of shared creation of a sexual and/or relational experience or of mutual pleasure. As Angela soon found, her must-have boyfriend didn't offer the happily ever after we are promised. Instead, she said *"yeah like he just wore me down"*, later continuing:

*Angela: I just became this weak person whose boyfriend was her life ... my relationship with him was the only reason for me to be here and that was not going well cos we would fight every day*

Angela positioned herself as someone who went from being an outgoing young woman into someone whose life shrunk and became less engaged with the outside world, apathetic about things she used to enjoy:

*Angela: Before I met him I really liked going to parties with my friends and just being really silly, and being really loud, and drinking too much and just having a cool time, yeah just having like, just being outgoing, and stupid but it was fun and then like you know he would be super critical of my relationships with those people so then I stopped going*

*Angela: I was outgoing and liked hanging out with my friends and liked doing stuff. And then suddenly all those things just started to get less and less attractive to me. And I can only explain it by that he got in my head and started undermining everything that I liked doing*

His negative comments and critiques of how she engaged with her friends and how she enjoyed herself acted to isolate her from

activities and people that she liked, leaving her reliant on his social support and contacts:

*Angela: we could only see his friends, but his friends weren't nice to me*

*Angela: my relationship with my family got less and less good because he was partly putting pressure on me while I was living at home to get my mum to say that he could start staying over and my mum, and that became this huge conflict between me and my mum, and kind of ended up with me being kicked out of home and having to go and live with him and his parents. But when you are in that situation where someone is, I don't know, I was my own person and I was surrounded by people who cared about me and I had some supports, even if there was like, even if there was less support than I would have liked and suddenly I was in a completely different situation where the only people around me were people he chose for me to be around*

While this could have been incidental, her recollection that "*he certainly enjoyed it when my relationships with other people are fraught*" suggests that her boyfriend may have been proactively trying to make Angela's relationships with other people complicated to turn her focus towards him and foster her dependence on him. Through this isolation he is able to limit the possibilities of Angela's life and ways of being<sup>109</sup>" (Stark, 2007), as well as making himself her primary source of affirmation, and way of making sense of her world. In this limited environment, Angela's boyfriend is able to have more influence and control over her and any critiques he makes are likely to be amplified (Stark, 2007):

*Angela: I had never had a particular man whose opinion mattered to me so much telling me that a specific thing that I did was not right*

Angela recounted that "*Every interest of mine was devalued*", enabling him to control her towards his preferences and shape how she was in the relationship, to encourage her to try and please him. This

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<sup>109</sup> Stark (2007) makes an interesting suggestion that when isolation occurs at an early adult age it interferes with the woman's identity formation at a time when she is differentiating herself from the family unit and stepping more fully into her personhood, "eviscerating a woman's selfhood and constraining her subjectivity" (p. 262). I note that this developmental perspective is likely a very Eurocentric view of early adulthood and identity. I wonder if Stark's (2007) suggestion is relevant for how Angela was experiencing life at this time?

emphasis on his preferences is evident in the reshaping of her interests and how she spent her time involved in activities he enjoyed, even when she was clear to herself that she did not want to engage in these activities:

*Angela: (I had) to be active in ways that does not necessarily come naturally to me*

*Angela: I am incredibly scared of the ocean and he was a surfer and suddenly it became absolutely vital that even though I didn't like to go in the ocean I suddenly had to become like this beachy person. And he would make me feel like I had to go swimming with him all the time. Like the ocean terrifies me*

Women easily default to what their partner prefers because at a broader social level, we are encouraged to please men (sexually and relationally, Gavey, 2005; Kelly et al., 2017;) and to defer to them in relationships (Pickens & Braun, 2018). The normalisation of men being at the centre of women's lives leads to the de-centering of things (hobbies, people, experiences) that are important to us, and coercing us into doing and being what/who he prefers. As the processes of control and cultural norms shaped her towards her boyfriend's desires, it is hard to imagine Angela would have been able to meaningfully assert her sexual interests (or lack thereof) and shape the nature of the way they fucked.

## **questioning myself**

Angela's boyfriend used gaslighting and intentional suggestions of non-monogamy within the relationship, causing her to doubt her own sense of reality and leaving her feeling crazy. He did this by drawing on ideas of heteronormativity (Mulholland, 2011) and the male sex drive discourse (Holloway, 1984) to suggest that men and women can only relate through fucking<sup>110</sup>:

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<sup>110</sup> This also acted to isolate her further by restricting who she could associate with.

*Angela: his opinion on like relationships between men and women was that they couldn't just be friends*

*Angela: he didn't like me being friends with other guys at all, and other girls, so that just basically wasn't allowed. I wasn't allowed to have friendships with other guys*

*Angela: if he did (show any interest in her female friends) then that was like a warning sign to me because if that was his opinion and then he was making an effort with one of my female friends I think now he was doing that to hurt me*

After priming her with this knowledge of his opinion on men and women's inability to be non-sexual friends, he then used his apparent interest in her (women) friends to illicit feelings of jealousy and emotional hurt (Robinson, 1997), leaving Angela uncertain about the stability of the relationship and his interest in her. It seems likely that making Angela upset was the intention of this process given the current taken-for-granted expectation of monogamy (Farvid & Braun, 2013). By cultivating a state of jealousy and feeding her contradictory messages about the nature of his interest in her friends, Angela's boyfriend created a situation where she became confused and uncertain about trusting her own judgments:

*Angela: I think he also encouraged jealousy in me. Like, jealousy was a natural part of a relationship. But he fed it, he fed that jealousy. So, he would make me think I was crazy because he would do things that were not in line with what he was saying to me about how he felt, so he would say that he didn't like my friends but then he would do things that made me think that he did*

*Angela: I just think that the worse thing is like questioning myself that suddenly I could not rely on my own judgement of things and yeah if you can't judge things for yourself how are you ever going to make sure you are comfortable, and it is not just an internal voice that is telling you, like it was an external voice telling that I didn't, that what I was saying wasn't right or true or I'd misrepresented something but when you hear that enough it gets inside you and you start doing it yourself and then yeah I was having circular conversations with myself about what I should expect or not expect*

Given that our language for making sense of and naming intimate partner violence is largely limited to physical violence (Stark,

2007), it makes it difficult for women to recognise their sense of crazy as the result of their partner's gaslighting, as it was for Angela. Instead, women in romantic relationships readily believe it is them that is not understanding things correctly; that it is their emotionality, and themselves that is the problem (Hayes & Jefferies, 2016). Unable to trust their own sense of reality, their reactions and understandings of their experiences, women become more easily controlled by, and dependent upon, their partner (Hayes & Jefferies, 2016; Stark, 2007) as Angela was.

## **needing to be thin and up for it**

Angela's boyfriend wanted her to embody a thin, active woman who was always ready for sex. He made his positive opinions about health, fitness, and thinness known to Angela, alongside critiques or comments about her weight:

*Angela: the only value well like the most value he saw in me was in my exterior appearance so then that became like more important than it ever had been before. But also, something that he could also make me feel bad about as well. So that was really vulnerable making. But it also helped solidify that people had only ever seen me as an exterior like object my entire life. Like all that really mattered since being 11 or 12 was that I looked girlie and I had never really been drawn to like hyper fem sort of stuff*

*Angela: it was just if you are thin you are also healthy kind of thing... if I was thin then he would admire me*

The thinness her boyfriend favours and wanted to see in Angela echoes society's demands that women have thin bodies (Bartky, 1990; McKinley, 1999; Thompson, 2018). Her comments illuminate the limited way western society represents desirable femininity and how any deviation from this thin ideal allows space for others, especially men, to negatively comment on our weight:

*Angela: Um, but there was nothing wrong with how I looked, like it wasn't like, I didn't deviate at all from anyone else except that I had always had like a really fem kind of figure traditionally, like big boobs, wide hips, so*

*like it was not easy for me to. I mean it was in the mid 2000's as well. I look back on some of the like you know Kate Moss, like I mean she is tiny right. Like even like Mandy Moore when she was first out. She was fucking so so small. And there was not conversation around, like it was before Beyoncé or the Kardashians or like maybe in certain subcultures in America like those kind of figures had been admired but not sort of like in the generic pop shit that we were getting and so like there was no question that everyone had to be really, really thin. And um I just could not achieve that model look, ever like without surgery because my boobs were too big and my arse was too big. And yeah, so that was just like a really easy thing for him to like comment on*

Retrospectively, Angela was able to question the expectations of thinness by contextualising the social norms temporally and discussing how these have changed in time. But at the time of the relationship, Angela engaged in self-surveillance of her weight and actively tried to control her size with drugs and restricting her food intake:

*Angela: I found out when you took MDMA that you not only feel good, really really good but you also don't eat for like a day and a half afterwards and so suddenly that was like something I started do use to both feel better about myself in that I was I happy and loving while I was high and it was also a way to starve myself that was not hard. So, like I could control my weight in this really fucked up way and it was all because I think he had made me, like there was this thing with health and fitness with him as well where he had been in his high school soccer team, so he saw a lot of value in being thin*

In addition to the thin ideal, Angela's boyfriend also wanted her to perform a more sexualised femininity, a post-feminist sexual agent who resembled the blonde porn stars who inspired raunch culture; someone who is adventurous and available for fucking at all times (Bay-Cheng, 2019; Evans & Riley, 2014; Gill, 2008; Gibson, 2014):

*Angela: he would encourage me to do things like die my hair blonde and stuff and then he would make a big deal about it, like I remember that I changed my hair and he thought that was cool cos he was like it's like I am cheating on you with a different person*

*Angela: he would try to express dissatisfaction with me maybe not being as adventurous or like not gagging for it 24/7*

*Angela: there was a lot of pressure to always sort of be up for sex. Which when you are 17/18, I certainly had a much higher sex drive than I do now, so like I probably was up for sex all the time but also in like in weird locations*

The normalised importance of sex in relationships (Farvid & Braun, 2013) is evident in Angela being expected to engage sexually when she was tired from working 12 hours a day, split across two different jobs:

*Angela: I would be too tired, and he would be like well I waited up for you, we have to talk and we have to have sex*

In the context of increasingly pornified sex (Day, 2009; Donaghue et al., 2011; Rizos, 2012; Sun et al., 2016) where women demonstrate their "satisfaction" through exaggerated and loud groaning and performative orgasms (Potts, 2000), Angela's boyfriend expected her to orgasm during sexual encounters:

*Angela: he did not like it if I didn't orgasm so there was always like a lot of pressure on me to (orgasm)*

*Angela: So, it just, I had to pretend to orgasm all the time*

When she did not find the experience orgasmic, she faked an orgasm, presumably to secure his sense of being a good lover (Chadwick et al., 2019; Potts, 2000) and help her avoid a potentially emotional and adversarial interaction with him, as indicated by her experience of feeling pressure to orgasm. Her faking an orgasm is a form of sexual emotional labour women perform (Thomas et al., 2017) that reifies the orgasm imperative (Braun et al., 2003; Opperman et al., 2014; Potts, 2000).

The demands that our sexuality is confident, open, adventurous, and physically unencumbered<sup>111</sup> were difficult for Angela to

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<sup>111</sup> Despite the demands on Angela for a highly sexualised performance, he also slut shamed Angela because she had had sex with people before her relationship with him:

*Angela: he had not had sex with anyone before me um and so I think that there was some resentment because I had had sex with one or two people before him. In kind of like meaningless, not proper relationships kind of a way, so there was a lot of like slut*

perform when at the same time she was being told (by society and her male partner) that she was not attractive enough, and her sexual performance was wanting:

*Angela: I don't know that I felt secure enough in his affection to be like super out going and that was because you know he was saying that I was not good enough at anything so how was I meant to suddenly blossom into this amazingly talented sexual person who had huge body confidence and who would be willing to read his mind and know what he wanted or whatever, when he was telling me that nothing else about me was adequate. So, I don't know how I would have been able to meet these expectations*

*Angela: he was a bit rough<sup>112</sup> as well, not in sort of not in like a, he would throttle me or anything ever, certainly not in a, I was quite a prude and I am still quite a prude, you know, it should all be nice and loving, and he wanted to push me further than I was willing to go*

*Angela: I don't know, it (her sexual performance) was never good enough*

Angela's comments resist the expected porn style sexual performance that was demanded from women during this time (Gibson, 2014; Sun et al., 2016; Whitehead & Kurz, 2009) in favour of fucking more gently. However, despite her desire to fuck differently it seems as though she was not able to engage her boyfriend in this. Instead, her comments above about faking orgasms, and her (upcoming) comments about enduring painful sex and her partner being unresponsive to her body, suggest that she was coerced by him and society into giving a lackluster raunchy performance that was almost always unwanted.

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*shaming or what I see now as slut shaming, around that fact that I had not waited for him, excuse me how could I even know that he was going to exist. Like I didn't know him!*

This highlights the competing demands and contradictions in what is normalised for women's sexuality and the impossibility of meeting these demands. On one hand women are expected to be sexually skilled, but one the other women are expected to limit their sexual experiences and certainly their number of sexual partners (Farvid et al., 2017; Kelly et al., 2017), leaving themselves open to scrutiny shame, and a sense of not being good enough if they do not walk this tightrope with skill (Bay-Cheng, 2015).

<sup>112</sup> I wish I had asked her specifically what she meant by him being rough during sex.

## **(s)he would assume**

The importance society places on women attracting men's sexual interest leads to an expectation that we will welcome their sexual attention without question. In relationships, where sex is expected (Gavey, 1992; Kelly et al., 2017), these two expectations collide to create a situation where our male partners can easily assume they have a free pass to fucking and that explicitly seeking consent is not really necessary (Muehlenhand et al., 2016). It seems to me that the interplay between these social sexpectations and interpersonal pressure by her boyfriend in non-sexual domains of Angela's life (discussed previously), set up a default deferral to his interests, pleasure, and desire within sexual interactions:

*Angela: there was never like, it was never, he would assume that I that I would consent, there was never conversations around that*

*Angela: I think that my value in myself was so intrinsically connected to his sexual attraction to me that it wasn't surprising or it necessarily like, it was just a given*

Angela's boyfriend's assumption that he could be sexual with her whenever he wanted is evident in her account of waking up to him touching her sexually:

*Angela: I would just be asleep like in the mornings or whatever and I would wake up and he would be doing stuff to me*

Her limited ability to meaningfully shape their sexual interactions is further evident in her comments about enduring painful sex:

*Angela: it was getting to the stage where doing stuff with him would actually be quite painful cos he wasn't really taking notice of me and so I clearly didn't want that*

Despite her not wanting these sexual interactions, she didn't feel able to say no to them, constrained by social norms of the male sex drive and women's passivity that render it normal for

women to acquiesce to sex because men are thought to have a stronger (biological) need for sex than women (Gavey, 2005; Gilfoyle et al., 1992; Holloway, 1984; Kelly et al., 2017). So strong are these norms that she didn't even really question the fact that she was regularly subject to ways of fucking that she did not want:

*Angela: I thought it was kind of natural and generally accepted that men wanted to have sex with women more than women wanted to have sex with men, so consent was women doing it because it was easier than saying no kind of. Like I thought that was perfectly normal*

Angela's understanding that it is easier for women to go along with unwanted sex suggests that women expect that if they say no to sex (through body language or verbally) we will have to account for our not wanting to have sex (Bay-Cheng, 2015), and may be at risk of coercion intended to shape us towards saying yes, or being physically overpowered (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Beare & Boonzaier, 2020; Gavey, 1992, 2005; Kelly et al., 2017).

Overall, Angela's sexual engagement in this relationship appears shaped by coercive social norms that demanded she defer to her boyfriend's desires in sexual and non-sexual domains of life, his sense of entitlement to her, and his intentional isolation, gaslighting, and microregulation culminating in her being *unable* to question his sexual behaviour and demands, even though the ways of fucking were painful and unwanted.

## **a (generally) compliant consort**

*the potential for male violence against women is arguably ever present in at least some relationships and contexts, in ways that might invoke fear and passivity and reduce the options for acting otherwise*  
- Gavey (2005, p. 156)

Nancy<sup>113</sup> said that her first relationship in her mid-teens, with a man in his early 20's, "*started off pretty exciting and great as they always do*". However, the relationship soon became marked by putdowns, verbal attacks, isolation, and violence that acted to (generally) silence her in sexual situations.

## **shrinking (in waist and life)**

In a social environment where we are surrounded by images of thin women's bodies being held up as the ideal (Bartky, 1990; McKinley, 1999; Thompson, 2018), it is easy for men to mobilise this marker of desirability as a way to shame women<sup>114</sup> and cause them to feel inadequate. Bartky (1990) suggests that women's

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<sup>113</sup> My experience of my conversation with Nancy was that she did not elude to any social, cultural, and political discourses that may have shaped the nature of her relationship, sex, or her role/performance in these. Her explanations were largely limited to fear of his emotional and physical reprisal if she resisted his wishes, be they sexual or otherwise. Whilst I do not wish to diminish the fear she experienced within this relationship at all I do not think that fear is solely responsible for the passive manner in which Nancy engaged within this relationship. The period in which the relationship took place was roughly the early 1990s - this was pre-raunch culture and the demands on women were for a largely docile and passive feminine subject (Bartky, 1990), as such I believe this would have been at least a distal influence on how Nancy thought she should behave in relationship with men. Through my explanation of how I have understood gendered (broader political and interpersonal) social power relations (and their implications) that have come together in Nancy's story I have made some educated assumptions about the discourses that might have informed her experiences. My commentary is offered in *addition* to her explanation of fear, not instead of.

<sup>114</sup> Shame is embodied as part of women's experience in the world, a pervasive feeling of inadequacy and deficiency related to their perceived failure to adhere to prevailing patriarchal standards of femininity (Bartky, 1990). The disciplinary power of the thin ideal means that women engage in regular self-surveillance of their bodies, food and exercise, in an effort to achieve acceptable thinness and experience shame associated with any deviation from thinness (Bartky, 1990). Shabot and Korem (2018) suggest that gender shame acts as a form of oppression, limiting women's ability to collectivise their struggle because the shame is experienced as individual failure rather than the result of sexist social structures. Women's embodiment of shame is discussed further by Probyn (2005).

body shame is the internalisation of "the tyranny of slenderness" (p. 73) which forbids women from being large or massive. The thin ideal is so pervasive within (white) western society, that even when women are well within normative body weight expectations they are likely to readily accept that they are overweight and *should* actively work to be slimmer. Nancy readily believed her boyfriend when he told her she was overweight, leading to an eating disorder, presumably to reduce her size:

*Nancy: he would um sit me down and look at me and grab my shoulders and tell me no one liked me, and that I was worthless, and that I was overweight, which I wasn't. Looking back at photos, I was this skinny thing. And he introduced me to an eating disorder*

I find it interesting in this quote that, with reflection, Nancy is able to resist his comments about weight because she has photographic evidence that she was not overweight. She does not challenge the apparent social "right" to remark on her weight in the first place, reifying the thin ideal.

Alongside his commentary about her weight, Nancy's boyfriend also told her that no one liked her. In light of Stark's (2007) theory, I understand this as gaslighting and an attempt to isolate her from other people. In doing so, he is fostering Nancy's dependence on him, rendering him more influential over her and limiting her ability to disclose his abuse (Stark, 2007). While living in a shared flat, Nancy's boyfriend told her that their flatmates did not want her there. When her boyfriend went away for a weekend Nancy confined herself to their shared room, isolating her within her own home:

*Nancy: They said "why didn't you come and join us", "well I know you guys don't really want me here, and I know you don't like me at all". And they were horrified*

Her boyfriend also isolated her from the outside world limiting Nancy's contact with friends, and making it difficult for her

to maintain employment due to her mental state (induced by him), visible evidence of physical assault, and shame<sup>115</sup>:

*Jasmine: so you didn't see your friends and stuff that much?*

*Nancy: no he isolated me completely*

*Nancy: I did have a job, so I was working at a fashion store. But I couldn't keep that up and I got fired cos there were days that I just couldn't go in*

*Jasmine: And that was because of him or the stress of the situation?*

*Nancy: I think just the whole thing and being bulimic and just not in a good headspace*

*Nancy: He would hide things, and that I had bruises and I just couldn't do it*

Nancy said that she did not engage much with the world because she was fearful of his reprisal:

*Jasmine: did you go out often without him?*

*Nancy: no, no.*

*Jasmine: were you allowed to?*

*Nancy: not really no. I think the fear to be honest, I think he probably was very fearful that I would tell somebody what was going on*

*Jasmine: do you think you would have or?*

*Nancy: probably not actually. He put the fear of god into me, so I don't think I would have*

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<sup>115</sup> Violence against women impacts our ability to be viable and productive employees. Stark (2007) suggests that work places can act as safe havens for women that help them "imagine themselves as something other than victims" (p. 269). Making it hard for women to work forecloses this possible source of safety and self-esteem and enables a greater sense of control for abusive partners. A New Zealand survey of Public Service Association (the PSA is the largest union representing civil servants) members found that domestic violence made it difficult for women to arrive at work on time or even turn up at all. The women cited physical violence and restraint, and concern about leaving children with the perpetrator as reasons for their difficulty in getting to work (Rayner-Thomas, 2013). Women also reported having to take time off work to manage physical and mental health impacts of the abuse. In addition to domestic violence causing women's absenteeism, the women's partner's also stalked and harassed them at work and sometimes also targeted their co-workers. When at work, the women's productivity was likely to be negatively impacted by their experience of abuse causing increased work load for co-workers and tension in teams. Collectively, this led to abused women being subject to disciplinary action (as I experienced) and termination of employment. Rayner-Thomas (2013) commented that these findings are similar to international literature about the impacts of domestic violence on workers and their workplaces.

*Jasmine: So you just really lived by his rules whether he was there or not?*

*Nancy: Yeah. Yup*

Nancy's comments speak to how coercive control situations enable men's rules, and the fear associated with transgressing these, to become embedded in our consciousness such that they shape the way we engage with the world even when they are not present (Stark, 2007). In this way, coercive control acts much like the disciplinary power of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon to trap women in an invisible cage, limiting the possibilities of their world to the desires of their male partner.

When Nancy and her boyfriend were out together, she said that he was very jealous if she spoke to anyone, especially other men, and this could escalate into physical violence and death threats towards her:

*Nancy: There was one situation where we were at this bar and everyone used to go to it. And I got talking to this lovely, lovely, guy and we were just chatting away and um, and my boyfriend got really jealous, insanely jealous, and pretty much came over and pretty much verbally attacked me in front of this person and then started threatening, "I am going to fucking kill you", and I saw these eyes, you know and I was like this is terrible, so one of my girlfriends said "you need to get out of here". So I started walking down the road, and I saw him and he had like this real wild look in his eye, and then I started running, and I haven't been there for years but they used to have tiles, and he was a skate boarder and so he was on a skate board that was going dic, dic, dic, like that sound and um I got down to the bottom and he actually pulled out a knife and was pretty much like "I am going to fucking kill you, I'm gonna kill you so no one else can have you". And I had to actually hover behind a um waste disposal bin in fear. But I was really lucky that I had witnesses and he said "if I don't get you with the knife, I am going to get you with skateboard, with the trucks, you know the metal bit, so you get brain damage so no one else can have you".*

*It was awful, it was just awful*

Confined to a world of control, threats and violence, Nancy describes herself as a "*bit of a hollow mess really and my self-esteem was at an incredibly all-time low*". Controlled psychologically and physically through fear of future violence, Nancy was not able to pursue friendships, employment, and/or hobbies that might have been

meaningful or important to her. Her experience echoes Stark's (2007) theory that coercive control entraps women, limiting the possibilities of their life projects.

## **fucking compliance and resistance**

Nancy characterised sex within her relationship was at her boyfriend's instigation and was largely unwanted, "*I mean sometimes that sexual activity was not great, there were things that I didn't want to be doing for sure*". Despite her desire not to have sex, Nancy's ability to prevent or shape the nature of their sexual interactions was heavily curtailed by social expectations and the very real threat of her boyfriend's violence rendering her (generally) very compliant with what her boyfriend wanted sexually. Consent in this situation was not a consideration for Nancy:

*Nancy: he initiated sex and I went with it, there was no consent at all.*

*Jasmine: And did you, did you feel like you could have said no?*

*Nancy: No, no definitely not*

*Jasmine: did you generally, would you have said yes anyway?*

*Nancy: absolutely, I was young and I think I just wanted to do what he wanted to avoid any form of conflict or violence.*

*Jasmine: but there wasn't a desire on your part*

*Nancy: in the very beginning days yes, but then it turned to fear*

Given the time period that Nancy's relationship occurred, I wonder if *in addition* to her fear, her inability to engage actively in shaping how their sexual experiences unfolded was because her (and her boyfriend) were exposed to traditional gendered norms, such as the have/hold discourse, sexual scripts and women as nurturers, that proscribe women's subordination to male sexual desire (Gavey, 1992; Holloway, 1984). These gendered power relations make it difficult for women to even consider that they may be able to do anything other than acquiesce to his

desire, rendering women's engagement in unwanted sex common (Crawford et al., 1994; Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Brady et al., 2018; Gavey, 2005; Gunnarsson, 2017; Lamb, 2015; Thomas et al., 2017). In addition, at the time it was likely that consent within an existing relationship was assumed by all parties involved (Crawford et al., 1994; this is still largely the case - see Brady et al., 2018) unless a woman was actively resisting or clearly stated her desire *not* to have sex (Beres, 2007). In this social context even if Nancy had been able to conceive of saying no to unwanted sex, the physical violence and the ever-present threat of further violence left Nancy with no safe option to say no to sex she didn't want (Bay-Cheng, 2010; Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Beare & Boonzaier, 2020; Gavey, 1992; Kelly et al., 2017):

*Nancy: He forced himself on me and I just didn't know how to say no it, yeah.*

*Jasmine: Did you feel like it was your job to say yes anyway?*

*Nancy: yup*

*Jasmine: why was that?*

*Nancy: I think out of complete fear of what would happen if I did actually say no.*

*Jasmine: So no was not an option?*

*Nancy: no, nope*

Nancy's sexual agency in this relationship was very heavily curtailed by coercive control, and from her comments below, it seems that being anything other than a passive recipient of sex was not considered at the time. I asked her if she ever initiated sex during the relationship:

*Nancy: I don't think I would have known how, I guess I would have known how but the insecurity because I was always put down I don't think I would have even thought about initiating sex, just yeah because the rejection would have been huge*

Yet, despite the dangerous and controlling nature of the relationship and Nancy's general passivity within their sexual encounters, she was (somewhat miraculously I think) able to resist her boyfriend's attempts to engage her in unwanted threesomes, resulting in her being verbally abused and kicked out of their shared bedroom so he could have sex with other women:

*Nancy: he would then um, bring other women into the situation, as well that I was just not ok with.*

*Jasmine: so you never talked about that, he just told you that was gonna happen*

*Nancy: absolutely, yeah*

*Jasmine: um, what happened in those situations, like*

*Nancy: a lot of the situations he would actually like really kick me out, so I'd have to go and find somewhere else to stay. It was terrible because we were living together by that point, and he would basically scream, hurl abuse at me, and I would have to go and find somewhere else to stay while he was with other women*

*Jasmine: did he um, try and get you to be involved with them as well*

*Nancy: yeah*

*Jasmine: and you didn't want that*

*Nancy: no, no, definitely not*

Nancy also spoke about waking up to her boyfriend and her friend having sex in the bed next to her. Following this incident, she tried to talk to her boyfriend about her discomfort with the situation, only to find herself abused again:

*Nancy: I had a friend come and visit me and I was, she came and stayed and we went out and we had some drinks and what have you, and we got back and I was asleep and I woke up to them having sex in my bed next to me*

*Nancy: I tried, you know I did try but I got verbally abused, very much like you know, well she was there and she was willing*

Nancy's recollection of his comments about her friend's (apparent) willingness and availability, re-enforces the norms

of heterosex that suggest men need variety in their sexual interactions, leading to women making sure they are pleasing their partner with frequent and "good" sexual experiences, so that they do not seek sex outside the relationship (Jackson, 1984; Gavey, 2005).

On a trip snowboarding, Nancy found herself in a situation where she was treated like property that was lent to an unknown man, so that her boyfriend could have sex with a stranger he met in a bar:

*Nancy: this big sort of RV thing turned up and this woman walked out, she almost looked like Barbie, and of course he just thought, he was just in there, and he was just like oh my god, he just thought that she was amazing. And we went down to the local pub one night to see some friends, and he was in the bathroom with this man and he pretty much said to this guy "go home and fuck my girlfriend cos tonight I am going to go home with that American lady". So I was sitting in there and this man came up to me and said "can I talk you" and he said "hey look this is really not, this is really problematic, this is not actually ok". Um, I was really fortunate that this man was so lovely, wouldn't ever take advantage. He was from Australia and he was just here visiting and he managed to get me out of the situation and I am just so grateful for because it was just really bad*

Given that monogamy is generally assumed in relationships within our current western culture (Farvid & Braun, 2013), his non-monogamy was not something that they discussed and negotiated proactively. In a social context that demands monogamy and where he has fostered her dependence on him (through isolating her from the world and heavily critiquing her), I think it could be assumed that he knew that casting her aside for other women would cause her to feel jealous and vulnerable (Robinson, 1997) thus enabling him access to sexual variety and (re)enforcing Nancy's subjugated position:

*Nancy: with hindsight, I think that he was trying make me insanely jealous and all that was all the control and manipulation cos he wanted me to feel weak, he wanted me in that vulnerable position. It is where he placed me so that was adding to that. Yeah.*

*Jasmine: and, do you think that it worked*

*Nancy: I think it did, yeah. I think it did, very, very, much so*

Despite her clear fear of physical assault, Nancy resisted her boyfriend's attempt get her to engage in sex work to support them financially. Her resistance resulted in her being beaten in the street:

*Nancy: I remember walking down the main street and he pretty much said your gonna have to go and work. Pretty much you are going to have to sell your body for sex because we need the money. And I said no that is not going to happen at all and he completely beat me up, like completely. It was horrible lying on the ground being kicked. It was awful*

*Nancy: there was blood coming out of my head,  
yeah, it was just really, really, bad*

*Nancy: I had to I think, yeah there was just no way that I was going to go and do that so it was probably one of the only times I really stood up for myself, it was just like there was just no way that I was going to do that*

Nancy was (generally) very passive within her relationship, and sexual engagement. She explains her passivity as the result of her fear about a potentially (physically) violent response if she voiced her disinterest in his sexual advances. Her relationship was quite obviously very dangerous with the ever-present threat, and actuality, of physical violence which acted like disciplinary power to shape her into a compliant consort who would not readily consider not doing what her boyfriend wanted, sexually or otherwise. *In addition* to her passivity stemming from interpersonal abuse, I wonder if the early 1990s (when this relationship was) expectations of a more docile femininity (Bartky, 1990), the demands of women to be nurturing (Gavey, 1992) and the have/hold discourse also contributed to her passivity.

Within the context of her abuse and a socio-cultural environment that collectively shape her towards compliance with men's

(sexual) desires, Nancy displayed great courage in resisting some of her partner's sexual demands<sup>116</sup> even when it meant being subject to verbal and physical aggression. These acts of resistance, of trying to engage in a consent process of sorts, of daring to have a say in how her sexual relationship worked, came at a huge cost and demonstrates in a very real sense how dangerous it can be for women to assert any sense of bodily autonomy within the confines of an abusive relationship. When safety cannot be assured, there is limited chance of women being able to contribute in any meaningful way to sexual encounters, let alone experience much in the way of pleasure.

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<sup>116</sup> I find it interesting that the two things Nancy felt she *had* to proactively resist were two types of sexual activities, group sex and commercial sexual arrangements, were considered deviant at the time (Rubin, 1984). I wonder if this says something about these activities being particularly repugnant to Nancy because of their association with deviance and an abject social position that meant she felt unable to resist them, or if the other sexual activities he was pursuing with her were so normalised as part of "the way sex is done" that she didn't really question them as much, even when she didn't want to be having sex that way.

## sex on demand

*what a young woman wants may be of little consequence if she is with someone who feels no ethical compunction to honour her wishes or who feels emboldened by their social or material standing to override her*  
- Bay-Cheng (2019, p. 467)

Catherine's account of two abusive relationships, speaks directly to the above quote of Bay-Cheng's (2019). In her first ever relationship, Catherine experienced her boyfriend's lack of compunction to honor her clear disinterest in the sexual interaction. In a later relationship, her boyfriend's middle-class privilege combined with gender norms to enable him to coerce Catherine into offering him sex on demand. In this way he is not really over-riding her so much as quietly shaping her into non-resistance. Within both accounts, her sexuality is constrained, and at no point was she able to meaningfully collaborate on how sex was practiced and experienced. Her 'no' was essentially meaningless, being ignored or sanctioned, training her to not say no again.

### coercion, threats and rape

From early on in Catherine's first relationship<sup>117</sup>, her boyfriend drew on social norms of heterosex to pressure her to interact sexually:

*Catherine: just like little comments he would make started making me feel weird, he would be like you're frigid, and I didn't know what it meant so I had to find out what frigid means, or like why don't you want to hold my hand or why can't I touch you or just things like that*

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<sup>117</sup> In her first relationship, Catherine was 13, and her boyfriend was 16.

Within the permissive social environment where sex is expected, her boyfriend was socially entitled by sexual imperatives (Farvid & Braun, 2013) to question Catherine's lack of sexual engagement (Gavey, 1992), positioning her negatively as someone who is sexually uptight, and therefore not engaging in her "liberated" sexuality as expected (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Farvid et al., 2017). He re-enforced her sexual failing by commenting on how other women were playing their sexualised part "properly", adding to the pressure she experienced being positioned as abnormal and frigid, leaving Catherine thinking she was not as good as other girls:

*Catherine: (he) would go on about all the women he had had sex with and how come I wouldn't have sex with him and I feel like he kind of got part of me to a point where I was like well maybe I am not like as good as the other girls if that is what is happening*

Alongside his coercion, her boyfriend intentionally used substances (presumably) to make her more compliant or accepting of his sexual interest (Beres et al., 2014):

*Catherine: he would try and get me drunk or stoned, and if we were drunk or stoned he would try and touch me and I just felt really uncomfortable about the whole thing*

By the time they had sexual intercourse (via rape) Catherine felt that "I was partially manipulated into thinking that it was the right thing to do", highlighting the power of 'normal' (Foucault, 1979; Lorde, 2007) to coerce her into thinking she needed to be sexual with him. However, despite his continued attempts to coerce her into having sex, it is clear within Catherine's re-telling that she did not want to engage with him sexually, "I still didn't consent". Coercion and disregard for Catherine's sexual desire (or lack thereof) characterised sexual engagement within their relationship:

*Catherine: one day we were at the house alone and he was like I want to have sex with you and I was like I don't want to do that. Um, and he was*

*like no, no, we will do it, and I was like no I don't want to do that and then  
I felt really uncomfortable and lots of pressure*

When he persisted, despite Catherine making clear her desire not to have sex, she tried to stop the encounter by appealing to "common sense" that they needed a condom for the encounter to protect against pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (Kelly et al., 2017):

*Catherine: I was like can we at least buy a condom and I knew that that  
was not a possibility at the time and I couldn't find anything*

When this did not work, Catherine was raped by force, leaving her feeling disgusting and hurt:

*Catherine: he threw me on the bed and I lied there cos I didn't know what  
was happening or what it was and I didn't know anything about the  
human body and um, afterwards I just cried cos he just I didn't, I didn't  
know anything about the human body and he came inside of me and it  
was dripping out, it was probably the worst moment of my life. It is just so  
cringey. And I just felt disgusting and I had bruises on my arms*

He then criticized her (non)performance with the use of the term "starfish<sup>118</sup>", which positions her negatively for not participating in the active and enthusiastic manner, required by permissive norms:

*Catherine: afterwards he called me a star fish and I didn't know what that  
meant and apparently I just didn't know what I was doing I should be  
better*

Catherine's sense that she should be "better", more sexually skilled, reflects the disciplinary power of current social norms that coerce women into thinking that they need to be sexual in particular ways, and enable men to use these norms to further regulate women's sexuality.

Alongside his continued use of rape and sexual coercion predicated on the social demands that she engage sexually within

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<sup>118</sup> Urban Dictionary (2022b) defines starfish as "someone, (usually a female) who just lays there, unmoving, as they are getting fucked".

a relationship, Catherine's boyfriend used humiliation, threats and continued sexual assault to maintain his power within the relationship and ensure sex was available when he wanted it.

In the following quote, Catherine recounts an experience of her boyfriend demonstrating his dominance and ability to control her physically:

*Catherine: he held me down and made a nine year old neighbour hold me down and he put these big fucking hickies around my neck in a chain and made me go into the supermarket*

By leaving hickies on her with a visible placement and making her go to the supermarket, he is using slut shaming to humiliate her. Hickies on display in this manner are likely to draw attention from shoppers and be read as an indicator of Catherine's promiscuity or sluttiness, at a time when the sexual double standards put limits on how visibly a woman can display desirous, sexual behaviour (Farvid et al., 2017; Kelly et al., 2017). Those who are positioned as too overtly sexual, or as sluts, are considered immoral (Farvid et al., 2017) and without ability to control their sexual behaviour (Bay-Cheng, 2015). "Sluts" are subject to public sanction, in Catherine's case most likely disapproving looks and negative comments. When Catherine returned home to her grandparents (where she lived), her mother arrived (drunk) and slut shamed her for the hickies:

*Catherine: I was still 13 and she looked at me and she looked at my neck and called me a dirty slut and said that I am no child of hers*

This was the last time Catherine and her (late) mother ever spoke.

Catherine recounts another time in which her boyfriend left another physical mark, which again acted as a reminder of his power and ownership of her, and a source of humiliation:

*Catherine: I remember sitting on a couch with him and one of his friends and they put a dog leash around my neck and with a choker collar, he was on one side and his mate was on the other and he grabbed the thing and then they were like ripping it back and forward until my skin peeled off and had a big chain mark around my neck and there was like blood dripping down*

*Catherine: I felt like I felt like those things like the marks, were like it was like a form of him reminding, him wanting me to be reminded of him and wanting me to carry round that humiliation, and that he could do what he wanted to me and I don't know if that is what it was but that is what it felt like*

He takes up a masculine position, assuming overt physical and mental control of Catherine, enabled by taken-for-granted authority of men's power over women, and women's traditional patriarchal position as men's property. She later said, "*I look back on it, I think that is probably pretty accurate, basically treating me like an animal*". A collar is emblematic of ownership<sup>119</sup>, because of its association with human "ownership" of domesticated animals, enabled by human's "common-sense" domination of animals and the natural world afforded to us by Christian and capitalist ideology that underpins western thought (Adams, 1990). Catherine said she had "*always loved animals, obsessed to a ridiculous point with animals*" and is aware of their vulnerable and submissive position in the human-animal binary - knowledge that helped her further understand the message he was sending about his authority over her. Catherine, like a dog, is property, dominated, and at his mercy.

He also used her love of animals to hurt her emotionally by physically assaulting a dog (whose company she was enjoying) in front of her:

*Catherine: I was hugging the dog first and giving it love and playing with it and I don't know if it was he got jealous or whatever but he went up to the dog and kicked it and grabbed it by the throat and like threw it outside and it hit a fence post and the poor little thing yelped and it was really awful*

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<sup>119</sup> This is why the collar is *consensually* worn by submissives within some BDSM relationships (Taormino, 2012).

His violence towards the puppy acting as a reminder to her of his physical power. She said this experience “*created fear in me*”, which was likely the purpose of the behaviour<sup>120</sup>, ensuring her captivity and compliance with his wishes. He further created an environment of fear by threatening her with knives and physically and sexually assaulted her (again):

*Catherine: we (Catherine and her friend) were sitting on the couch and he would just like hold us both down and drop knives above us and catch them and think it was really funny and we would be crying and screaming and stuff and telling him to fuck off and he wouldn't like he just thought it was hilarious*

*Catherine: he threw me on to the ground and grabbed my mouth open and made me give him a blow job in front of a neighbourhood boy and he punched him in the face and said this is what you need to learn. This is how you get what you want*

Catherine's recollection of her boyfriend's commentary to the young boy suggests clear misogynistic intent<sup>121</sup> in his physical control of her. His control is further evident in his continuation of sex despite clear signs that she desired the interactions to stop:

*Catherine: I would cry if he touched me and I would cry throughout it and he just didn't care at all and it got worse because it became really painfully because of the infections that I contracted so he like literally had to force himself in me because it was just like, it was horrendous so I was crying with pain and telling him to stop anyway so that was like. It was pretty urgent, like you need to stop, this is like, and he just fucking ripped me up and he still wouldn't stop so*

*Catherine: he would just have sex anytime like he would, it was just definitely going to happen, like he would pull me outside or pull me upstairs or whatever and just make me do it. And I couldn't really say no when there are people around because I didn't want them to hear me and I felt embarrassed about the whole thing*

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<sup>120</sup> Abusing companion animals is a common tactic used in domestic violence to cause guilt that the animal was hurt, fear of future violence against the self and the animal, to teach submission, create an environment of terror and make it difficult for women to leave their relationships (Adams, 1995; Gillespie-Gray, 2017; Ascione et al., 1997a, 1997b; Flynn, 2000; Roguski, 2012; Stark & Flitcraft, 1996; Tiplady et al., 2014).

<sup>121</sup> Or at least (re)enactment of the misogynistic actions of grown men around him.

Catherine continued being raped whenever they saw each other. She didn't feel able to reach out for help from those around her<sup>122</sup> nor was she able to avoid him because their families were close and interacted often. Instead, she did what she could to make the situation bearable, self-medicating with drugs and alcohol:

*Catherine: I used to steal it (alcohol) from my sister, and I used to steal her weed. Um, and because I knew that I was going to end up having sex with him anyway like I would rather just be drunk*

Despite being told that we should say 'no' to stop or prevent sexual encounters that we do not want, this only works if the people we are with choose to respect our boundaries. It is clear that some men, including Catherine's boyfriend, knowingly choose to not respect women's desire to not engage with, or continue, sexual situations (Jeffery & Barata, 2019), disregarding any ethical compunction to engage equally and responsively within the sexual interactions. His refusal to hear her 'no' to sex she didn't want left her feeling powerless:

*Catherine: I felt like there was just no power, it felt like anytime I said anything it wasn't listened to, it just became nothing. Um, which was really hard because you have just got no power like it's just I don't know, they need, there needs to be more than just teaching girls no means no and it's the way that its said and its never ok and it's like you can't like that's not enough*

Catherine's comments point to one of the critiques of consent education - that it focuses too much on the responsibility of women to communicate their desires clearly and keep themselves safe, and not enough on ensuring men know that it is not ok to rape women (Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Graybill, 2017). Catherine further challenges the way consent is understood as a verbal process, insisting that consent, or rather the desire not to

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<sup>122</sup> I did not ask Catherine why she did not feel able to ask, but given the content and tone of our conversation I speculate that it is likely due to the shame of being in a victim position and unable to prevent the violence from occurring (as demanded by discourses of violence prevention and neoliberal post-feminism that demands women are in control of their lives; Bay-Cheng, 2015; Frazier & Falmagre, 2014), and the shame of being seen as sexual at that age.

consent, is also a felt and embodied process that is communicated through body language (Brady et al., 2018; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012):

*Catherine: you don't just say no though, you push, you close your legs, you tense up, you give so many signals, and you try and run away and you get grabbed and pushed back, you there are so many fucking signals and you know that they must know that you don't want it, and it's just ignored*

The high level of physical resistance Catherine recounts is in line with what is expected from a "real rape victim" (Ryan, 2011), yet she still takes some responsibility for the rapes by suggesting that she should have done more to prevent it:

*Catherine: maybe if I screamed and screamed and you know told someone or I don't know, maybe that would have helped*

*Catherine: for a long time I thought it was me and I thought I had put myself in that situation and that um, and that I should have known better and I shouldn't have allowed myself to get drunk or just be around someone like that. And how I could have said no. And now I am like I did say no a lot of times but because I didn't push him off me or punch him, because I didn't get abusive, didn't mean that I wanted it*

Catherine draws on victim blaming and violence prevention discourses, underpinned by neoliberal ideology that apportion blame for sexual assault to women for not doing more to stop the situation, including monitoring the places she frequents and the people she is around (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Frazier & Falmagre, 2014; Lea, 2007), and physically resisting if she is sexually assaulted (Ryan, 2011), rather than society demanding that men do not sexually assault women in the first place. To be good neoliberal subjects, women are expected to reflect on their experiences, as Catherine has done, to look for opportunities to behave differently next time, thus transforming these unethical sexual experiences into "learning opportunities" for personal transformation (Bay-Cheng & Bruns, 2016; Karlsson, 2019). Even in her more recent reflections on how she did say 'no' many times, she still thinks she should have fought back more, resisted more physically. A

feminist framework for making sense of her experiences would argue that they occurred at an intersection of unequal gender power relations<sup>123</sup> that afforded her boyfriend social consent to demand and take sex from her through the use of coercion, control and violence (Gavey, 2005).

The physicality of the relationship influenced Catherine to think that anyone who did not assault her was a much better partner:

*Catherine: I got treated so shit by him (her first boyfriend) anyone who wasn't gonna physically hurt me was a massive upgrade and it made me feel really, really special*

The focus on physicality within unethical sex, much like the violent incident model of domestic violence (Stark, 2007), does not act to keep us safe from more insidious forms of coercion and control that cause women to make sex available for men whether we want to or not. In this way men benefit from rape because it by positions those non-rapists as good guys, obscuring their use of non-physical forms of abuse to procure sex from us, as was the case in a later relationship (discussed below) of Catherine's. The absence of physical assault and rape is a really low bar for acceptable behaviour within a sexual and/or romantic relationship.

## **coercion and class privilege**

In the beginning of a later relationship<sup>124</sup>, Catherine's boyfriend mobilised sexual imperatives, like her first boyfriend, to position their not having sex as abnormal:

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<sup>123</sup> Such as the permissive discourse, sexual imperatives, and rape myths (like women's token resistance and desire to be raped) (Gavey, 2005).

<sup>124</sup> Catherine met her long term boyfriend at high school and their relationship continued into their early 20s.

*Catherine: I would get texts from him like you know I think it is about time we had a root. Like I still remember that text and oh everyone is having sex and how come we aren't and that sort of stuff*

He then used the importance of being "normal" - within the neoliberal context - to persuade Catherine into feeling bad and having to account for the non-sexual status of their relationship. Again, this amounted to pressuring Catherine into sex:

*Catherine: at the time I felt like there was still that sort of emotional pressure or emotional manipulation that felt like I had to do it (sex) or he wouldn't like me*

Her quote illustrates social coercion, where the have/hold discourse and the permissive discourse are coming together to create a cultural understanding that a woman can only maintain a romantic relationship if she makes sex readily available for her male partner, reaffirming sex's status as vital to heterosexual relationship wellbeing (Brown-Bowers et al., 2015; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Gavey, 1992; Kelly et al., 2017). The pressure to fuck in a relationship creates a situation where it is difficult for Catherine to say no to sex (despite the absence of physical force), unless she was willing to risk losing him. Which she didn't want to do because she viewed him as enabling her to escape from her past experiences of poverty and violence:

*Catherine: he was just so out of my league, I thought he was so out of my league, he bought my confidence up and really made me feel like a person because I felt like my prior life, my younger days, I was like, like, poverty, like rough, you know no one loved me I was never good enough and I got treated like crap because I was crap and he changed that for me*

*Catherine: I thought he was so amazing and like how could me who was like this dirty disgusting girl ever get someone like him who was like from this really great family and was like a popular kid at school and I had never been in those circles so I felt like I need to do this (sex) to like keep him around*

Her sexual engagement could be understood as a "pragmatic strategy for obtaining vital support and avoiding critical losses; of social status and esteem, of an emotional lifeline,

or of essential resource" (Bay-Cheng & Bruns, 2016, p. 515). In the midst of a coercive social and interpersonal environment, Catherine could be understood as enacting some agency to shape her life, using sex as a commodity that can be traded for social, material and/or emotional gain (Bay-Cheng, 2019; Brown-Bowers et al., 2015). While this could be superficially read as her taking advantage of the situation or fairly exchanging sex for social capital, at a deeper level it reveals a class system that privileges his middle class world as being 'normal' and more desirable than the poor and working class world Catherine grew up, creating a situation where women like her will use whatever makes them "valuable" to the middle class. In Catherine's case it was sex as is often the case for poor women (Bay-Cheng, 2019). So while she is making the most of what she has available to create a better life for herself, the possibilities and options she has available are less than would be the case for a "better" class of woman.

She was grateful to her boyfriend for the improvement she perceived in her life and wanted to retain his interest. She reflected that this gave him some advantage in the relationship, enabling him to behave how he wanted (non-monogamously), knowing that Catherine was unlikely to leave him or even make a comment about it:

*Catherine: I really wanted his approval and really wanted to stay in those circles, like I really didn't want to lose him which I think he knew because he, I think that's why he could go out with my friends or like have sex with them and think that it is ok and know that I would stick around so he knew that it was like an advantage there*

*Catherine: he wants to do all these things in the bedroom you know, like which I was more than happy to do and like cuddle me at home or hang around with me and act like he loved me but as soon as other people were around, especially his friends, but just anyone in general, he wouldn't even want to be physically associated with me unless he was really, really, drunk*

*Catherine: (he) would only like meet me at the end the night or hang out at  
4 o'clock in the morning*

He maintained her desire for the relationship through the promise of love and romance and his attention (in private), in exchange for sex. If she did not provide him with sex when he requested it, she was punished through his absence, re-enforcing the importance of her being available sexually:

*Catherine: he would never be like oh it is because of this but it always was,  
it was always, it always added up perfectly because I wouldn't have sex  
with him or I didn't see him or whatever it was, um, I said no at 4 o'clock in  
the morning, or I didn't respond to his message or whatever, um, then that  
is when the ignoring would come in*

In response to his absence, Catherine said "it made me want to try harder" and "give an offer of sex to see him again" .

The incongruence of his behaviour, that his private and public actions and words did not reflect each other, created a gaslighting type situation, leaving her feeling crazy as she oscillated between a sense of gratitude towards him for her elevation out of poverty and feeling like he was manipulating her for access to sex:

*Catherine: it sounds silly but I couldn't get over that barrier cos it was like  
something that was just like two me's, I am not schizophrenic or anything  
like that, but it felt like there were two me's, there was one who was like  
he is so nice and look at all he has done for you, like helped you detach  
from your previous self and that other part was like he is fucking your  
friends he's like ignoring you, he's manipulating you to have sex with him,  
um, get rid of him*

*Catherine: it is almost like he became an addiction of some sort. Cos every  
time I would see him, I would be like yes, he loves me, or you know, I am  
important again*

The moments of romantic and/or sexual interaction acted to reinforce her desire for him and the relationship, pulling her into a cycle of making her body available for sex (wanted or not) to maintain access to that moment of good feeling and the middle class dream, despite her sense that it is not right:

*Catherine: I felt wrong, it felt like I shouldn't be doing that and that I should like value myself more but I just couldn't*

In this way social expectations of her sexuality, his class privilege and his actions (endorsed by the social environment) shaped her to perform as his sexual puppet, available on request.

*Catherine: So it was sort of like pressure, though he never physically forced himself on me, and it was consensual*

For Catherine this sex is understood as consensual. To my mind, the presence of social and interpersonal coercion to fuck, calls into question the ability of consent to be used as a marker of ethical sex. It is clear within her account that Catherine's agency to pursue her desire for fuck (and how) or her desire to not fuck, was heavily curtailed by a gendered and classed social structure that afforded her boyfriend(s) more power than her. As Catherine's account has illuminated, consent does not reliably reflect women's sexual desires, consent simply means we have agreed or acquiesced to someone wanting sex from us. It is not uncommon for consent to be made under duress, in the presence of ambiguous desire, or when there is a clear desire not to have sex (Bay-Cheng & Bruns, 2016; Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Crawford et al., 1994; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Beare & Boonzaier, 2020; Karlsson, 2019; Gavey, 2005; Gunnarsson, 2017).



# the perfect (pornified) wife

*the main means used to establish control is the micro-regulation of everyday behaviours associated with stereotypic female roles, such as how women dress, cook, clean, socialise, care for their children, or perform sexually*  
- Stark (2007, p. 5)

During our conversation I asked Elizabeth what she thought men wanted from her sexually, she said *"to be a bloody porn star, and definitely being married to him made that a more of a thing"*. Expectations of a hypersexualised performance were present from the beginning of Elizabeth's relationship with her husband *"it started off that there was quite a lot (of sex)"* and *"I was quite confident about sex and he really liked that"*. Her sexual pleasure in these interactions was irrelevant, "it is the power of sexual attractiveness that is important" (Gill, 2008, p. 44). What makes Elizabeth sexually appealing here, within the permissive norms of raunch culture, is that she is frequently up for sex, proactively (and confidently) engaged, and leaves him feeling good about his sexual prowess, while making no demands on the sexual encounter herself:

*Elizabeth: I would say that it was never satisfying me but I was not even in a position to ever admit that. And I was a bit of a people pleaser so I would always make him think that I was satisfied*

While Elizabeth blames her inability to shape the sexual encounter on a personal trait of being a "people pleaser", I wonder if this is more symptomatic of a political system that does not genuinely care about women's sexual pleasure and instead focuses our attention on men and their pleasure, making us mindful to nurture their egos, in this case his expertise (Gavey, 1992; Potts, 2000). It is likely that her way of making him think she was satisfied (and thus a good lover) would have

been to fake an orgasm (Thomas et al., 2017), which acts as to “reward and validate his performance” (Potts, 2000, p. 6). As Elizabeth said herself:

*Elizabeth: I used to think it (sex) was all about sort of a man’s world really, like a man’s pleasure, um, yeah just I don’t even know if I really knew what it was at all. I went into sort of sexual relationships thinking it was all about pleasing the man*

Elizabeth’s focus on her husband, and his sexual wants, continued throughout the relationship and intensified within a backdrop of manipulation, violence and drugs. After 13 years of marriage, this once happy-go-lucky, confident party girl was a shell of her former self, manipulated and scared into doing sex work at his insistence (and for his pleasure) while navigating a very dangerous situation that saw her subject to physical assaults, strangulation and rape.

## **crumbling confidence**

During the first years of Elizabeth’s marriage, the relationship was characterised by attacks on her confidence through constant use of critiques about all aspects of her femininity (her ability as a wife, her sexuality and her looks) while her husband retreated into a world of pornography:

*Elizabeth: then it (sex) started you know cos we had kids really quickly and I already had my oldest boy so we had a baby within six months I was pregnant so we had kids and then we had another one ten months later<sup>125</sup> so the sex went downhill really fast*

*Elizabeth: there was a really, really, really, sad time for me during when the kids were little babies that he never touched me, never came anywhere near me and was just constantly into porn like to the point where it was so*

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<sup>125</sup> In a feminist-structuralist analysis of literature about post-partum sexual health, Ollivier et al. (2020) found that women can feel conflicted as they move between the discourses that demand women be nurturing of their new baby and discourses that demand women maintain their (pre-pregnancy) sexuality. Women’s sense of “duty” to a male partner’s sexuality remained post-partum and a “rapid return to sexual activity and frequency of sexual intercourse is therefore measured as an achievement in attaining ideal sexual health” (p. 1094). I wonder if these social expectations account for the closeness in these births, or if there was genuine desire of Elizabeth’s part for the sexual interaction that resulted in conception of her third child. I wish I had asked Elizabeth what she thought about this.

*upsetting cos it was a total addiction and it was every single night he wouldn't come to bed because he would be too into that*

Elizabeth's comments suggest that sex is understood as an important indicator of relationship health (Brown-Bowers et al., 2015; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Gavey et al., 1999; Kelly et al., 2017) and the absence of sex within her relationship left Elizabeth concerned about the stability and longevity of the relationships:

*Elizabeth: I was always really concerned about that because um I always felt that if he wasn't sleeping with me he must have been sleeping with someone else and I always liked to keep that part alive*

Her account speaks to the male sex drive discourse that suggests men need sex regularly and will go seek sex out if none is readily available at home, and the have/hold discourse that requires women to exchange sex, and good wifing, for monogamy, stability and children. Collectively, these discourses put responsibility on women to manage the regularity and quality of sexual experiences so that their man is satisfied (Gavey, 1992; Kelly et al., 2017). His emotional, physical and sexual absence, in the context of name calling and putdowns about her failure to be thin (and thus sexually desirable) and cooking (as a wife's responsibility), is understood as her not doing a good job as a wife and not being attractive enough:

*Elizabeth: I think when I was you know married at the beginning I think my biggest complaints I would have had towards him was that he didn't spend enough time with me and the kids and if I voiced that to him and then I was just you know, I would be constantly put down and like it was my fault that he was not there in the first place and if I was a better wife then he would be home more. And then I think and you know I used to feel really deeply sad about him never being there and did feel like it was me, like me not being attractive enough and not being a good enough wife*

*Elizabeth: after having my third baby I put on a lot of weight and he, it was a horrible time for me being overweight with him*

*Elizabeth: every single night that I cooked tea it was not good enough, it was thrown on the floor I was made to cry every night I cooked*

*Elizabeth: in the early days it's kind of it was more like words like being constantly called a bitch, being constantly called useless*

Elizabeth's husband also slut-shamed her for the number of sexual partners she had before him. That he could shame her in this way and that she would believe him, speaks to the conflict between social conditions that demand an active and sexual performance from women while also sanctioning those who are perceived to be too active in their sexuality (however, that distinction is arbitrarily drawn up at that particular time and place; Farvid et al., 2017):

*Elizabeth: you would be walking down the street and see some guy and he would go hey Elizabeth and I would go hey and it was be a bit awkward and he would go who's that and then I would let him know oh he was a boyfriend when I was a teenager blah blah blah and then he would just want all the details but it would be about sex and how many times and what was it like and then it became that I was a slut. Um, so I actually believed that I was a slut because he was telling me I was a slut as well. Having I don't even know maybe 12 guys that I had slept with at that age, at 21 I had slept with 12 guys, um, cos he made me count each and every one and I was such a slut like I was just you know so that was the biggest, that was one of the first, that was really on in the relationship. I can remember being really like in such a depression over it, guilt and shame over being such a slut*

Elizabeth appears to take up a discourse of egalitarian romance that assumes our male partner is trust worthy and that they are just being a good partner by helping us see areas we need to work on, leading to a privileging their opinion and ideas. This boyfriend/husband privilege is difficult to question in a neoliberal environment that demands a near constant focus on self-improvement (Türken et al., 2016) and because his critiques mirror existing societal expectations of women's sexuality, bodies and skills as (house)wives and mothers (Stark, 2007):

*Elizabeth: for a long time I thought the sun really did shine out of his arse, I really did, and I believed everything he was telling me was the truth like about myself and I always felt that he was right and that I needed to do better and everything was indeed my fault so I believed that for a really long time*

Elizabeth's belief that his opinion was right led her to trying to correct her deficits and make things easier for him. In this context, when he started showing displeasure in her friends and family, Elizabeth reduced her contact with them to make him happy and avoid conflict:

*Elizabeth: I had like a lot of people in my life back then, like I had a lot more people around me, I had my parents around me a lot I had friends I had a lot of people that would just call in and then those people all started to go away due to him due to him not liking them, him having arguments with them, them not getting on and me just trying to keep the peace by the less people the better um, it became I couldn't see that at the time I couldn't see that at all. Um, but what started to happen that the less people that were coming around the little bit more intense it became*

In isolating her from loved ones, he is able to prevent her from disclosing his abuse, foster dependence on him and reduce her connection to the outside world, creating a vacuum that more easily normalises his behaviours (Stark, 2007). Her situation intensified, including an increasing physicality of the abuse:

*Elizabeth: it (the abuse) just got bigger and bigger as time went on and then it became you know more physical but still not like what I saw back then as abuse. More pushes and shoves and um, yeah just real like rough with me with everything*

Elizabeth's difficultly claiming pushes and shoves as abuse highlights how the focus on highly violent attacks as markers of abuse leads to women tolerating behaviour from a partner that would not be tolerated if committed by a stranger (Stark, 2007). As Stark (2007) argued, the violent incident model of domestic violence obscures other less physical and non-physical forms of abuse.

Despite the increasing risk to herself, Elizabeth stood up for her children when they were the focus on her husband's abuse. In these circumstances good mothering discourses demand that women protect their children at the expense of their own safety and autonomy (Maher et al., 2021; Stewart, 2021). Men are not subject to such strong expectations to not abuse (their)

children, or their partners, in the first place, making child safety women's responsibility:

*Elizabeth: the only time I probably would have stuck up for myself was when it was to do with the kids, I just always found a way to stick up for them, or at least start an argument to get him to back off them a bit*

In the midst of these difficult times, there were "good days":

*Elizabeth: (I was) talked up on other days so there would be days where he was very loving and then there would be those days so those days that weren't so bad cos there were other days when he would turn it around, what I felt was turning it around*

These good days offer respite and enable hope that things could be different. Towns and Adams (2000) suggest that within perfect-love discourses, women can come to see the abusive behaviour as not representative of the "real" version of their partner. These good days act as a reminder of who their partner "really is" and how they could be all the time if the women just tried harder to love him more. In this way, these cycles and moments of good times keep women trapped in abusive relationships (Towns & Adams, 2000), as was the case with Elizabeth, who had made comments such as "I thought the sun really did shine out of his arse" and "that I needed to do better and everything was indeed my fault" .

## **it was all about keeping him happy**

Mid-way through their marriage, Elizabeth's husband introduced drugs to the relationship and divulged that he was not romantically and physically attracted to her and instead had interest in other women that they knew:

*Elizabeth: he got really, really, high with me, gave me this I don't even know what it was, it was just really, really, intense and confessed all this stuff about how he wasn't, about how he didn't love me, and he wasn't attracted to me, and hadn't been for years and how he was actually attracted to this woman and this woman and this woman and they were the ideal for him, and these were all women I knew. Um, and that stuff broke my heart so much*

And over time he forced Elizabeth to accept his active interest (and potential liaisons) with other women. I say forced because as the rest of this section sets out, Elizabeth did not have any meaningful ability to shape how their sexual relationship unfolded. In this way, any consent that was given was with a background of coercion, threats and escalating violence that heavily curtailed her agency, rendering consent (at best) acquiescence or compliance and thus ethically problematic (Gavey, 2005; Woodard, forthcoming):

*Elizabeth: (I had) to give him consent that he could flirt and do whatever he wanted with these other women and for me to be ok with that. That was a massive part of our marriage in the second half was me, I was I had to be ok absolutely ok, actually enjoy him being interested in other women and that was like yeah one of the biggest*

It is possible that he was accurately conveying his feeling and thoughts about Elizabeth and other women; however, given the already abusive circumstances of the relationship, I wonder (as Elizabeth does) if his admission was more a case of playing mind games, using the suggestion of his wandering eye and non-monogamous desires to put pressure on her to try harder to please him within the relationship, which is what happened:

*Elizabeth: it was just a game when I look back at it now but at the time though it was just so mentally like fucked you up sort of stuff to have like randomly thrown at me um, that whenever I feel like pain over it, it, always takes, the very earliest thing was the time that he did that, and just basically made me feel like I wasn't good enough but these women were and these women were very attractive women, bubbly personalities*

*Elizabeth: I did switch into trying to be what he wanted*

I asked Elizabeth who the perfect wife was, from her husband's perspective. Her comments suggest there were three different, and competing, ways of being a perfect wife: the housewife, the wife as fellow (sexual) adventurer, and the hot trophy wife. Within the traditional demands of a housewife, her desirability is found in her ability to keep home and care for her husband and children (Gill, 2008):

*Elizabeth: he had everything he needed right when he needed it, that would be his food, you know his free time*

*Elizabeth: there would definitely be no, no nagging, no nagging, complaining, so that was something that, that was sort of where things started to change for me too, because I did stop nagging if I didn't like something and I did stop complaining and speaking my truth and doing what he wanted, um yeah*

*Elizabeth: um, you know just, just, basically being like praising on him, arriving with lunch and food for him when he was doing his thing and um looking good while doing that, it was all about looking good*

*Elizabeth: also being a really good mum and having quite unrealistic but it was all you know you also had to have a nice tidy house and had to had to have it all spotless and perfect even though the house was an absolute shambles, like a DIY disaster home, it still had to be perfect so my life became extremely demanding*

To meet these demands, Elizabeth's life became focused on anticipating, and responding to, her husband's wants while looking good and making no demands, or even suggestions, of her own.

Unlike a typical 1950s house wife, Elizabeth was trying to manage these demands while working two jobs and contributing to the household financially, within the demands of an egalitarian discourse of modern relationships. Hochschild (1989) refers to this domestic work for (paid) working women as the second shift. As (middle class, white) women began to have (somewhat) equal access to education and employment opportunities, society did not re-think the nature of work and domestic labour so that it was equally shared between men and women. Instead, women had to do both paid and domestic labour, essentially meaning they have two full-time roles (as employee and housewife). Within the exhaustion of these competing demands women can find they do not have much energy for sex, and it becomes another chore that they have to find time for and manage (Kelly et al., 2017).

For Elizabeth, sex and her attractiveness took on great prominence, as her husband also demanded she take up the role of a hot, trophy wife who was sexually open, adventurous, and attractive within the requirements of raunch culture (Evans & Riley, 2014; Gibson, 2014):

*Elizabeth: that was a really, really, good figure, um, had to be extremely you know it was all about what did the other men think when they saw his wife*

*Elizabeth: there just came a point where I felt like everything, I did have to be of some sort of sexual, like everything about me had to be sexual and yeah attractive*

*Elizabeth: I had to put on a really like exceptional mask and be like the perfect wife so that was, that was where the abuse started to come in because it changed from you are not good enough to this thing where he tried to build me up in the wrong ways, sexually and all that, and how I looked and that, into being a trophy for him and it was a very confusing, yeah, a very, very, confusing time*

The requirements to be sexual and attractive at all times are evident in these comments below, where the suggestion that her body might have functions beyond sex saw her degraded:

*Elizabeth: like he would say something so demeaning like "oh you know that is a really big turn off when you say that you have got a sore stomach, cos do you know what that makes me picture in my head"*

*Elizabeth: he used to make me feel like I could not go to the toilet before or after (sex) because that was just not attractive, um, just little things like that, like I just actually wouldn't go to the toilet because I was absolutely dying to go to the toilet but I wouldn't go to the toilet*

These expectations of Elizabeth, while informed by social expectations on women to be sexual and always up for it (Farvid et al., 2017; Holloway, 1984; Thomas et al., 2014), were also enforced by her husband who would set them out explicitly and demand evidence of their enactment. Elizabeth said "*he would say them, he'd straight out say it sometimes and then it would turn into questioning like had I done that and it became very controlled about what I did*". Her husband's micoregulation was particularly intense when it came to his sexual desires/demands, though not exclusively. The hot trophy

wife was required to perform for her husband's male friends, being friendly and flirtatious so they would desire her, but importantly, they could not have her. As a trophy, Elizabeth is his possession and her broad desirability reflects favourably on her husband because he is able to possess her. These demands placed Elizabeth in a difficult and increasingly dangerous position because she needed to finely balance appearing promiscuous (through sexualised dress and actions) but also being mindful that she did not "overdo it", and face repercussions from him. In this way, her experience is similar to (and perhaps an even more intensified version of) women's self-surveillance as they navigate sexual double standards (Farvid et al., 2017; Kelly et al., 2017):

*Elizabeth: he wanted me to be like that bubbly wife that every guy that he knew would want me, so I had to be, when someone was around it was all about being like sort of flirty but not too flirty, um, and revealing but not too revealing unless it was his choice*

When Elizabeth's says "revealing but not too revealing unless it is his choice", this implies to me that her husband is actively engaging in microregulation, requiring and policing her performance as a hot trophy wife. Her husband also demanded her flirtatiousness in her work place:

*Elizabeth: asking me to do things just in my everyday life, to flirt with the men at work and um, to tell them make them think that I am going to have sex with them today which actually ruined my reputation at work, like when I look at it makes me feel sick cos it was just all on purpose, it was all just a game. You know, flirt with them, tell them this, and then to report back and so I would those things and then report back about what they said and what they thought and it's just such, it's just so fucked up when I think about it*

Her husband's sexualised demands resulted in Elizabeth being sanctioned with a negative reputation, presumably as a slut, for exhibiting sexualised behaviour that would generally be considered to fall outside of what is considered morally respectable (Farvid et al., 2017) within a work environment. In addition to any sexual enjoyment he may have derived from her

retelling of her interactions at work, I wonder if there was knowledge that his requests would impact her negatively at work, potentially isolating her from colleagues and thus also acting to reduce her access to a safe haven and connection to the outside world (Stark, 2007).

Despite her own desire to not engage in the sexualised activities her husband wanted, Elizabeth felt compelled to go along with them, using drugs to mask her clear discomfort in doing so:

*Elizabeth: I used to just feel kind of sick, just weird things, just really weird requests like can you go to the shop and imagine everybody naked and come back and tell me what you thought. Honestly those things used to just make me want to vomit but I felt like I had to do it as well so it's just always trying to kind of cope with it and then having drugs that made you almost not really care as well, you just kind of have days where your like oh well it's what he wants and do it*

*Elizabeth: I always knew that I didn't want to, that I didn't want to do it. It was trying to find a way to keep him happy as I could because I still had that pressure in my mind that I had to be this perfect wife that was into all of this and was into you know it was always like trusting and loving my husband and stuff like that*

*Elizabeth: the rules would change, we are going to do it (sexual things) this way now, or we are not going to have it at all, we are going to, I was just I was just always just willing to go with what he wanted to do*

There are many social and interpersonal dynamics at play that coerced Elizabeth into this position of not being able to decline participation in her husband's (sexual) desires. Elizabeth said she had this pressure to be a "perfect wife", which appears to mean doing what her husband wants and being who her husband wants her to be at all times. Ideas which are re-enforced by a society that expects women to please their male partners sexually and relationally (Fahs & Gonzalez, 2014; Gavey, 1992; Kelly et al., 2017). She was also under additional pressure to maintain his interest in the relationship following his disclosure of interest in other women. Elizabeth said, "*I tried to please him as much as I could with it (sex) to keep us happy*". Her compliance with

his requests is for the sake of the relationships wellbeing, not just for him, in accordance with compulsory heteronormativity and hetero-femininity that demand women are in relationships with men "after a certain age" (Pickens & Braun, 2018), and the have/hold discourse that positions women's sexual service within a relationship as an exchange for security and monogamy (Holloway, 1984). To decline his requests may have meant him seeking sexual satisfaction without her, and may have risked the relationship she was still invested in maintaining.

It seems as though her husband also harnessed an egalitarian discourse about (heterosexual) relationships where a couple equally share in life together, navigating the journey on a basis of love and trust. In combination with the permissive discourse that demands sexual exploration, this creates a situation where non-monogamous sexual practices can be undertaken legitimately to "spice up" a relationship and as an expression of a couple's love and trust in each other and the strength of their relationship. As Elizabeth said "*Basically, I think it got to a point where if you love me you will do this*". Interestingly, in this case Elizabeth does not appear to be able to make the same requests of her husband and their relationship to accommodate her sexual interests, either within or outside the marriage, suggesting that rather than being a genuine interest in sexual exploration together, these ideas are mobilised by her husband to enable and validate his sexual wishes and control. Elizabeth experienced significant mental manipulation, compounded by drug consumption that he encouraged, making it easier for her husband to shape her to his will:

*Elizabeth: my thoughts, even what my thoughts were, it felt really controlled and like there was no, I didn't even have private thoughts anymore because I think I was so sort of frightened of him at the same time as if he was asking me I felt like I had to tell him what I thought it was very uncomfortable and awkward with him in those last few years around that sort of stuff, how I acted around other men, especially his friends and*

*then it sort of became and then it was like some days he didn't want me to flirt with them and then the next day he would be mad at me if I didn't. And never wanted to flirt with them in the first place*

*Jasmine: so that didn't feel like natural behaviour to you?*

*Elizabeth: no, no, and that's what I didn't, and like at the time that was hard to figure out for myself, I can look back on it now and say oh my god I can see it really clearly but at the time with the combination of taking drugs and stuff like that, I felt like he knew were changing me as a person, and they made it easier to deal with his requests. And would even be to the point where he would make me think that I was absolutely happy with that and I at the time I would have felt like I was yeah, because he could easily turn it around and say like well you wanted to do that. And it was all just manipulation if you know what you mean, a lot of manipulation, like really gradually*

In the presence of increasing violence and abuse, I wonder if there is a possibility that her "no" may not have actually meant anything, that she may have been subject to physical threats or violence if she resisted his desires in any way, rendering compliance with his wishes a safe(er) option. As she said above, and emphasises below, she was frightened of him and with good reason:

*Elizabeth: when he bought the drugs in that was when he flipped things to another gear with violence, cos I don't even know how but I would just wake up with like my face completely mangled and him really like the first couple of times that he did that he was crying that he had done*

It is clear that Elizabeth was subject to a number of constraints that essentially removed in her ability to say no, or maybe, to her husband's sexual requests/demands, irrespective of her own wishes and the impact they were having on her. Similarly, she does not appear to have much ability to make sexual requests of her own, even when the apparent focus is her pleasure:

*Elizabeth: there was another time when it was about me, what satisfied me, and him trying to meet that because he had all of these issues around if he was big enough, if he was hard enough, and he did struggle to stay hard as time went on and that was a big issue for him, it wasn't even as big for me as it was for him*

*Elizabeth: I couldn't ever really be 100% honest with him anyway because it was like, he would be like do you like this, well you just say yes because if*

*you said no right now it's like it's so hard to even know what I want cos it's  
so manipulated*

Her comments suggest that her husband's focus on her pleasure was more about re-assuring himself of his sexual abilities, rather than a genuine interest in knowing what Elizabeth enjoyed sexually. Given that she found it difficult to be honest about her sexual desires in the beginning of their relationship, it is not surprising that sharing her sexual desires became even more difficult with the addition of mind games, threats and violence in the mix. Still, in the midst of this she did, somewhat miraculously I think, raise some concerns she was having about the dominance of sex toys<sup>126</sup> in their sexual interactions:

*Elizabeth: he was like wanting, like getting me to buy toys and then they were all involved in everything, and that started to be like the thing that I, like I didn't care cos I was all for that but I also didn't want it to always be like that and I remember saying to him once that it upset me that the only time that he was ever turned on by me was when I had a vibrator in my hand. Like it was the only time he wanted to anymore*

Elizabeth's comments here are interesting because much of the consent literature is about consent at the point of sexual interaction or through the sexual experience. I wonder about women's ability to shape the nature of fucking within their relationship by being able to discuss their broad desires, dislikes and experiences they are curious about in conversations during non-sexual time, enabling them to actively shape the direction their shared fucking takes. These types of conversations seem important enactments of sexual agency and render the consent process more meaningful, in my opinion.

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<sup>126</sup> Her husband's insistence on the use of sex toys speaks to the normalisation of using manufactured objects within heterosex over the last two decades, and their association with female orgasm (especially vibrators; Mulholland, 2011).

## straight onto the internet

Unlike in the beginning years of Elizabeth's relationship where sex was largely absent, sex now occupied much of her time and energy:

*Elizabeth: Um, yeah and then there was a massive period of time where it (webcamming<sup>127</sup>) was something that happened every day. Like I would come home from work, I was working and had a very busy life, two jobs, three kids, um, and I would come home and he would want to get straight onto the internet and do that again*

The increasing intensive sexualisation of Elizabeth's relationship demanded a lot of her emotionally, physically and time wise, in addition to her employment and responsibilities in the home. These demands speak to the 'third shift', proposed by Fahs and Swank (2016) who argue that the emotional labour women are required to do to manage sex within their relationships constitutes a third shift, on top of the paid work and domestic labour women are also required to enact. They suggest that sexualised emotional labour relates to faking orgasms, tolerating sexual pain, defining sexual pleasure based on their partner's sexual satisfaction and accepting bad sexual experiences. With the exception of sexual pain, which Elizabeth never alluded to, her sexual relationship is shaped by this sexualised emotional labour, and in a very real and overwhelming sense sex become another job she had to perform in her day-to-day life, via the internet and eventually in person with strangers.

The physical inclusion of others into their sexual relationship started with Elizabeth's husband wanting to bring someone else in for a threesome:

*Elizabeth: he never did it because I don't think he actually could but he always wanted to and always talked about it and always sort of um, like it*

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<sup>127</sup> Webcamming is where people use their computer camera to offer live sexual content to (paying) viewers.

*was a massive part of just it was a huge fantasy thing for him to have us talk about someone else coming in, there was only one time that he actually called like a prostitute and then they didn't answer the phone um, and so he used to talk about it all the time and it was always about um, other men as well. And but I don't think he actually had the guts to actually have someone physically there*

When the threesome didn't eventuate he turned to electronic means to include others in their sexual interactions:

*Elizabeth: so he started to instead of doing it in that way, it started to be about online, so it became using like webcams and stuff like that*

*Elizabeth: usually that would involve other men being able to see me and that really was a thing for him and then photos um, taking photos and putting them on the site um, which I never had any access to the sites, I never had any passwords or anything like that, and so yeah so I wasn't allowed to do that but he was, so it was yeah*

Elizabeth's comments that her husband was the only one with access to the sexual images of her that were uploaded to the internet suggests that her husband was in control of these interactions and that she did not have much say over how, and even if, they unfolded. His control of their digital sex is further apparent in Elizabeth's comments that she was coerced into the webcamming and used drugs to mask her discomfort:

*Elizabeth: every time it was always I always absolutely wasted and that was part of it, we would have this (drugs) and then we would do that (webcamming) and I used to constantly feel sick in my stomach the whole time that it was happening and I just numbed everything out*

*Jasmine: so no was not a consideration there?*

*Elizabeth: no because, if I didn't then um, I didn't love him. And I wasn't like the right wife for him and there was not trust if I couldn't do these things, that was his way of kind of making me do it. Which I fell for because he knew that was one of the biggest things for me to feel that him and I loved each other and trusted each other and um so that was his thing*

Her husband used Elizabeth's wish for a loving and trusting relationship to manipulate her into performing, threatening that she was not the right woman for him if she did not want to do these things. Elizabeth's compliance with the webcamming is clearly subject to coercion, incapacitation through drug use and

lack of meaningful agency to shape the experience, rendering her participation non-consensual from my perspective. In these circumstances, his taking of and control over the digital images and access to the websites where these are stored constitutes a form of digital sexual abuse that sits between revenge porn<sup>128</sup> – in that the images could be shared or viewed without her permission both at the time and even now – and digital coercive control<sup>129</sup> in that technology is being used abuse and control her further.

## **fucking dangerous(ly)**

During the final year of Elizabeth's marriage, her husband directed her towards selling sex. When he first introduced the idea she said no, however within a year or so she was doing it. Her husband continued to work away at her boundaries and used increasing webcamming as an introductory step that de-sensitised her to paid sex work and intertwined it with notions of an egalitarian permissiveness underpinned by love and trust, the very things that were most important to Elizabeth:

*Elizabeth: I was just devastated I just could not believe what I was hearing (when he asked her to do sex work) and then a year later I was doing it. So, he slowly worked away at it, just through um, more and more of the online, more and more about this is a trust thing, a love thing, so I just so couldn't see it. You know I ended up doing it*

Elizabeth's life became even more dangerous after this point, subject to ever changing rules and microregulation of what she did and said, leading to a situation where Elizabeth could easily

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<sup>128</sup>Revenge porn or non-consensual pornography is defined as “the distribution of sexually graphic images of individuals without their consent” (Citron & Franks, 2014, p. 345). I regret not asking if his control of these images still concerned Elizabeth and if he has used these images to blackmail or otherwise harass her either during or following the end of their relationship.

<sup>129</sup> Digital coercive control refers to “the use of digital technology (which includes, for example, mobile phones, Global Positions Systems (GPS), social media) to stalk, harass, threaten, and abuse partners or ex-partners (and children” Woodlock et al., 2020, p. 369).

“get it wrong” and risk physical and emotional reprimand<sup>130</sup>, including humiliation, threats, rape, assault and strangulation:

*Elizabeth: once I did do it (sex work) things go really nasty after that because um I apparently cos what I had to do was report back after every single one minute by minute um, details everything and if I was missing a minute of the details or if I couldn't tell him every minute of a half hour then I was lying or covering up so it became really dangerous. Um, and he was really violent anyway throughout those couple, that year and a half or two years, but after that he became a whole next level violent and that was when I really started to know that I had to go. And it wasn't very long after that that I left him*

*Elizabeth: he would say oh you know I don't want you to do it anymore and then the next day he would get high and be like no we can do this we love each other we trust each other. It was very confusing up and down like what am I meant to do kind of stuff. And I knew that when I went in the first time I knew that as soon we did that our marriage was over, I knew that so I asked him outside if he thinks I should still do it and he just yelled at me and told me to get my arse in there*

*Elizabeth: Rules around what I was allowed to say, um, cos I wasn't allowed to talk them up and to their face I was only allowed to talk about them to him. About how big they were it was only allowed to be to him but not to them, so I made that mistake like and it was kind of like no that's not what, it would be like massive just like massive abusive arguments over it where he would just sort of just interrogate everything and then threaten me that I am lying and then threaten to do this and threaten to do that and then the last time it actually only lasted about two and a half, three weeks of doing that, because it just didn't last that long because I left him after that because it just got so bad*

*Elizabeth: There is a couple of times with the physical violence that still upset me to think about because of the way they were done. Like if it was more of a like the strangling<sup>131</sup> was one, um, the making me get naked*

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<sup>130</sup> I chose not to write through her recollection of this time period for two reasons, (1) it felt wrong to pick it apart, that there was something uncomfortable about dominating her space in the midst of such a harrowing account, and (2) because it really speaks for itself, I do not think (m)any people would dispute that she speaks to very clear control, threats and, physical and sexual violence.

<sup>131</sup> This was the second time that he had strangled Elizabeth. Of the first occasion Elizabeth said:

*Elizabeth: I was upset because the bank has turned me down for a loan that we desperately needed and cos it was always up to me to make sure that we were financially ok and so the pressure was on me to keep the bank off our case and I had done everything I could and that bank had said no and he came home from his, cos he worked, he did work, he came home from lunch and I was in the bedroom crying and he was so mad with me that he strangled me and held me there long enough to start thinking is he actually going to kill me right now. That changed me*

Strangulation is of great physical risk to women as it can cause them to lose consciousness and/or cause death, and those women who survive strangulation are at greater risk of being killed by their **continues over page**

*was one of them, he like made me get naked and I'm not over that cos that has been hugely traumatic like him stripping me naked and then abusing me was just like hideous um, and then maybe like being on the floor or something and just being kicked was just really emotional as well*

*Elizabeth: I think it was a fantasy for him to hear about it but then when it was actually happening there was that jealousy that he couldn't actually deal with it so he wanted the honest truth but it was really, so I became really scared of everything I said and everything I did and um, there were so many rules to it that I didn't understand that it became yeah just awful*

*Elizabeth: So that the last time that I worked I ended up being asked by a girl and doing it because I thought it would be fine, but that wasn't fine. And it wasn't just a girl, it was two guys and two girl's scenario that they wanted. And so that was not allowed and that was I was just yeah he totally that night was awful I don't know if it was the same night cos it was all a bit of a blur but he he got pretty pretty bad pretty violent threatened to kill me, threatened to kill the kids, um, I thought I was going to be chopped up into little pieces that night and I thought my kids were going to be as well. He raped me*

During the legal battles that followed the end of the marriage, her husband excused his behaviour on that last night to Elizabeth's family, drawing on expectations of monogamy and discourses that position sex work and sex workers as morally questionable (Mulholland, 2011) to paint his jealousy and response as reasonable given her "betrayal":

*Elizabeth: he told the whole family that I was a prostitute behind his back and that I was telling him that I was a waitress and so that's why he lost the plot and got arrested because he was so upset because he had just found out that his wife was a prostitute. And of course, those sorts of things are what I don't get to sit there and correct. I haven't even tried so they think that*

Even though her relationship contained clear use of violence that Elizabeth can label as such, she still feels (at least somewhat) responsible for what transpired in the relationship, questioning "*where did that come from in me, that part of me that was ok with being treated so badly*". Her comments are not the only example of victim-

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partner in the future (Thomas et al., 2014). Strangulation also instils a great deal of fear in women, as Elizabeth comments above, due to a sense of vulnerability about how easily they could be killed, leading to increased compliance with the demands and desires of their partner (Thomas et al., 2014).

blaming in that there was something in her that is to blame for letting the abuse happen (as if she had control over it), it also obscures his responsibility and the role that broader gendered power relations had in making the situation possible. Even in her naming him as the cause of her engagement with his sexual desires, there are no gendered notions of responsibility, highlighting how the neoliberal post-feminist social context has depoliticized our lives and made it difficult to name and critique structural sexism and misogyny (Gill, 2016):

*Elizabeth: I know that a lot of people say that no one can make you do something that you don't want to do but in that situation it wasn't something I wanted to do and I do feel like I was made to do it, like I was turned into that, that I was turned into someone who didn't care cos I was just so high while I was doing it, so I did, I feel he did that to me, and some people argue that no one can make you do something but I don't believe that, I think that he did do that to me and I think it was me that didn't have any boundaries and that I didn't, couldn't say no to him, that allowed it to happen*

Ultimately, I think Elizabeth understands what transpired through a neoliberal lens that apports blame to her for not enforcing her boundaries, despite that fact that when she did say no, as she did to sex work, he knowingly pushed and manipulated her into the sexual activities anyway. And while someone should be able to change their mind over time, in such a coercive, controlling and violent environment alongside heavy drug use, it is hard to imagine that Elizabeth had a genuine change of heart about any of the unwanted sexual behaviour she experienced within the relationship. As such I wonder if it is less a case of her allowing anything and more about the way we are sold this tale of romance from a young age, which normalises women placing men at the centre of our universe, and prioritising (monogamous, heterosexual) romantic relationships at all costs, and always trying to think the best of our partners. Towns and Adams (2000) suggest this thinking is informed by perfect-love discourses that, in the context of intimate partner violence,

lead women to believe their love, nurturing and care can tame wounded men and turn them into loving partners:

*Elizabeth: its co-dependency stuff and going for these broken kind of men that I want to be able to help*

*Elizabeth: I put them first and always tried to help them and couldn't see through that sort of abusive stuff*

*Elizabeth: it so of course like everything looking back on it, it all did gradually happen and right from the beginning he was quite abusive but I didn't feel like it was abusive. I always felt really upset but I still tolerated it and tried to see the good in him and that*

Alongside this, the dominance of the violent incident model of domestic violence as the most common sense understanding of abuse within a relationship means that we do not have language to notice, understand and speak about violence that is enacted more subtly; violence that slowly chips away at a woman's sense of self and her spirit, shaping her mind, body and actions to his wishes. What enabled this to happen was not a failing in Elizabeth but a society that demands we prioritise men and their sexuality, and that we work harder to please them. It is a society that excuses men's abuse and renders anything other than extreme physical attacks and/or rape not really abuse. A society that gave her husband permission, a sense of entitlement, and the tools, through the normalisation of unequal gendered power relations and sexexpectations of hetero-femininity, to treat her however he wanted without consequence. Elizabeth's experience was made possible by a society that thinks women don't fucking matter.



# quietly raping mum

*gendered expectations governing mothering provide fertile ground,  
which domestically violent men can exploit*  
- Heward-Belle (2017, p. 375)

Stark (2007) argues that men use their intimate knowledge of their (ex) partner to target their coercive control. During my conversation with Roxanne, it was very clear that being a good mother and her children having a father figure was very important to her. Given Stark's (2007) comments I believe her (ex)partner also knew that Roxanne was very committed to her children's wellbeing, and used this knowledge to continue his abuse long after the relationship ended<sup>132</sup>.

Roxanne had many difficult experiences early in life, including multiple instances of sexual assault and rape. She made sense of these experiences as having occurred as a result of coming from a broken home and the absence of a father figure. This thinking informed her decision to have an abortion following pregnancy to a man who would not be involved in the baby's care:

*Roxanne: I had gotten pregnant previously and there was no way that child would have had a father and I had a termination that I wasn't actually ok about it but the thing for me was that baby wouldn't have a father. That's what mattered*

Later, when Roxanne had a daughter, the breakup of the relationship with the father caused her to worry that the harms of her early life would also befall her daughter because she would not grow up with her father:

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<sup>132</sup> Within the relationship Roxanne reported being subject to all kinds of abuse including, manipulation, verbal and physical attacks, and strangulation. We did not discuss sex in detail during this period, instead our conversation explored the post-separation sexual violence that Roxanne endured.

*Roxanne: I was really upset because again I thought if she had a broken home or didn't have a father then she wasn't going to be ok and some of the things that happened to me might happen to her*

Roxanne's understanding that fathers are important is underpinned by the essential father discourse which suggests that there are gendered differences in parenting, rendering a father figure essential for healthy child development (Randles, 2020). The absence of fathers has been suggested as (at least in part) responsible for a daughter's promiscuity - as they did not learn to establish appropriate sexual boundaries with men - and sons becoming violent and engaging in criminal offending (Randles, 2020), among other social ills. The essential father discourse is afforded authority within the family courts, underpinning the courts favoring of co-parenting arrangements for children following parental separation<sup>133</sup> (Feresin et al., 2019).

To be good mothers, women are expected to love and care for their children (Stewart, 2021), to protect their children, and put their children's needs first (Heward-Belle, 2017; Lapierre, 2010). Given that the essential father discourse suggests that it is best for children to have the input of both their mother and father, these two discourses work together to encourage and sometimes mandate women (through the authority of the courts) to enable the child-father relationship following separation. Failure to enable this relationship positions women as bad mothers.

Roxanne's (ex)partner used her desire to be a good mother and ensure her children had a relationship with their fathers to maintain contact with her. Post-separation contact between the father and child(ren), in the context of coercive control,

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<sup>133</sup> For more about intimate partner violence and the family court, see Backbone Collective (2017) and Mackenzie et al. (2020).

allows additional opportunities to continue abusing women (Crossman et al., 2016), as was the case for Roxanne. Maintaining contact between father and son led to further verbal abuse (targeting her mothering), as well as surveillance, mind games and rape(s), echoing Heward-Belle's (2017) comments that men knowingly "exploited the powers of women's desires to be good mothers<sup>134</sup> to meet their own needs" (p. 384).

He used suggestions of her being a bad mother, alongside shaming her for the consequences of his abuse, to isolate her from locals in the small rural community that she still lives in, the consequences of which continue 20 years later:

*Roxanne: I live in a small rural community, I still have the stigma from the domestic violence situation with him going to court, he dragged, like neighbours wrote affidavit about me not being a good parent or being a bit unstable mentally. Some of them still don't talk to me now*

*Roxanne: I think he painted the picture that I was the mother trying to keep her son away from having a relationship with his father*

*Roxanne: he wouldn't have visits with our son through Barnados or anything like that, or through a neighbour or anything like that. I would have to come here, or I would never see him again*

In an effort to maintain contact between her young son and his father, she stayed with her son overnight in the home of her abusive (ex)partner. During the visit he orally raped her:

*Roxanne: my son wouldn't stay with him without me there, so I just did it I stayed there and then the next morning his dad, it was weird how it*

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<sup>134</sup> Being a good mother also requires women to (at least try to) protect children from abuse (Callaghan et al., 2018). Prior to their separation, and after, Roxanne protected her children from abuse, at great risk to herself:

*Roxanne: I couldn't have him abusing me in front of my children even verbally. So, I would say, don't talk to me like that in front of the children, which would often make him worse. The times he was particularly physically violent towards me was when I was trying to protect my daughter from him. So, we are talking about when she might have been five eating with her mouth open and you know, big angry man standing up to go towards her. Um, so yeah, he strangled um on that occasion in the hallway here and I was holding my son. My daughter didn't see, she was around the corner. And I was not hospitalized. I had his fingerprints around my throat. I couldn't bare, I still can't bare my children being exposed to violence. Its way huger than whatever has been done to me. Or what I have done to myself*

*happened. I had had a sleeping bag and I could not get the zip back up so I had taken it to him and said I can't get the zip up, and he said "ah well I have got something else up" you know and had a hard on and pushed me into his lap and I guess you would say forced oral sex and then my son was in the next room you know watching cartoons on the television and you know it was that instance where I didn't actually bite him or didn't fight him or didn't scream, was just whatever, used in that way. And he was saying "I'm just fucking using you for sex"*

Her suggestion that she remained quiet during the encounter to prevent her son from becoming aware of the situation is in keeping with dominant ideas of a good mother protecting their child from being exposed to adult sexual interactions that are not age appropriate, and from experiencing violence. Furthermore, it could be said that she also a good mother for protecting the father-son relationship by ensuring her son did not see his father doing anything that might make him seem scary or portray the father in a negative light to his son. That said, it is also apparent that she thinks her behaviour - her non-resistance - needs to be accounted for in some way. That is, she has to justify acting in a manner that did not conform to dominant expectations of an active, resistant rape victim (Ryan, 2011) and violence prevention discourses (Frazier & Falmagre, 2014). Collectively these social norms place the moral responsibility for being a good parent and not getting raped on women, rather than demanding that fathers do not rape or be otherwise abusive.

Roxanne was raped *again*, in similar circumstances maintaining his father's role in their son's care and fostering their relationship. Again, her (ex)partner took advantage of the children's presence to sexually violate Roxanne, knowing that she will probably remain quiet, unable to resist his violence:

*Roxanne: he anally raped me there and again I didn't kick him off me. I certainly was not consenting and I certainly wasn't prepared for something like anal sex, physically. But I was in a room full of children then and I can't even think how like my children and my friends, I can't even think of how he would have thought that was ok um to do that. So I guess that has been*

*a really huge issue for me that I couldn't, I couldn't make a big noise about it um you know because there were children*

When their son had to be anesthetized for a dental operation, Roxanne's (ex)partner blamed her for their son's tooth decay and used put downs of her mothering to abuse her repeatedly. That evening she was raped again:

*Roxanne: I remember walking down the corridor with him and the whole time he was swearing at me just in the ear. He would do this if he ever went somewhere, like to other people's places and other people wouldn't hear. "You're just a fucking useless mother" "you're such a useless mother, you have given him this, it is your fault he has got this, you are so fucking useless". You know that kind of talking. Lots of swearing and abuse involved in it, but mostly I guess it would be put downs*

*Roxanne: he pushed me down and you know got into me in the motel and said "I know you don't want me to do this to you, I know you don't want me to do this to you" and again I didn't actually kick him or he is bigger than me, fatter than me, heavier than me, but like I knew that he knew, and I knew*

Roxanne conceived during this rape and her (ex)partner pressured her to get an abortion, using threats to leave the unborn child fatherless to persuade her:

*Roxanne: he just kept saying things like if I had another baby I would never able to tell them like you know who their dad was or that he was their dad. So, at that point, I don't think I really knew at the time until years later doing all the work, he actually got, he got inside of my head<sup>135</sup>. How I*

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<sup>135</sup> For context to her comments that he got in her mind, at other points during our conversation Roxanne made reference to the psychological impact her (ex)partner's actions:

*Roxanne: I got a funny feeling inside of my head like after, when he would come on to my property breaching the protection order without my consent*

*Roxanne: I still get it if I have to be in his presence*

*Roxanne: with him arriving anytime that hypervigilance, that maintaining that level of hypervigilance for all those years um I guess almost like a radar I suppose*

He also had a long history of making threats against her:

*Roxanne: He got busted (for drugs) at his house and he believed it was me. And I said to him I am scared of you, why would think it would be me. But you know he would say things to me like I will kill you or if I find out it is you I will find you and come and punch your head in. Threats I guess, all the time, all the time, all the time*

Together, along with knowledge that he had a firearm, Roxanne felt like she was under constant threat of danger:

*would describe it is that he made me, he made me abort that child when I didn't want to ... I just wanted to not do it, even then, just like even then like right before it but I just was too scared of what he would do*

At the time this was happening, her (ex)partner was living on her land and therefore able to keep her under surveillance<sup>136</sup>, make remarks to her during the day, and maintain pressure on her to have a termination. He moved on to the property after threatening (again) to sever ties with their son:

*Roxanne: at this point his houstruck was here on my land because he had said if I didn't let him park it here he would never see our son again*

Following the abortion, Roxanne had another medical procedure to prevent her from further pregnancies because his ongoing presence in her life meant she could be raped again:

*Roxanne: I organised to have as tubal ligation very soon afterwards because I knew, I knew I could not stop that from happening again. I could not be sure I could stop him from doing that to me again*

By drawing on good mothering discourses and the essential father discourse, alongside using technologies of coercive control Roxanne's (ex)partner was able to cultivate a situation in which he could silence her and take any sex he wanted. In raping her he prevented her from exercising any agency and made consent totally impossible. Her experiences highlight the extremely difficult and dangerous position mothers are in trying to navigate their own safety and that of their children, while also complying with court requirements and socio-cultural pressure to facilitate a child(ren)-father relationship. Roxanne reminds

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*Roxanne: I guess for me it was a threat, wherever he was or even is now, is a threat to me and an impact on my life, and also that area of unpredictability. You know see that last protection order I got, I was made to sign something to say that he could still have a gun*

<sup>136</sup> Stark (2007) suggests that surveillance deprives the women under observation of privacy and can give the abuser a sense of being omnipresent, limiting the way women go about their lives. Roxanne's (ex) partner maintained a level of surveillance over many years, finding some way to be on her land or very nearby:

*Roxanne: this man if not on my property, (was) very nearby. And this went on for years. He bought the house two doors up the road from me and at the time I couldn't even believe that he was allowed to*

us that violence does not end once women and children (and animals) escape abusive relationships. If we want our families to be safe, we need to stop telling women to leave violent relationships and instead start telling men not to abuse their family in the first fucking place.



# I just hope it goes deeper for her

*your partner is supposed to  
enrich your life  
not drain it  
staying when it hurts is not love*  
- Rupi Kaur (2020, p. 66)

When it came to writing up my understanding of the social and interpersonal gendered power relations that shaped Jessica's account, it felt uncomfortable using the same format that I had for the previous women's stories. The other women could be written about in past tense, because while the impact of their abuse was long lasting, in a very real sense their lives were very different now; free from abuse, with the space and time to heal the wounds of the past, to reconnect with themselves and loved ones, and focus on their life projects rather than living in survival mode. For Jessica, this didn't seem like it was the case - our conversation detailed a series of abusive relationships that she was in and out of. She did not seem to have been able to break free from the cycle of abuse in the way the other women had, yet. As such, writing her story in past tense didn't feel right, and seemed more like I was taking something from her (her story) for my benefit (my academic success) and giving nothing back in return.

I felt compelled by feminist research ethics, shared experience, and compassion to support her in some way. Thinking about Elizabeth's comments that being in the midst of abuse can make it hard to see the dynamics at play, I wondered if writing my understanding of her story might offer her a light if she got lost in the cycle of abuse again. I decided to write my

understanding in the form of a letter in the hope that it might resonate even more personally, and sensitively<sup>137</sup>.

Hi Jess,

I have been listening to the conversation we had for my research and wondering how you are? I hope you are not caught again, thinking that you are shit, that no one else will ever want you, that you are crazy and that you need his love to be good enough, or to even feel just ok.

One of the other women I spoke with said that when you are in the midst of the abuse, it can be hard to see what is happening. Especially because heaps of what goes on in abusive relationships mirrors what society is already telling us, like that we MUST have a man<sup>138</sup>, and that to keep him we have to put all our time and energy into them, making sure their lives are easy, that we are pleasing to the eye and that we are fulfilling all their sexual needs<sup>139</sup>. So, we start shaping ourselves to their tastes, based on their little comments and the women they pay attention too, as well as replicating what broader society is using to define our desirability<sup>140</sup>. I remember you commenting on this during our conversation, that you used to go through periods of trying to lose weight, and used to dress in ways you didn't like to get male attention and how this felt validating to you much of the time because we are bombarded with messages that we should be thin<sup>141</sup> and sexy<sup>142</sup>:

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<sup>137</sup> Before writing this letter, I analysed her story for the use of technologies of coercive control and discourses of heterosex, in the same manner I did with the other stories. In that way, this letter contains the same content as it would have had I put it together in the same manner as the previous women's stories. However, I wrote about it differently, more personally, emotively and with even less jargon, hoping it would be more accessible and resonate more. From a research reflectivity perspective, I also hope that in writing this way my personal and political stance on abusive relationships comes through more clearly. I am proactively biased against these type of relationships and am comfortable with this position.

<sup>138</sup> Compulsory heteronormativity; see Fahs and McClelland (2016) and Serano (2013).

<sup>139</sup> Dowling (2017); Gavey (2005); Jackson (1984); Kelly et al. (2017); Potts (2000).

<sup>140</sup> We do this using the technologies of femininity (Bartky, 1990) and the technologies of sexiness (Evans & Riley, 2014)

<sup>141</sup> Bartky (1990); Gibson (2014); McKinley (1999); Pickens and Braun (2018); Thompson (2018).

<sup>142</sup> Donaghue et al. (2011); Evans and Riley (2014); Gibson (2014); Gill (2008); Whitehead and Kruz, (2009).

*Jessica: I used to go through periods where I used to starve myself because I felt like how I am isn't alright. Like it, you know, but then I even changed how I dressed. Oh yuck. I used to wear these tights and little shorts. It is actually quite horrendous you know. And I would always have my boobs hanging out. You know, I felt like I had to present in a certain way. And it was funny cos at the same time when I was younger, and like this is only going back three or four years, I really enjoyed the attention. I thought that was where my worth was. If men were giving me attention, then that meant I was ok*

*Jessica: I felt like I had to pretend in a certain way and behave a certain way and you know, so that I was pleasing to his eye*

*Jessica: I never used to dress like that. Like this is my way of, I like to cover up to a degree, I think to be respectful. I also sometimes yeah, got a bit of a gothic streak. I always used to, before I started dressing like that, was long skirts and like long black lacey. You know, that's me. But then I switched into this other role and being this other person*

*Our lives become a series of performance pieces, aimed at gaining male attention to feel good enough, rather than developing in the ways we find interesting, appealing, and desirable to us. But it is not surprising that we think like this given the messages we get from the media and people around us, all repeating the same ideas, that women should be attractive (in conventional ways) and that it (life) is all about getting and pleasing men<sup>143</sup>. You even noticed this yourself in the things and people that influenced your thinking:*

*Jessica: I got ideas about what men want from my dad, definitely my dad. Not just my dad, I think society is another big one. You know, it is just little things, like what you see in TV, I know it sounds pretty clichéd but it is what you see in TV, what you hear your friends say, you know what advertising. It is all those subtle little things that you don't realise that you are taking on board. But definitely my dad was really a player in that one*

*Jessica: You know women should be the ones that raise the kids and whatever, and when the man wants sex they need to just be there. You know, he (dad) always used to comment on women's physical appearances, you know he is quite superficial as far as that goes. And I don't think he can have a conversation without bringing something sexual into it and a lot of the time it is derogatory towards women*

*Jessica: dad always, growing up, dad always objectified women and he was quite violent as well. He could be quite nasty*

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<sup>143</sup> Bartky (1990); Pickens and Braun (2018); Rich (2018).

These social expectations of women are where men find their power to make us believe we are not good enough, that we are too fat, too stupid, too demanding, the list goes on as I am sure you know. My point is society sets women up to believe we are not good enough, so when our significant other(s), the person(s) whose opinions and actions are meant to mean so much to us starts with the same critiques, we are primed to believe him<sup>144</sup>.

*Jessica: I had been on meth for a few months, and like I was unhealthy, like ridiculously unhealthy skinny, it was gross but he seemed to like that. Cos I noticed he's quite, he portrayed the whole thing of not being like that, not being one of those perverts who, the men who objectify women, he played the role of being a respectful man so well but I noticed when I got pregnant and started to get bigger and after I gave birth and I was how I am now um he went off me and it really hurt*

Our bodies give us life, and they help us create life, we should be able to love them unapologetically but that is fucking hard when society and our partner(s), that person(s) we want to love us tell us that their love will be at least partly (if not largely) contingent on our looks being close to whatever is considered desirable at the time<sup>145</sup>.

*I'm tired of being disappointed  
in the home that keeps me alive  
I'm exhausted by the energy it takes  
to hate myself  
~ I'm putting the hate down  
- Rupi Kaur (2020, p. 47)*

It is fucking exhausting hating yourself and the very thing that sustains you. We need our bodies to exist on this material plane, this is something that the passing of my mum's partner recently has reminded me, without a body we are not here. As I watched his final stages of life, I saw his body functionality decline, his ability to interact and be in the world reduce and finally extinguish as he took his last breath. It has given me so much more respect for what the body does for us, and how fucked we are without it. As a mother, you are probably aware of just how miraculous the body is. Yet as women we spend so much time hating it, being disappointed, wishing it was different. I wonder what living with our bodies, rather than fighting them, could be like and how this could change our relationship to ourselves and to others.

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<sup>144</sup> Stark (2007).

<sup>145</sup> McKinley (1999); Thompson (2018).

*live loud and proud like you deserve  
and reject their bullshit definition  
of what a woman should look like  
- Rupi Kaur (2020, p. 160)*

At the same time, it is also shit because we are more than our bodies, more than how we look, we have ideas, skills, dreams and more complex ways of being, yet we are reduced to the superficial<sup>146</sup>. Much like the way we are expected to fuck, reduced to an aesthetic performance focused on pleasing men, rather than being about genuinely sharing in the creation and experience of pleasure<sup>147</sup>.

*Jessica: I felt like how I was going to keep this guy happy was to always be agreeing to what he wanted and I had to be this certain sexual you know what I mean? Even if I didn't want it, I had to, you know. For me it all revolved around the sex, it was quite horrible*

Instead fucking is shaped by sex expectations that sex ends in his orgasm. Feminist academics refer to this as the orgasm imperative, meaning that orgasms appear vital to fucking and his usually marks the end of sex, whether we want to finish before or after that<sup>148</sup>:

*Jessica: When he is done, its done pretty much. Which is I know logically, like I know that is not what it is all about but in my experience it has been. Just it is the whole, his orgasm and that is it*

*Jessica: there were a few occasions where I did breakdown crying and I had to ask him to stop and I felt like I was not good enough as a result because I didn't you know follow through with what he was expecting*

The orgasm imperative also means it can be hard for us to stop sex (or that if we do) before his orgasm, then we feel bad because we have not given them a full performance as they would have expected, like you commented above. As you said before, everything just revolves around sex and it is not even necessarily sex we want to be having:

*Jessica: I felt like I had to be this sex goddess to make him happy. And be like extra kinky and all this sort of shit, even if I wasn't. So yeah. It was an interesting process because sometimes I enjoyed it, and sometimes it was complete hell*

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<sup>146</sup> Day (2009); Rizos (2012); Sun et al., (2016).

<sup>147</sup> Dowling (2017); Gavey (1992); Kelly et al. (2017); Potts (2000).

<sup>148</sup> Dowling (2017); Opperman et al., (2014); Potts (2000); Thomas et al., (2017).

*Jessica: because even when I didn't want it I would sometimes do the control thing, cos sometimes they would like that. And I would try and perform things that I you know, even if I didn't enjoy it I would still do it they liked it and this is what men enjoy*

*Jessica: It is not about the intimacy and the pleasure and the passion<sup>149</sup>*

I think we learn that sex is not really about us, it is not about the things that we like, want to do or experience. We learn that sex is just what did you say, "penetration" - you did try to acknowledge it is more, saying "Or no not just that, it is a whole lot of shit leading up to that too" - but like the orgasm, penetration is the expected main sexual act though isn't it, or at least that is the "normal" way of fucking. Feminist academics refer to this as the coital imperative, meaning that penis-in-vagina sex is an essential part of fucking. These expectations create what I call the paint by numbers way of fucking, it is this move then that all leading to penetration and his orgasm. Not only does this limit the possibilities of women's pleasure, it also becomes unsafe because we cannot stop sex once it is started<sup>150</sup>. There is no room for being in the feelings and sensations of the experience, the very things you like:

*Jessica: I am quite like I am quite sensual, I love the build-up, the touching and the emotions that you can bring up doing that are quite beautiful*

But of course, fucking is not about us is it, it is about keeping men happy<sup>151</sup>. Sex is part of our job as women<sup>152</sup>, irrespective of what we actually want. We are told this how we keep relationships together, by giving them what they want<sup>153</sup>, not that it works:

*Jessica: I have felt like as long as you give them everything they want, they won't stray or abuse you or whatever, but it still happened anyway. And I think that is what made it hurt so much. It made me feel, it actually made*

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<sup>149</sup> These comments speak to how expectations of raunch culture and the permissive discourse *require* women to perform a sexually adventurous role even when it is not desired by the women.

<sup>150</sup> Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras (2008); Burkett and Hamilton (2012); Gavey (2005); Jeffrey and Barata (2019).

<sup>151</sup> Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras, 2008, Burkett and Hamilton (2012); Baere and Boonzaier, 2020

<sup>152</sup> Crawford et al. (1994); Gavey (1992).

<sup>153</sup> This is the result of the have/hold discourse and compulsory monogamy that insist women keep their partner sexually and relationally satisfied in exchange for his sexual faithfulness (Crawford et al., 1994; Gavey, 2005; Jackson, 1984; Kelly et al., 2017; Rich, 1980) and the result of sex being considered important for relationship health (Brown-Bowers et al., 2015) and part of women's responsibility to manage (Gavey, 1992; Kelly et al., 2017).

*me feel quite worthless, and just an object, like just another notch on the belt sort of thing<sup>154</sup>*

*These expectations can mean that some men think they can just do what they want with our bodies:*

*Jessica: when we were having sex he used to like pin me down, and even if it was starting off consensual he would get quite rough, but not rough in the way, cos I do like enjoy rough sex but not like not in that way. Like he was quite, it used to make me quite uneasy. You know he knew these like wrestling moves and I was like, it has always struck me as a bit strange the way that he behaved when we were having sex. And he would, he used to force himself upon me sometimes, like we would start having sex and then he would force anal. And there were a couple of times where he just did it and I remember a couple of times actually he had me quite sore and bleeding and I could not walk properly for about a week. But I told people that I enjoyed it because I was trying to come across like I am all good, like I have got this under control, but really I didn't<sup>155</sup>*

*And even when we are raped, society expects us to appear that we have our shit together, maybe that we are enjoying this violation or are at least not phased by it, not able to show vulnerability or ask for support<sup>156</sup>, like you talked about above. It is like it is our fault for the things that happen to us<sup>157</sup>, rather than there being expectations on men to not touch us in ways that we do not want, in ways that we have not asked for or said yes to. It is like we are their possession to do with as they please, especially when we are in a relationship and have been intimate with them before<sup>158</sup>. These expectations of us, our bodies and our sexuality are demanded by society and enforced by some men, meaning it is difficult for us to have a meaningful say in how we fuck and even how we are in the world. Especially when there are other abusive process is happening in our relationship(s) that can make our lives constrained, confusing and dangerous, making it even harder to*

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<sup>154</sup> These comments highlight how coercive control and gendered expectations create a situation where women are expected to fuck, rendering consent expected, assumed, or unimportant.

<sup>155</sup> This comment highlights the importance of consent as a process over the duration of a sexual encounter, rather than being an event at the beginning.

<sup>156</sup> This is evidence of the 'together woman', where women are able to assert complete control over their circumstances and those who are victimised in some way are weak and lacking self-respect because they "let" themselves be in that position (Phillips, 2000, as cited in Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008).

<sup>157</sup> This is the result of victim blaming discourses and violence prevention discourses that render safety women's responsibility, rather than the perpetrator's (Frazier & Falmagre, 2014) and results in women being sanctioned for failing to perform the expected agency within heterosex (Bay-Cheng, 2015).

<sup>158</sup> Such obligations and expectations render consent apparently unnecessary within relationships (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Brady et al., 2018; Crawford et al., 1994).

engage in sex we want and disengage from sex we don't want.

The processes of abuse I refer to are experiences you talked to me about, such as gaslighting that makes you think you are crazy<sup>159</sup>:

*Jessica: he used to fuck with my head quite a bit to actually you know. He would demand that I go and see him, so I would catch the bus and then the train. You know, and then have to change buses over there I think, or was it down here. It was several busses and a train. And then I would get there and he would start an argument with me and I would leave. I would walk down to the bus stop crying and then he would be like "where are you going, come back" sort of thing. It was quite bad but um, he used to cheat on me a lot to as well. And then he would tell me I was going crazy and imagining it as well*

*Jessica: When I would catch him out doing something (cheating) he would tell me I was crazy and imagining things. And by the end our relationship, I actually believed I was crazy*

*Jessica: He used to walk around in my backyard and make footprints (so she thought she was being terrorised by a stranger) and then it was him the whole time*

Sometimes men might play mind games to get in your head and make you feel dependent on him, that you have no other options and that you should probably feel lucky to be with him<sup>160</sup>:

*Jasmine: did he use to tell you that you weren't attractive or that other men would not want you?*

*Jessica: yup, yup all of those lines. And it was not just about my physical appearance either, he was like who is going to want a single mother? You know, all that sort of shit*

*Jasmine: did you believe him?*

*Jessica: yeah I did at the time. I didn't like, it's funny, I think of things in layers. It was not on the surface but it definitely was deep down*

They may even use surveillance to monitor what you are doing, and feel a sense of threat in day-to-day life, controlling you and making you believe he is always around, like a prisoner in an invisible cage<sup>161</sup>:

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<sup>159</sup> Stark (2007); Stark and Hester (2019).

<sup>160</sup> Stark (2007).

<sup>161</sup> Stark (2007).

*Jessica: He showed me every point from which you could see my house and he used to carry binoculars in his car and sometimes he would let me know that he was watching my house*

*Sometimes they try to keep you away from loved ones, and even making you feel disloyal for seeing them or keeping in regular contact, this isolation leads to our world becoming smaller, and our safety zones and other ways of understanding ourselves disappear, creating a vacuum that can intensify the harm and leave us feeling more dependent on him<sup>162</sup>:*

*Jessica: you know he isolated me quite a bit*

*Jessica: he was quite controlling over what I did, who I spoke to, those sort of things. How much contact I had with my family. I noticed gradually over the period of time I was with him, I started losing contact with people, I wasn't allowed to mix with people, I wasn't allowed to, even if I was going to catch up with my sister or my mum, like he would get shitty about it. And he would sometimes, not directly, but he would make derogatory comments, that would make me feel bad about seeing them or accusing me of doing things I wasn't doing. Cos back then I was still relatively conservative I think. I have always been really loyal, I don't cheat, you know, he always used to make me feel like I was doing something wrong by going to see family or friends*

*They might also threaten other things that are important to us or that make us stand out, such as your hair, keeping us disconnected from the things that make us feel like us, and reducing the possibilities of independence in the process<sup>163</sup>:*

*Jessica: my hair was like a point of interest with a lot of men, it was weird. They were all like we love your hair and I was like ok. And I found that that was one of the things that to then made me attractive so um I think he didn't like that. So um my hair was precious to me not cos of that reason but cos when I was younger I went to the hairdresser and mum got it cut off right to a boy hairstyle and he used to say that if I ever did anything to upset him he would shave my hair off in my sleep. So one day I actually got really pissed off with him and got the pair of scissors and was like "really" fuck you. And I just cut my hair in front of him and he was like no and I was like nah, fuck you*

*Even when we resist their attacks and try to limit their control we might lose something in the process, as you did with your hair. So we even when we feel like we gain some*

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<sup>162</sup> Stark (2007).

<sup>163</sup> Stark (2007).

momentary control, it can come at a great cost.

Maybe there are threats, and some kind of physical expression to demonstrate that they can and will be followed through with:

*Jessica: he used to do the sort of "you know you are lucky I am not the sort of guy that would hit you". Dah dah dah. You know and then he would punch the wall in front of me. But I didn't realise that this was anything*

*Maybe you are made to feel constantly feel on edge, unsure when you are going to be threatened, or hurt, like you experienced when pregnant, and/or we are subject to violence and humiliation:*

*Jessica: I was walking on eggshells the entire time as well cos the first time started physically abusing me was when I was pregnant*

*Jessica: once I remember holding our infant child and he punched me in the mouth and missed her head by this much. And I remember him telling me that he was going to do that before he did it and I was like you are not going to do that while I am holding our daughter what the fuck is wrong with you. And he did it, and actually it broke my tooth which was embarrassing cos I had to walk around over Christmas time with a big gap and I felt like a hillbilly. Every time I looked in the mirror it was, it was really quite degrading*

*When we notice these dynamics, we will stay, not just because we have no fucking idea where the door even is to get out<sup>164</sup>, or because it is fucking dangerous when we try<sup>165</sup>, but because we have been sold this romantic bullshit that with women's nurturing abilities, we can save these broken men with our love, our patience, our commitment and our tolerance of his shitty behaviour<sup>166</sup>:*

*Jessica: for some reason I thought he could change. And so we did counselling and all that sort of shit but yeah, he just got better and better at lying to me*

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<sup>164</sup> Stark (2007).

<sup>165</sup> Stark (2007).

<sup>166</sup> These comments are referring to discourses of perfect-love that Town and Adams (2000) propose draw on notions of romance (portrayed through movies and other media) that show men as being a beastly exterior hiding a prince charming within, who is freed with the love of a good woman.

*I was trying to make him the one  
and it took three years to realise  
love doesn't work like that  
- Rupi Kaur (2020, p. 53)*

There is that underlying hope that things could be different, that he will change, and it will make it all worth it. There are even moments of sunshine, what did they call that in my Women's Refuge training, maybe the chocolates and roses phase, where there is a glimmer of hope, of how things could be. These moments make us hold on, but they do not last, and it can feel like you are caught in a cycle<sup>167</sup>:

*Jessica: he would have his outburst and he would do what he would do and then he would go to leave and then he would come back and say I am so sorry, I will get help, blah blah blah. You know, kiss arse and then be amazing for a couple of weeks and do housework and stay clean. You know, all that sort of stuff and then yeah. Just back to square one*

When we are offered a little hope, kindness, affection, moments of peace, we feel like we have won. We convince ourselves that it is a glimmer of who our partner "really is", underneath their bad boy exterior. These romanticised ideas of women healing wounded men with our love teach us to tolerate the periods of abuse, always working to heal him, make his life easier and better, demonstrating love in the ways we have been trained, though our ability to provide homely comforts, all while being thin and sexy, and not complaining, or demanding much. If he continues to hurt us, it is because we are not better partners, it is because we have not loved him enough.

That is a fucking endurance test, not a relationship.

We get taught to tolerate a lot don't we, so much so you even had a scale for ranking the abuse you experienced - the less physical abuse being down played, tolerated, normalised, and in this way it becomes an accepted, yet uncomfortable, commonplace understanding of what it is to be in relationship with a man. We expect to be put down, confused, even threatened a little and this does not raise (too many) concerns for us because it could (usually) be worse:

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<sup>167</sup> Towns and Adams (2000).

*Jessica: if I was shade it with black being the worst and grey being not so bad, he's at the bottom of the scale and from there it just got worse. So I think that is why in my own mind I down play it*

As the violence increases it hurts us but we have learnt to cope with so much already, I wonder if we even notice it, the pushes, the shoves, the near misses. It is unremarkable, unless it is the "real thing", the physical attacks, by which time we are probably so stuck, confused and fearful. We don't know what to do other than try to love them more, fuck them better, try to avoid anything that sets him off<sup>168</sup>. Maybe your scale also acts as a safety gauge, for when it is getting too dangerous? Just a wondering there.

We should not have fear in our relationships, we should not constantly feel not good enough, constrained and alert to danger. I would hope that our whole being can feel safe, to be able to build a family and nest with someone(s) if when we want to, and feel able to say when, and if, we want to engage in fucking, and how we want that to unfold, collaboratively and in a manner that supports everyone's pleasure and boundaries. Maybe even engaging in ways of relating and fucking that are deeper, more connected, like you want for your daughter(s):

*Jessica: I hope that she learns to be strong within herself, I think it is important, when it comes to sex I think it is important to have a sense of who you are and confidence, not just a physical appearance and how you please men. I hope that she learns it is not just about sex in life, it is about the emotional connection, even spiritual if you believe in that stuff. Um, I just hope that it goes deeper for her, than that superficial level*

I hope that these desires you have for your daughters, are also for you as well, for all of us really. Our generation has grown up through a superficial, aesthetically driven time where we have been caught up with how things look, a one-dimensional perspective on life at the expense of how we feel. And this includes our relationships, as much as our sexual encounters. Our experiences are shallow, limited and performative, focused on trying to portray a "right" image, in our fucking and ways of relating. We deserve better than this.

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<sup>168</sup> Stark (2007).

We deserve to be in relationships with people who want us as whole, complex equals to share in the creation of a life together. Our relationships should not reduce the possibilities of our lives, they should enhance our ways of being in the world. They should not hold us captive, intentionally keeping us under control, unable to think, behave and feel safely, in(ter)dependently and confidently towards our own aspirations in life.

*I want someone who is  
inspired by my brilliance  
not threatened by it*  
- Rupi Kaur (2020, p. 78)



Jasmine x



# collectivising our conversations

*a turn to more ethical sexual relations is key to reducing sexual violence*  
- Beres and Farvid (2010, p. 391)

*what is needed is a new mythology one which speaks about  
mutual exploration, communication, discovery  
and pleasuring one another, where penetration is not an end unto itself,  
but one of many possibilities for erotic enjoyment*  
- Crawford et al. (1994, p. 585-6)

While not all the women's sexual experiences within these abusive relationships were clear examples of rape, from an ethical perspective I would argue they were all extremely problematic and could (should) be considered sexual violence. Their experiences went well beyond what could be attributable to coercive social norms and involved regulation by male partners for *his* (sexual) gain. His use of technologies of coercive control were supported by specific hegemonic understandings of women and their sexuality that came together to control women's sexual engagement (virtually) eliminating the possibility that the women would not comply with his desires, rendering consent meaningless and sexual autonomy near impossible. Rape or even obvious sexual coercion was "unnecessary" for men to access sex that they wanted, whether women wanted to fuck or not. That is not to say that rape and sexual compliance were experienced in the same way by the women but that the focus on obvious use of coercive tactics and/or physical overpowering of the women - inherent in most dominant understandings of sexual violence (Ryan, 2011; Stark, 2007) - obscures the way women in coercive control relationships are rendered docile, dependant, and even desperate in their dutiful sexual compliance. The women's ability to act otherwise was

suppressed by the invisible cage of coercive control (Stark, 2007) and gendered power relations (Gavey, 2005), albeit through the coalescing of different technologies of coercive control with specific hegemonic understandings.

In this section I will outline the main dynamics I noticed occurring within the women's stories and briefly discuss the consequences for the women's ability to consent in these relationships.

## **desperately (un)wanted sex**

Within many of these women's stories there was a dynamic where transgressions of monogamy and the demands of heteronormativity came together with gaslighting; critiques of women's looks, sexual performance and domestic skill (in one case); and regimes of reward and punishment<sup>169</sup> to shape the women towards *his* (sexual) demand's and desires. This dynamic resulted in women adhering to a highly proscribed sexual aesthetic and practice, at the same time as feeling confused, unable to trust their perception of reality, and experiencing a pervasive sense of dependence on their male partner for validation. The women tried harder in their efforts to keep "their man" by engaging in heavy self-surveillance and regulation of how they looked and acted. The women took up technologies of sexiness (and ideas of good housewifing in Elizabeth's case<sup>170</sup>) to gain their partner's sexual and relational attention, resulting in the women producing highly sexualised versions of themselves. In many ways this rewarded the men's behaviour with the ability to possess

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<sup>169</sup> Here I am considering how the male partner's attention and praise, or withdrawal of such, act to shape the women.

<sup>170</sup> Elizabeth's relationship was the only one where her domestic skills were subject to coercive control - this may be because hers was the only marriage type relationship where they also owned a home and had children. The other relationships were either on again/off again in the case of Roxanne, a series of shorter relationships in the case of Jessica, or relationships in their late teens or early 20s without the responsibilities of children and domestic life.

their own pornified partner. In these circumstances the men's sexualised attention acted as a source of stability and connection pleasure (Kelly et al., 2017) in an otherwise stormy relationship. His sexual interest ensured her continued engagement with the relationship and acting as a source of hope that things could be different if she just kept trying harder to pleasure him (reflecting the perfect-love discourse; Adams & Towns, 2000).

The women desperately wanted the sex because it helped ease concerns about their relationship status and positioned them as desired women. As Danielle said earlier, she was just stoked he found her hot and wanted to fuck her. Yet, the women also reported not actually desiring the sex for themselves and were knowingly doing it for him and his approval. While the women referred to this fucking as consensual, it appeared to me the women understood consent as being present if they had not said no or physically resisted the sexualised interactions as they unfolded. I wonder if this is really enough to consider the fucking consensual, especially when we bear in mind Beres' (2007) and Gavey's (2005) suggestion that we consider consent within the context of interpersonal and social power relations, with a critical understanding of how power is influencing (and limiting) different people's sexual engagement. The women were subject to sex that resulted from the socially coercive forces of discourses of monogamy, heterosexuality, the have/hold discourse and hegemonic understandings of the role sex plays in a relationship, alongside the women's sense of self being so closely tied to his positive reactions (Williamson, 2010) and sexual interest (Kelly et al., 2017), a pervasive feeling of being crazy, as well as being subject to punishment for not performing her sexualized femininity well enough. In these circumstances the sexual encounters were not able to meet the standards for feminist understandings of consent which require

it is given freely (MacKinnon, 1989), to be enthusiastic rather than acquiescent and able to be (re)negotiated at any time (Beres & MacDonald, 2015; Harris, 2018).

## **defaulting to men**

Sexual coercion is typically discussed as being the use of a range of emotional, verbal, and behavioural tactics/processes *at the time of sexual interactions* to pressure women into consenting to sex (Beres et al., 2014; Tomborra et al., 2014). Within the women's stories there was a dynamic where women were coerced by social expectations to defer to men's wishes alongside individual men's use of isolation and microregulation to further control women and shape them towards *his* desires and demands in sexual *and* non-sexual domains, without question. In this way, her sexual compliance was the result of a background of social and interpersonal control that disciplined her to default to him, rendering his "need" for sexual coercion at the point of fucking unnecessary for him to secure whatever sex he wanted.

The dominant norms of heterosex that result in a favouring of men and their sexual desires (Gavey, 2005; Kelly et al., 2017), appeared to be mirrored in non-sexual aspects of heterosexual relationships. For example, the script for how early relationships favour a deferral to men with respect to the status of, and commitment within, the relationship (Pickens & Braun, 2018; Thompson, 2018). As relationships develop this male power, and women's deferral to his wants, is further hidden behind ideas of romance, of "us", relational compromise, ideas that relationships take work, and the importance of phallogentric fucking (Gavey, 2005; Jackson, 1984). This kind of work is predominately undertaken by women as part of their disproportionate share of emotional, relational and sexual

labour within heterosexual relationships (Fahs & Swank, 2016; Hochschild, 1989).

These dynamics of male primacy were evident within the women's stories, such as their role keeping the peace within the family home, favouring his interests and hobbies, not "nagging" or making demands on him (or the relationship or sexual encounters), and tailoring themselves to his preferences with respect to physical appearance and behaviour. From the beginning of the relationships this default to men appeared understood as a commonsense and normal way to be a woman partner. When men made their preferences known it seemed quite natural to the women to be responsive to his wishes. The disciplinary power of these malecentric relational ways made it difficult for the women to discern from his use of isolation and microregulation from just being a wife/girlfriend who is responding to her partner's wishes, as well as western society's expectations that women fuck their male partners and be thin. Within this dynamic it was assumed by the woman, and her partner, that she would comply with his sexual wishes without question. Consent was not a consideration because it was implicit in her role as girlfriend/wife; thus the women's own desires to fuck, or not, were irrelevant.

### **fucked in fear**

The other prominent dynamic within the women's stories was where women were fucked in fear due to threats, physical assault, and/or rape. Women who had experienced physical assault and were subject to ongoing threats of further physical violence reported that fear of further violence was the reason for their compliance with unwanted sex. The danger within these relationships rendered complying with sex they did not want the *safer* option compared to resisting his wishes. At other times, the women

described circumstances that were *clearly* rape and which appeared to be *explicitly* intended to demonstrate to the women that they had no power and could (and would) be dominated, violated, and controlled at the man's will. As Cahill (2016) argues, the point of rape is to overpower women's agency and render it meaningless, which is what Catherine reported feeling after her repeated "no" failed to stop her from being raped on numerous occasions. These rapes acted to control the women further by creating an environment where *his* power and unfettered access to her body was ever present. Consent after these experiences of rape is meaningless because the threat of further rape is omnipresent. In these circumstances consent was not a consideration, or was intentionally ignored.

The women's ability to say no and be listened to was in a material sense basically impossible within this dynamic. The women were generally unable to link their experience with the role of social structures that favour men and embolden some individual men to wield the power this system affords to use women's bodies as they please and create an environment of fear (Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2016; Fahs & Gonzales 2014; Gunnarsson, 2017; McRobbie, 2011; Rutherford, 2018). Instead, the women often took up neoliberal values of personal responsibility and victim blaming discourses (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012) to blame themselves (at least in part) for "letting" these things happen<sup>171</sup> and for not resisting more or seeking help.

## **consent conclusions**

The women's stories raise serious concerns about their safety (emotionally, mentally, physically and spiritually) which seems

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<sup>171</sup> While most of the women blamed themselves for what transpired, at least in part, they interestingly did not take up neoliberal ideas of transformation or personal development within the context of adverse situations, the way women did in the context of sex within the grey area (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Gunnarsson, 2017; Karlson, 2019; Lamb, 2015).

necessary before there can be equal, and thus consensual, fucking. Feminist authors have repeatedly found that women do not share equal power with men in relationships and sexual situations, resulting in women regularly engaging in sex they do not want (Bay-Cheng, 2010, 2019; Bay-Cheng & Bruns, 2016; Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Dowling, 2017; Kelly et al., 2017). The addition of a coercive control relationship dynamic further curtails the women's ability to act in ways that honour *her* wishes to fuck, not fuck, or fuck under some circumstances.

I do not want my comments to suggest that women cannot consent to sex with men - I think they can, provided there is some understanding and unpacking of the way unequal gender, class, racial, and other social power relations impact the situation. But such a conversation requires the critical consciousness of the potential playmates and an interest in respecting the wishes, boundaries, and bodily autonomy of all involved, irrespective of the duration of the relationship/s involved (Beres & Farvid, 2010). These parameters for ethical sex *cannot* be present in a coercive control relationship given the intention of the abuser is to control the agency of the woman (Stark, 2007).

Ultimately, these relationships restrict the possibilities of women's sexual selves, as well as narrowing the possibilities of life, potentially forever (Gavey, 2005; Stark, 2007). It was difficult for the women to feel safe within themselves and with others; it made it hard for them to know and express their own desires and boundaries in all areas of life, and it stopped them living fully, sexually, and relationally:

*Roxanne: I have had two very long periods of celibacy, that one was four years, that one was six. And with that one I just made the decision that I*

*was happy with that for the rest of my life,  
not that I was suddenly asexual because I wasn't*

*Elizabeth: I feel as if I find it just really hard to be in my body now because I  
feel like all of the sex that I ever had was very acted out wasn't really me  
wasn't fully just being able to be me*

*Elizabeth: (I have) committed to no relationships for a another five years, I  
have made that a deal with myself just purely because I don't trust myself,  
and I don't trust them, I don't trust myself to be able to pick the right men  
so yeah that is a big part of my life just sticking to that.  
I find that quite difficult*

*Catherine: it's a bit sad really cos I have given so much of my time and my  
life to trying to impress other people when I, because I thought I needed a  
man, or I thought that I needed to have sex, to be fulfilled sexually um, so  
it's really sad looking at it, really depressing*

*Jessica: I think I have just picked up everyone else's shit around me and  
gone on everyone else's ideas. I think actually for myself I don't actually  
really know (what my sexuality is)*

*Danielle: I never knew if other guys were telling the truth and always  
thought that they have this uncontrollable urge with regards to sex and  
variety and I can see it in so many of their actions and don't believe their  
words*

*Angela: I think probably because of so much value being put on that part  
of me by the world and society in general and men who I have had  
intimate relationships with I think I have gone, because of that, in the  
other direction, like I guess even though I see it as theoretically awesome  
that women can be like super sexual beings, I think that because of the  
things that have happened to me I am just not going to be like that. And  
yeah it is revolutionary for a woman to be as sexual as she likes, but it is  
also revolutionary in my mind for me to be able to be like well no fuck that,  
I'm going to do what feels comfortable for me ... So um yeah I think it has  
probably made me be a much less sexual person than maybe I would have  
been*

Much like myself, the women have spent years healing from the toll these relationships took, resisting the notion that leaving an abusive relationship makes the abuse stop. This brings to mind an example from Stark (2007) where a woman continued to live by her husband's rules - for things such as the shape of the animal flesh (meat) she bought - due to fear of his reprisal should she get it wrong, despite her husband having been dead for a number of years. While we need to be cautious about saying

all abusive relationships have an overly detrimental impact on all women that leaves them broken for years - similar to the idea of rape *always* being a highly traumatic event (Gavey & Schmidt, 2011) - we also need to acknowledge that at least for some women the impacts of their abusive experiences remain embedded in their mind and body for years after the abuse ends, sometimes for their lifetime.

## **reimagining relating and fucking**

Consent is not enough to reduce sexual harms (Beres, 2018) and a broader sexual ethics is needed that considers our boundaries and pleasure, as well as those you are interacting with, and consideration of the broader social power relations that these interactions take place in (Beres & Farvid, 2010). It is not just about being able to say no, or about "stopping the worst of bad sex" (Thomas et al., 2017, p. 774); I think it is also about being able to say yes, being able to give in-the-moment feedback about what someone is doing to or with your body, it is about your ability to change your mind mid thrust, it is about being able to guide things in real time and also caring about and being able to notice the yes, the uncertainty and the no in our sexual partner's(s') body language and words (Beres & Farvid, 2010), knowing that sometimes we might get it wrong but if we are trying to pay attention we are more likely to notice when we need to make inquiries. And it is about hearing the yes, the no, the maybe inside ourselves and being able to be responsive to this, safe in the knowledge that our sexual partner(s) want to know and will respect what is right for us in that moment, because as Catherine put it, consent is a privilege:

*Catherine: I would like to think that consent is um, a privilege and that when you are consenting to someone to have sex with you that they are privileged in that you are wanting to share your body with them and that it*

*is an experience for everybody and that they should feel like lucky to able to do that and to come into your private space um, and that they need to respect any boundaries you have around your body*

We need intimate justice, that is "freedom from harm and coercion, as well as experiences of pleasure and satisfaction" (McClelland, 2010, p. 673). Working towards women's safety necessitates consideration of women's (sexual) pleasure and desires (including their life projects). We need to understand how the norms that govern fucking and relating result in coercion and severely limits women's access to pleasure (Beres, 2018; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Gavey, 2005; Gilfoyle et al., 1992; Hust et al., 2017; Jeffery & Barata, 2019; Metz et al., 2020). Consciousness raising efforts to help make links between the personal and the political, enable us to dismantle the barriers to pursuing women's genuine sexual (and relational) desires and pleasures (Gavey, 1992), and opens up space for safe, equitable, and pleasurable ways of fucking and relating.

In this way we are taking up Judith Butler's (1990) challenge to trouble gender expectations, to queer<sup>172</sup> our performance and move outside the binaries that maintain our current understandings of fucking, relating, gender, sex, and sexuality (Farvid et al., 2017), including who is allowed to be sexual (Fahs & McClelland, 2016), to promote diversity of sexual and relational behaviour and identities (Gavey, 1992). Choosing to critically consider the wider power relations involved in the way we fuck and relate doesn't mean we can't "*get off with a good dick inside*", to quote Catherine, or be in a monogamous relationship with a man. Instead, it means that those involved have made an

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<sup>172</sup> The term queer has multiple meanings including an umbrella term for all non-heterosexual individuals, an identity that enables fluid and inclusive desire, and a challenge to hegemonic sexuality (Callis, 2009). Here, I am using it as a challenge to hegemonic sexuality (and relationships), to critique and challenge dominant understandings of the relationship between gender, sex and sexuality, about who can have sex with whom, in what relationship configuration and how. For example, challenging the role of penetration in fucking, or troubling (mixing up) the who and what of penetration, as Minge and Zimmerman (2009) do in their exploration (and subversion) of penetration through the use of dildos in lesbian sexual encounters.

informed decision based on their desires, rather than pressure to be 'normal'.

We need to move away from sex that is bound in expectations, orgasm goals, and a focus on how we look in the fucking, and move towards noticing how our relationships and fucking leave us feeling physically and emotionally in the doing and the aftermath (Gavey, 2005; Woodard, forthcoming). It is a turn to thinking about the energy and flow of the sexual encounters, to the prioritization of safety and equality in shaping how the interactions that transpire, so that all involved may find pleasure within the encounter (if they want). Ethical sex should be about fucking in manner that is welcomed by all involved at the time and should not commit us to wanting it in the next moment, to ensuring his/her/their orgasm(s) (or ours), or that we will fuck the same way next time or with that person(s). It just means at that time, that is what feels good and there is a mutual desire to share that experience until such a time as any of those involved no longer likes it, for any reason.

While the women did not experience fucking and relating in an open and ethically bound manner, they held aspirations for sex that resisted a sole focus on men and male pleasure. Drawing on notions of romance, equality (Gavey, 2005), and spiritual connection (Potts, 2000), they articulated collective desires for fucking that was a more felt, more embodied and undefinable<sup>173</sup> experience, bound in emotion, pleasure, and (spiritual) connection<sup>174</sup>:

*Jessica: I am quite sensual, I love the build-up, the touching and the emotions that you can bring up doing that are quite beautiful\*\**

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<sup>173</sup> I use the term undefinable here in two respects: one discursive and one spiritual. Angela resists putting discursive limitations on how sex could be defined. Elizabeth and Jessica's comments speak to sex as a spiritual experience that is almost beyond articulation, at least within dominant western thought.

<sup>174</sup> Quotes below that end with \*\* indicate that these have been used elsewhere in this thesis and are replicated here for ease of reference.

*Jessica: it is not just about sex in life, it is about the emotional connection, even spiritual if you believe in that stuff\*\**

*Danielle: I think it is an act, it should be an act of like love and enjoyment between people that respect, care for each other or are otherwise comfortable exploring that together like for both people*

*Angela: I think it is whatever you frikkin want it to be. Like I think that people can have sex without it necessarily even involving genitalia, yeah, I don't know, I think its undefinable in a lot of ways like, I am unwilling to say what I think it is because I think a lot of people are having sex in ways or relationships that most people wouldn't see as such. Or are doing things and yeah, I don't know*

*Elizabeth: I believe that it will be in your body*

*Elizabeth: I think sex is an exchange of energy but I think that it is all, I think that we get all caught up with the acts of what sex are rather than the feeling of what sex is so it has become about like for me I think it is more of spiritual I really do believe it is more a spiritual connection with someone else and that you just happen to have these feelings with each other that are just so good that you are feeling it and that it is all in your body and it is like pleasure. But then at the same time it is kind of like more and more what is happening on a level somewhere else I think... I do think that sex is just pleasure like it's just finding pleasure with someone else ... I think that is what it really is in a nut shell, it's just that connection, that energy, and that feeling of pleasure*

The women's version of fucking speaks to something deeper and beyond the current focus on performative phallogocentric sex<sup>175</sup>. Women's sexual pleasure is not a luxury, it is integral to our safety, our equity, and our life projects (Bay-Cheng, 2010). When we can engage in fucking that we want this can be healing and fulfilling, as Roxanne found recently:

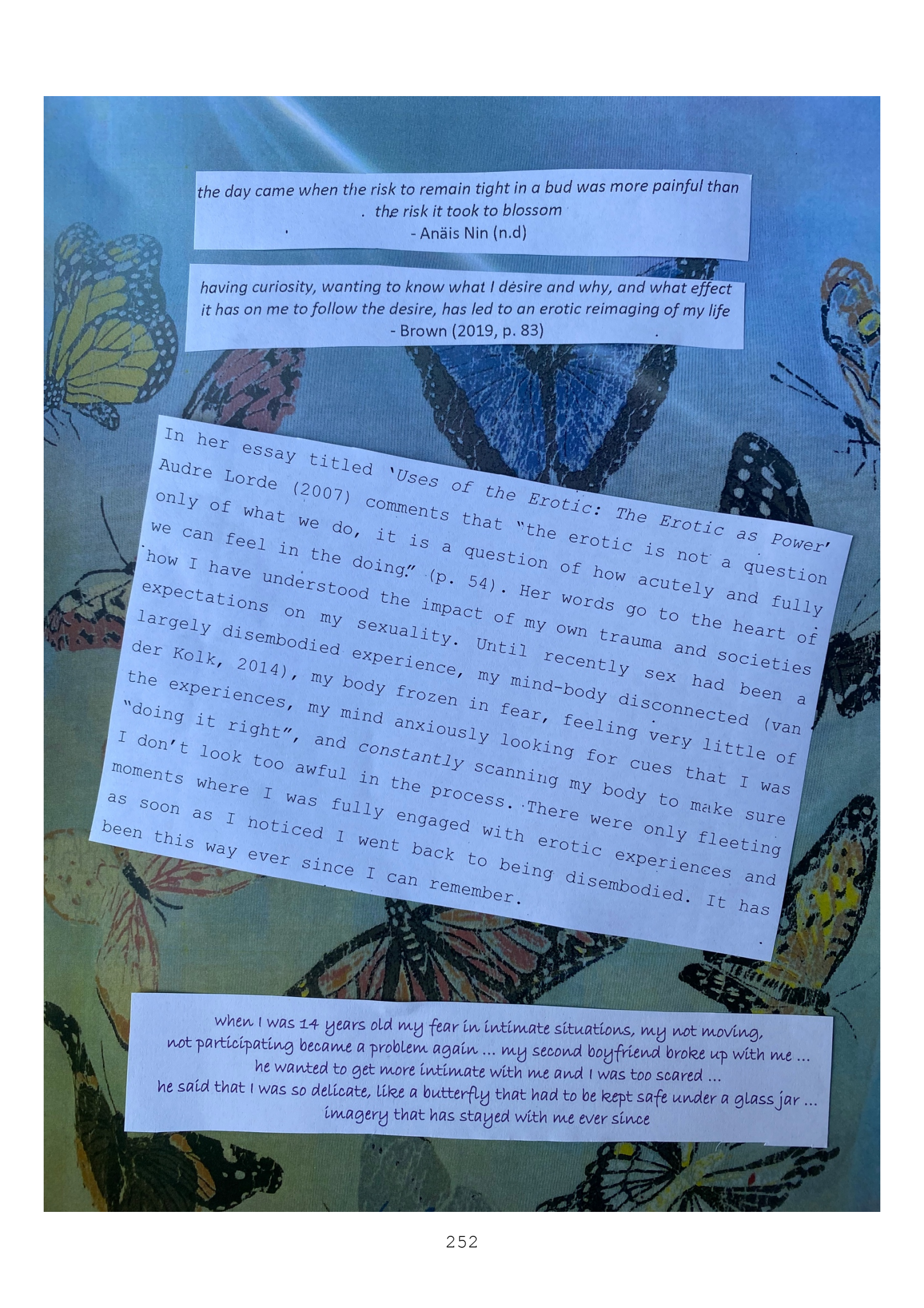
*Roxanne: I guess with sex I am just at this point where I am so fulfilled that I can hardly comprehend that. Yeah. And that's healing, you know, that's healing within itself for me*

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<sup>175</sup> Interestingly these new desires for fucking appear to reflect a turn within feminist psychology towards affect (Ahmed, 2004) and embodiment (Tolman et al., 2014) and clinical psychology's turn towards third wave treatment modalities that draw on Buddhist psychology (Hayes, 2019; Linehan, 2015). This makes me wonder if there has been a cultural move towards a more felt, authentic experience of life in the west, possibly developed alongside the growing industrial wellness complex (capitalism's commodification and commercialization of pagan ideas about (re)connection with cycles of natures and eastern ideas such as yoga, meditation, introspection, mindfulness, and intuition that the counterculture took up during the 1960s and 1970s). Just a wondering.



**freeing butterflies**



*the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than  
the risk it took to blossom*  
- Anais Nin (n.d)

*having curiosity, wanting to know what I desire and why, and what effect  
it has on me to follow the desire, has led to an erotic reimagining of my life*  
- Brown (2019, p. 83)

In her essay titled 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power' Audre Lorde (2007) comments that "the erotic is not a question only of what we do, it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing." (p. 54). Her words go to the heart of how I have understood the impact of my own trauma and societies expectations on my sexuality. Until recently sex had been a largely disembodied experience, my mind-body disconnected (van der Kolk, 2014), my body frozen in fear, feeling very little of the experiences, my mind anxiously looking for cues that I was "doing it right", and constantly scanning my body to make sure I don't look too awful in the process. There were only fleeting moments where I was fully engaged with erotic experiences and as soon as I noticed I went back to being disembodied. It has been this way ever since I can remember.

*when I was 14 years old my fear in intimate situations, my not moving,  
not participating became a problem again ... my second boyfriend broke up with me ...  
he wanted to get more intimate with me and I was too scared ...  
he said that I was so delicate, like a butterfly that had to be kept safe under a glass jar ...  
imagery that has stayed with me ever since*



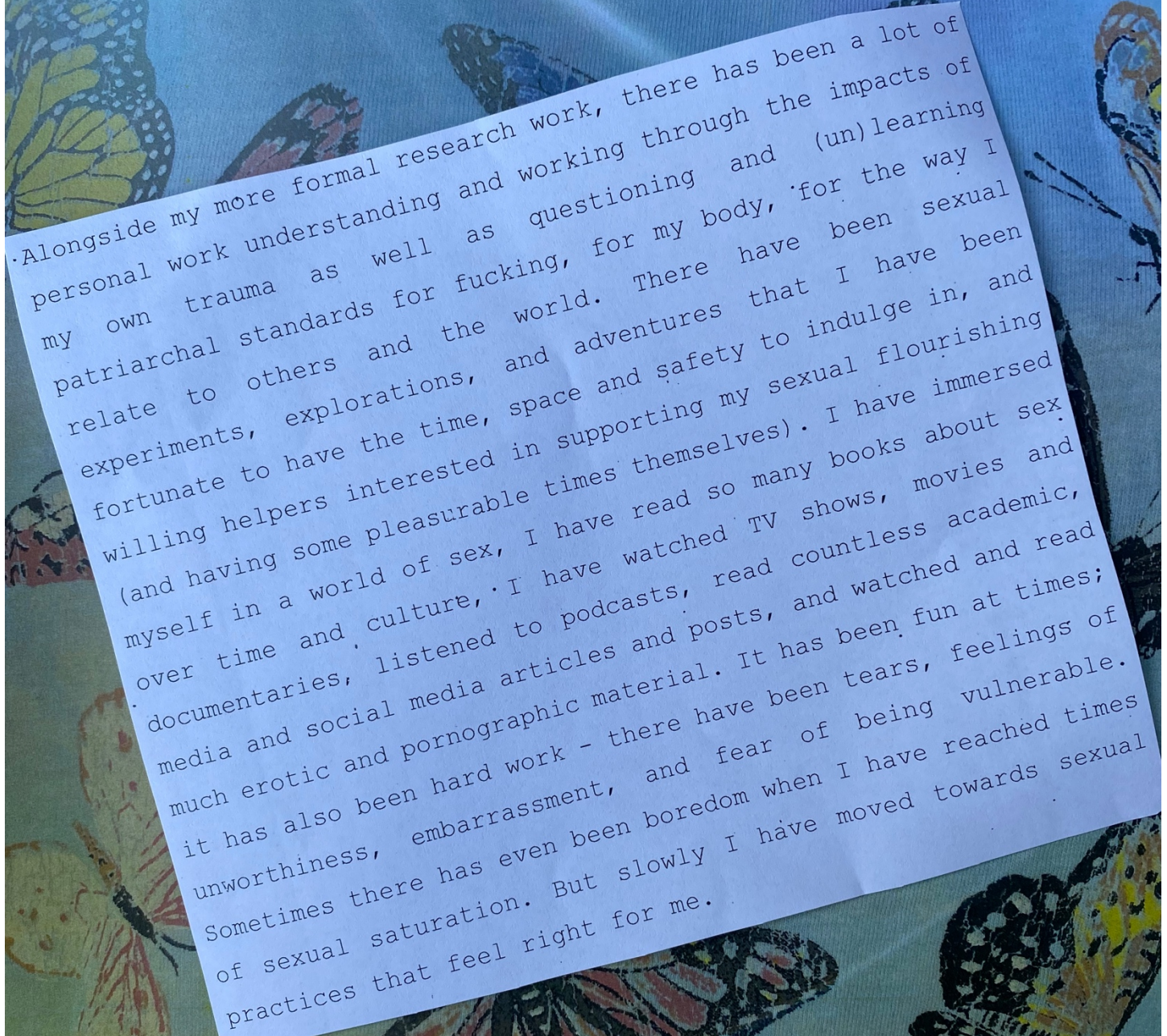
In my trapped butterfly I recognise the "black hole" Danielle used to describe her own relationship to her sexuality, a shared sense of terror in sexual situations. Like her, and several of the women, I turned to substances to overcome this terror and enable me to engage in sexual situations, such was the "importance" of being sexual with boys and men (Gavey, 2005) despite the stress of doing so. The use of alcohol to manage sexual situations continued throughout my teens and much of my adult life. Feminist psychology has seen me propelled towards a totally different sexual reality:

early in my psychology studies my lecturer Leigh (now supervisor) said that women who had been sexually abused could have fulfilling sex lives ... these comments confused me greatly, this did not reflect how my sexual experiences had been at all ... my sexuality was largely still trapped in my head and body... this felt far from fulfilling

When I started this research, I read Nicola Gavey's (2005) book 'Just Sex?', which outlined the taken-for-granted ideas about what and how sex is and how these ideas coerce women into regular engagement with unwanted, but seemingly consensual sexual interactions. I was shocked by how much of what I was reading reflected in my own sexual experiences. I did think and behave as if sex was about being desired by a man, that his erection and pleasure was paramount, that sex was finished when my partner orgasmed and if he didn't then I felt like I must have done something wrong.

At the same time as reading Gavey's (2005) book I was also reading a zine called 'Fucking Transwomen' by Mira Bellweather (2010). The zine detailed her experience of being a transwoman, her sexuality and sexual practices. I was captivated by the practice of muffing<sup>11</sup>, where a finger is inserted into the inguinal canals (where the testicles descent from). Reading this alongside Gavey's (2005) descriptions of hegemonic heterosex, it helped me to really grasp how dominant discourses limit our understanding of our bodies and the possibilities of our pleasure by controlling the who, what, and how of fucking (and relating). Collectively, Gavey (2005) and Bellweather (2010) led me to deeply question what sex was for the first time. If my arousal was anything to go by, muffing was definitely sex, what else was there I didn't know about? And what did I want for me?

<sup>11</sup> I wonder if this practice is something that enables pre-operative transwomen to experience something akin to vaginal penetration and thus still centers the coital imperative as the desired, and normal, way of having sex? At the same time, muffing also queers how penetration could be understood, taken up, and by whom.



Alongside my more formal research work, there has been a lot of personal work understanding and working through the impacts of my own trauma as well as questioning and (un)learning patriarchal standards for fucking, for my body, for the way I relate to others and the world. There have been sexual experiments, explorations, and adventures that I have been fortunate to have the time, space and safety to indulge in, and willing helpers interested in supporting my sexual flourishing (and having some pleasurable times themselves). I have immersed myself in a world of sex, I have read so many books about sex over time and culture, I have watched TV shows, movies and documentaries, listened to podcasts, read countless academic, media and social media articles and posts, and watched and read much erotic and pornographic material. It has been fun at times; it has also been hard work - there have been tears, feelings of unworthiness, embarrassment, and fear of being vulnerable. Sometimes there has even been boredom when I have reached times of sexual saturation. But slowly I have moved towards sexual practices that feel right for me.

My first experiment with my love was to remove penetration for a month to see what happened; nearly five years later, while penetration is still practiced, it has not regained prominence: I have found myself in a wonderland of possibility and pleasure beyond the coital imperative that embraces a way of fucking that intentionally (and enthusiastically) pursues and solicits arousal; plays with gender, power, and restraint; explores genital and full body pleasures and orgasm; engages in solo through to group experiences. Engaging in the politics of this research has seen emboldened to make my life look, feel, taste, smell and sound how I always imagined it to be. Embracing the fullness of my (sexual) being has become part of embodying feminism - my resistance to dominant discourses about fucking that seek to position me as quiet, pretty and thin, laying on my back, the passive recipient of a man's desire (Holloway, 1984; Gavey, 1992), and at the same time also being confident, hot, up for anything (that looks like porn sex; Fahs & Gonzalez, 2014). Every time I cultivate sexual situations I want, every time I say yes, no, or maybe authentically based on what feels right for me, my butterfly flies a little freer!



Alice in  
disney

# fucking in wonderland



mad t  
xxxpic

go ask Alice, I think she will know  
- White Rabbit (Jefferson Airplane, 1967)



Alice in Wonderland porn toon c...  
disneyporn.com



Alice in wo  
hotnupics.c



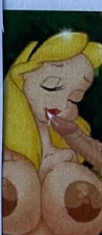
Anamited  
sexpictures



Sex has always been complicated for me, disconnected, limited, and uncertain. As I have fallen down the rabbit hole of my own sexuality alongside my research, Alice in Wonderland (Carroll, 2015) has become an antidote to the impact of my own abuse and the constraints of monogamous heterosexuality. Alice has helped me question our taken-for-granted reality and seen me move towards a more authentic and wonderous rendering of my life and sexuality; one that oscillates between colour, whimsy, and nature, and darkness, ritual, and depth. She has opened my eyes to the world of possibility when I follow my curiosity and queer my sexual practices. Alice (quite literally) has helped me fuck in wonderland. In the following section I will set out how I experience my sexuality now, after going through such a personal and transformative process alongside my research. I find myself in a wonderland of pleasure that has not only reshaped my sexual and relational practices, but also my relationship with myself.



on porn |...



Alice In Won...  
ex-xxx.com

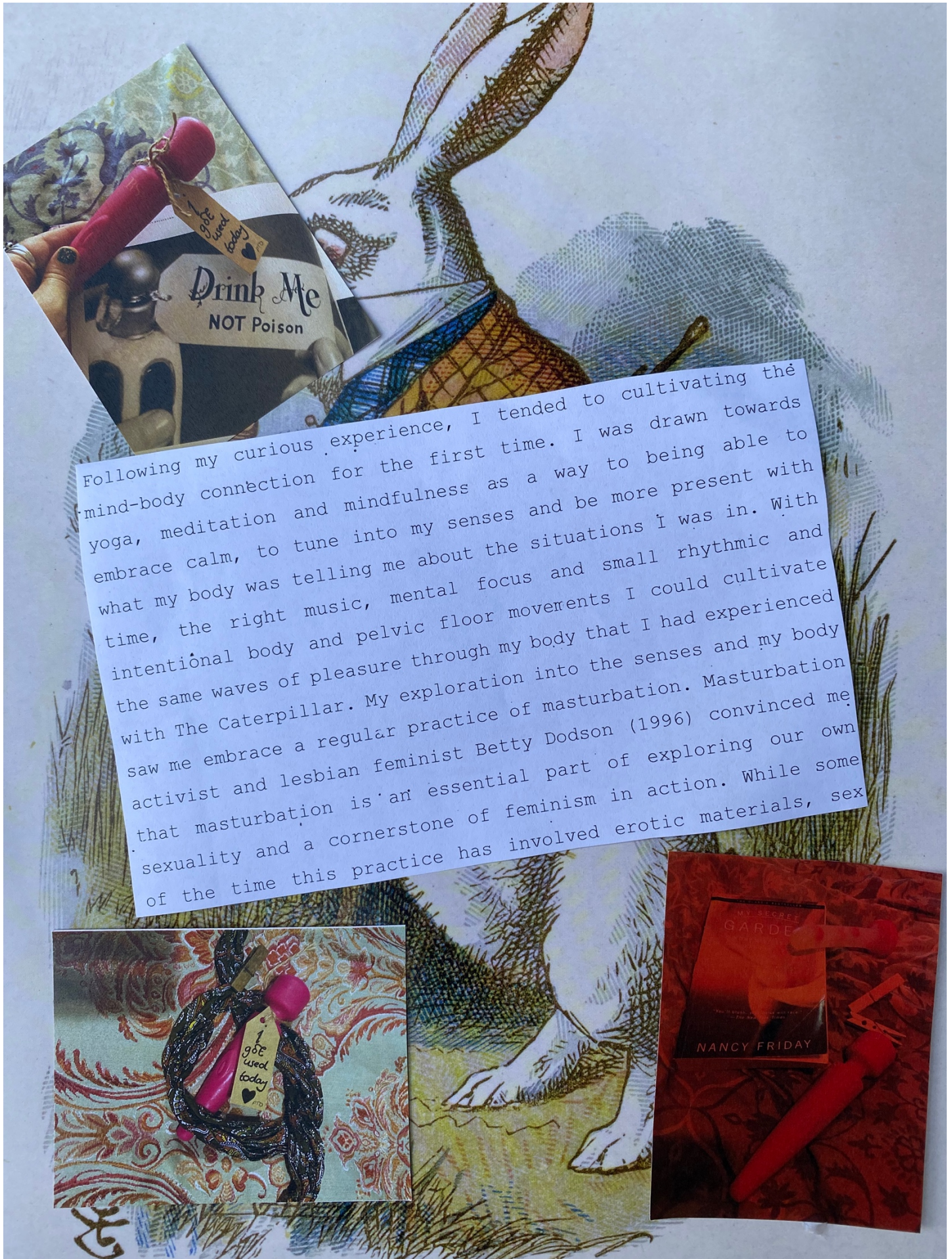


## sex for one

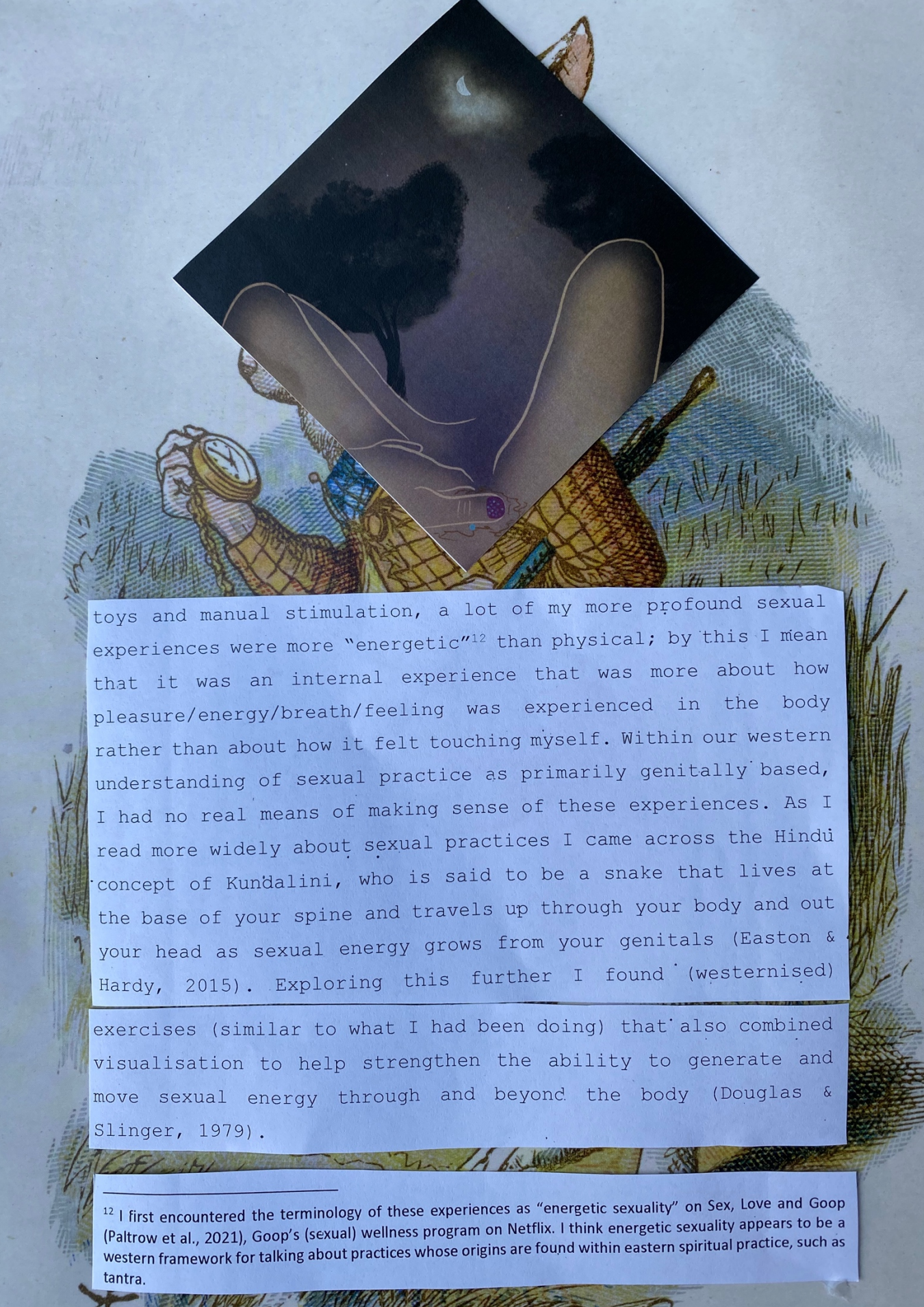
Three years ago I had an experience with a close friend (we will call her The Caterpillar.) that opened the mind to how good the body could feel, and hurtled me towards finding and being comfortable with my own pleasure. We lay back in the sun on a summers evening, lost in the sounds of Pink Floyd (the album Ummaguma to be specific). I noticed the music coursing through my body, stretching and compressing me, building over time through my whole body. As the sun slipped away below the hills we both experienced multiple full body orgasms, waves of pleasure with no genital contact. Becoming aware that my body

was capable of doing such pleasurable things saw an expansion of how I understood sexual pleasure. It was so different to how I usually experienced fucking which left my cunt feeling like a dead zone.





Following my curious experience, I tended to cultivating the mind-body connection for the first time. I was drawn towards yoga, meditation and mindfulness as a way to being able to embrace calm, to tune into my senses and be more present with what my body was telling me about the situations I was in. With time, the right music, mental focus and small rhythmic and intentional body and pelvic floor movements I could cultivate the same waves of pleasure through my body that I had experienced with The Caterpillar. My exploration into the senses and my body saw me embrace a regular practice of masturbation. Masturbation activist and lesbian feminist Betty Dodson (1996) convinced me that masturbation is an essential part of exploring our own sexuality and a cornerstone of feminism in action. While some of the time this practice has involved erotic materials, sex



toys and manual stimulation, a lot of my more profound sexual experiences were more "energetic"<sup>12</sup> than physical; by this I mean that it was an internal experience that was more about how pleasure/energy/breath/feeling was experienced in the body rather than about how it felt touching myself. Within our western understanding of sexual practice as primarily genitally based, I had no real means of making sense of these experiences. As I read more widely about sexual practices I came across the Hindu concept of Kundalini, who is said to be a snake that lives at the base of your spine and travels up through your body and out your head as sexual energy grows from your genitals (Easton & Hardy, 2015). Exploring this further I found (westernised) exercises (similar to what I had been doing) that also combined visualisation to help strengthen the ability to generate and move sexual energy through and beyond the body (Douglas & Slinger, 1979).

<sup>12</sup> I first encountered the terminology of these experiences as "energetic sexuality" on Sex, Love and Goop (Paltrow et al., 2021), Goop's (sexual) wellness program on Netflix. I think energetic sexuality appears to be a western framework for talking about practices whose origins are found within eastern spiritual practice, such as tantra.

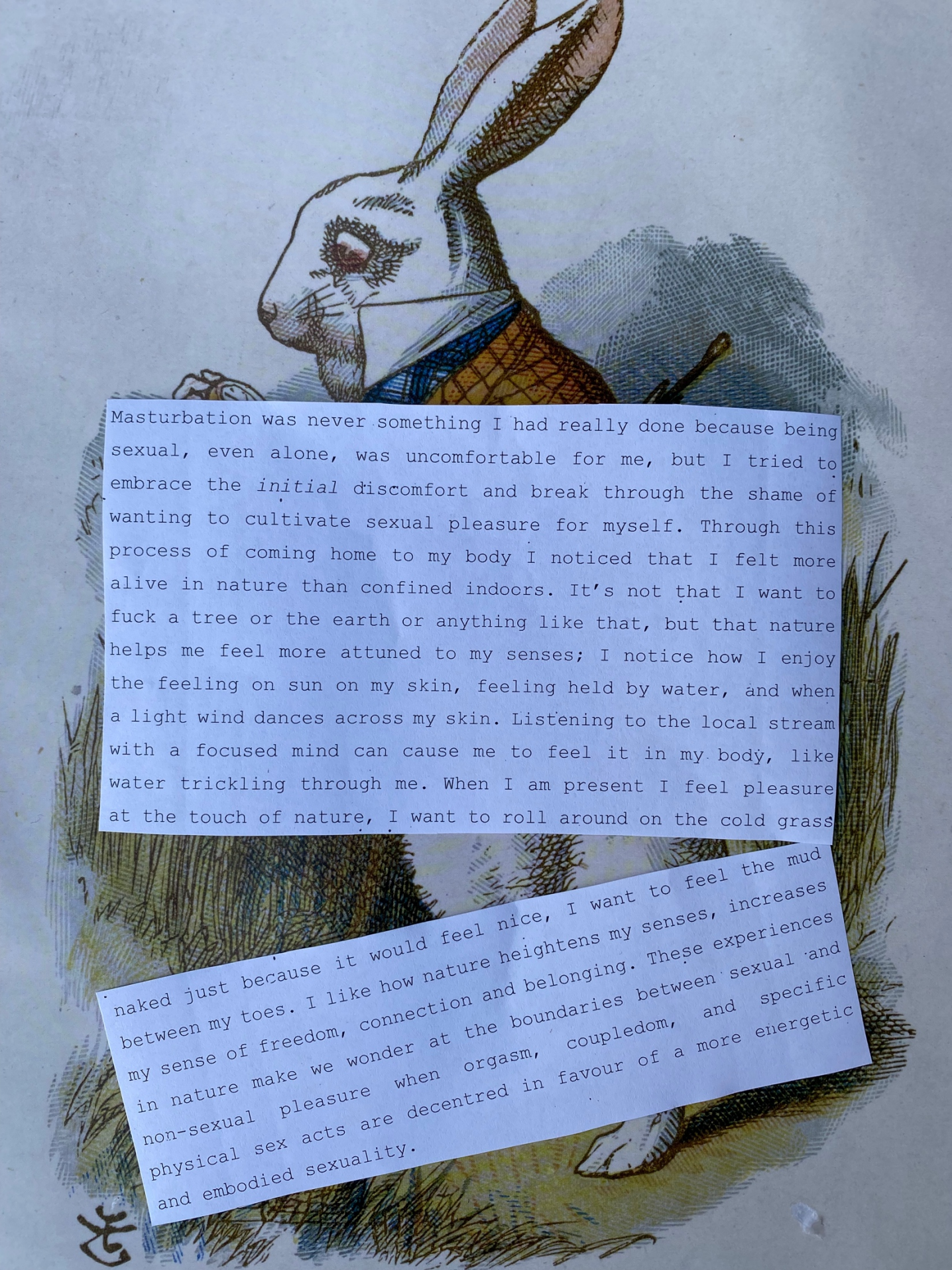
Living in a society where women's sexuality is largely about men, learning what you like and how to please yourselves, for yourselves, can feel like a radical act<sup>13</sup>. But masturbation was a hard thing to start, it felt like there was something wrong in enjoying the possibilities of my own body for my own sake. As Catherine said:

Catherine: they [school sex education] talk about masturbation and they talk about men and that it is a need and that you are going to start wanting to do it when you get erections when you are like this age but like to even touch on a female, like on a woman's masturbation, it's just, it wasn't even a thing



<sup>13</sup> Catherine also commented about finding a sense of liberation within her masturbation practice:

*Catherine: I bought myself a toy that I could use in my own time and like I prefer that and I find it way better. Some reason I find it really liberating, like it's like I am doing it for me and it is my body and it feels incredible and it's like a completely different feeling for me. And so I continue to do that in my own time*



Masturbation was never something I had really done because being sexual, even alone, was uncomfortable for me, but I tried to embrace the *initial* discomfort and break through the shame of wanting to cultivate sexual pleasure for myself. Through this process of coming home to my body I noticed that I felt more alive in nature than confined indoors. It's not that I want to fuck a tree or the earth or anything like that, but that nature helps me feel more attuned to my senses; I notice how I enjoy the feeling on sun on my skin, feeling held by water, and when a light wind dances across my skin. Listening to the local stream with a focused mind can cause me to feel it in my body, like water trickling through me. When I am present I feel pleasure at the touch of nature, I want to roll around on the cold grass

naked just because it would feel nice, I want to feel the mud between my toes. I like how nature heightens my senses, increases my sense of freedom, connection and belonging. These experiences in nature make me wonder at the boundaries between sexual and non-sexual pleasure when orgasm, coupledness, and specific physical sex acts are decentred in favour of a more energetic and embodied sexuality.



- outside<sup>4</sup> -

I sit crossed legged  
nestled in a grove of trees  
long grass tickling my toes

I breath  
I notice  
eyes closed

the bird song and my music merge  
sing bowls, singing birds, and me  
one

slowly  
I gyrate  
vibrations grow  
they move through me

During this exploration of myself I have had some of the more powerful, pleasurable and intense sexual moments of my life, challenging the dominant discourse that sex needs to be partnered, always genitally based, and definitely involving a cock to be fully felt and enjoyed. Without the presence of someone else I felt safe (and like the male in my head was bound and gagged), which enabled me to fall into sexual pleasure as an embodied and deeply felt experience.

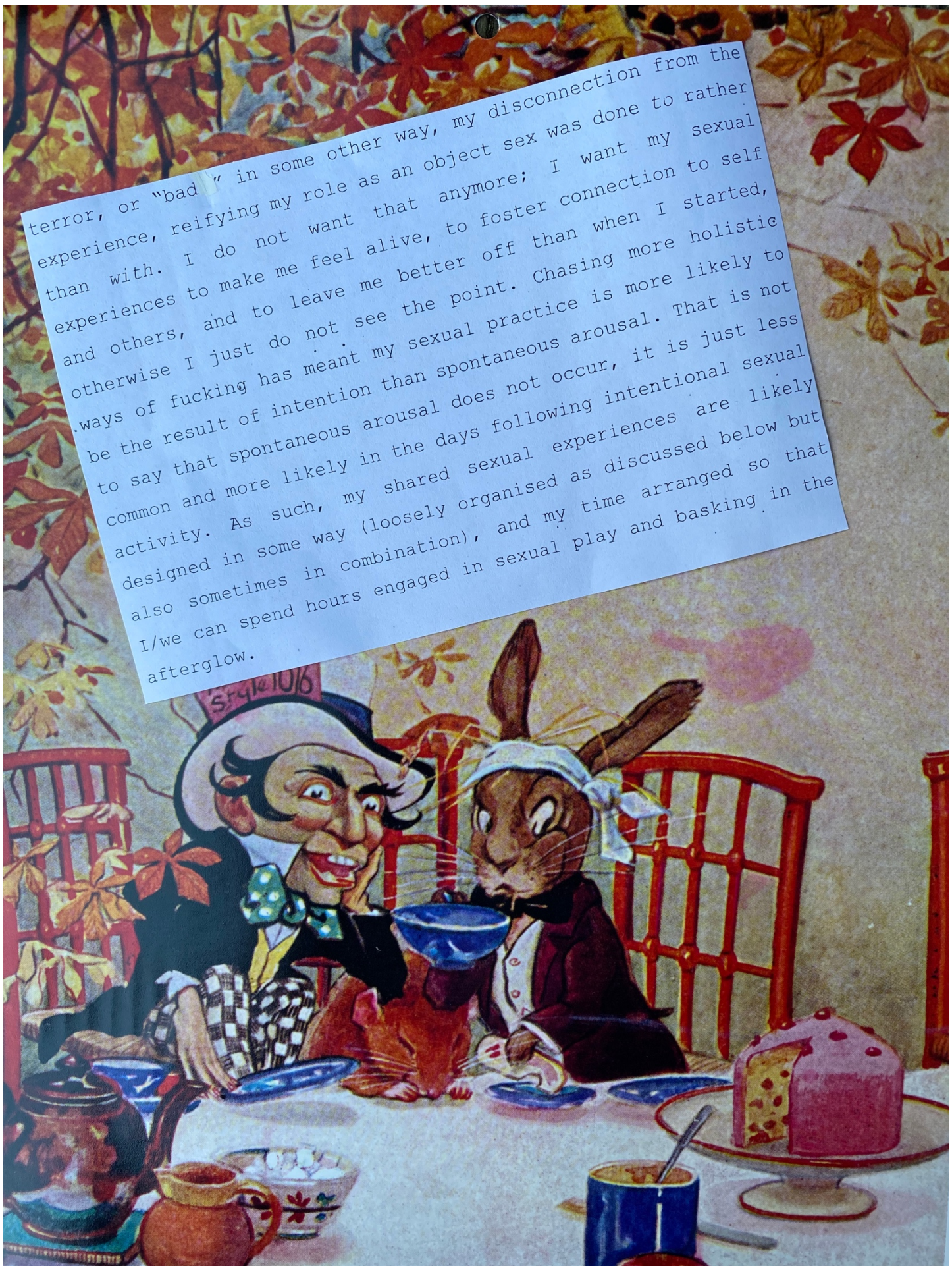
<sup>14</sup> The poetry in this section was written to capture my pleasurable real-life experiences and share them with my sexual support crew.

## playing with others

In addition to my solo exploration, I have had the pleasure of company and support from my love (also friend, lover, comrade, colleague, nesting partner, and fellow traveller in life), and the Caterpillar (friend, also lover, colleague, and fellow traveller in life<sup>15</sup>)<sup>16</sup>. With their support I have found that I am drawn to practices that play with sexual energy and connection, that involve different elements of BDSM play, and those that foster arousal through the sensory experience. This embodied and felt way of fucking emphasises attention, being fully present within, and responsive to, the experience. It feels a far cry from the way I experienced sex before this research, as a disembodied robot who often found sex a source of obligation,

<sup>15</sup> Easton and Hardy (2015) commented on the limitations of language with respect to more complex and nuanced relationships between people who are sexual with each other in the presences of commitment, care, and friendship but that is *not* a traditional marriage type relationship and does not desire to be. The prioritisation of "love" (read heterosexual marriage type love) relationships over other types of the relationships, and the nature of sex being considered abnormal and deviant outside of this type of love relationship makes it difficult to describe relationships that are multifaceted and blur the boundaries of love, sex, friendship, and family. The Caterpillar and I often discuss the challenges of defining our relationship within the discursive resources (read the ways we have for understanding and talking about something) we have available to us and that there is something pleasantly contrary in its indefinability, and at the same time we also marvel at how it actually does not matter at all because we seem to understand the dynamic, flow and energy of the relationship as it moves and changes over time. It is interesting to me as write this I feel the need to defend my relationship with my love, that my talking about any close relationship with another is disloyal somehow and reducing the importance of my life with my love. I think this is internalised hetero-monogamy at play because if I was talking about a non-sexual relationship with a close friend then the plurality of my affection would not be in question. After all, most of us are likely able to care about or love multiple people (children, parents, friends) in different ways that does not undermine the affection for other people in our lives. It is the addition of sexual interaction with another (within the context of the heterosexual monogamous social order) that causes us to (needlessly) question the validity of my commitment to my love and our nest.

<sup>16</sup> I have found that I am drawn to people I have a strong emotional bond, rather than physicality and/or gender expression (labelled as a demi-pansexual). It is people's values, politics and style that peak my interest above all else, their physicality and gender expression is of less interest or arousal to me. That said, I have only ever had romantic relationships with men, which I suspect is the result of heteronormativity and internalised homophobia, rather than representative of who I have been drawn to. I consider myself non-monogamous as my sexual and relational interest has often been directed towards more than one person at the same time.



terror, or "bad " in some other way, my disconnection from the experience, reifying my role as an object sex was done to rather than with. I do not want that anymore; I want my sexual experiences to make me feel alive, to foster connection to self and others, and to leave me better off than when I started, otherwise I just do not see the point. Chasing more holistic ways of fucking has meant my sexual practice is more likely to be the result of intention than spontaneous arousal. That is not to say that spontaneous arousal does not occur, it is just less common and more likely in the days following intentional sexual activity. As such, my shared sexual experiences are likely designed in some way (loosely organised as discussed below but also sometimes in combination), and my time arranged so that I/we can spend hours engaged in sexual play and basking in the afterglow.

## the wonder of the fairy cottage

The default way of being with my love is connected, emotionally vulnerable, and whimsical within, and beyond, the walls of our fairy cottage. In this state there is pleasure to be found in our everyday interactions, as much as there is being sexual. At times without intention, we have managed to have moments within the flow of day-to-day life, times of affection, and fucking where we feel like we have transcended time and space, like nothing else in the world exists, it is just us in a perfect, never-ending moment<sup>18</sup>. The more we sit on our bed and gaze into each other's eyes (the starting of our westernised tantric practice) the more we cultivate connection and shared reality.

Our presence with each other enables us to cultivate shared sexual energy but at the same time sex has become less important as our everyday can foster similar (but different) pleasure. As such we have moved away from concerns about the frequency of fucking towards favouring quality, depth, and fucking amazing experiences. Within our day to day lives and fucking, we are the most equal, playful and in the moment. We strive to notice and resist the influence of heteronormative patriarchal expectations that do not serve us.



<sup>18</sup> My understanding this as transcendence reminds me to the quasi-spiritual discourse participants used to explain good orgasms in Potts' (2000) research. The descriptions they offer of these experiences ring true for me within these day-to-day moments, as much as within some of our orgasms.

- new moon penetration<sup>9</sup> -

our bedroom is dark,  
the air heavy with incense  
and rhythmic Nordic drums

slowly I pour the cool oil over his shoulders and down his spine  
it trickles down his sides

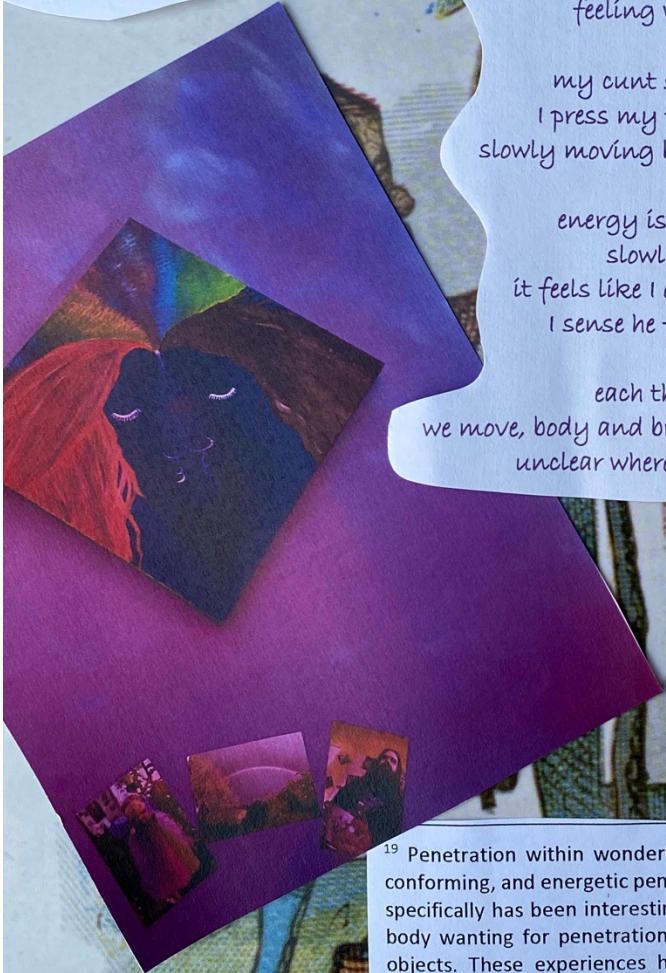
his back slightly arches  
in response to the cold,  
in desire  
in anticipation

I straddled his back  
slowly I slide my bare chest up his back,  
I press firmly and intentionally  
feeling where we connect

my cunt slides over his arse  
I press my pubic bone into him  
slowly moving backwards and forwards

energy is grows between us  
slowly and gently  
it feels like I am penetrating him<sup>10</sup>  
I sense he feels it like this too

each thrust .... deeper  
we move, body and breath together with the drums  
unclear where I end, and he begins



<sup>19</sup> Penetration within wonderland has broadened from traditional coitus to include same sex, gender non-conforming, and energetic penetrative experiences as I have tried to convey here. The journey with penetration specifically has been interesting because at times I have experienced what Gavey et al. (1999) term a sort of body wanting for penetration involving natural (the phallus, fingers, and tongues) as well as manufactured objects. These experiences have been felt orally, vaginally and involved anal play (but not phallus anal penetration). At other times any penetration, especially coitus, has been less desired/less enjoyable for me, sometimes he has wanted to receive penetration, and sometimes all penetration has been completely absent and unnecessary for pleasure over extended periods of time. During this adventure the meaning of penetration (for us) and its importance within our sexual experiences has become much more diverse and not really so imperative, enabling a much broader way of playing together sexually.

<sup>20</sup> Easton and Hardy (2015) spoke about their experiences of an "energy dick" (such as I had here with my love) which was capable of feelings of penetration and orgasm.

- inside -

we close the curtains  
saying goodbye to the rainy day outside  
we recline on a pillow pile  
surrounded by house plants

there are swirling light projections on the walls  
like blue and green waves  
it's like we are in an underwater forest  
(getting wet)

I feel him pressed up against me  
warm  
at each point of connection energy grows  
slowly filling my body

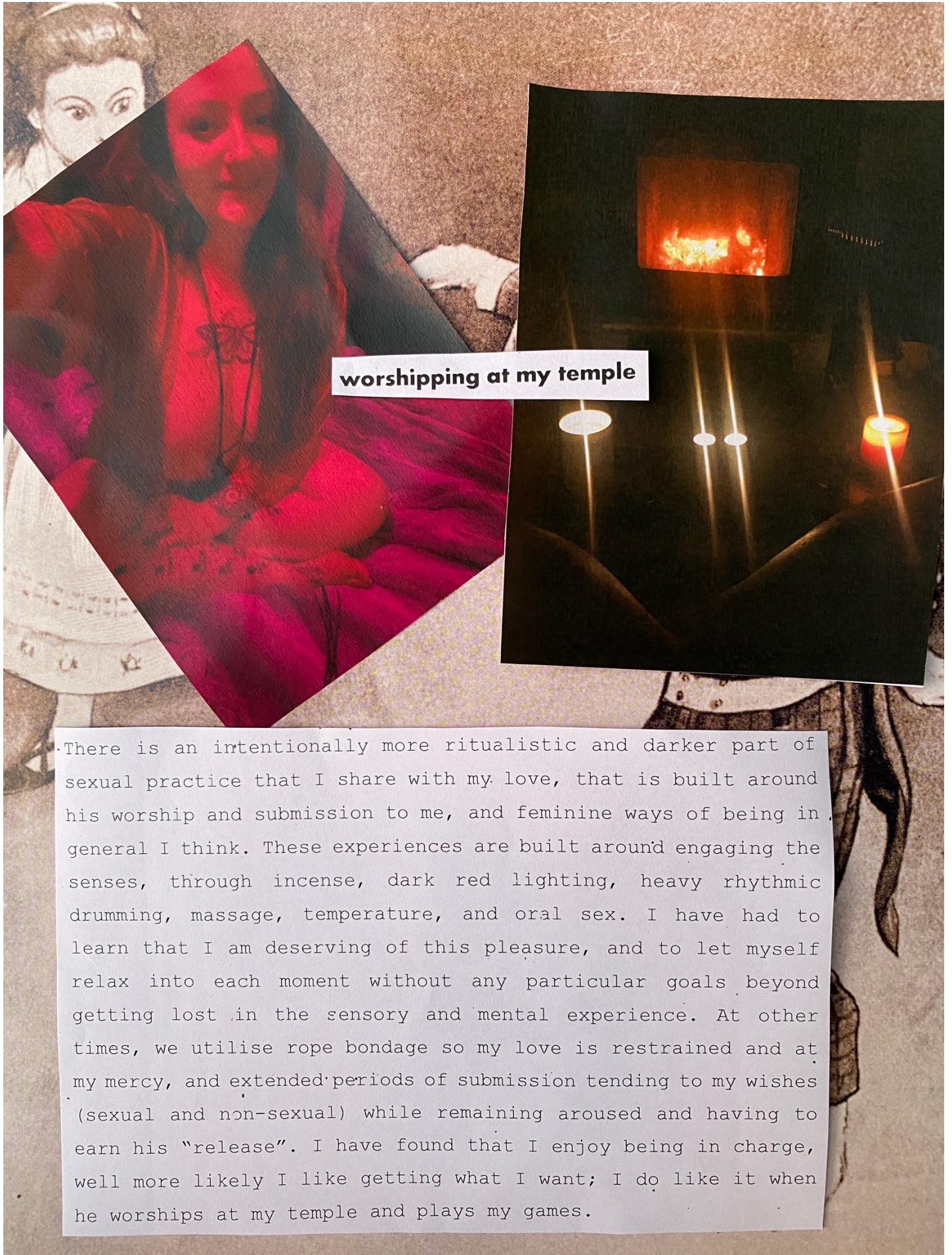
his hand slides over my bare stomach  
moving in slow, heavy, rhythmic circles  
knowing my shape, my skin, me  
intimately, wholly

anchored securely to his clothed lap  
the current between us flows like water  
running through me

energy in my pelvis grows with each stroke  
alive in the knowledge I am seen, known  
loved

my hips stir  
gently oscillating  
from side to side

awakening  
each stroke, each breath  
building  
growing  
pulsating



worshipping at my temple

There is an intentionally more ritualistic and darker part of sexual practice that I share with my love, that is built around his worship and submission to me, and feminine ways of being in general I think. These experiences are built around engaging the senses, through incense, dark red lighting, heavy rhythmic drumming, massage, temperature, and oral sex. I have had to learn that I am deserving of this pleasure, and to let myself relax into each moment without any particular goals beyond getting lost in the sensory and mental experience. At other times, we utilise rope bondage so my love is restrained and at my mercy, and extended periods of submission tending to my wishes (sexual and non-sexual) while remaining aroused and having to earn his "release". I have found that I enjoy being in charge, well more likely I like getting what I want; I do like it when he worships at my temple and plays my games.

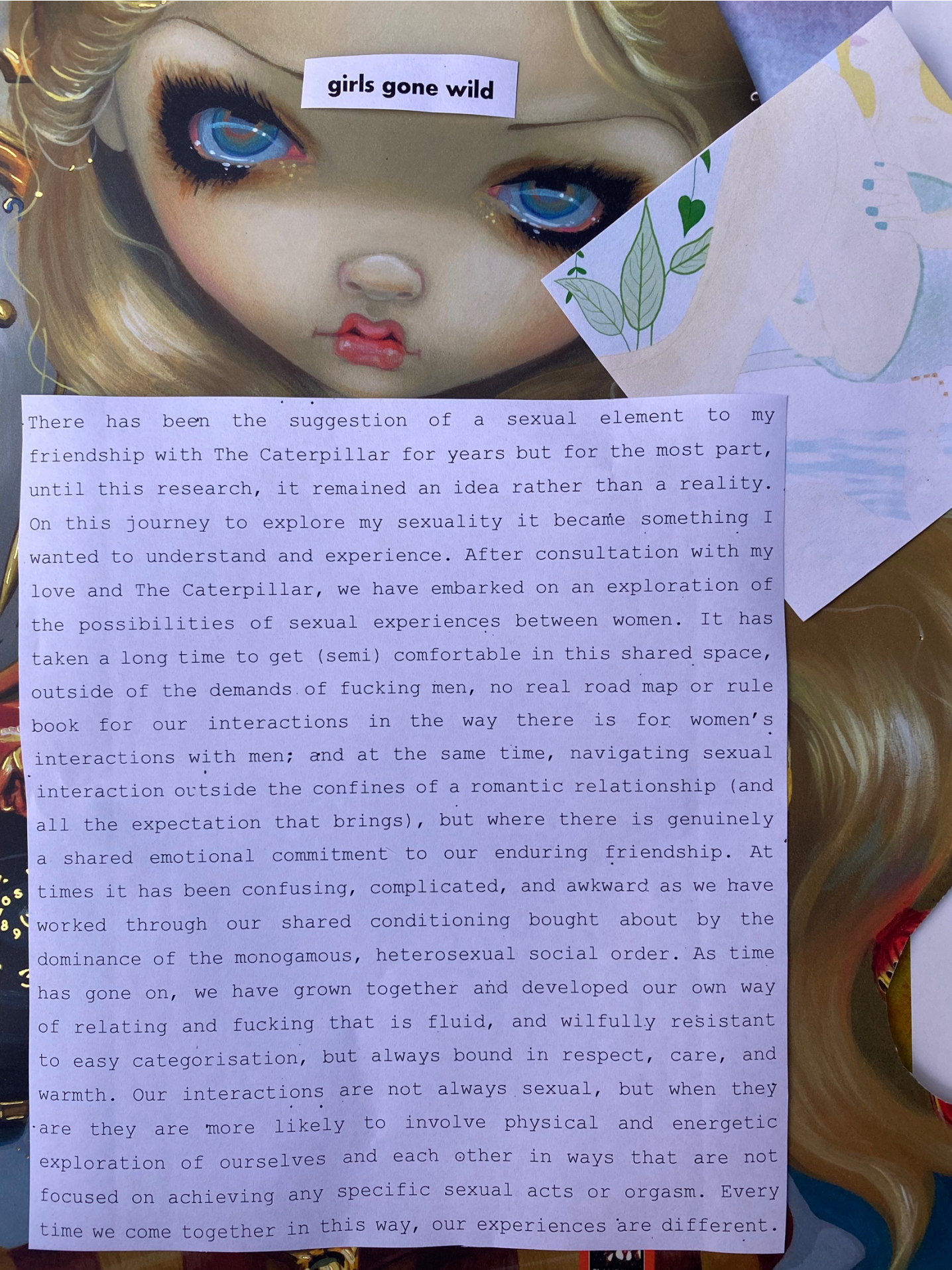


- worship -

covered in oil  
he slowly massaged my body  
knowing and honouring every part of me  
eventually he moves his attention to my temple  
moist  
warm  
wanting

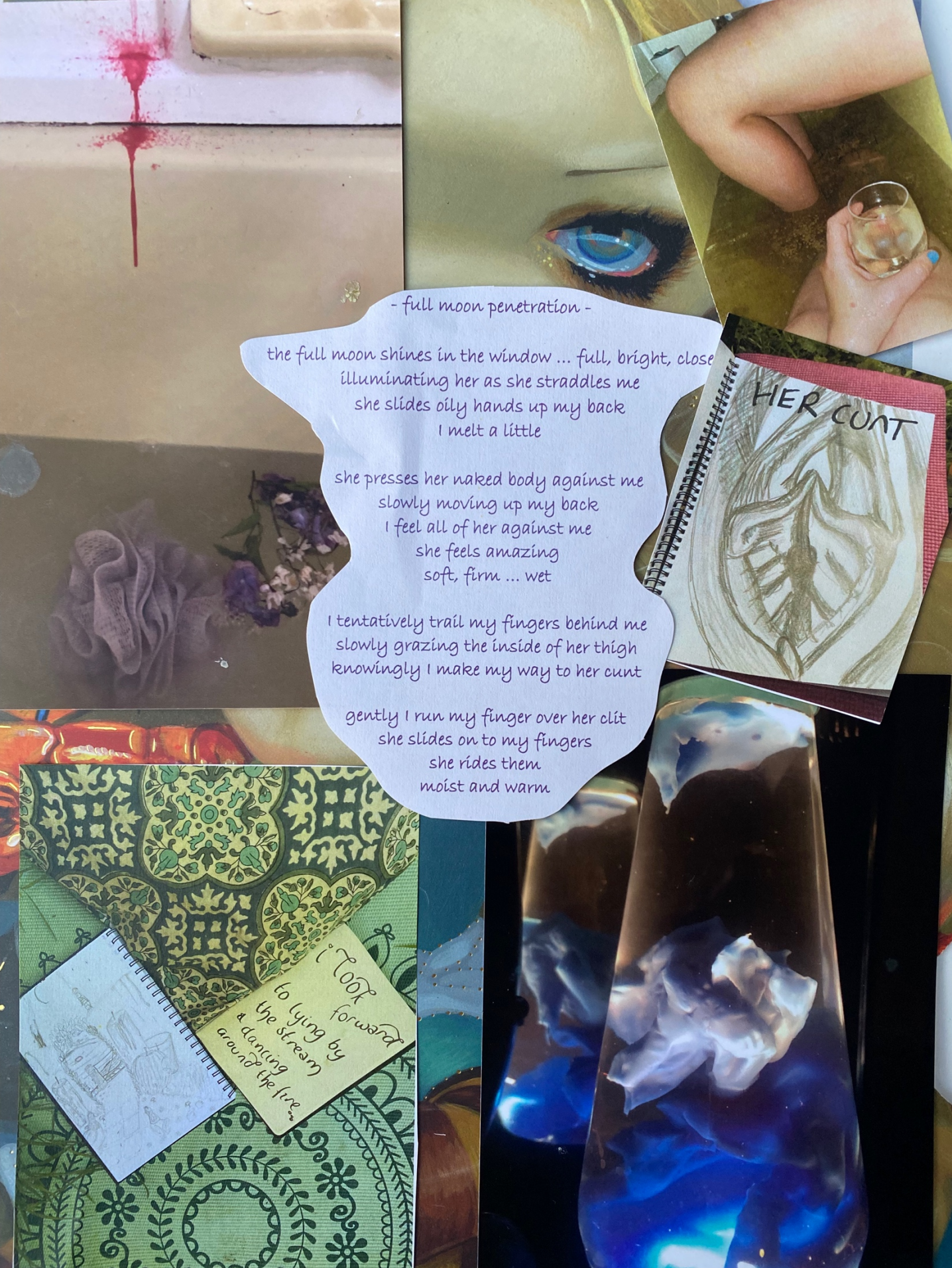
his fingers caress my opening  
dancing delicately over my jewel  
eventually entering me ... (briefly)

his mouth takes over  
getting lost in me  
pleasuring  
satisfying  
worshipping



**girls gone wild**

There has been the suggestion of a sexual element to my friendship with The Caterpillar for years but for the most part, until this research, it remained an idea rather than a reality. On this journey to explore my sexuality it became something I wanted to understand and experience. After consultation with my love and The Caterpillar, we have embarked on an exploration of the possibilities of sexual experiences between women. It has taken a long time to get (semi) comfortable in this shared space, outside of the demands of fucking men, no real road map or rule book for our interactions in the way there is for women's interactions with men; and at the same time, navigating sexual interaction outside the confines of a romantic relationship (and all the expectation that brings), but where there is genuinely a shared emotional commitment to our enduring friendship. At times it has been confusing, complicated, and awkward as we have worked through our shared conditioning bought about by the dominance of the monogamous, heterosexual social order. As time has gone on, we have grown together and developed our own way of relating and fucking that is fluid, and wilfully resistant to easy categorisation, but always bound in respect, care, and warmth. Our interactions are not always sexual, but when they are they are more likely to involve physical and energetic exploration of ourselves and each other in ways that are not focused on achieving any specific sexual acts or orgasm. Every time we come together in this way, our experiences are different.



- full moon penetration -

the full moon shines in the window ... full, bright, close  
illuminating her as she straddles me  
she slides oily hands up my back  
I melt a little

she presses her naked body against me  
slowly moving up my back  
I feel all of her against me  
she feels amazing  
soft, firm ... wet

I tentatively trail my fingers behind me  
slowly grazing the inside of her thigh  
knowingly I make my way to her cunt

gently I run my finger over her clit  
she slides on to my fingers  
she rides them  
moist and warm

HER CUNT

i look forward  
to lying by  
the stream  
& dancing  
around the fire...

## alice & the caterpillar

It has been a natural evolution to bring my two play mates together (fortunately we are all a similar kind of filthy - in the good way) and this has seen my love reimagined as Alice<sup>21</sup>, helping to bring my wonderland to life even more, troubling gender, monogamy, and heterosex along the way. S/he is mostly present when I am entertaining The Caterpillar. During these times, Alice is generally in my service, catering to our food, entertainment, relaxation, and sexual whims. I enjoy sharing Alice's sexual service for my viewing pleasure, and allowing him to watch whatever it is me and The Caterpillar get up to, be it hanging out, or engaging sexually. I find amusement and irony in this play because of course Alice would never actually find herself in a submissive position, she likes to make her own rules and guide her own adventure<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> As with many things in my life over the duration of this research, Alice got an erotic twist. I found (and enjoyed) an Alice themed BDSM novel, an erotic graphic novel, heaps of cartoon Alice porn, and an x-rated musical fantasy from the 1970s. Disappointingly all the Alice in Wonderland erotic material I have come across was very much from the perspective of a cis-male, the emphasis on controlling women sexually, guiding their development into "womanhood", and being a particular kind of attractive (thin, white and the more recent depictions, also buxom). Whilst it held some potential from an arousal perspective, it was also politically problematic in the depiction of a particular idea for women's bodies, women's submission and male dominance. (Antevska & Gavey, 2015). Ciclitira (2004) found that women often had difficulty reconciling their feminist politics with arousal from problematic pornographic material. I have found this difficulty on my own journey and have made the decision to not consume mainstream erotic material particularly in the form of free internet porn. I would rather friends and I made our own and otherwise I will consume written and vintage erotic material. I have a problem with the mainstream porn industry with respect to the limited ways in which they depict women and the possibilities of sex, as well as the labour practices, but I can also understand that there is place for erotic images and video produced by actors who own their own means of production (individually and/or collectively), especially if they consciously strive to enable pluralism within the depiction of body types, gender expression and sexual practices.

<sup>22</sup> In many respects this sense of autonomy is quite like my love, but it just so happens he likes to cede his (sexual) autonomy to me *temporarily* and he is *always* able to withdraw his submissive status at any time.



Porn style threesomes that are really active and that centre male pleasure do not greatly interest me. (of course that could change in time but I won't hold my breath) and are not the basis of our interactions. Whenever the three of us are together (and my love is not in formal service as Alice), there is always an undertone of him catering to my whims, though not with as much mental submission and the retention of a little more autonomy. During these times we might engage in *cuddle puddles*<sup>23</sup> which can be surprisingly arousing, while also being peaceful and lacking any expectation of active sexual interaction. I also find great pleasure from waking up together, and sharing tea and all chatting in bed in the mornings, and just hanging.



<sup>23</sup> Urban Dictionary (2022a) defines a *cuddle puddle* as: "A group of people cuddling en masse, usually to comfort each other or express mutual friendship."



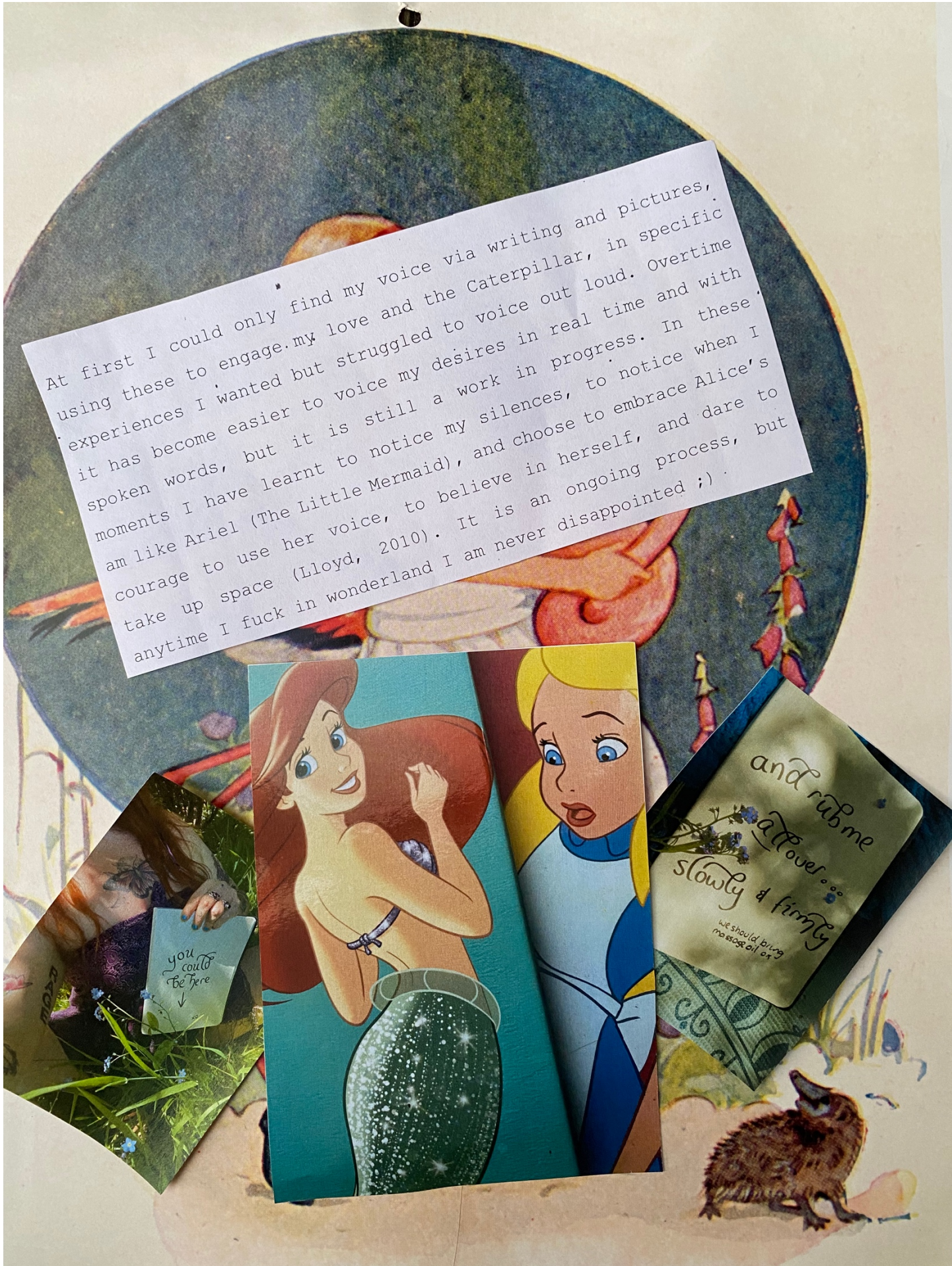
At times the monogamy imperative circulating in my head has raised questions about our interactions, and my solo explorations with The Caterpillar. I wonder what does it mean for him to accept and enjoying pleasure from someone else? Or what will he think seeing (or knowing about) me enjoying someone else? And pondering what it means for our relationship(s) and the stability of my nest? When I consider these experiences through queer eyes, I find something quite different; where romantic love relationships are not exclusively prioritised over all others, and relational pluralism, and diverse gender and sexual practices are more easily embraced.





**reclaiming my voice**

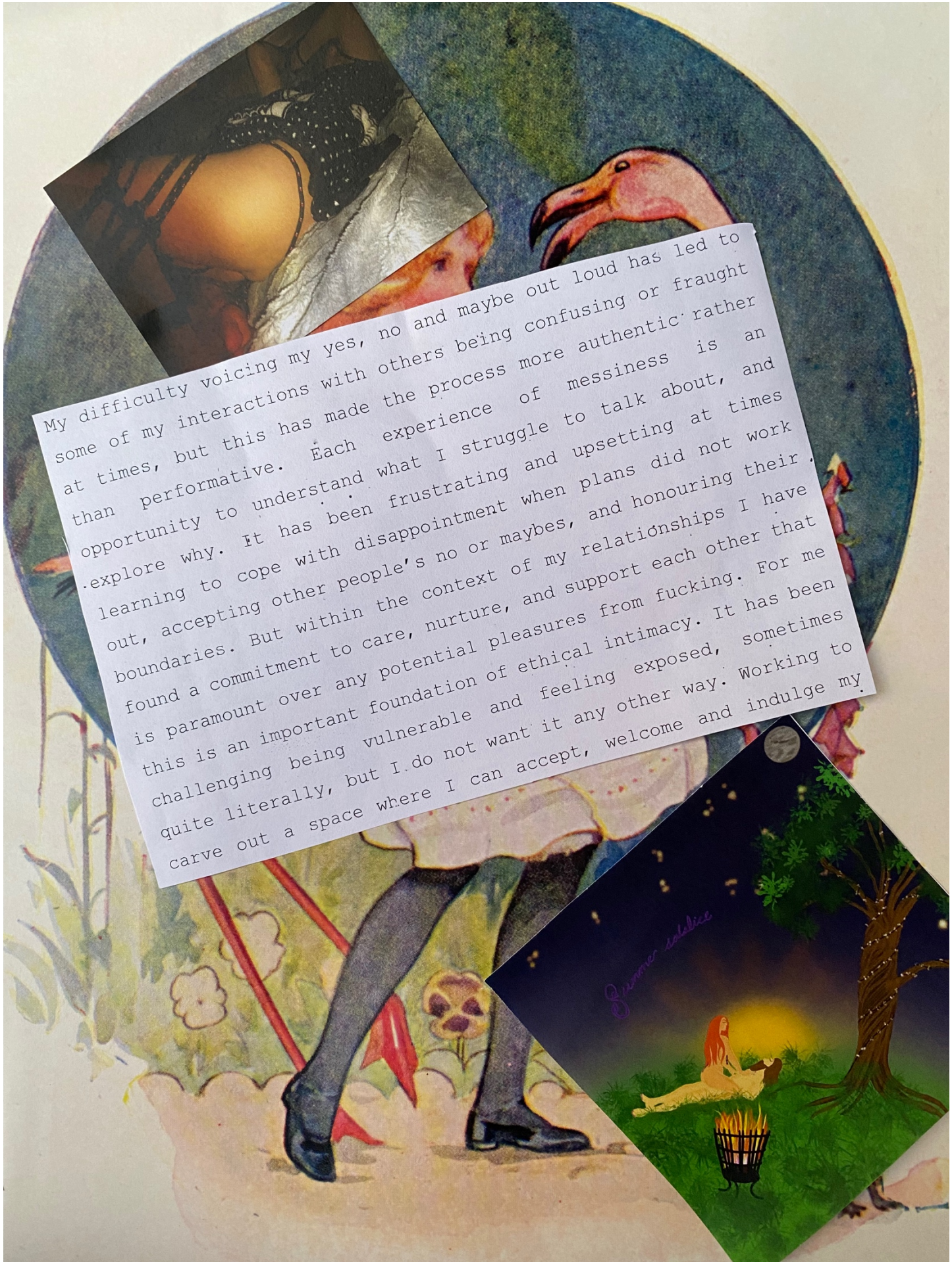
Engaging openly with my sexuality in the presence of others has been a lot harder than being sexual on my own. I have often felt mute, like Ariel in the Little Mermaid, seeking to be wanted, but unable to demand anything of the situation, passive to the whims of others. I have been uncertain about acknowledging my arousal, voicing my desire, and being seen to claim my pleasures. I have struggled to be in the moment, to let go to the experience and those who I am with. My trauma and patriarchal power circulating in our society have made this journey challenging and I have had to work hard to reclaim my ability to have these experiences with others, and myself. To resist shame, disconnection and silence, and seek embodiment, voice and pleasure. But I have also felt like this is an important part of what Elizabeth talked about, about being able to be in your body, and in the experience.



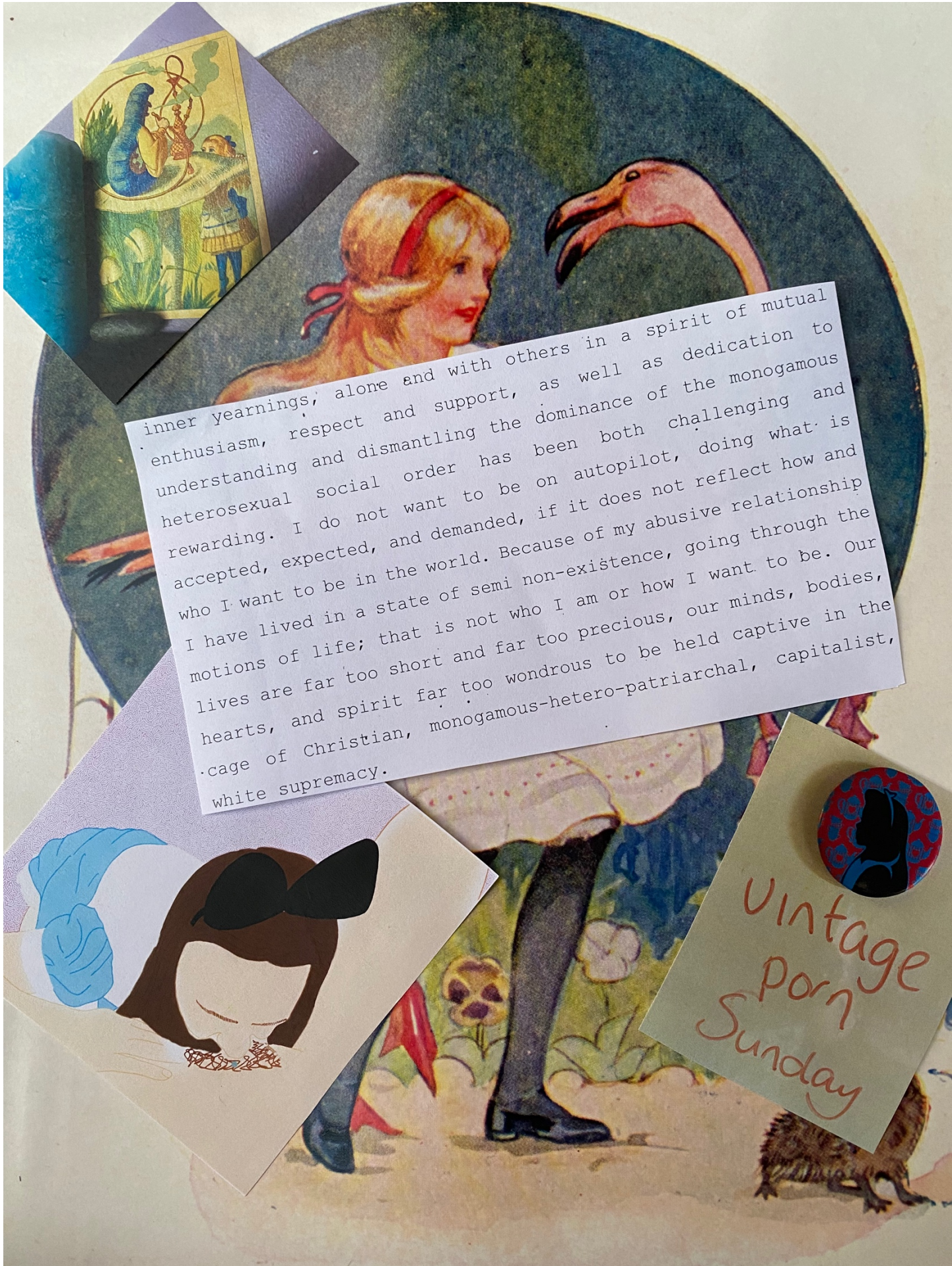
At first I could only find my voice via writing and pictures, using these to engage my love and the Caterpillar, in specific experiences I wanted but struggled to voice out loud. Overtime it has become easier but still a work in progress. In these moments I have learnt to notice my desires in real time and with spoken words, but it is still a work in progress. In these moments I have learnt to notice my silences, to notice when I am like Ariel (The Little Mermaid), and choose to embrace Alice's courage to use her voice, to believe in herself, and dare to take up space (Lloyd, 2010). It is an ongoing process, but anytime I fuck in wonderland I am never disappointed ;)

you could be here  
↓

and rub me  
all over...  
slowly & firmly  
we should bring  
massage oil or

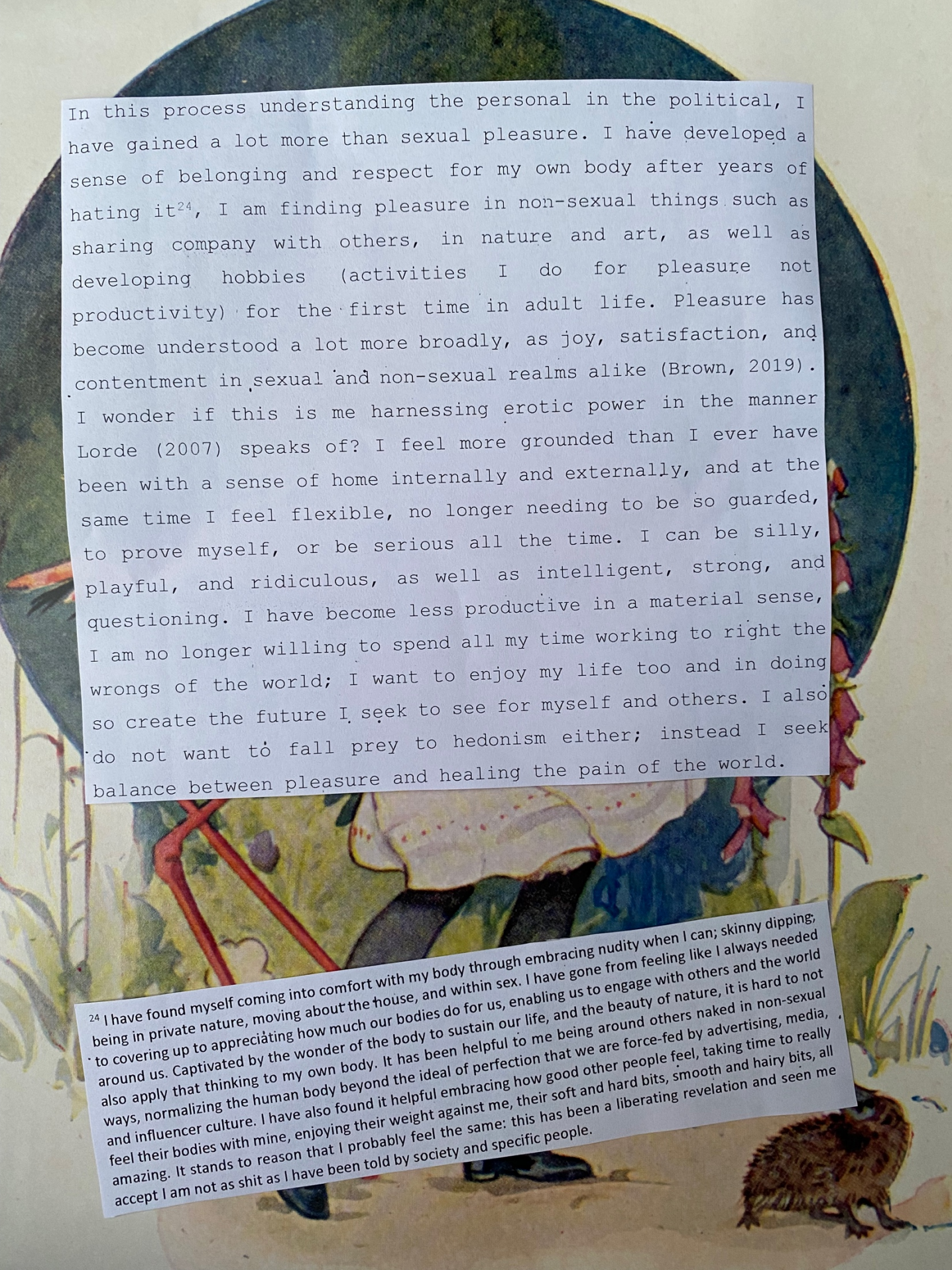


My difficulty voicing my yes, no and maybe out loud has led to some of my interactions with others being confusing or fraught at times, but this has made the process more authentic rather than performative. Each experience of messiness is an opportunity to understand what I struggle to talk about, and learning to cope with disappointment when plans did not work out, accepting other people's no or maybes, and honouring their boundaries. But within the context of my relationships I have found a commitment to care, nurture, and support each other that is paramount over any potential pleasures from fucking. For me this is an important foundation of ethical intimacy. It has been challenging being vulnerable and feeling exposed, sometimes quite literally, but I do not want it any other way. Working to carve out a space where I can accept, welcome and indulge my



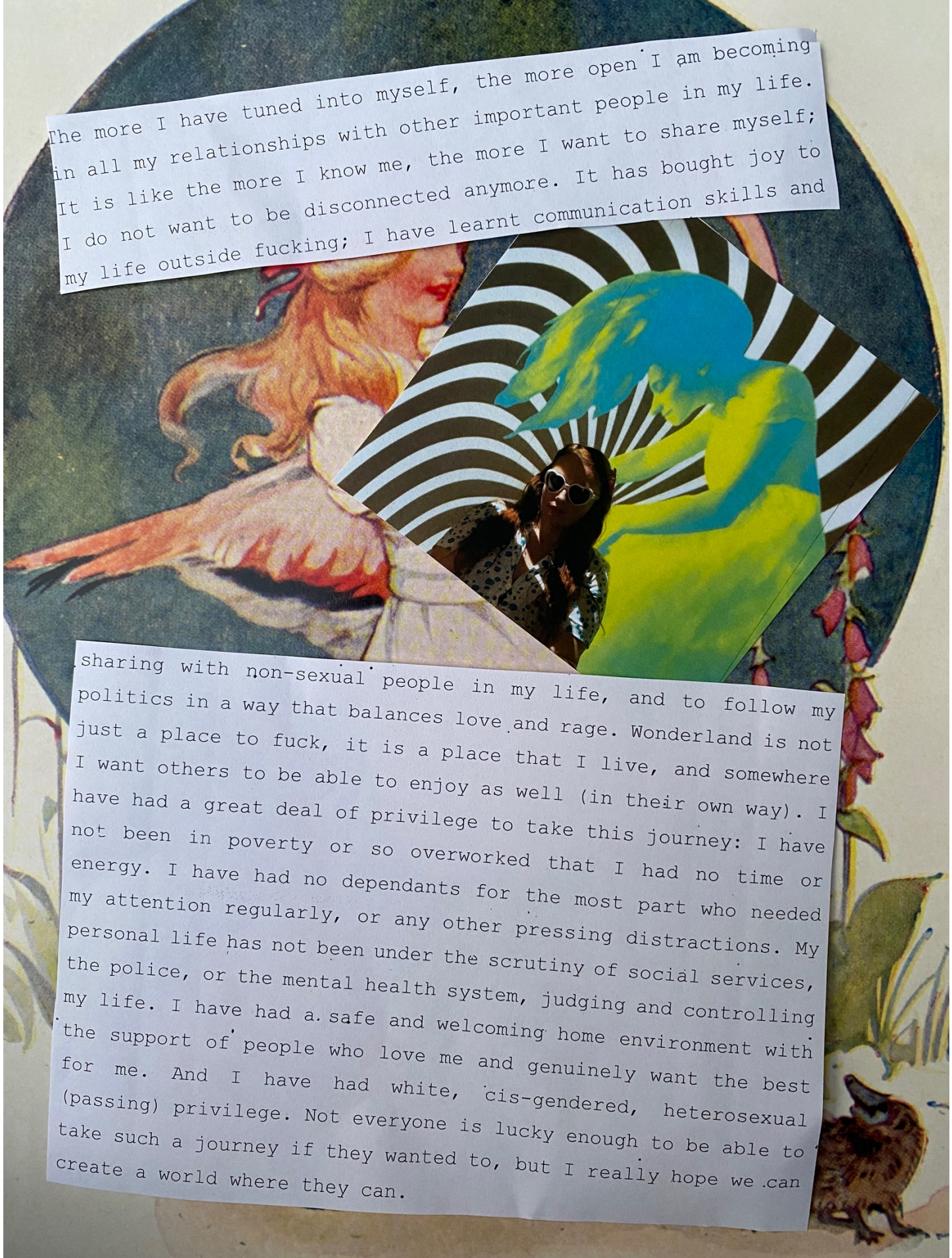
inner yearnings; alone and with others in a spirit of mutual enthusiasm, respect and support, as well as dedication to understanding and dismantling the dominance of the monogamous heterosexual social order has been both challenging and rewarding. I do not want to be on autopilot, doing what is accepted, expected, and demanded, if it does not reflect how and who I want to be in the world. Because of my abusive relationship I have lived in a state of semi non-existence, going through the motions of life; that is not who I am or how I want to be. Our lives are far too short and far too precious, our minds, bodies, hearts, and spirit far too wondrous to be held captive in the cage of Christian, monogamous-hetero-patriarchal, capitalist, white supremacy.

Vintage  
porn  
Sunday



In this process understanding the personal in the political, I have gained a lot more than sexual pleasure. I have developed a sense of belonging and respect for my own body after years of hating it<sup>24</sup>, I am finding pleasure in non-sexual things such as sharing company with others, in nature and art, as well as developing hobbies (activities I do for pleasure not productivity) for the first time in adult life. Pleasure has become understood a lot more broadly, as joy, satisfaction, and contentment in sexual and non-sexual realms alike (Brown, 2019). I wonder if this is me harnessing erotic power in the manner Lorde (2007) speaks of? I feel more grounded than I ever have been with a sense of home internally and externally, and at the same time I feel flexible, no longer needing to be so guarded, to prove myself, or be serious all the time. I can be silly, playful, and ridiculous, as well as intelligent, strong, and questioning. I have become less productive in a material sense, I am no longer willing to spend all my time working to right the wrongs of the world; I want to enjoy my life too and in doing so create the future I seek to see for myself and others. I also do not want to fall prey to hedonism either; instead I seek balance between pleasure and healing the pain of the world.

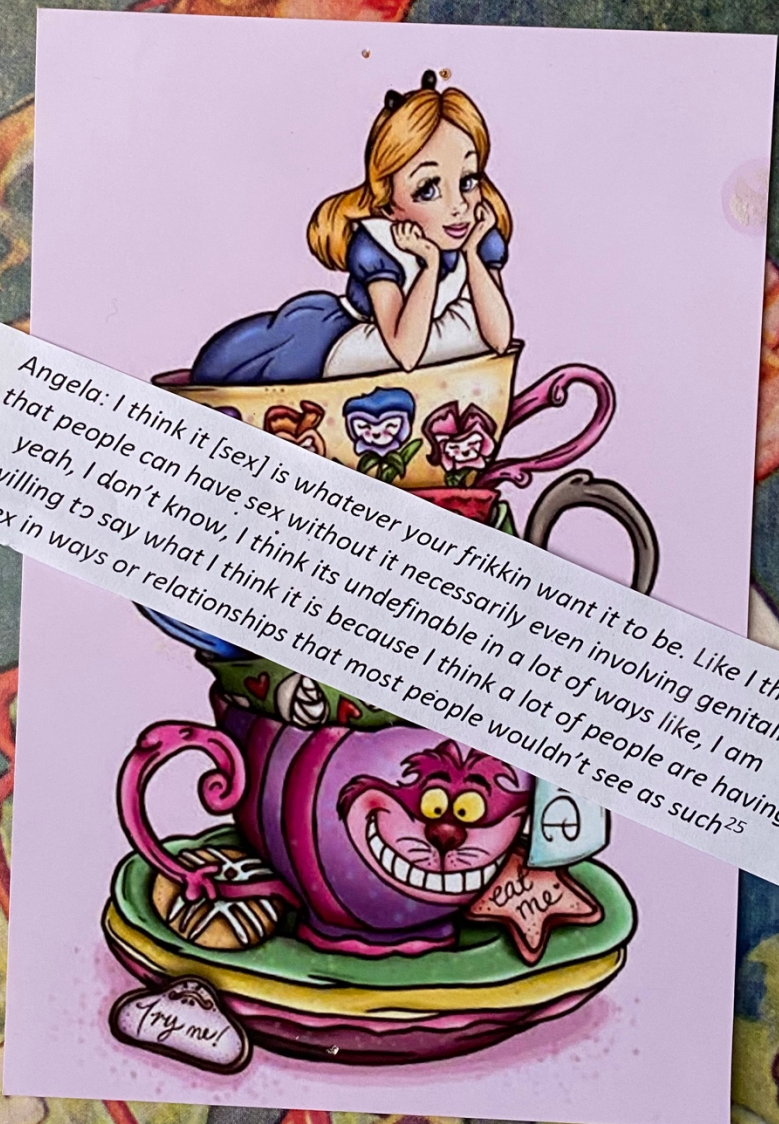
<sup>24</sup> I have found myself coming into comfort with my body through embracing nudity when I can; skinny dipping; being in private nature, moving about the house, and within sex. I have gone from feeling like I always needed to covering up to appreciating how much our bodies do for us, enabling us to engage with others and the world around us. Captivated by the wonder of the body to sustain our life, and the beauty of nature, it is hard to not also apply that thinking to my own body. It has been helpful to me being around others naked in non-sexual ways, normalizing the human body beyond the ideal of perfection that we are force-fed by advertising, media, and influencer culture. I have also found it helpful embracing how good other people feel, taking time to really feel their bodies with mine, enjoying their weight against me, their soft and hard bits, smooth and hairy bits, all amazing. It stands to reason that I probably feel the same: this has been a liberating revelation and seen me accept I am not as shit as I have been told by society and specific people.



The more I have tuned into myself, the more open I am becoming in all my relationships with other important people in my life. It is like the more I know me, the more I want to share myself; I do not want to be disconnected anymore. It has brought joy to my life outside fucking; I have learnt communication skills and

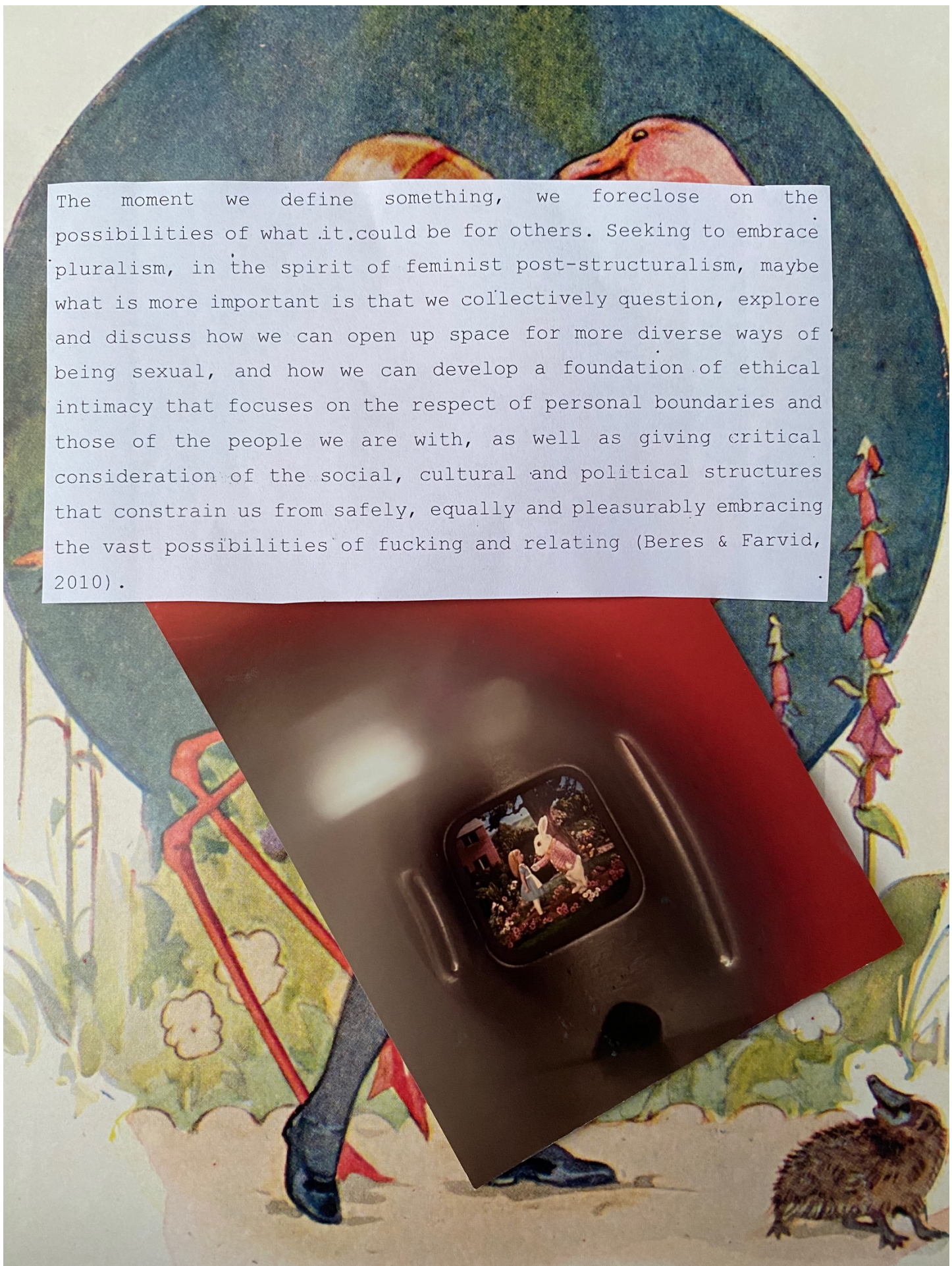
sharing with non-sexual people in my life, and to follow my politics in a way that balances love and rage. Wonderland is not just a place to fuck, it is a place that I live, and somewhere I want others to be able to enjoy as well (in their own way). I have had a great deal of privilege to take this journey: I have not been in poverty or so overworked that I had no time or energy. I have had no dependants for the most part who needed my attention regularly, or any other pressing distractions. My personal life has not been under the scrutiny of social services, the police, or the mental health system, judging and controlling my life. I have had a safe and welcoming home environment with the support of people who love me and genuinely want the best for me. And I have had white, cis-gendered, heterosexual (passing) privilege. Not everyone is lucky enough to be able to take such a journey if they wanted to, but I really hope we can create a world where they can.

I still do not know what sex is, but I wonder if it is even for us to define. I like what Angela said:



Angela: I think it [sex] is whatever your frikkin want it to be. Like I think that people can have sex without it necessarily even involving genitalia, yeah, I don't know, I think its undefinable in a lot of ways like, I am unwilling to say what I think it is because I think a lot of people are having sex in ways or relationships that most people wouldn't see as such<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> This quote of Angela's has been previously used in *collectivising our conversations*



The moment we define something, we foreclose on the possibilities of what it could be for others. Seeking to embrace pluralism, in the spirit of feminist post-structuralism, maybe what is more important is that we collectively question, explore and discuss how we can open up space for more diverse ways of being sexual, and how we can develop a foundation of ethical intimacy that focuses on the respect of personal boundaries and those of the people we are with, as well as giving critical consideration of the social, cultural and political structures that constrain us from safely, equally and pleasurably embracing the vast possibilities of fucking and relating (Beres & Farvid, 2010).

- thank you for taking care of me -

part one: her

I arrive late  
emotional, withdrawn, worn out  
lost

she feeds me  
she bathes me  
I fall into the comfort of bed  
it's like lying on a cloud

gentle sounds of water fill the room

my hand rests on the inside of her thigh  
electricity trickles through me  
flowing like water

I am tired, I enjoy the energy as I drift off

I awaken with the dawn call  
comforted  
settled  
cared for

part two: him

warm water swirls around us  
night air dances on our skin  
wood in the fire crackles  
the stars sparkle above

I stroke his leg  
he stiffens  
thick  
inviting

I straddle him  
resting on his tip  
I slide down  
encasing him

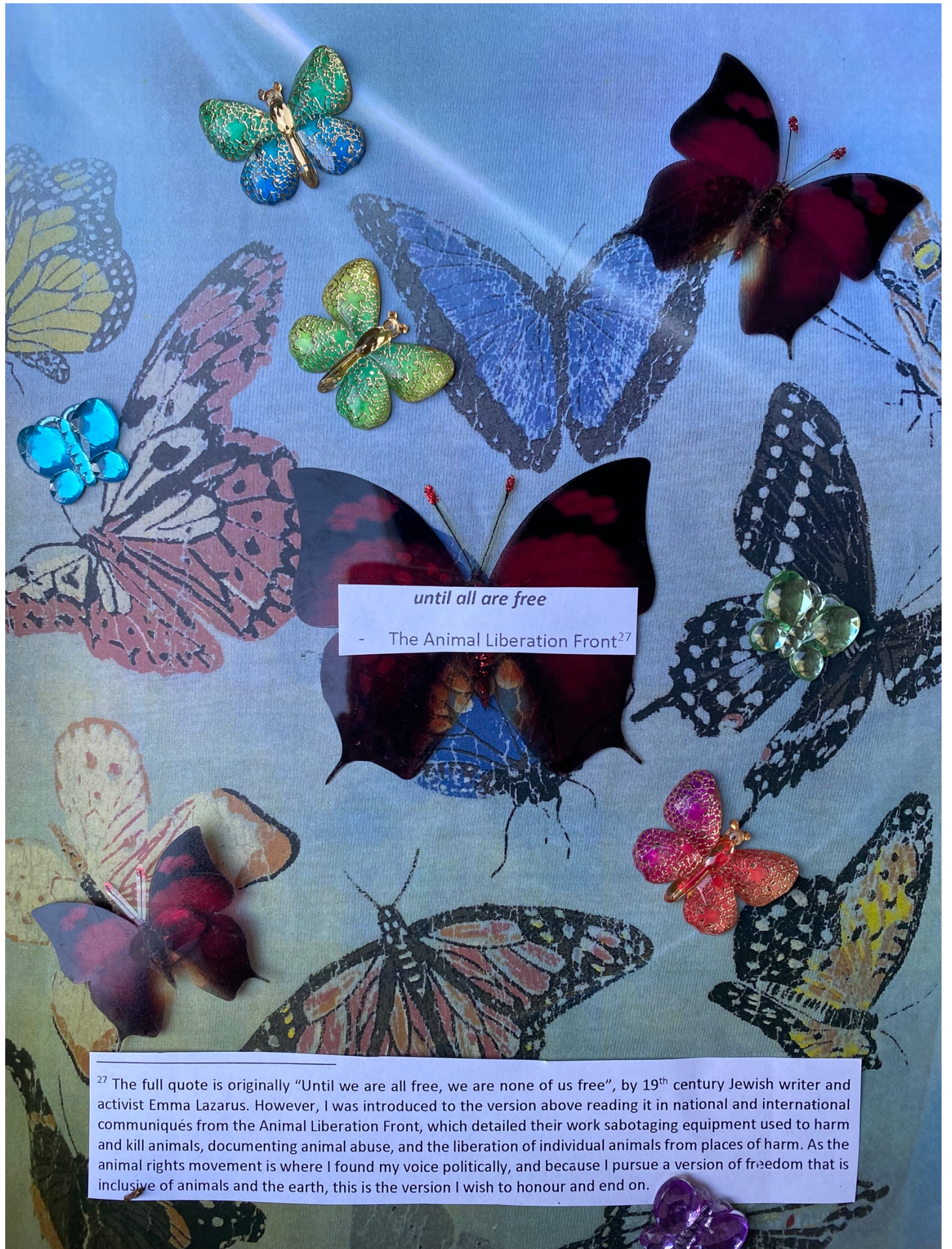
I press against his body  
rising and falling  
together

pleasure grows  
I am hard, engorged, wet  
new year fireworks explode  
so do I

I melt into the water  
quiet  
still<sup>16</sup>



<sup>26</sup> I find some irony in closing this research project with a sexual encounter that speaks to women's roles as nurturers, and male penetration ending in orgasm. Perhaps it is made more permissible (from a feminist perspective) by the fact that it was my orgasm that ended that sexual interaction, not his, and that I was so overcome by my own melting into the steamy water and darkness of the night, I did not even really notice where he was at ... good thing he enjoys my pleasure, I do to ;) Whilst these experiences were gendered in nature, I think the reality of wonderland is such that all of these roles are interchangeable and on a different day who I described doing what might have been different. My love does nurture, as do I (I am probably the worst at it), and the three of us are equally capable of doing and being penetrated when desired. What I particularly enjoy about reflecting on this 24-hour period was how care and pleasure have become intertwined in my reality and how fortunate I am to have a support crew who want to be there for me in the way that is right for us in the moment. I wish we all had that. Much love, Jas x



*until all are free*  
- The Animal Liberation Front<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> The full quote is originally "Until we are all free, we are none of us free", by 19<sup>th</sup> century Jewish writer and activist Emma Lazarus. However, I was introduced to the version above reading it in national and international communiqués from the Animal Liberation Front, which detailed their work sabotaging equipment used to harm and kill animals, documenting animal abuse, and the liberation of individual animals from places of harm. As the animal rights movement is where I found my voice politically, and because I pursue a version of freedom that is inclusive of animals and the earth, this is the version I wish to honour and end on.



# expressions of gratitude

**the women** - thank you for your generosity trusting me with your stories, I hope I have been able to honour them appropriately. I have spent hours listening to our conversations, pondering your experiences, and lost in your tales of pain and courage. Each of you have helped shape not only this research, but also myself and my relationships with those I love the most, especially my mum. I cannot thank you enough for this. My journey into our experiences of abuse has taught me a lot about relationships and how I function in them. When we spoke, I was more guarded and task driven, and less present in my life compared to now. I have moved towards a more relational way of being and I regret that I was not in touch more during this process, shared how it has been spending so much time with you in my head, what I learnt from you, and how I have been inspired by you. I hope the rest of your lives are fucking amazing in ways that are right for you!

**leigh and mandy** - thank you for protecting this time for me so that I could finally heal, rest and grow. So that I could better understand and interrogate not only my political ideas but also how I enacted those ideas in my activism, and so that I could really think about what it means to contribute to the academy as well as in my clinical work helping support the healing of wounds left by this bullshit system. Sometimes it has felt like you have known what I needed personally, politically, and professionally, and going through this process I am simultaneously an entirely different person and more myself than I have been in years. I finally feel like I able to contribute

to our collective, and ongoing, struggles in a way that is authentic, intentional, and fierce (but that no longer burns others or myself).

**geneva** - you are a fucking legend! Thank you so much.

**rochelle** - I am really sorry about my inconsistency and absence as I have been pulled further into the vortex of this clinical psychology program. I regret missing so much. You are my oldest friend, and are more like a sister really, family, forever. It sucks that we don't get to see each other almost daily anymore, to hangout, plot, and also enjoy life. I was thinking about Deirdre's comments from years ago about me not having a backbone, I think what she might have hit on was the impacts of my trauma which left me silenced and immobilized, not able to say what I thought or take action on my own. You have been one of the biggest influences on me finding the inner strength to use my voice and actions to change the world, that has shaped me fundamentally as a person in amazing ways - thank you x

**teddy** - Meeting you has been such a gift - your love was my first experience as an adult of really feeling that I was not shit. Our relationship showed me that it was possible for life to be safe and enjoyable. Thank you for sharing yourself, country, and family with me. I hope our paths continue to intersect as we journey through life, I can't imagine you not being there. Your wee girl is so lucky to have such a kind and gentle man for a father.

**john raymond hayes** - It is 20 years since shit started getting confusing, chaotic, and concerning (again). Despite the challenges during that time, I deeply appreciate the home that you gave us and the values you embedded in me. My long-standing desire for higher education, my thirst for knowledge, and curiosity about philosophy and sociology has come from you. As

has my love of tattoos; I regret I was not able to get one at your hand. I feel like there was so much I still don't know about you, but it is safe to say that you "had lived". The changes you were able to make in your life were miraculous and helps inspire me in the mahi that I do. As I walk my work corridors in my (vegan) cowboy boots, I find myself thinking about you (and your style). PS. thank you for introducing me to Rage Against the Machine.

**mike** - I am so sorry I didn't get to know you better, that the impacts of mine and mum's trauma made it hard for us to relate well at times and kept us apart. And I am glad I got to tell you this. I greatly appreciated helping mum care for you as you transitioned towards your next journey. You were an interesting, fiercely intelligent, lovely (and stubborn) person who has deeply enriched my life, even if I never got the time with you that I would have liked. I am so thankful to you for the love and kindness you have shown mum, and the life you were able to build together. I am saddened that so much of your time together was foreshadowed by loss and poor health, but I am endlessly grateful you both had the time together that you did. Sending love to wherever you might be x

**paul** -You have always supported me to be myself, even though it was often going against the grain and ruffling feathers. I think I would be an entirely different person if it was not for your support. You have instilled me with a love of music, the values of the counterculture, and the audacity to question everything, especially authority (including your own). Thank you father!

**elle** - Thank you for your generosity sharing your cultural knowledge, you have taught me a lot about what it means to ally with tangata whenua in practice and what it means to be pākehā living on and with this whenua. I find your passion for academia and critical psychology endlessly inspiring, and you have influenced me to want to retain one foot in the academy. I have really appreciated your support and interest in my journey with this thesis and clinical practice. I am so glad we have been able to support each other through this harrowing and life changing process. Personally, I am really enjoying our growth into friendship and look forward to getting to know you even better over the coming years.

**braxton and liam** - I am sorry I have not been around for your early years as I would have liked, I have found it hard missing out on supporting your mums more practically, not being able to attend all birthday parties and special events, and not knowing you as deeply as I would have liked. Healing the pain I was carrying around the time of your births has taken me away during this crucial period and I hope one day you will be able to understand my absence. I needed time and space to work through a lot of stuff and find myself again before I could be the best Auntie I can be. I love you both so much, and I really hope we succeed in making the world a better place for you x

**thea** - I can't imagine life without you, even though on the surface we make no sense. You have helped me understand, open to, and heal parts of myself I never used to be able to go near. You have been so supportive of my endless goings on about this research, my work, and my own personal framework for organizing and making sense of the world. Whatever the fuck this journey is we are on I am glad we are able to take it together. Needless to say this thesis, and my current incarnation, is very much a product of our hours and hours of talking, being, and adventures.

**my love** - I fucking love you, you are fucking awesome, and  
fucking brilliant to have in my life 💜

**rani breeze** - Summer **Breeze** by Seals and Crofts (1972).

Summer **breeze** makes me feel fine  
Blowing through the **jasmine** in my mind  
Summer **breeze** makes me feel fine  
Blowing through the **jasmine** in my mind

See the curtains hanging in the window  
In the evening on a Friday night  
A little light a-shining through the window  
Let's me know everything's alright

Summer **breeze** makes me feel fine  
Blowing through the **jasmine** in my mind  
Summer **breeze** makes me feel fine  
Blowing through the **jasmine** in my mind

Sweet days of summer, the **jasmine's** in bloom  
July is dressed up and playing her tune  
When I come home from a hard days work  
And you're waiting there, not a care in the world

See the smile a-waiting in the kitchen  
Food cooking and the plates for two  
Feel the arms that reach out to hold me  
In the evening when the day is through

Summer **breeze** makes me feel fine  
Blowing through the **jasmine** in my mind  
Summer **breeze** makes me feel fine  
Blowing through the **jasmine** in my mind

**mum** - I love you; I am really glad we are knowing each other. Thank you for bringing me into the world and gifting me creativity, curiosity, and whimsy.

**myself** - I love you, I am really glad we are knowing each other finally.

**mother earth and her inhabitants** - It is hard to not be despairing at the way western society treats you, like an endless resource to be transformed into profit at the expense of your well-being and everyone's ability to survive. I am enjoying our reconnection since leaving the city; I am finding healing and connection in your cycles, your diversity, and your beauty. Thank you for your nourishment and ability to exist on this material plane I hope the way I dance about your surface honors the gift of life that you give us all.

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# appendices

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# **women's experiences of sex and consent in abusive relationships**

## **INFORMATION SHEET**

Kia ora, my name is Jasmine Gillespie-Gray. I am a student at Massey University enrolled in a Doctorate of Clinical Psychology. I am undertaking a qualitative research project as part of this qualification. The project will explore women's experiences of sex and consent while in abusive relationships. Before I talk about this research more, I would like to tell you a bit about myself and why I want to do this research. I currently live in Whanganui-a-tara (Wellington), though originally I am from Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland). I was very fortunate to grow up at the beautiful west coast beach Muriwai. I volunteer for the Wellington Women's Refuge and Te Whare Rokiropi after hours crisisline and last year I worked at Wellington Sexual Abuse HELP on their crisisline.

My research topic is of interest to me because it combines my work in these two areas of intimate partner violence and sexual violence. I have found that these two issues are rarely talked about from women's perspectives. I hope that your stories will help to further the understanding of women's experiences of intimate partner violence, which in turn can be used to improve services for women and inform policy.

Participation is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw until you have signed the Transcript Release Form. To be included in this study participants must:

- be over 18 years old,
- self-identify as a woman

- have been in an abusive intimate relationship previously, but not at the time of the interview

In this research, the term "abusive intimate relationship" refers to any intimate relationship where there has been on-going psychological, physical, sexual, and/or emotional harm by one partner towards another.

Your participation will entail a single one-on-one interview of between 60-120 minutes, and scheduled for a time and place that is convenient to you, and that is safe for both of us. The aim of our conversation will be to explore your experience of sex and consent in your past abusive relationship/s. The interview will be conversational, so that you can decide what you want to tell.

The interview will be digitally recorded, and I will personally transcribe these to maintain and protect your confidentiality. If you report that you might be at risk of harm in your current circumstances I can support you to engage with services at Women's Refuge. The original digital recordings will be destroyed once they have been transcribed, and a copy of the interview transcript will be provided to you for review. You will then have the opportunity to amend the transcript before granting your approval for analysis. If you are interested in hearing about the results from this study please let me know, and a summary of the research findings will be provided to you once analysis is complete.

Your privacy will be protected at all times. Interview data and any information that you provide will be stored securely, and password protected. Your details will not be disclosed to anyone and any identifying information (such as person or place names) disclosed during the interview will be replaced with pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- Decline to answer any particular question;
- Withdraw from the study at any point up until the release of your transcript;
- Ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- Ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview;
- Be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded via email or post;

Be given a \$20 petrol voucher to thank you for your participation  
Should you need support regarding relationship abuse, the Women's Refuge can be contacted on 0800 REFUGE (0800 733 843).  
For support related to sexual abuse, Sexual Abuse HELP Wellington can be contacted on 04 801 6655.

If you wish to participate in this research or if you have any further questions I can be contacted at any time by phone: 027 201 3858, or by email: [jasminegillespiegray@gmail.com](mailto:jasminegillespiegray@gmail.com).

Alternatively my supervisor, Senior Lecturer Leigh Coombes, can be contacted by telephone: (06) 356 9099 ext. 85075 or by email: [L.Coombes@massey.ac.nz](mailto:L.Coombes@massey.ac.nz).

*This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, Application NOR 17/61. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Associate Professor David Tappin (Chair), Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, email [humanethicsnorth@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethicsnorth@massey.ac.nz)*



# women's experiences of sex and consent in abusive relationships

## PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I wish/do not wish to have this interview recorded.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signature:

Date:

Full Name -  
printed



# women's experiences of sex and consent in abusive relationships

## AUTHORITY FOR THE RELEASE OF TRANSCRIPTS

I confirm that I have had the opportunity to read and amend the transcript of the interview(s) conducted with me.

I agree that the edited transcript and extracts from this may be used in reports and publications arising from the research.

Signature:

Date:

.....

Full Name -

printed

.....



# power, politics, and practice

*the idea that you would isolate someone from the circumstances that had led to their wrongdoings was simply culturally incomprehensive*  
- Moana Jackson (Newsroom, 2018)

As I come to the end of my research and step into the world of practice I have been reflecting upon how this journey has shaped my engagement clinically. The short summary is that it has been fucking<sup>176</sup> profound! The values, social justice aspirations, and theory that underpin critical feminist psychology have shaped my clinical practice to be highly sensitive to ethics, relationships, and power (and to myself). But then I have navigated my psychology training in an intentional manner so that I had a strong scholarly foundation for understandings and talking about social inequality before I entered the realm of individual practice so that I would do clinical psychology differently, bound in solidarity with the people I work with, able to identify the broader social processes at play in their distress, as well as helping to heal the impacts that these social inequalities have on us<sup>177</sup>.

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<sup>176</sup> My supervisor suggested that the use of fucking in this context was not in keeping with the image of a respectable clinician and *possibly* it is but I am not sure respectability is something I aspire to be as I put it very much in the same realm as “professionalism” which I discuss below. I want to be competent, ethical and just, and make people feel safe, comfortable, and like they are able to find healing in my teachings and support. In any case, fucking in this context is an attempt to be descriptive and express the gravity and enormity with which this research journey has shaped my engagement with the clinical realm.

<sup>177</sup> I am not alone in wanting to resist individualisation of distress within the clinical space. The Meihana Model by Susan Pitama et al. (2007) asks us to turn our mind to the way the Māori people we work with have been shaped by colonisation, racism, marginalisation, and migration. The growing body of literature about adverse childhood experiences (see Asmundson & Afifi, 2020) and complex PTSD (see van der Kolk, 2014) point to the social and political origins of an individual’s experience. And in his recent book, clinical psychologist Paul Rhodes (2020) asks us to think ‘*Beyond the Psychology Industry*’ to see how else we might support people to find healing.

## **(un)performing professionalism**

Judith Butler's (1990) theory of performativity and Foucault's (1979) theory of power made me wonder about the type of normal that is expected from us as clinical psychologists, about how we are shaped by institutional expectations and education program requirements, towards being objective, emotionally distant, bland, white, middle-class urban "professionals". To my mind, this way of performing as a clinical psychologist emphasises a different world view to many of the people we work with and denies our shared humanity, allowing us to position ourselves as more able, sane, and together than the "disordered" that we work with. This way of being as a clinical psychologist has not worked for me in an environment where the people I work with are largely male, Māori, working class or come from families living in poverty, those who have grown rurally or in poor suburbs without the trapping of white, middle class urban life, and largely in the midst of chaotic home lives filled with domestic violence and sexual abuse.

Despite this mismatch between many clinicians and service users, if we take steps to perform our role differently, we risk being considered "unprofessional"<sup>178</sup>, not so much by the people we work

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<sup>178</sup> I have an increasing issue with the idea of professionalism, to me it is more like code for white, western, straight, male, middle class norms being the standard for participating within the type of environments where you are likely to find clinical psychologists. These homogenising standards have nothing to do with competency to do the role and are all about policing how you can be within a workplace. I wonder how these standards act as a barrier to growing a truly diverse workforce that includes those with lived experience, those who are queer, gender diverse, those from rural and working-class backgrounds, and non-western, and/or non-white cultural groups. To my mind our "professional" ways of knowing, being, and doing do not reflect the vast majority of our mental health service users and I wonder if this is at least part of why our services come under such heavy scrutiny (see Government Inquiry into Mental Health and Addictions, 2018) as failing to meet the needs of the community? Working alongside Māori (who typically do not occupy clinical or managerial positions – structural racism anyone?), I have noticed a tendency towards a much more personal and human approach of interacting with the guys that from a western perspective could be seen as crossing "professional boundaries". These instances see feminist post-structural ideas about what we understand to be normal and commonsense coming front and center in my mind, with our western standards of highly boundaried interactions being accepted as normal, without any consideration that there might be other legitimate perspectives about how we might navigate our therapeutic relationships.

with but by the people we work for (that is the institutions that pay us). The emphasis on masculine power and being a commanding presence sees more feminine, gentle, and humble approaches to practice means that you can be taken less seriously, as a "soft touch", or as less competent. But these are the social sanctions that Butler (1990) talks about happening when our performance deviates from what is expected, and/or when we choose to resist hegemonic norms. Placing the worldview and socio-cultural realities of the people I work with at the center of my practice has seen me change many aspects of my performance as a clinical psychologist<sup>179</sup>, the environment in which I do my work<sup>180</sup>, where the focus of my work is<sup>181</sup>, and how

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<sup>179</sup> My research made me wonder about the discourse bound in the way we dress, and wonder at the values and social locations we support with our clothing choices. Professional attire (to my mind) tends towards presenting yourself as middle class with modern, corporate-casual clothing that is somewhat feminine (but not frilly, floaty, or sparkly), and women need to be attractive but not overtly sexual, hair is to be clean, tidy, and "normal" in terms of colour and style, and women should wear some make up. Presenting as butch, rough, sexy, poor, hyper femme, or any other deviation from corporate-casual risks being labeled unprofessional in the type of environments most clinical psychologists work in. Given my style influences have come from hippies, bogans, and punks I have always struggled with this type of "professional" dress and find it physically uncomfortable because it is very much a performance and does not reflect me as a person at all. To get around this early in my training I found comfort in a style that was bold, feminine, and retro but generally passable at work. As time has gone on and my work has become centered around the guys, I have moved towards clothing choices that are more masculine, subtle, more working class, and more reflective of how I dress at home (when I am not being a nature fairy). I have removed a performance element of my dress and turn up as *a person first*, rather than a professional. I have noticed those I work with who are distrusting of the system and psychology tend to engage with me more readily now. In another service, with different people my dress would probably be different again.

<sup>180</sup> Similar to dress (above), I have wondered about the discourse and values inherent in the spaces we occupy. My office was quite clinical when I arrived, it was occupied by a huge desk, one inappropriate chair, and no soft furnishings. I have dramatically changed this space to including a smaller desk, many plants, pictures (including personal ones of my life), pride and Tino Rangatiratanga flags, carvings gifted from some of the guys, a bean bag and floor cushions. The changes I have made to this office space have made it more welcoming, and I have noticed a difference in the guy's engagement with me and this space since I have made the changes. For some of the men our work is best done off the unit in nature or at a marae, and I have advocated within our service for the ability to meet the guys needs rather use an environment that was not as therapeutic as it could be.

<sup>181</sup> As we are a residential unit, I have focused my practice on the individual work *and* the environment and those who staff it. While I believe the individual assessment, formulation, treatment planning, and therapy has some utility for the men and reducing their risk, their trauma histories and limited cognitive abilities suggest to me that they also need to be provided with a safe and intentional environment that supports their slow acquisition of skills and new ways of thinking and being over time. To support this work I give suggestions about how our service could deliver care in a more trauma informed and therapeutic manner at any opportunity I can get, I am starting to deliver education in house for staff to understand the complexities of our guys, the theory that underpins aspects of psychological work and how they could engage with the guys in an intentional manner to better support their rehabilitation, and I am looking to carve out some space for staff to develop reflexive skills and support their own wellbeing. Burnout, compassion fatigue, workplace apathy, and bullying seem to be common problems in mental health services. I think that psychology has knowledge and tools that can support the development and maintenance of healthy workplaces and more effective work practices, and that this is necessary for us as staff and for those we work with.

I am in my interactions with staff and the guys<sup>182</sup>.

## **caring for those in captivity**

My research emphasised the importance of relationships and ethical practice, these values have shaped my engagement within the forensic service<sup>183</sup> where I did part of my internship. The service had been without a clinical psychologist<sup>184</sup> for many years and had turned to interns as a way of gaining some psychology input and hopefully attracting someone who wanted to work there more long term. The men I worked with most closely during my internship had undiagnosed Complex PTSD<sup>185</sup> and were Māori. From a cultural and theoretical perspective, relational

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<sup>182</sup> Rather than engage with staff and the guys as a highly bounded, perfect, and distant professional, I have taken a more human and personal approach influenced by radical genuineness found in third wave therapy modalities. I share how I am feeling, notice and comment on how I am reacting to situations that arise, I share reflections and where I could improve (or did things well) and I try to foster this way of interacting in others. In many respects, I am trying to normalise the use of many of the skills and ideas we use in therapy, and show that they are really skills for living that any of us can use, they are not just for those deemed mentally unwell.

<sup>183</sup> The forensic service I work in a small, 16 bed medium secure facility, that is home to 16 men between the ages of 45 and 75. Half of the guys are pākehā, and half are Māori and/or pacifika. The men have largely been diagnosed with psychotic disorders that have been implicated in arson, violent and sexual offending, including rape, murder, and attempted murder, and they have generally been required to reside there by the courts in lieu of going to prison. While this psycho-legal framing of the men is one perspective, for me it is inadequate to make sense of the men and the possibilities of their healing and the reduction of their risk.

<sup>184</sup> I have questions about the safety of this internship as I was always on site as a sole practitioner, my supervisor worked in the DHB's community mental health and addictions service and had no working knowledge of forensic services and expressed a disinterest in my work in the unit, and there are no clear expectations of, or processes for, clinical psychology within the unit.

<sup>185</sup> While I am cautious about the role of diagnosis within psychological work, within our services the diagnosis of Complex PTSD (only recently available under the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems 11th ed. (ICD-11); World Health Organization, 2019) offers a framing of the person in a way that makes sense of their ways of being through a more compassionate lens and offers a body of literature for helping to heal the psychic and spiritual wounds caused by extensive and ongoing abuse. I wonder how many people there are within our forensic services are considered unpredictable, dangerous, cycling through (violent) emotional outburst and subject to seclusion, punishment, and limited progress out of forensic services because they are not diagnosed with Complex PTSD and thus are not being offered the most suitable support for their distress. Medication is the frontline treatment within forensic services and only limited consideration is given to other means of understanding and enabling change. I have seen the benefit of medication for the guys I work with and certainly the impact of their trauma is overwhelming without it – unmedicated they experience the return of acute psychotic symptoms and extreme emotion dysregulation – yet I do not know that it is enough to manage the symptoms associated with Complex PTSD. At best, the medication enables stability to do the deeper work that (to my mind) underlies their psychosis and their risk for causing future harm. This is not to say that all people within forensic services have this presentation, but there appears to be a group (of largely Māori – at least within our service) who from my perspective are misunderstood and not managed in a manner that will get the best results for themselves or society.

connection was key to the possibilities of their healing but as a pākehā new to the service, armed with a clip board and “professional” attire, it is not surprising that they were skeptical of me and my discipline. It took much of the year to develop some kind of connection and shared humanness from which to build a therapeutic relationship. When it came time to leave, it did not feel ethical to stop my work with these men when we were just finding some common ground and I knew they would be subject to another intern the next year with the same limited prospect of making progress. Despite the three-hour round trip and the fact that my thesis was in serious need of attention I asked to stay on part time so that I could continue with these men.

My clinical supervisor following my formal internship asked me if I ever take the easy choice, and I could only answer no. I make the choice that is just, that is ethical based upon my values and political ideology. Given the commitment critical feminist psychology makes to relational ethics, and what I was learning from trauma and attachment theory, it did not seem right or just to step away from my working relationship with these guys when I knew it would take a long time to create a secure therapeutic relationship<sup>186</sup>. Three years later, we are

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<sup>186</sup> It has not been uncommon for these men to stop engaging in treatment or for treatment to not really go anywhere and I wonder if this is because our services are not really able to meet the needs of those with complex PTSD from “hard to reach” groups such as those with gang connections or lifelong incarceration who feel like they would not be understood by “normal (non-imprisoned) people”. Usually it is not our services, formulations, or interventions that are challenged or labeled as deficient or not fit for purpose, instead it is these men who are considered to blame for their failure to engage with treatment. My research has seen me take a different approach, one that centered the needs of the guys and sees me change myself and my approach to meet their needs. Though this sometimes means having to defend my practice to the psychiatric institution that questions my “lack of focus” in this work. Sometimes it seems that rolling out a manualized treatment protocol or engaging in a structured therapy would appease the powers that be because it appears like you are “doing therapy” more than learning to carve alongside the guys, or chatting about music, art, or other shared interests. But from my perspective, this would not work and is a waste of everyone’s time. Healing trauma (which has been my main focus) is deep, personal work that one has to be ready for. Taking the time to build safety and connection, even if it takes years, seems more sane to me than repeatedly making premature attempts that fail. Resisting institutional power and protecting our relational space is certainly a product of my research journey and my commitment to doing clinical psychology differently.

only really just getting to the stage where there is a basis of some trust so we can move into more intentional therapeutic work. Had they been subject to a continuous cycle of interns they would not have had the time to forge the depth of relationships they needed to feel okay to open a little to their own healing. And, given the environment they are in if they do not address their trauma and its impact, from my perspective at least, they risk either never being deemed safe enough to return to the community or may see themselves released but returning under similar circumstances that led to their incarceration in the first place.

Having made a connection with them, I felt a commitment to their ongoing healing and to advocating for them within our service. Making such a commitment early on in my professional development was not surprising given my politics and the nature of my psychology studies, but it has meant my love and I needing to shape our lives to enable this because we do not live in the same city as my work place and currently do not intend to. He commutes up to 16 hours a week, and I spent a lot of money on petrol and accommodation and spend a night away from home each week to allow me to do this work. But I do not know that leaving them before they are ready would be any easier on me from a moral perspective; potentially always wondering how they were, or if I could have helped them escape the cycle of harm and detention. Sometimes it feels like as soon as I walked in the door of that unit I was fucked<sup>187</sup>; if I stay it is hard for me

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<sup>187</sup> In this case, I used the term 'fucked' to convey emotional and physical suffering Brooks (2018) speaks to in her unpacking of the term because this is exactly how it has felt for me navigating forensic spaces and responsibilities to relationships with patients. It has been overwhelming and all encompassing. My own experience of being in these services has made me wonder about staff wellbeing in spaces that are so complex, with very real risk, and chronic under funding, limited professional development, demand for bed space outstripped supply, and understaffing. In these conditions, staff are not able to do the best job they are capable of, instead it becomes a case survival and making do. These circumstances do not enable healing or rehabilitation and are at best only able to manage risk through containment. And this is not criticism leveled at management, I think that our society does not prioritise the well-being of those who have hurt others, they are othered by tough on law and order" discourses and those that position the men I work with as "mad and bad".

personally, politically, and professionally, but if I leave it would also be hard just for different reasons.

Caring for these men feels like a huge responsibility for me and their stories have changed me at a deep level, just as the women who shared their stories for my thesis have. Critical feminist psychology has meant I understand the guys offending, and their mental health challenges, not as the consequence of individual failure but the result of a political, social, and cultural structure that never intended them to flourish. I can't help but wonder how their lives might have been if their whanau had been intact and they grew up connected to te ao Māori rather than subject to colonisation, if we had better support for those who struggle to make ends meet, and if patriarchal social norms didn't enable domestic violence and sexual abuse to persist in families for generations. At times I have oscillated between tears and rage as I come to terms with the abuse they have experienced at the hands of their family *and the state*<sup>188</sup>, as well as the harm they have caused<sup>189</sup> to themselves and the community.

## **troubling treatment**

My research is in essence about power and thinking about the role of power in shaping the experience of life has become an

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<sup>188</sup> The men I work with have been subject to physical and sexual abuse by employees of the state from childhood through to adulthood, harassment by Police, and extensive racial and class bias from the education, health, and "justice" systems.

<sup>189</sup> Given the focus of my masters and doctoral research is focused on harm towards women, some of the staff in our unit have wondered about how I would find working with men who have perpetrated abuse against women. I have not really found this an issue at all and I think there are several reasons for that; feminist post-structuralism has challenged my Marxist understanding of the oppressor-oppressed binary and I can hold easily that these men are *both* perpetrators *and* victims; I do not think that such abuse comes from people/men being bad so much as from what society enabled through its (patriarchal) norms (as discussed at great length in my thesis) but I also think that when our behaviour causes clear harm to others we have a responsibility to reflect on this and possibly intervene to prevent the perpetuation of future harms; we need to be able to work with men if we want to break the cycle of violence within our society; I probably tend to see the guys as the children of abusive relationships rather than the perpetrators (even though some are definitely both); and I genuinely like many of the guys and feel privileged to work with them.

engrained way of thinking. Within my budding clinical practice, it has been evident to me how an unequal distribution of social, economic, and political power has impacted on the lives of those I work with, contributing to the development and maintenance of their mental, social, physical, and spiritual health difficulties. Yet it is the person, rather than the system, that we label as being broken, not right, or in need of work. The individualisation of the harms of social inequality has led me to think about the power of clinical psychology; we are able to label people's distress with diagnoses that carry social stigma, make treatment decisions, set in motion a process of curtailing a client's freedom under the Mental Health Act and have the ability to shape the lives of the people we work with, their friends and family. And while I want to resist the individualisation of social inequality, there is no denying that the men I work with carry the risk of further (*serious*) harm. And, while this might be the product of broader systematic inequalities, I feel they have some responsibility to address their mental health so they do not hurt others again. It is a tension that I am unable to resolve, but I endeavor to work most closely with those who want to change themselves<sup>190</sup> rather than imposing change upon those who are ambivalent or resistant.

Coming to terms with this "power of psychology" has been a challenge, even more so working in a forensic<sup>191</sup> setting, which has placed me in a position of being a jailer, literally with

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<sup>190</sup> Though, of course, it could be argued this is the result of a coercive environment, where reward and punishment are related to apparent compliance with treatment plans and hegemonic norms.

<sup>191</sup> While the forensic environment is different to a prison and the guys' day to day life is certainly different, they are still legally detained and do not have freedom of movement in the manner that most of us are accustomed to. At the same time, I also feel like the men are in a better situation than if they were in prison, they are held a little more compassionately in terms of the causes for their offending, their day-to-day life is fuller than if they were in prison, – they can go on day trips, engage with the community, and actively pursue interests – and they are generally in a safer and more enjoyable environment. I am glad feminist post-structuralism has helped me find comfort in holding potentially contradictory ideas at the same time.

keys that keep people imprisoned<sup>192</sup>. I am skeptical about the role of prisons in our society and if they are actually capable of delivering a safer, and more, just society. This is particularly the case when I consider the disproportionate number of Māori in prison (and forensic services). I am reminded of the korero of late (and great) legal scholar Moana Jackson (Ngāti Kahangungu, Ngāti Paraou) who asserts that Māori have not traditionally had a word or concept for 'prison' and did not pursue justice in the punitive (almost revenge like) style of the western legal system. In light of my research and the role that public discourse has in the development of social inequality and abuse, I cannot help but wonder if we approached the causes of injustice more systemically, resisting patriarchy, homophobia, racism, and capitalism in place of a society that welcomed and found strength in diversity, that cared about each other and not stuff, and where we did not have to exhaust ourselves to survive, would abuse, substance misuse, violence, and theft reduce?

I have also wondered about the power embedded in the knowledge of our discipline when it emphasises the values and taken for granted norms of the of the well-educated European and American middle class, heterosexual, cis-gendered, able-bodied, neurotypical, men who developed clinical psychology. Their ways embedded unreflexively in the bones of our discipline creating unacknowledged bias in all the literature, assessments, tests, formulations, and interventions that we use, perpetuating a particular way of being as normal and othering everything else as deficit, deviant, or pathological. I have wondered how this knowledge is able to safely (and with some accuracy) guide our understanding of, and support for, those who come from different social locations, such as the men I work with. As Rhodes (2020)

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<sup>192</sup> I have noticed one response to this discomfort is to ensure my key that I carry on the unit is not visible to the guys.

said, "indigenous psychology is culturally safe, supporting the persons' strengths and their relationship with community, spirituality, and land. Contemporary therapy, on the other hand, is not safe in this context. It is a hyperrational approach to healing build on individualism, the sole agent in a sealed room, cut off from culture and land" (p.1). To address this within my work, I have tried to understand and draw influence from the cultural origins of the men I work with and seek guidance from those with cultural authority (Conyer, 2020), I have tried to include social, cultural, and political influences within the formulations I/we create<sup>193</sup>, and use the institutional power I have to make space for the guys (re)connection to cultural places, practices, and ways of knowing and being. It does not seem like enough, but it is a start<sup>194</sup>.

## **regular reflexivity**

I had never really paid that much attention to myself until undertaking this research, but the importance of reflection within critical feminist research saw me considering the story of my family, the values and culture I was brought up in, and my experiences and how these have shaped the way I think, feel, and behave. The literature and theory I explored in my research helped me understand the political origins of my experiences and helped turn my attention gently inward. I have become aware of

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<sup>193</sup> Some of the guys I work with do not seem to possess the cognitive ability to grapple with the structural causes that contributed to their life circumstance and mental health difficulties. For these men, I tend towards making these political links with staff and in paperwork rather than with the guys. I am also mindful that giving consideration to these broader influences may cause some of the men to further resist our pākehā interventions, and institutions and that because of their precarious legal status and the ongoing control the state will exercise over their freedoms this is not in *their* best interests as it will see them further perceived through an "anti-social" personality disorder lens. As with many aspects of forensic services, there are constant ethical considerations to be managed.

<sup>194</sup> I think the thing I am most proud of is extending our Puanga/Matariki beyond a lunch to also include the early morning fire where patients and staff come together to honour those who have died in the past year. The 30-45 minutes that this ceremony lasts is a pausing of time and the sharing of loss that connects us all beyond the various roles that we play day to day. In these moments we experience a potent sense of shared humanity, which seems vital for people who have often spent their lives as outsiders.

how my experiences of abuse had impacted my way of being in the world, with others, and with myself. The more I worked with people who had experienced similar traumas and became familiar with the developmental trauma/Complex PTSD literature my awareness about how stress impacts my mind and body has increased, and I started to take steps to live in a way that supports my internal harmony<sup>195</sup>, I have been able to notice how these experiences have impact my patterns in interpersonal relationships, and have become much better at communicating with loved ones in a deep and meaningful way.

I do not think I would have been able to undertake this process were it not for my research needing me to be able to notice myself theoretically and personally. This regular self-reflection has become second nature to me, and I think it provides a useful tool for navigating the personal and political aspects of psychological practice. Reflection enables me to notice and explore issues related to power, conflicts of interest, boundaries, engage in intentional practice, and prevent against harm. It has also helped me to notice when my self-care practices falter and supports me to get back to doing what keeps me well.

The journey I have taken over the course of my research has helped me to connect the political origins of our abuse to the personal impact this can have on some of us. The combination of critical and clinical psychology knowledge has collectively

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<sup>195</sup> A key component of supporting and developing my self-reflection has been to establish a regular meditation and mindfulness practice. In doing so it has helped me start towards what Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) would refer to as self as context, which the ability to see how you are thinking, feeling, and behaving with some distance, rather than getting caught up in it. Chapman and Rosenthal (2016) suggest that developing such a practice is helpful for preventing behaviour on the part of the therapist that interferes with therapy, which I have noticed myself. Doing this practice has enabled me to start seeing how my background and values are playing out in the therapeutic relationship and make choices about this, rather than being unaware. I am able to better sit with the guy's distress and think before reacting. And I find that my mind is stiller, enabling me to more easily access my clinical knowledge and intentionally decide how best to use it.

supported my own transformation<sup>196</sup> and I believe this is a potent combination that can help guide the development of more human, culturally bound, and emancipatory services. This work is hard within conservative institutions that resist examining the politics inherent at the junction of mental health and justice services, but it is necessary if we are to heal and prevent harm, rather than perpetuate it. And as much as I have come to (appropriately) love the people within our service - staff and patients alike - I have also had to accept that it is not the right space for me, at least at this time. A lone voice working part time cannot affect the change needed individually or institutionally within our service, and trying to do so would risk my sanity, and practice. Choosing to honour my wellbeing and the direction my research is taking me has been a really hard decision to make but as I have engaged in contemplative and reflexive practices of the Winter Solstice and Puanga/Matariki period it was also the obvious one.

*nā te pō, ko te ao, ko te ao mārama  
from the darkest depths of the night we become enlightened*

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<sup>196</sup> With my clinical hat on, I wonder if the understandings from feminist post-structural discourse analysis and feminist consciousness raising processes can act as forms of political rather than individualised cognitive restructuring that can enable us to re-frame our thinking and understanding of ourselves, others and the world? This certainly seems to have been the case for me.

## **expressions of gratitude**

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**my work and the guys** - it has certainly been unexpected to find myself in such an environment but I am thankful for the people I have met and the learnings I have had there, personally, professionally, and politically. I am a different (and better) person for the experiences I have had within our unit and the stories of the guys (and staff) will stay within me for life, acting as kindling for my passion for social justice and the reimagining of a better world, including a different way of engaging with clinical psychology. You have influenced the direction of my life for many years to come.

**PTH** - you have taught me so much about myself and where I have needed to grow and heal personally, you have helped me deeply interrogate the manner in which I practice so it is culturally bound and authentic as well as in line with all those books of theory I read. You are endlessly challenging (in a good way) and inspiring. I hope you find your way to rangimarie.

**VT** - it is such an honour to be supporting you on your hikoi as you open to the world and find safety, happiness, and meaning in your life. Your resilience is inspiring. Your deep love for your mother has seen me open more to my own mum; fortunately I am still able to see her, talk to her, and hug her. As you have reminded me, we cannot take these things for granted. I hope your remaining years offer the life you always deserved.

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