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I am (M)other-wise:

Decolonising Family Court Systems in Aotearoa New Zealand through Nomadic Processes of
Re-membering and Becoming

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

This project flows from my own experience of silence and suffering within the Family Court of Aotearoa New Zealand as I attempted to move my life, and those of my children, to safety following the end of my marriage. It seeks to disrupt the demonisation of separated (m)others within the Family Court system that results in unsafe outcomes for women and children and is perpetuated by the privileging of majoritarian/masculinist, colonial and patriarchal knowledge. I move through this project alone, but not alone, my own knowing linking deeply and inextricably with that of others in a process of collective becoming-with (Haraway, 2019). Informed by a feminist politics of location that privileges situated knowledge as the route to strong objectivity, albeit always partial and incomplete (Haraway, 1988), and a relational process ontology, I engage in a nomadic process of re-membering (Braidotti, 2011), listening hard to hear the unsaid in order to map a cartographic figuration of the conditions of the present from within my embodied and embedded location. Creative, nomadic re-membering opens space for the ethical affirmation of difference and dis-identification from dominant, singular representations, enabling me to resist the figuration of vindictive, hostile, obstructive, selfish, uncaring and in-credible (m)other produced through the gendered norms of Western heteronormativity that form the bars of my epistemological cage. As I push against the bars of my cage, I seek to move away from pathologisation and suffering by re-telling myself differently, transforming my own knowing and repositioning my song as legitimate. Through acknowledgement that the personal is political, my resistance to the figuration of Vindictive (M)other also seeks to decolonise knowledge systems that perpetuate the suffering of women who have left coercively controlling relationships. My creative, interdisciplinary process of affective re-membering enables re-imagining of new possibilities for my own future and the collective futures of other (m)others engaged in Family Court processes within Aotearoa New Zealand, opening space for the (m)other-wise knowledge of women to be heard and legitimised. I re-imagine a future in which (m)others who leave coercively controlling relationships might be permitted the right to freedom and flourishing.

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First, to the chorus of (m)others from whose stories I have drawn strength, thank you for having the courage to raise your voices so that I might join with you in song and renewed understanding. To other (m)others out there who may still be finding their voices, breathe in deeply and hum...it is a good place to start.

To my supervisor, A/P Leigh Coombes. After writing so many words, I am at a loss to find any that sufficiently convey my thanks and deep admiration for you. You have walked me through the most personal of journeys, supported me to challenge my thinking beyond what I knew possible, believed in me through many moments when my own belief wavered, and opened my eyes to the vast horizon. Your effect on my life has been profound. Thank you.

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Finally, to my children. You are my reason. I write this, with love, for you.

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Introduction: Dissonant Beginnings

Despite claims that I had been dictatorial during the establishment of care arrangements for my children following separation, the judge who oversaw our Family Court hearing explicitly found in his summary comments that this had not been the case, and that my actions were inconsistent with someone determined to limit and control contact between my children and their father.

And yet....

Silenced, suffocating, stuck.

My song catches in my throat,

clamouring for release.

It stutters, stops, and stutters again,

*its staccato rhythms unable to strike a chord with
those who listen.*

Everyday fighting to be heard,

everyday struggling to survive.

The melody within me is a refrain that

demands space and place to be.

That space is not here.

Here I am managed, misunderstood, mocked.

Judged.

Reduced to a

one-dimensional caricature: Vindictive (M)other.

Distorted and gnarly.

My song falters.

A scream rises in its place, tearing at my insides and

threatening to undo me completely.

Dissonance colours my days; its jagged edges

haunt my nights.



I begin with a memory of a moment in time. A creative expression of my embodied experience as a (m)other¹ hoping for a better life after leaving my marriage, but still caught within systems that held me in place and regulated my capacity for agency and my ability to parent my children. A memory of affective flows experienced from my position within a web of relationships and institutions. This moment exists in the past but is equally of the present and future, its impacts still deeply rooted within my being, informing and forming possibilities for what is yet to come.

In searching for a way to articulate this feeling of being stuck, to express what my body was screaming out to me, I found myself time and again coming back to musical imagery. Thoughts of sticky moments. Notes, like my truth, stuck in my throat; breath not flowing, limbs rigid and stiff, a body full of raging sound with no acceptable way out. I felt desperate to experience movement away from this feeling of entrapment and unleash the free flow of sound once more. My strongest moments of recognition have always been through music. It is a touchstone, enabling me to tap into a higher plane within myself; a place within and all around me that I can return to, to show me the way forward. It nourishes, replenishes, and opens me up to moments of understanding, moving me on to new possibilities by unlocking affective flows within me, ‘unsticking’ me from my stuck-ness. Music enables me to hear

¹ Throughout my writing, I make purposeful use of the term (m)other as a visual representation of my embodied and embedded experience as ‘other’ following the end of my marriage, an experience produced by the simplistic binaries of Western, colonial, patriarchal knowledge that perpetuate normative expectations of what it means to be a ‘good mother’ and restrict multiplicities of difference (Morgan et al., 2019). I will return to these ideas in more depth as my writing continues.

knowledge held deep inside myself, long buried beneath layers of doubt, confusion, guilt and shame.

Within the writing of this thesis, I take up the metaphor of music to help break my silence. It is a vehicle that enables me to find my voice and articulate the embodied affects of entrapment and loss that flow within my situated location. This project aims to disrupt dominant lies (Fine, 2017) about separated (m)others perpetuated within the Family Court system of Aotearoa New Zealand by the privileging of majoritarian/masculinist, colonial and patriarchal knowledge, while also repositioning my own song as legitimate. It is a creative expression of the vital life and essence within me, providing an opening to hope and to new possibilities for an as-yet unimagined future through processes of becoming.

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Prelude: Getting From Here to There

In the dark times

Will there also be singing?

Yes, there will also be singing.

About the dark times.

(Bertolt Brecht, as cited in Willett & Manheim, 1976, p.320)

In setting out on my research journey, my intention was to create space for the articulation of women's experiences of coercive control within intimate partner relationships. In particular, I wanted to shine a light on experiences of coercive control endured by middle-class Pākehā women, which do not always match dominant narratives of domestic violence and therefore can be made invisible through and perpetuated by social coercion and expectations of Western heteronormativity. I assumed I would interview women about their experiences, listening carefully and gently and accepting the gift of their stories (Oakley, 2016), opening space for their experiences to be heard in order to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of coercive control within the academic literature. My focus was on raising awareness of the terrible issue of gendered violence within Aotearoa New Zealand by singing about the dark times, through a process of narrative research. In beginning to engage with the literature, however, I realised many stories of coercive control had already been told.

Domestic or intimate partner violence (IPV) was historically conceptualised as the perpetration of discrete acts of physical or sexual violence against an intimate partner and regarded as a private family matter (Morgan et al., 2019; Westmarland & Kelly, 2016). In the context of legislation within Aotearoa New Zealand that allowed husbands who raped their wives exemption from criminal prosecution through spousal immunity until 1985 (Tombs, 2024), intervention by police in instances of physical and sexual IPV was limited to efforts to calm and mediate what were identified as 'interpersonal disputes' (Morgan et al., 2019; Westmarland & Kelly, 2016). Such dismissal and minimisation of violence against women in relationship continues to be enabled by Western gender norms and stereotypes that serve to

justify violence and make it difficult for women to recognise their experiences as abuse (Kelly, 1988; Westmarland & Kelly, 2016), especially in the absence of egregious physical violence (Kelly, 1988; Morgan et al., 2019). Women have historically found themselves “caught between the dominant discourse and their own experience: a conflict between men’s power to define and women’s truth” (Kelly, 1988, p.138). Since the late twentieth century, increasing recognition has been given to the role deeply entrenched gender norms play in enabling and perpetuating IPV, the continuum on which violence against women sits, and the minimisation of many acts of violence on this continuum as a result of the normalisation of gendered norms (Westmarland and Kelly, 2016).

“If abusive behaviour exploits existing gender norms when does ‘normal’ end and ‘abuse’ begin?” (Tolmie, 2018, p.56).

Unlike the preceding focus on discrete acts of physical or sexual violence, coercive control recognises IPV as a pattern of behaviour that exploits heteronormative gender norms in order to maintain the dominance of men over women in relationship (Stark, 2012). This pattern includes multiple tactics of coercion and control that may or may not include acts of physical violence and are employed to intimidate, isolate and control women. Intimate knowledge gained within relationship enables the abuser to personalise the tactics employed, so that seemingly innocuous or mundane acts play on known vulnerabilities (Stark, 2007). Stark (2007, 2012) conceptualises coercive control as a liberty crime, one that targets a woman’s dignity and autonomy and results in the entrapment of women within intimate relationships, closing down their scope for action. Thus, in coercive control the focus is not only on what an abusive man has done but also what his intimate partner has been *prevented* from doing (Tolmie, 2018).

Women in Aotearoa New Zealand experience coercive control within a colonising socio-cultural framework that continues to impose gendered norms of Western patriarchal heteronormativity (Black et al., 2020; Elizabeth, 2015; Mouat et al., in press; Towns & Adams, 2016; Towns & Scott, 2013). With one of the highest rates of IPV within the OECD (Black et al., 2020; Elizabeth, 2015), more than half of all women in Aotearoa New Zealand

report experiences of abuse across their lifetime (Fanslow et al., 2023). Māori women report the highest lifetime experiences of any form of IPV at 64.6%, followed by Pākehā at 61.6% (Fanslow et al., 2023). Gendered violence within intimate relationships therefore represents a significant social and health problem. Coercive control is experienced by women in the context of discourses that privilege the dominance of man while simultaneously normalising submission and passiveness as constitutive of feminine subjectivity through narratives of romantic love (Jackson, 2001; Towns & Scott, 2013) and responsibility to care (Jackson, 2001; Mouat et al., in press; Towns & Adams, 2016). Constructed through fairytales and pop culture, the romantic love narrative fuses and blurs the lines between love and violence (Jackson, 2001, p.307), thereby making it difficult for women to identify the dominant and controlling behaviours of men within intimate partner relationships as abuse (Jackson, 2001; Mouat et al., in press). Hegemonic norms of femininity that place responsibility on women to be nurturing, caring, loyal, supportive and unselfish within intimate and familial relationships also contribute to the obfuscation of women's experiences of coercive control (Mouat et al., in press; Towns & Adams, 2016) and act as a discursive tool for men, their exploitation creating ambiguity regarding experiences of violence and victimisation that results in confusion, shame and silence for women (Hancock, 2017; Towns & Adams, 2016; Towns & Scott, 2013). Women report experiences of ownership within intimate partner relationship, with some men's sense of entitlement to ownership over their bodies extending to surveillance and control over the clothes they wear, who they see, where they go (Towns & Scott, 2013), their capacity to work (Jury et al., 2017), their sexuality (Gavey, 1992; Towns & Scott, 2013) and reproductive rights (Burry et al., 2020). For women in Aotearoa New Zealand, experiences of coercive control include patterns of psychological, financial, sexual, physical, spiritual and paper/litigation abuse that lead to loss of self-identity and ultimately isolation and entrapment (The Backbone Collective, 2017; Elizabeth, 2015; Mouat et al., in press; Towns & Scott, 2013). These experiences are hidden within "the norms of heteronormative romance [that] speak surrender to love and responsibilities for care and support" (Mouat et al., in press). Middle class Pākehā women report further difficulty identifying their experiences of coercive control due to dominant stereotypical media representations that emphasise the physical violence model and victimisation of women who are young, Māori and/or of low socio-economic status (Elizabeth, 2015; Towns & Adams, 2016), media reports of family violence involving Asian and Māori victims using "more highly negative language" (Dissanayake & Bracewell, 2022, p.252) than reports regarding Pākehā. Elizabeth (2015) identified that middle class Pākehā women often experience covert tactics of psychological abuse and

control that are more subtle and therefore less identifiable and subject to social sanction than overt physical violence. Further, their abusive partners are often professionals who are “imbued with notions of civility and respectability” (Elizabeth, 2015, p.38) and therefore do not match the stereotypical portrayal of a perpetrator of abuse.

Māori women’s experiences of coercive control are a direct consequence of colonising practices (Wilson et al., 2021). Prior to colonisation, wāhine Māori enjoyed equal positioning with men (Mikaere, 1999) and their mana and status as *te whare tangata* (the house of humanity) was upheld, with harmony and balance between men and women seen as integral to collective wellbeing and the maintenance of whakapapa (Mikaere, 1999; Wilson et al., 2021). IPV was rare and not tolerated (E Tū Whānau, 2018). Upon their arrival, colonial settlers imposed patriarchal values and an individualised worldview that redefined gender roles, positioning women “as men’s chattels on the margins of society” (Wilson et al., 2021, p.9812), and caused the fragmentation of supportive whānau and hapū networks (Mikaere, 1999; Wilson et al., 2021). Māori women now carry the highest burden of IPV in Aotearoa New Zealand (Tolmie et al., 2024). They report experiencing IPV as mana-reducing (Dhunna et al., 2021) and entangled with expressions of aroha and manaakitanga that honour and sustain whakapapa and whanaungatanga (Wilson et al., 2021). These values, and the close links that often exist between intimate partners and whānau, complicate safety decisions that put the onus on women to leave violent relationships (Black et al., 2020; Tolmie et al., 2024; Wilson et al., 2021). Black et al. (2020) draw attention to the everyday resistances Māori women enact within coercively controlling relationships and the importance of looking beyond neoliberal binary constructions of ‘staying versus leaving’ that do not account for multiplicities of experience, the social and cultural context within which Māori women are embedded, nor the reality that leaving often leads to an escalation in violence (Morgan & Coombes, 2016) and increases vulnerability to homelessness and poverty (Robertson & Masters-Awatere, 2017). Black et al. (2020) argue women who remain in coercively controlling relationships are extremely active in resisting tactics of coercion and control that become so normalised within their everyday lives that they are “as routine as sleeping” (p.530), and that these resistances, however small, are evidence of women’s ongoing attempts to carve out what safety they can for themselves and their children. When Māori women do seek help, they are more likely to be subject to culturally unsafe practices that pathologise them and perpetuate harm, many experiencing racism, sexism and victim-blaming within

community and institutional services charged with ‘helping’ (Dhunna et al, 2018; Morgan & Coombes, 2016; Tolmie et al., 2024; Wilson et al., 2021).

Tolmie et al. (2024) argue that while the model of coercive control has assisted to shift the focus from the pathologisation of women to the abusive behaviour of men, bringing the abuse into view, it does not go far enough as it continues to maintain a focus on the individual behaviours and decision making of women without consideration of the wider social and cultural context that contributes to women’s experiences of coercive control. They assert that locating coercive control within the wider lens of social and systemic entrapment is crucial to understanding the multiplicity of women’s experiences and their resistances, especially for wāhine Māori and others at the margins for whom “intersectional oppressions form a matrix of domination” (Tolmie et al., 2024, p.63). Tolmie et al. (2024) remind us “...attention needs to be focused on the scaffolding that encases the multiple axes of oppression. In settler states, colonization is not simply one of the axes; rather, it is an infrastructure that shapes the matrix itself” (p.63). Establishing responses to IPV that seek to decolonise the social mores and structural institutions through which it is enabled, enacted and perpetuated, is therefore vital (Mouat et al., in press).

Following my engagement with the coercive control literature, I recognised it would be unethical of me to replicate research that has already examined the experiences women in Aotearoa New Zealand, as doing so would only contribute to the “hawking of ‘oppression stories’” (Fine, 2017, p.55) within a global market hungry for tales of suffering. My attention therefore turned to what happens after separation. I was interested in the ways in which social and institutional processes, particularly those that regulate childcare, perpetuate cycles of abuse and prevent women from moving away from pain into lives characterised by freedom, agency and flourishing. I found that my own stories of the ways in which I had been silenced began pouring out of me. Moments where layers of social and institutional coercion held me in place through expectations of heteronormativity and dominant narratives of what it is to be a ‘good mother’. I began to question the need to seek out other women’s stories for my research and my motivation for doing so. Did I want to hide behind their stories, so that I did not have to share my own? Was I afraid of the consequences of sharing and being heard in this way? Slowly, I realised that the ethical choice, rather than replicating other women’s stories of

pain, was to engage with my own stories in a way that would allow my research to do something. To shift sediments of thought by looking inwards while at the same time hoping to radiate out (Fine, 2017). Part of this realisation was a developing understanding that I had a responsibility as a researcher to embrace my own vulnerability and in doing so use what resources were available to me to create a piece of work that opened potentials for new understandings and to ultimately shift the conversation and action forward. In coming to this understanding, I also acknowledged that while it is important to make space to express and hear experiences of pain, we must also be careful that experiences of trauma and oppression do not become “static splinters of negativity forever inscribed in the flesh of the victims of history” (Braidotti, 2013, p.347). Yes, we can sing about the dark times, but if change is to be effected, we must not *only* sing about dark times. We must also actively work to challenge the dominant narrative that holds women in place, limiting their range of movement and possibilities for becoming.

In reflecting on my memories of pain a process of re-membering emerged, during which I imagined the transformation of my silence into a vibrant and emphatic release of song, notes representing inner knowing flowing freely from deep within, breath and energy travelling from my diaphragm and taking flight, their vibrations crossing boundaries of thought and setting off a chain reaction, resonating with and affecting those who hear. A vocal cadenza, supported by the academic framework within which it sits, that provides a spontaneous and uniquely individual and nuanced rendering of what it is like to live this life, to walk this path away from pathologisation, pain and suffering towards becoming-woman, becoming-(m)other, becoming-me. Transforming silence to sound, scream to song, suffering to self-determination and flourishing.

Continuing to tune in and listen to the voice that relentlessly pushed at my insides and demanded to be heard enabled the unfolding of a creative process of inquiry that took on a life of its own, producing more questions than answers but in doing so providing multiple openings for new knowledge to be heard. Following and attending to affective flows as I moved through my process, recognising them as moments to be listened to, moments through which my body and inner voice were trying to tell me something, became key to the shaping of this project and to movement beyond pain into a process of becoming. These affective

traces became signposts in a cartographical framework. Refusing to shift, they instead asked me to listen and tune into knowledge able to be gained from my location. Consistently turning inwards, I began to understand these affective traces as the embodiment of power relations from my location within a web of social and institutional systems. Each time affective flows became too much, each time a limit was reached, I turned to writing to find a way to articulate the inarticulable.

My process of turning in towards my own embodied knowledge was enabled by feminist approaches to epistemology that acknowledge the personal is political (Cornforth et al., 2009; Frazer & Michell, 2015). Throughout the history of the women's movement, feminist activism and research has made women's experiences more visible through the telling of personal stories (Claiborne et al., 2013; Haug, 2008), and feminist scholars continue to argue that personal experience cannot be separated from knowledge but instead informs insights and movement towards social change. Understanding the aspirations underlying feminist research requires distinguishing between politics, which advocates for incremental emancipatory change within current structural frameworks, and the political, which proposes radical change that "aims at the counter-actualisation of alternative states of affairs in relation to the present" (Braidotti, 2013, p.356). Not content with accepting repeated iterations of the status quo, feminist researchers engage with the political by agitating for radical change. This first requires understanding of the conditions of the present, gained by revealing power relations "where they are most effective and invisible: in the specific locations of one's own intellectual and social practice. One has to start from micro-instances of embodied and embedded self and the complex web of social relations that compose the self" (Braidotti, 2013, p.356). A feminist politics of location therefore embraces the personal as a route to understanding the conditions of the present, gaining partial but strong objectivity through the examination of views from somewhere, challenging the view from above/nowhere privileged by Eurocentric epistemologies and arguing instead that all vision, and therefore all knowledge, is embodied and situated and that *how* we see impacts on what we can know (Haraway, 1988). Partial objective knowledge, never complete nor final and gained from the body in a particular location, can come from the "joining of partial views and halting voices into a collective subject position...of *views from somewhere* [italics added]" (Haraway, 1988, p.590). Examining views from somewhere allows researchers to build deeper and more nuanced understandings of embodied and embedded experiences, understandings that an impartial

Gods-eye view cannot provide. Continuing to seek understanding through insatiable curiosity (Haraway, 1988) in which present knowledge is continually contested and deconstructed, allows the construction of webs of differential positioning that sometimes connect, sometimes diverge and sometimes provide “unexpected openings” (Haraway, 1988, p.590) for a shift in understanding. Engaging with embodied, situated knowledge in order to build an understanding of the conditions of the present also resonates with indigenous knowledges, which argue “the bifurcated gaze results in a myriad of positions that at times collide, sometimes complement, and at times muddy what might otherwise form neat distinctions and boundaries” (Waitere & Johnston, 2009, p.15). Mikaere (1999) enables the politics of location through her argument for subjugated indigenous knowledges, reminding us that there is a “chasm between indigenous reality and the coloniser’s perception of that reality” (p.20). She argues the colonisation process was, and continues to be, enacted through the privileging and superimposing of patriarchal values of the colonisers on Māori, a process that has undermined the powerful status of women according to Tikanga Māori and inflated the power of men. Just as Mikaere (1999), Waitere & Johnston (2009) and Simmonds (2011) argue for the centring of mana wāhine to provide space to explore the lived experience of Māori women in all its complexity and challenge the “hegemony of rational, masculine and empirical discourses that continue to marginalise and silence Māori women’s knowledges” (Simmonds, 2011, p.16), I began to understand how my research with a ‘view from somewhere’ could aim to tell a story that disrupts the dominant narrative about mothers who leave relationships, instead telling a story that pays “heed to the dignity of women” (Waitere & Johnston, 2009, p.14) and decolonises understandings, creating new opportunities for movement and change.

And so, I embrace vulnerability to offer a window into my somewhere: Middle-class-Pākehawoman; a mother who made the difficult decision to leave her marriage...

How do I open up the pain of that moment again? The tipping point when suffering had become too much, and movement was needed?

Do I even want to bother the scab that has grown over fragmented memories that sit behind my eyelids as if it were yesterday? It is dangerous to look closely, if I do the floor drops out from underneath me and I am falling again. My body re-members in an instant: desperation,

powerlessness, fear, shame, confusion; I am drowning with no way out, dying a little more each day.

I hear the words of the Women's Refuge advocate, my lifeline. I see myself going through the motions, holding my body together just long enough, walking out of my home, numb. I hear the heavy thud of the door closing behind me for the last time. My skin prickles with foreboding as I re-member the chasm of loss that opened beneath me the moment I left the last step, my fall cushioned only by my naïve expectation that now everything would be alright...

There are not enough words to describe the uncertainty and vulnerability that I stepped into amid the realisation that 'home' was not a safe place to be.

Engaging with the politics of location to enable the privileging of situated and subjugated knowledge with a view from somewhere also requires understanding of relational and process ontologies that provide the foundation for this epistemological approach. Haraway (1988) argues that objects are not just passive but instead are actors with agency and that understanding of the world does not flow from the “logic of ‘discovery’ but on a power-charged social relation of ‘conversation’” (p.593). Things do not just happen ‘to’ people. Instead, a complex interplay exists between the lived experience and psychological reality of personal lives and the socio-political histories and conditions that shape them. Tamboukou (2008) also highlights the shift in ontology from ‘what is’ to consideration of how ‘what is’ has been historically constituted and, further, how ‘it’ works, “with what effects and what are its possibilities for becoming other” (p.284). Haraway (2016) uses the metaphor of stories as string figures to illustrate the entanglements that contribute to what is and at the same time what we can know and how we know it. Just as string figures are made up of a complex array of patterns and knottings, developed through processes of giving and receiving in which each player is an active participant, so too are we humans enmeshed in a web of interactions and social structures that constitute the conditions of what is. There is a shift away from neoliberal individualism, in which what is and how it is known is based on universals and positivist objectivity, towards the space that is *between* individuals and the relational processes that contribute to who and how we are in the world and therefore what we know, how we know it and, ultimately, what ‘is’. In relational and process ontology, attention is given to the space between connections, and processes of exchange are vital. Just as Haraway’s string figures are sustained by the tension held between players, the reciprocal interplay between individuals in

relationship enables and shapes what is. Thus, by telling stories from points of difference in our own lives, we craft the substance of what is in a process of “collective becoming-with” (Haraway, 2019, p.566).

As I began to develop my understanding of an ontology that favours process and relationship over Eurocentric objectivity and individualism, I saw more clearly the intersection between this ontology and indigenous knowledges, which have long refused to separate subject and object, human and non-human (Braidotti, 2020). Conducting my research within Aotearoa New Zealand, I understood it was important to engage with an indigenous Māori worldview which, like relational and process ontologies, emphasises the importance of all living things in relationship to one another and the environment, each component possessing its own unique value and contributing to the harmony and balance of the collective as a whole (Mikaere, 1999). I began to experience discomfort at the thought that in making a conscious decision to engage with my own stories, my research would take up space that might otherwise be dedicated to representing and honouring stories of Māori women, who face a different set of challenges to Pākehā women as they move through the system post-separation. In applying indigenous and process ontologies to this problem however, I realised that I could not isolate my experience from that of others, despite their qualitative differences. My experience is one that exists within a system of which we are all part and which we all contribute to and traverse in different ways. I was mindful of Braidotti’s (2020) reminder that while ‘we’ all occupy this planet together, we are not one and the same and must actively work to undo the Eurocentric tendency towards claims of a collective ‘we’ that denies the material impacts resulting from differences in social location. But I also understood the importance of working together across difference to co-construct knowledge in order to transform the times in which we live (Braidotti, 2020). In the context of te Tiriti o Waitangi in Aotearoa New Zealand, it is important that I acknowledge my privileged position as a Pākehā woman, but rather than separating my research from knowledge held and contributed to by wāhine Māori, in presenting research from my Pākehā location I aim to create an opening for further understanding and action. I hope to elucidate processes of colonisation that continue to be imposed on and exert their effects over all women, including wāhine Māori, through the privileging of colonial, patriarchal knowledge. I understand my contribution as one knotting in the collective project to decolonise patriarchal knowledge systems that shape responses to

women following separation within Aotearoa New Zealand, acknowledging that we are in this together, but not the same (Braidotti, 2020).

In accepting that we are in this together, but not the same (Braidotti, 2020), I further came to realise that I created this work not as a lone individual (Fine, 2017) but as one voice influenced by and joining with a chorus of others. I continued to develop my awareness of the deep ontological entanglements between myself and others, understanding that human beings “are never singular even when alone, constituted by the internalised others of our social world” (Fine, 2017, p.119) and that subsequently as a researcher I was never alone, but instead always carried with me the voices of others (Fine, 2017). Because we each carry with us the words of others, including ancestors and loved ones both living, dead and not yet born (Fine, 2017), the stories that we tell are composed of a multitude of social and relational influences that are both consciously and unconsciously woven into what is known and passed on. Haraway (2019) also suggests that stories are not told in isolation from social influences. She argues against the concept of autobiography, saying it is “caught in illusions of self-telling and self-forming...nothing makes itself, nothing tells its own story” (p.565). Instead, she suggests that telling stories from our own social location is a process of “not life writing, but compost writing, writing-with in layered composing and decomposing...” (p.565). Thinking with compost-writing allowed me a deeper understanding of the presence of ontological entanglements in narrative, that stories are never “clean and original” (Haraway, 2019, 573) but instead are composed in and of the world, influenced by history and relational processes. I was also moved by Fine’s (2017) reminder that as we engage with narrative, “each text slices a small paper cut into our souls” (p.110). Through these arguments I understood that as I wrote my own memories I was not alone but joining with the many others whose stories have touched me across time, space and place, moving me along in my own process of becoming...

...How can I forget the feeling of hopeless isolation as I struggled on my own to resist the figure of Vindictive (M)other?...

Turning and turning again, searching for someone who understood the injustice of scrutiny and misinterpretation by a system I thought would help me; feeling like no-one did. Fighting

the internalisation of blame, telling myself day after day that I was not crazy: I was just a mother who loved and wanted to do what I thought was best for my children.

And then, suddenly, there you all were on the other side of my computer screen: the Backbone that I had been needing (The Backbone Collective, n.d.). In your heartbreaking stories I recognised some of my own experience. I gained an understanding that you too were out there, like me. I was both horrified and sustained. I drew strength from you, my body flooding with relief as I realised for the first time that I was not alone...

As I continued to think with compost writing I came to understand that, without realising it, I was already engaging in a process of collective becoming-with (Haraway, 2019) through the mere act of writing my memories. I had already begun the work of turning in (Morgan, 2013) to examine the personal in order to effect the political, my process of re-membering representing the “politically inspired reflexivity” (Morgan, 2013, p.175) characteristic of feminist research. Rather than self-indulgence, engaging with my memories was reflexive labour (Madison, 2011) that I undertook for political ends, my contribution to the collective feminist project of resistance and radical change that hopes to leave behind “something of value for others” (Morgan, 2013, p.175). I came to understand the ontological entanglements found (and not found) in my memory work as a tapestry of sound, in which what is and can be known weaves together in such close harmony that it becomes almost imperceptible. At the same time harmonies move in counterpoint, providing points of difference that add to the tapestry’s overall complexity and depth, tracing divergent lines that sometimes converge to provide openings for inquiry, leading to more nuanced and textured understanding of the conditions of the present. I understood that in the process of narrating my story I carry with me the stories of others, including wāhine Māori. I listen to and learn from them, our stories are composted and made richer through the process of reflexivity. My voice joins with those of others and theirs with mine, adding colour and depth to the timbre of my own song and resulting in the formation of a chorus of knowledge. As I conduct this research I recognise I am alone, but not alone. Through memory work I offer my voice as one harmony line that I hope can be further knitted together with others in a beautiful and vibrant waiata, one that carries the knowledge and strength of women forward in order to transform our collective futures.

As I began to gain confidence in the importance of telling my story and continued to follow the sounds emanating from my body, I felt a strong urge to step into the conversation and offer my knowledge, from my location, to work towards transformational change of the systems in which I felt so stuck. I understood the danger of the single story in perpetuating dominant narratives that hold minorities in place (Fine, 2017) and therefore the importance of presenting a narrative that challenged the single story of mothers who leave their relationships and become caught within Family Court processes. I also understood the need to create a piece of work that aimed to do something, to shift thinking and action forward. I did not want to merely replicate stories, telling them in the same way as before, resulting in the perpetuation of the status quo and the continuing “hermetic refusal to acknowledge State violence” (Fine, 2017, p.112). I became excited by the power of narrative to shift sediments of thought (Morgan, 2013), disrupting habitual ways of thinking and behaving by moving readers through aesthetic provocation and in doing so jolting them into “wide awakeness” (Fine, 2017, p.111). In asking “what is needed to unsettle the State’s (and elite Whites’) refusal to hear?”, Fine (2017, p.112) reminds us that minority speakers have long told stories from their subjugated location, but they have not always been listened to by dominant authorities. Waitere & Johnston (2009) also argue that telling stories does not guarantee a hearing and remind us that minorities, in their case Māori women, have not been historically silent; that they have, in fact, been noisy. Waitere and Johnston (2009) highlight that speaking and listening do not represent discrete “productive and receptive modes” (p.14) and that to listen and truly hear requires active participation, that speaker and listener together construct meaning through a relational process. When this does not happen, when the receptor is not active, the speaker is rendered mute and can never be truly heard. In understanding that speaking does not guarantee a hearing, I realised I not only needed to tell a story that disrupted the single dominant narrative of mothers who leave their relationships, I also needed to tell it in a way that aimed to shift the apathy of those who read it, requiring readers to become active receptors of this knowledge and in doing so creating the conditions for change, generating “further imaginative and knowing action” (Haraway, 2016, p.21).

Haraway (2016) asks why we should tell certain stories, when “there are only more and more openings and no bottom lines?” (p.29). Like Fine (2017), who asks us to consider the narrative responsibility “now that we know, what will we do?” (p.121), Haraway (2016) argues that the answer lies in the ways the giving and receiving of stories strengthens our

responsibility to stay with the trouble. Through this process we become more response-able, more attuned to “still possible finite flourishing, still possible recuperation” (Haraway, 2016, p.10). Haraway’s reminder to remain attuned helped direct my attention away from the single story of pain and suffering (Fine, 2017), toward new possibilities for different ways of being, attending always to multiplicities of experience (Morgan et al., 2019). Haraway (2016) reminded me that staying with the trouble, holding and working with stories of pain and possibility in active partnership through giving and receiving, renders us capable. We become response-able through *relationship* and the process of becoming-with as we hold still “in order to receive and pass on...moving, anchoring and launching” (Haraway, 2016, p.10). The dynamism of this process of becoming-with resonates with Fine’s reminder that narrative research should look inwards, situating stories within time, place and space, but also radiate out, aiming to effect change through provocation of readers’ awareness (Fine, 2017). Thus, narrative research is not merely a process of filling a ‘blank slate’ with individual, static stories. Rather, stories that are told and the meaning that is generated through them are the result of a complex interaction between speaker and listener, writer and reader (Waitere & Johnston, 2009), a weaving together of stories in the process of becoming-with in which participants invent “*n*-dimensional niche space” (Haraway, 2016, p.16), moving towards as yet unknown and unseen virtual realities (Tamboukou, 2008), new ways of responding and being in the world, always remembering that we are in this together, but not the same (Braidotti, 2020).

Underlying narrative’s relational and process ontology is a fluid conceptualisation of time. Linear distinctions between past, present and future become blurred as ontological entanglements exert their influence over what is known and can be known (Tamboukou, 2008). Bradbury (2017) argues that although we live our lives forward in terms of biological development, we make sense of them in reverse, “the horizons of worlds...perpetually shifting across time through the fluid processes of memory and imagination” (p.17), processes which we make sense of through the use of language. Past memories and future imaginings influence our actions and meaning making in the present, shaping “the temporal course of human life” (Bradbury, 2017, p.18) and therefore the possibilities for becoming. Understanding this and remembering the relational nature of narrative gives further weight and understanding to Haraway’s (2016) argument that “it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts...” (p.12).

Haraway's (2019) image of stories nesting "like Russian dolls inside ever more stories" (p565) is a potent one. Through it I understood that each story told is influenced by what has gone before and the particular stories that have been passed on. Tamboukou (2008) added depth to my understanding, arguing that in shifting the analytic lens from sequence to process, narratives need not be coherent, nor do they follow a neat trajectory from beginning to middle to end and in doing so provide insight and meaning that is complete and final. In keeping with Haraway's (1988) argument that views from somewhere are always partial and incomplete, Tamboukou (2008) highlights the distinction between and coexistence of actualised and virtual narratives and encouraged me to consider that actualised narratives, what is actually said, are the crystallisation of "*moments of being*" (p.284) that "create conditions of possibility for more stories to emerge" (p.284). I recognised that although some stories are not explicitly told they still exist, embedded within what has been said, and that by choosing to tell certain stories, creating actualised narratives, we open space for consideration of new possibilities and virtual realities (Tamboukou, 2008), shaping worlds as yet unknown (Haraway, 2016). I understood that paying attention to the unsaid, the virtual, allows consideration of "numberless possibilities of future becomings" (Tamboukou, 2008, p.290) and recognised the importance of engaging with my memories in an attempt to hear the unsaid: the embodied and embedded affective flows that until now had simmered with my silence but that opened space for deeper understanding of my story and allowed movement by revealing new possibilities for becoming. In moving through my research journey, I repeatedly returned to the question: how do I engage with the unsaid to re-tell myself away from pathologisation and suffering, and in doing so shift sediments of thought to decolonise knowledge systems privileged within the Family Court of Aotearoa New Zealand, re-imagining myself and the 'world' differently?

As I grappled with this question, I continued to experience a feeling of entrapment within a life that I could not escape and the ongoing effects of powerlessness to change my own circumstances, and those of my children. I was desperate to break free of the single patriarchal story that figured me as a Deviant Woman and Vindictive (M)other, a story that influenced the way in which I was being viewed and judged by actors within the Family Court system and others within my community. Morgan et al. (2019) gave me the words I needed to articulate what I was experiencing. They highlight the performative nature of gender and its function in holding women captive within individualised Western, colonial societies. Rather than the

expression of traits inherent within biologically determined “sexed bodies” (Morgan et al., 2019, p.591), gender is conceptualised as a construct. Hegemonic gender norms prescribe ways of doing masculinity and femininity through the privileging of heteronormativity and are reinforced and perpetuated by dominant discourse and patriarchal knowledge systems in which difference disappears (Morgan et al., 2019). Social and institutional rewards or sanctions for compliance to or transgressions against the norms of femininity and a neoliberal focus on individual responsibility enable gendered norms to exert their power over women (Morgan et al., 2019), who are made responsible for the management of their gendered bodies and held accountable for “bodily conduct” (Morgan et al., 2019, p. 592) that deviates from the normative, dominant story. Thus, women are held in place by norms of femininity. To stray from them, to wander outside normative gendered expectations, means stepping onto the path of difference, a path that opens women to figuration as deviant and risky. I recognised that in leaving my marriage I had taken a step away from the normative expectations of ‘wife’ and ‘mother’ to secure a different future for myself and my children. But with each step I took, I increasingly felt my failure to live within the norms of femininity resulted in me being figured as a difficult, problematic woman. I felt as though I was locked within a sound-proofed chamber, singing my truth with every ounce of my being, but no matter how hard I tried to project my voice and make my truth known my song was falling on deaf ears. Because my decisions as wife and mother had strayed from the norms of femininity, my song was unrecognisable to others, my experience of difference rendered unknowable (Morgan et al., 2019). Instead, my conduct was held under the spotlight for any sign that confirmed my deviance. Increasingly aware of and unable to escape this scrutiny, I began to work harder to manage my own behaviour, terrified that at any moment I might confirm the perception that I was mad, bad or sad...

Crazy (M)other? Or crazy-making...?

The word “depression” leaps off the page of his court affidavit and

stabs me in the gut.

I rail against the accusation:

how else, when faced with my situation, was my body

supposed to respond?

I am dis-figured,

backed into a corner before we have even begun.

My experience of being rendered mute (Waitere & Johnson, 2009) and having my difference made unknowable (Morgan et al., 2019) resulted in an ever-increasing desperation within me to be heard. I felt the embodied effects of dis-figuration deeply: rage and confusion oscillated in equal measure. Through Morgan et al. (2019), I understood that against the dominant story of heteronormativity, my story was unrecognisable: I could not be a loving, protective mother and at the same time have stepped outside the norms of femininity by leaving my marriage. The simplistic binaries of sameness and difference reified through patriarchal Eurocentric knowledge did not make space for this possibility. Instead, they masked and erased the complexities of my embodied and embedded experience, and my story of difference became one of deviance and risk (Morgan et al., 2019). Figured thus, my truth did not matter, my song was irrelevant and my subjective experience obfuscated by the perpetuation of structural violence by social institutions that do not recognise alternative ways of doing gender. My attention was drawn to the existence of categories of risk that I had sensed others applying to me as I moved through the process of my separation. Either/or categories that rested on hegemonic gendered norms and determined whether I was a good/bad mother, victim/survivor, passive or possessing agency (Morgan et al., 2019). I felt the injustice of being ring-fenced in this way: yes, I had left my marriage, but that did not mean I did not also spend every second of every day thinking about what my children needed; yes, I had left my marriage but that did not mean I had agency, nor that it was a decision I would have made if given the choice. Why was my alternative experience so unrecognisable and unacceptable to others within my community and the Family Court system? Where was the space between

these binaries that would allow for the complexity and multiplicity that flows from being embedded within relationships of power? Slowly, the enclosure that I was trapped in began to come into view: I recognised that in operating to silence me, forcing me to turn in on myself and question the validity of my experience, these binaries formed part of my cage. I came to understand my embodied experience as one of gendered captivity, sustained by epistemological violence (Morgan et al., 2019), and understood that in order to break open the bars of my cage I needed to find a way of accounting for myself and articulating my experience within the system that shifted away from Eurocentric dichotomies of thought, challenging and decolonising Western, masculinist, patriarchal knowledge systems to resist the dominant story of heteronormativity.

In a re-membered moment, a spider crawls across the wall above my desk. I trap it in a glass and, using a piece of cardboard, pull it away from the wall to put it outside. The spider scurries, darting about anxiously, trying to escape. As I examine the spider through the glass its jerky movements speak to me, reminding me of my own struggle to escape and find freedom...

...In the spider I see myself, frantically trying to move to safety. I recognise the glass as the system that has enveloped me since the end of my marriage, restricting my range of movement and the choices I am able to make. The glass is invisible to the spider, it becomes disoriented, doesn't know which way to move. In the same way, I had become disorientated within the workings of the Family Court as my experiences were minimised and denied. So, I had fought harder to make myself heard in the belief that if I just sang a bit louder, someone would hear. What I didn't know was that as I sang I was being observed and judged by professionals within the system through a figuration that distorted and misinterpreted my actions.

I know what it feels like to be that spider, trapped within that glass. To have a belief that if I ask for help I will be believed and supported, but then to feel the panic set in as no matter which way I turn it seems that it is my conduct that is on display and under scrutiny, not his...



In searching for a way to escape the invisible cage I felt myself caught within, I recalled another time and place where learning about the theory of disciplinary power had been a welcome balm, a window through which I began to understand the effects of power that had been acting on me. Bartky (1998) highlighted how accepted forms of feminine subjectivity are achieved through the internalisation of social norms and subsequent moderation of behaviour by women, self-surveillance rendering discipline from outside sources unnecessary as the internalisation of the disciplinary gaze does its work to produce “subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies” (Foucault, cited in Bartky, 1998, p.25). Thinking together with Morgan et al. (2019), Bartky (1998) offered me a deeper understanding of how my experience of gendered captivity was engineered by disciplinary power, opening my eyes to the embodied effects of power on women that flow from the binary of sameness and difference, in which masculinity takes up the dominant position of the ‘same’ against the feminine ‘other’. Like Morgan et al. (2019), Bartky (1998) reminds us that “femininity is an artifice, an achievement” (p.27), a performance of gender imposed on and taken up by the female body through the workings of disciplinary power that is everywhere and is nowhere: “the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular” (Bartky, 1998, p.36). She illustrates the ways in which disciplinary power invades the female body, inscribing it with meaning through the enforcement of norms of femininity and thus perpetuating the subordination of women. In asking us to consider the effects of disciplinary power on female identity and subjectivity in particular, Bartky argues it controls and restricts the movement of women in a way that differs to the that of men, producing an inferior form of subjectivity. Through the enforcement of ideal femininity, the practiced female body becomes confined, unable to move freely in the world due to the “enclosure in which she feels herself positioned” (Bartky, 1998, p.29), women instead acting as “docile and compliant companions of men” (Bartky, 1998, p.37). Through her argument, Bartky (1998) illustrates how disciplinary power produces disparate embodied effects for men and women, the privileging of heteronormativity upholding the dominant ‘sameness’ of masculinity against which all else is measured and producing gendered social power relations that continue to act on the female body to restrict her movement and maintain her subordination. I now understood my body as a disciplined body and my experience of gendered captivity as the embodiment of social power relations, resulting from “an oppressive and inegalitarian system of sexual subordination” (Bartky, 1998, p.37).

I sit in front of our financial mediator, engaged in yet another moment of negotiation to untangle myself from my life as 'wife'. He encourages me to accept the offer on the table, telling me not to worry about my financial situation because I will be in another relationship soon and then everything will be ok. As my decision to be single is delegitimised, dismissal punches me in my gut. I feel his gaze on me: I am an accessory, purely ornamental, a pleasant decorative addition but not worthy or whole if I choose to stand on my own. Even in this moment, as I try to reclaim my autonomy, I am made to feel less-than, reminded of my place...



Coming to understand my experience of gendered captivity as the embodiment of epistemological violence and social power relations perpetuated by disciplinary power had provided me with much needed insight, but now I found I needed more. Understanding the workings of power and the ways in which it held me in place did not stop me from feeling. It did not stop the ongoing exhaustion I was experiencing, nor my frustration, anger, and desperation to find freedom. It did not provide me with answers as to how I could re-imagine myself and the world, enacting change in my own life. Where was my power? Was I forever to be stuck in the position of having life do 'to' me, rather than me 'doing' life? I wanted to become more than a docile body, inert and fixed in space and place. I became interested in the potential of moving away from a rigid, fixed identity towards the conceptualisation of subjectivity as moving, multiple and never final. Tamboukou (2008) provided the shift in thinking that I needed, suggesting that within narratives are not only discourses that reveal power and knowledge relations, but also those that reveal forces of desire originating within the subject. Attention to forces coming from within the subject reflected Tamboukou's (2008) argument that the self is not only bound by the conditions of the time but also actively engages with it, forces of desire joining and linking with power and knowledge relations and constituting embodied, affective experience. Tamboukou (2008) reimagines the figuration of 'docile' subjects, those who are an effect of power relations within particular socio-cultural locations, instead conceptualising the self as a "threshold, a door, a becoming between multiplicities, an effect of a dance between power and desire" (p.285). Moving the subject away from merely being an effect of power relations to the embodiment of both power and desire provided me with hope. My imagination was awakened by Tamboukou's (2008)

description of that dance, my senses attuned to and excited by the promise of the dynamic flow of movement that it would enable. Rather than the conceptualisation of passive subjects having something done 'to' them, unable to escape the gaze of disciplinary power, I recognised that subjectivity could be opened up to processes in which the combination of power and desire allows new possibilities to be imagined. There is the potential for movement towards something new, different, other. Subjects are no longer fixed in place but full of potential for new ways of being. Thus, while an important step in my process of becoming was understanding the workings of "increasingly invasive apparatuses of power" (Bartky, 1998, p.41) and the particular embodied effects of normative femininity on women, Tamboukou (2008) provided a new line of inquiry regarding the nature of subjectivity. I understood that forces of desire within me provided the fuel for the generation of something new and that paying attention to these forces would allow me to resist the bars of my epistemological cage. Allowing the forces of desire originating within me space to be, grow and be heard was an important next step in disarticulating my experience from the simple binaries of Western, colonial knowledge systems that tried to keep me contained and subordinate within my embedded location. Through acknowledgement of these forces, my own gaze shifted from one of self-surveillance to the positive affirmation of my difference, allowing me to begin the process of rearticulating my experience, singing my song, in a way that responded to the complexities of my experience and provided space for the exploration of as yet unknown future possibilities for becoming.

In exploring the potential of a conceptualisation of subjectivity that provides space for multiplicities of experience, movement and change, I arrived at Braidotti's (2011, 2013) nomadic theory and associated affirmative ethics. Like Haraway (1988), Braidotti (2013) acknowledges that subjects of power provide the "privileged starting point for active and empowering processes of transformative becoming" (p.344) but reminds us that in order to shift from positions of submission, subjects must reinvent themselves through a process of becoming in which counter-memories are activated and alternative political practices are actualised. Rather than reinforce relationships of domination and subordination perpetuated by the binary of sameness and difference, or Majority/Minority (Master/Slave), in which women and other marginal subjects are "frozen by the paralysing gaze of the master" (Braidotti, 2013, p.344), nomadic theory privileges a relational process ontology that favours motion over stability, change over stasis, and views difference, or 'otherness' not as a site of

“exclusion from the entitlements to subjectivity” (Braidotti, 2013, p.354) but as a starting point for change. Difference does not equal deficiency but, rather, represents a “generative threshold” (Braidotti, 2013, p.343) for understanding. Braidotti (2013) argues the global economy of advanced capitalism, driven by the proliferation of “multiples of One” (p.344), reinforces sameness and the dominance of Man, located as the Majority. By reflecting on the position of Woman as the second sex, the “other of the Same” (Braidotti, 2013, p.346), I recognised that while it is important to identify and acknowledge this location and in doing so validate experiences of pain, transformative redistribution of power cannot come if women and marginalised ‘others’ remain stuck in this dialectic. Movement from this location is dependent on the opening of minds and hearts to creative processes of becoming that trouble hierarchical power relationships perpetuated by the binary of sameness and difference and the privileging of majoritarian knowledge. By embracing difference, affirmative ethics undoes the “struggle for the recognition of sameness” (Braidotti, 2013, p.343) and instead shared meaning making in relationship becomes a “gesture of creation” (Braidotti, 2013, p.343), enabling processes of becoming in which potentials are explored, movement becomes unhindered and new ways of being come into view. Rather than weaponising difference as a tool to dominate and disqualify marginalised subjects (Arrigo, 2013; Braidotti, 2011), nomadic theory centres and affirms it as a prime site from which to slash the bonds of Master/Slave and in the process re-map and transform power relations to enable collective flourishing (Braidotti, 2013). Just as Bartky (1998) calls for the dismantling of the categories of masculinity and femininity, arguing that “femininity as a certain ‘style of the flesh’ will have to be surpassed in the direction of something quite different – not masculinity, which is in many ways only its mirror opposite, but a radical and as yet unimagined transformation of the female body” (p.40), Braidotti (2013) reminds us we must not “stop at the dialectical role-reversal that usually sees the former slave in the position of new master or the former mistress in the position of dominatrix” (p. 346). The willingness to embrace becoming-woman, becoming-minor, becoming-other is therefore crucial. Movement away from the dialectic requires embracing a minority position where qualitative difference can be explored and celebrated, allowing new ways of being to come into view. Ways of being in which resistance to dominance and control need not require “assimilation or integration” (Braidotti, 2013, p.346) into the phallogocentric Majority. I recognised that dismantling the dialectical binaries of Majoritarian knowledge through affirmation of difference was key to escaping my epistemological cage.

The exploration of difference through affirmation requires a shift away from Eurocentric individualism in which humans are viewed as discrete, singular entities, towards multiple subjectivity in which the boundaries of the self are blurred with others and the social and natural world (Braidotti, 2008). Within nomadic theory, there is no self-other distinction (Braidotti, 2006). Instead, a monistic, post-anthropocentric perspective is adopted in which all matter is connected and sustained by generative forces of desire originating within the subject (Braidotti, 2014). These driving forces do not aim to sustain and preserve the status quo but instead hunger for change, the desire for self-realisation moving the subject through processes of becoming towards the actualisation of virtual possibilities (Braidotti, 2014). Acknowledging that matter is “vital and self-organising” (Braidotti, 2014, p.170) and exists within a complex web of dynamic rhizomatic entanglements in which the flows in relationship are multidirectional and driven by desire, makes space for the positive affirmation of difference. No longer the deficient ‘other’ when measured against the rule of sameness, difference becomes a vibrant, generative and responsive manifestation of the complex flow of affects and forces, both internal and external, within relationship (Braidotti, 2014). Opening my mind to this dynamic web of interactions allowed me to recognise the potential that nomadic subjectivity had to provide movement away from the dialectical, simple binaries that framed difference as lack and in doing so formed part of my cage. I understood more clearly the embedded nature of nomadic subjectivity, found in “a set of interrelations with both human and inhuman forces” (Braidotti, 2006, p.237) in which individuals are inextricably linked to others, human and non-human (Braidotti, 2006) and subjectivity is constituted through a “socially mediated process of relations and negotiations with multiple others and with multilayered social structures” (Braidotti, 2011, p.4). Power is conceptualised as a process rather than an object, its effects flowing freely between, enacted upon and embodied by subjects within diverse social locations within this rhizomatic web (Braidotti, 2011). This vision of an embodied and embedded non-unitary subject (Braidotti, 2013) is also supported by the monistic assertion that body and mind are inseparable, “the embodiment of the mind and the embrainment of the body” (Braidotti, 2011, p.2) constituting the core of human experience. I began to understand more deeply the porosity of our being which, rather than a vessel ‘containing’ identity, opens out to the dynamic flow of affects in relationship and is constituted by it. I understood that the examination of these affective flows provides a pathway to understanding one’s embedded location within a web of connections and the embodied effects of that. Turning into the personal through engaging with affective flows is a tool that enables the cartographic figuration, or mapping, of the conditions of the present

(Braidotti, 2011) “to enable the analysis of situated formations of power and hence the elaboration of adequate forms of resistance” (Braidotti, 2013, p.358).

In turning towards affect, nomadic ethics opposes the “Kantian moral imperative to avoid pain or to view pain as the obstacle to moral behaviour” (Braidotti, 2006, p.242). Instead, it places emphasis on acknowledging and turning towards the embodied effects of pain with curiosity. Pain becomes a site of learning, the examination of affective processes providing knowledge and impetus for transformational change (Braidotti, 2006). Of particular interest are instances when pain has become too great and a limit has been reached. Nomadic theory argues that rather than impenetrable boundaries that prevent growth, limits are thresholds to new ways of being, “points of encounter and not of closure, living boundaries and not fixed walls” (Braidotti, 2006, p.251). Limits provide the starting place for the process of becoming, the point from which new lines of flight become possible. Braidotti describes processes of becoming as “being on the edge of too-muchness, or of unsustainability, surfing on the borders of the intolerable” (2006, p.250). Through this I understand that in reaching a position of unsustainability, as well as pain there is potential. That all is not lost. That movement to a painful moment has and will enable movement away from it to something new. Riding the wave of pain, however, is not done alone. Braidotti helped me understand more clearly that processes of becoming are realised through the coming together of subjects in multiple and complex interconnections, where the ethical instance is not one that follows the Kantian imperative to avoid pain but, rather, empowers “modes of becoming” (Braidotti, 2013, p.343) through joyful affirmation in relationship in which negative affects are transformed into life-giving generative flows (Braidotti, 2006). I was encouraged by Braidotti’s reminder that in focusing on interconnections and relationship we can, together, transform “negativity into affirmative affects: pain into compassion, loss into a sense of bonding, isolation into care” (Braidotti, 2006, p.250).

Braidotti (2008) argues that pain has become inextricably linked to suffering within the politics of melancholia that fuels advanced capitalism in contemporary times, and that it is important to de-link one from the other. Continuing to conflate pain with suffering reflects society’s obsession with stories of oppression and shines a disproportionate light on suffering, perpetuating its existence as the dominant narrative and limiting consideration of what we can

learn from experiences of pain (Fine, 2017). Examining pain on its own enables us to see that “the core of the subject is affect, that is to say the capacity for interrelations with others: to affect and to be affected by them” (Braidotti, 2008, p.18). This reframing of affective flows, including pain, as a response to interrelationship moves pain away from being a symptom of individual failure to an embodied response to the web of relations one inhabits within a particular location, and allows us to examine possibilities for movement that resist the single story of suffering. Through Braidotti (2011, 2013), I came to understand the affective flows I was experiencing as both the enactment and embodiment of power, experienced from my location in a rhizomatic web of relations. I understood with greater clarity the potential nomadic theory had to generate change, both personally and politically, and was encouraged to keep turning in to listen to the affective flows from my own location in order to understand and resist the power relations that were working on me.

While the acknowledgement of pain is vital, affirmative nomadic ethics also emphasises that movement away from it into processes of becoming prevents our relational capacity and generative life force being cauterised. Focusing in on pain for too long, remaining fixated on the splinter of negativity (Braidotti, 2013), prevents us from moving beyond it into flourishing. Affirmative ethics requires the subject to find ways to work through pain in order to endure and live with it (Braidotti, 2008). By stressing joyful affirmation within relationship, it aspires to encourage and sustain flourishing, enabling “forces, desires, and values that act as empowering modes of being” (Braidotti, 2006, p.236). I found hope in this dynamic view of affect, understanding that even negative affects can be transformed, “even those that freeze us in pain, horror, disbelief or mourning” (Braidotti, 2008, p.21). Braidotti’s (2008) argument that “affirmative ethics puts the motion back into e-motion” (p.22) helped me to see that movement was possible, that I was not to be forever stuck in a place of pain. Movement is contingent, however, on the “radical repositioning on the part of the knowing subject” (Braidotti, 2008, p.19) and so does not come without effort. Braidotti (2008) acknowledges that letting go of “cherished habits of thought” (p.19) in order to embrace new ways of being can be a painful process, especially if those habits constitute the framework on which an individual has rested their identity. Despite this I understood it was a process that I must not shy away from and acknowledged the importance of the labour of self-reflexivity (Madison, 2011) to dis-identify from habits of thought, reposition myself within my particular location and once again unleash my song. As I continued to resist the bounds of my existence,

searching for movement away from the position of otherness in which I felt so stuck, Braidotti's nomadic ethics (2013) opened up for me a vast new landscape that I became excited to explore. A gentle, melodious hum began to vibrate within me: the sound of excitement, possibility and hope.



Titiro whakamuri, kōkiri whakamua...

Look back and reflect, so you can move forward...

(Māori proverb)

Following all that I had learned, and continuing to tune into the affective flows I was experiencing, I began to build a project using storytelling and memory work to map the contours of my world, listening carefully to affective flows as signposts to understanding and seeing these signposts as an invitation to journey to somewhere new through creative re-imagining. I understood that for too long my song had been mournful and silent and it was time to compose a new tune, one with a richness informed by all that has been but that opens out boldly in hope, each phrase building expansively on the last, an organic and forward-moving outpouring of breath, being, potential and change. As I mapped the harmonic structure of my song, a cartographic figuration began to come into view, constituted by the web of relations and institutions in which I felt so muzzled. I understood that it was only by identifying the flows and forces of my embodied experience (Morgan, 2013) that I could begin to dis-identify from the dominant story of pathologisation and suffering, decolonise my own mind, and re-imagine myself and my world differently.

In engaging with my memories to map and re-imagine a fluid and unfixed figuration, I do not make claims to truth. My stories are not a representation of fact: they do not document how events took place by providing carefully detailed descriptions of the past (Haug, 2008). Rather, they are an exploration of embodied and affective memories that unlock personal knowledge in order to connect with the political (Haug, 1999; Fraser & Michell, 2015),

illuminate social power relations from within my particular situated location and enable a process of dis-identification, re-imagining and becoming (Claiborne et al., 2013; Cornforth et al., 2009; Morgan, 2013; Stephenson & Kippax, 2017). Following a body of feminist research that utilises memory work as a process (Claiborne et al., 2013; Cornforth et al., 2009; Haug, 1999, 2008, 2020; Frazer & Michell, 2015; Morgan, 2013; Stephenson & Kippax, 2017; Widerberg, 2011), I recognised that it provided the opportunity for understanding the workings of power and gender from within my figured location. Working with my memories had the potential to reveal ways in which I have conformed to and been complicit with gendered norms, allowing me to learn from the embodied experience of this by listening to and hearing affective flows and understanding ways in which I can work “within/against the dominant, contesting its border” (Lather, cited in Claiborne et al., 2013, p.19) by resisting binary power relations of masculinity and femininity in a re-imagined future. Telling my stories through memory work, then, became a process of telling myself away from affective and embodied memories that continued to hold power over me through perpetuation of the norms of heteronormativity, moving myself from a subaltern position (Haug, 2008) and in the process contributing to deeper understandings of the embodied and embedded effects of colonial, patriarchal power systems on mothers in Aotearoa New Zealand, as they leave relationships in an attempt to move their lives to safety.

In order to unlock meaning through examination of embodied, affective memories, it is necessary to tune into the physical, paying attention to and elucidating as much information as possible from all the senses (Morgan, 2013). Attending to these sensory markers provides clues to the flow of forces acting upon us within our embedded social location, we become aware of “embodied dis-ease; pain, fear, joy, delight and the tense, conflicting or problematic relationships in which they are embedded” (Morgan, 2013, p.180). Braidotti (2011) also argues that when writing from memory, or “by heart” (p.232), our focus should turn to the visceral in order to open our perceptive apparatus to flows of forces (Braidotti, 2014). In combing over the terrain of embodied memory we encounter snags, affective traces that draw our attention to and implore us to hear moments that our bodies “forgot to forget” (Braidotti, 2011, p.32): embodied moments that have become entangled with our sense of self, “drags and sediments” (Braidotti, 2011, p.233) of the past that have stuck and continue to shape possibilities for our present and future subjectivities. ‘Truth’ therefore becomes not about an authentic representation of original events but, rather, about what sedimented affects tell us

about the effects of flows and forces in relationship (Braidotti, 2011). Accessing the affective dimension through embodied memory work enables movement away from the suffering perpetuated by dominant stories, allowing us to shake off the shackles of heteronormativity in which we are held captive (Morgan et al., 2019) and launch ourselves into horizons as yet unseen (Tamboukou, 2008). Re-membering nomadically is thus a process of looking backward in order to move forward and provides the wellspring for new lines of flight, new ways of becoming-other, becoming-Woman (Braidotti, 2011). Braidotti (2011) reminds us of the close relationship between memory and the imagination and argues that as we access embodied memories, past, present and future imaginings are opened up and become entwined through a reciprocal and non-linear flow. Because of this dynamic relationship between memory and the imagination, the process of re-membering is never stagnant, complete, nor final, but is instead continuous and fluid, always widening with curiosity to ever more questions and possibilities (Braidotti, 2011; Haraway, 1988). Engaging with nomadic re-membering by tuning into affective, embodied memories thus unlocks creative imaginative processes that create the conditions for something new. It generates fertile conditions for turning our vision towards the virtual, the unsaid, unlocking unknown possibilities for alternative ways of being that affirm difference by resisting, re-imagining and re-writing the conditions of the present (Braidotti, 2011; Tamboukou, 2008), providing a “time bomb placed at the very heart of the social and symbolic system that has welded together being, subjectivity, masculinity, compulsory heterosexuality, and (western) ethnocentrism” (Braidotti, 2011, p.31). Having always intuitively appreciated the power of the arts to provoke new awakenings, Braidotti (2014) encouraged me to recognise the important work creative processes do in conjunction with the sciences to help thinkers approach problems differently and create transformational change. Her reminder that through creative processes “...writers speak the unsayable; painters make visible forces that previously were not, much as composers make us hear sounds that were unheard of” (p.172), gave me license to further embrace my process of creative re-membering as one that would facilitate the opening out of my ‘self’ in order to more clearly recognise the flow of forces in which I was embedded. I understood that through my memory work I was also unlocking processes of creativity and imagination that allowed me to more keenly perceive and express my position within the flow of external forces and hear internal forces of desire that were driving me forward in my process of becoming (Braidotti, 2014). I understood the importance of creativity and creative re-membering as a mode of thought that enabled me to more deeply open myself out to as yet unknown forces and flows, affirm my difference, explore possibilities for new ways of being

and, in the process, resist dominant forms of thought by dis-identifying from the dominant story that worked to perpetuate my entrapment.

It is one thing to re-member embodied memories but quite another to transfer them onto the page in written form. Knowing it was important to connect with the affective flows of my embodied and embedded experience and communicate them to readers in a way that would move them to wide-awakeness (Fine, 2017), I opened myself to the process of hearing and expressing the unsaid. I began tracing moments when suffering had reached a limit and silence had become too costly. Moments when sound, no longer able to be contained, had begun to leak out of me in a slow but urgently building crescendo. I paid attention to the visceral, opening my heart and mind with curiosity in an attempt to truly hear and transcribe the melody that my body was singing. As I wrote, I was constantly challenged by Fine's (2017) reminder that narratives should look inwards but also radiate out, seeking to create aesthetic encounters to "provoke what could be" (p.121). In revisiting and writing particular memories, I attempted to follow the affective flows of my body and allow the tune that I was hearing to move freely through my fingers and onto the page. Sometimes, when my body sang loudly, words seemed to fall out of me without effort. At other times I had to work harder to hear what my body was telling me and mine the depths of my language abilities, challenging myself to write with as much evocative detail as possible. Always, writing involved a sense of catharsis and movement as fragmented embodied memories coursed through me and coalesced on the page in narrative form.

Opening myself to the process of hearing and writing my affective and embodied memories required an understanding that language is the vehicle through which we construct ourselves and our social worlds. Braidotti (2014) argues that "we are spoken by language, written by it..." (p.164) and that because of this, writing should be used intentionally to challenge, destabilize and loosen the "despotic grip of language over the process of subject formation and of making sense" (Braidotti, 2014, p.165). Through this, I understood that the words I used to map my cartographic figuration must be chosen carefully. Rather than second thought or ornament, every word on my page should be put to work, through the intensification of affects, to not only describe my embodied experience but also actively resist dominant patriarchal knowledge systems that laid the foundations for the bars of my epistemological

cage and set limits on my possibilities for becoming (Braidotti, 2014; Morgan, 2013). Already understanding the internal flow of desire as the generative force in processes of becoming, I now understood language as the vehicle through which desire is brought into being, processes of self-actualisation and becoming sustained by “the will to-know, the desire to say, the desire to speak...” (Braidotti, 2014, p.169). Through Braidotti (2011, 2014), I understood the process of writing as one akin to breathing: an embodied, sensory, sensual and life-giving activity that transforms affective energy into language, flows of forces into knowing and being. As I wrote, I recognised the continuous flow of words onto my page as an outpouring of song, an expression of the melody within me. Writing was an activity through which my subjectivity was brought into being, one that provided the space for the exploration and actualisation of new possibilities and potentials for becoming.

“And the poem, I think, is only your voice speaking”

(Woolf, 2016, p.128)

“Breathe-in experience, breathe-out poetry”

(Muriel Rukeyser, cited in Gander, 2018, p.1216)

Without pre-meditation, many of my memories crystallised on the page as poetry. I began to realise that the organic flow of affect into words had the potential to take its most powerful and provocative shape through this narrative form. Not having any experience as a creative writer, I was curious about the appearance of poetry on my page: how was it that my embodied memory work came to be expressed in this way? I was reminded of Braidotti’s (2014) assertion that opening one’s perception to unknown forces through thinking and writing in a creative, intensive mode, results in the suspension of conscious control and creates an opening for new information to flow forward and be heard. I began to understand my poems as intensive texts: spontaneous, fluid, living responses to the flows of affect within me and an “experimental site, a laboratory for the new” (Braidotti, 2014, p.175). My task while writing in this mode, then, was to sustain my open awareness long enough to hear the song my body was singing, to hear “the roar which lies on the other side of silence” (Braidotti, 2014, p.169), and transform my own silence into song by transcribing the knowledge that flowed forward onto the page in whatever form that took. I became interested

in poet Muriel Rukeyser's conceptualisation of poetry not as an object but as a process, one that rests on and is constituted by the expression of embodied experience (Gander, 2018). For Rukeyser, poetry was "an embodied, 'total response' to the world in which imagination, perception, and cognition come together to evince and invoke personal growth and social cohesion" (Gander, 2018, p. 1209). Just as the value in art lies in the experience it produces, its potential for the creation of aesthetic encounter between maker and perceiver (Fine, 2017; Gander, 2018), Rukeyser posited that the generative force of poetry lies in its potential to shift both poet and reader through the expression and exchange of embodied meaning (Gander, 2018). Like Braidotti (2014), who argues that writers and readers in an intensive mode join in the co-creation of meaning through the shared transfer of affective and intellectual energy, Rukeyser referred to "energies that are transferred between people when a poem is given and taken" (cited in Gander, 2018, p.1209) and argued that it was this flow of energies within and between bodies that "...in changing consciousness, can effect change in existing conditions" (Rukeyser, cited in Mąkowska, 2021, p.796). Barraclough (2018) also reminds us of a poem's power to disrupt, move and shift understandings by opening space for an intra-action between writer and reader, a relational experience in which affective forces and flows are awakened and energies transferred. This experience then, of writing and reading poetry, has the potential to shift and move us to as yet unimagined horizons (Fine, 2017; Tamboukou, 2008) through the dynamic transfer of energy within relationship, stimulating and amplifying forces of embodied, affective flows. In understanding that "poetry is not a resting on the given, but a questing toward what might otherwise be" (Adrienne Rich, cited in Bermann, 2011, p.97), I recognised that the use of this narrative form in my research opened space for the exploration of forces and the actualisation of new knowledge. Through this creative process I had begun to hear the unsaid and writing poetry was the mechanism through which I had begun to lever open the bars of my cage, dis-identifying from the norms of femininity that held me captive and re-articulating myself through my own process of becoming. This space of memory, imagination and creativity was one full of potential, a generative site that not only became part of my process of becoming-woman, becoming (m)other, but would also enable me to move knowledge systems forward through a nomadic process of collective becoming-with (Braidotti, 2011; Haraway 2016, 2019).

Not all my memories took the form of poetry. Others arrived as letters, reflections, or brief vignettes. I sometimes made use of metaphors which, Fine (2018) argues, "provide slightly

more than the empirical can reveal...metaphors hold the affect, the unreal, the sensuality of experience that can't/won't be contained, simply observed or documented on the page" (p.xiii). Whatever the narrative form, in all my writing I aimed to use highly descriptive language to bring my embodied memories to life, hoping that my affective energy might reach you, the reader. As I wrote, I was aware that while the use of poetry and personal narrative is increasingly utilised within qualitative research to "intra-act" (Barraclough, 2018, p.379) with readers powerfully and politically from the page, it remains an unconventional representation of data within positivist academic traditions (Morgan, 2013). As my project seeks to disrupt and decolonise Eurocentric knowledge systems that perpetuate violence against mothers who leave their relationships through the imposition of a singular, hegemonic, patriarchal story, I made a conscious and active decision to continue writing in this way: I would continue to follow the organic appearance of poetic language on my page. I understood this as an appropriate form of resistance to accepted phallogocentric knowledge through which I had been figured as a hostile, Vindictive M(other). The use of poetry and descriptive personal narrative presented an exciting opportunity to re-present myself, re-telling and re-writing my story differently through the connection of memory and imagination (Braidotti, 2011; Gander, 2018). I hoped it would allow me to expose wounds sustained while living within this figuration, revealing its embodied effects from the inside out (Fine, 2017). My words represent a refusal to remain silent and suffer. Through them I unapologetically sing out loud the song that has been locked, screaming, within my body for so long.

Braidotti (2011, 2014) argues that as writers and readers in an intensive mode, we meet together in a relational space where we actively engage in the transfer of energy, triggering the transformative process of becoming. Rukeyser also understood the flow of energy generated by the process of sharing poetry and took exception to the description of those who receive poems as 'reader', suggesting that they instead be described as 'witness' (Gander, 2018). She argued that a witness is not merely a passive observer but, rather, is an active participant through the personal experience of an event and the subsequent responsibility to give evidence (Gander, 2018). Shifting those who receive poems from the position of 'reader' or 'audience' to 'witness' acknowledges the energy that moves between bodies in interrelationship as stories are told and received and announces "with the poem that we are about to change, that work is being done on the self" (Rukeyser, cited in Gander, 2018, p.1214). I am reminded of Waitere and Johnson's (2009) call for us to become active

receptors in order that stories might not just be told but also heard. And so, as you now turn the page to read some of my story, dear reader, as we move together through this process of collective becoming-with (Haraway, 2019), I invite you to become an active receptor (Waitere & Johnston, 2009). I ask you to open your body and senses to hearing the unsaid by bearing witness, in the hope that we might move from here to a place as-yet unimagined and unknown, a place that despite the last full-stop will not represent a final destination but merely another opening. Another moment of understanding to move from once again. Let us breathe in and venture on together, but not the same, so that we might lift our eyes to and beyond the vast and endless horizon, an open and vibrant world full of infinite possibilities for new becomings.

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Narrative, Affective Re-membering

Ground zero.

Mere moments since I left my marriage.

I'm no longer in it but also

still there.

How do I re-member myself out of this darkness?

How do I fight the memory of terror that still tugs at my gut? The unravelling that walked me through my every waking moment?

Alive with fear, senses finely tuned to the oncoming threat:

Childcare Mediation.

And I am there again...

Sickening dread sits heavily in my stomach.

I realise it will be just

me and my wits:

I am not allowed my lawyer but

must go alone.

As I search for somewhere to hide, searing pain radiates through my chest.

My heart has taken to

skipping out of time,

its usually metronomic beat now an unpredictable and irregular rhythm.

*I lie at the doctor's surgery as a machine monitors
my distress,
measuring the cost of living through this moment.
The doctor's attempts to accurately map the scream of 'no more!' from my
body are futile.
They do nothing to change my reality,
the parameters of my existence.
I feel as though I might implode, the pressure of this moment
too great to endure.*

And yet there is no escape.

*I do what I can to prepare:
I write notes that I am painfully aware I will not be able to read when the moment comes,
my vision scattered, disrupted.
I write affirmational statements that I hope will ground me.
I attach a photo of my children,
my reason,
to my paperwork; their smiles radiate out
reminding me, as if I need reminding, why I am doing this.
Anxious anticipation clutches at my throat and refuses to
loosen its grip.*

My body burns: fierce, hot unease.

To the mediator I appear well-dressed, composed.

But the mask I wear hides

so much more and the cost of wearing it is

immense.

I stand tall and take a breath,

think of my children, and

step into the room...



Another moment in time, another visceral re-remembering. I continue my story from a time and place when affect was raw, my body's keening so profound that it is impossible for it to be forgotten, the drags and sediments of suffering rising quickly to the surface without need for provocation (Braidotti, 2011; Morgan, 2013). My task now, in this space of creative re-remembering, is a complex one. I turn to listening to and hearing the affective flows in my story in the hope that I might draw from them new knowledge that will enable me to resist the bars of my epistemological cage and, in doing so, remain open to the generative flows of new possibilities for becoming (Braidotti, 2011). Woven within my story are deep ontological entanglements, stories told by others that I am unable to separate myself from, knowledge found in spaces and places in which my embodied and affective energy has joined imperceptibly with that of others to unlock new possibilities and potentials. Through these entanglements I have been enabled to hear my own song more clearly, its composition an evolving and ever-flowing transformation of energy (Braidotti, 2014). As I began to make sense of my story through this process, I found that I was unable to separate my memories from the academic literature against which they sit. I recognised that engaging with the literature regarding mothers' experiences within the Family Court system had formed an integral part of my own process of becoming. With each new reading, I found language that helped articulate my embodied and embedded experience and I soon realised that although I

had been physically isolated from other (m)others throughout my journey, I was not alone. My own ontological understandings became increasingly and deeply entangled with those of the authors, my reading of the research constituting part of the process of collective becoming-with that I was engaged in (Haraway, 2016, 2019). It is for this reason that I have chosen not to create a separate literature review. Instead, I record the academic literature here, nestled among my own stories, each story cradling, supporting and framing the next just as Haraway's (2019) Russian dolls do. In this space of knowing, my stories enter a dialogue with those told through the literature, each speaking to the other and triggering new soundwaves, new vibrations for understanding and becoming (Braidotti, 2014).

Now, in this moment of possibility, I feel the weight of responsibility upon me: which stories should I tell in order to tell this story of gendered captivity and epistemological violence (Haraway, 2019)? And how should I begin, to move us forward on our journey from here to there...?

I turn to another re-membering...

Shattered Knowing

Dear Ma'am,

Expressed below are some things that until now I have been unable to say, truths that I want you to hear about my experience in your courtroom. Splintered, fragmented memories that sit fresh with me today and every day, despite the passage of time...

You walk into the courtroom and I feel the air around me contract. A collective inward breath has been taken by those present and I sense all are on alert. Backs sit straight in chairs. Business jackets are suits of armour donned to impress, exuding masculinity, their wearers playing to win. All except me. I do not wear a jacket. I do not know the rules of this game. I sense the power shift as you settle at your desk and a sudden, prickly feeling of unease moves through my body. Tingling, on edge, ready to react. I am out of my depth, grasping, holding tight to what I know in the hope that it will be enough. Reminding myself to breathe.

On my lawyer's advice I have prepared an opening statement in which I describe my children, their likes and dislikes, their unique personalities and needs. I want to bring their spirit into the room with me, to have you understand them as living, breathing beings, not abstract concepts easily dispatched of with cut-and-paste care arrangements. I have laboured over this statement, each word precisely chosen to bring my children to life. You do not allow me an opportunity to speak. Instead, you take charge with your agenda.

You begin by saying you have read our file but as the meeting progresses it feels to me as though you read his affidavit and stopped there. You attend to the draft parenting order and demands prepared by his lawyer and dismiss any issues that I try to raise as not relevant to the scope of the meeting. A cacophony of sound begins to build within me as I feel myself being silenced, my truth and concerns being stomped on, belittled, denied. I become more and more confused by what is taking place and as desperation builds, the noise that had begun as a low but persistent thrum now begins to drown out my thoughts. They become scattered,

erratic. Every instrument of the orchestra plays at once, a frantic wall of sound; discordant, loud. I cannot concentrate. Cannot hear the melody I need to sing.

Red rage rings in my ears.

You grant his application for Section 46G counselling, allowing him the face-to-face interaction that he has been seeking and I have been doing my best to avoid. You deride my request to take a support person with me, saying it would be more effective if I did not. Violent denial knocks the wind out of me: I can't breathe. I want to scream "effective for whom?!". I do not understand how support could be a bad thing and you are not interested in the reasons I need it. You tell me that I chose to marry this man, that presumably at some point I must have thought he possessed some good qualities. As you do I feel the weight of blame sit heavily on my shoulders. You mock my reliance on digital forms of communication, validating his insistence on in-person contact, and you are not interested in investigating why I need this boundary. I sit and listen to you lecture me about the fact my children have a right to a relationship with their father. You do not know the many and varied ways I have tried to encourage that relationship, nor are you interested in hearing them. You assume you know me and my motivations, but you do not.

During a break in proceedings my lawyer and I decide on a counter-offer, a compromise regarding care arrangements. When we re-enter the room, you demand to know what I have decided. I anxiously search your face for signs of approval as my lawyer puts forward my new suggestion. I do not see any. Instead, after going silent and looking down at your paperwork you say that we need to find a date for a hearing. You have not even glanced at the father of my children, not even given him the opportunity to consider my proposal and respond. I realise that all this time you had no expectation that his position should indeed shift. That in your eyes I need to accept his proposal, or else...

You do not see me walk out of the courthouse, alone, as if in a dream. I drift onto the street and wonder how it is possible that the people around me are still happily going about their days. Do they not know that the earth just shifted? That the ground has just opened up and swallowed everything I once knew and held to be true? I entered into this process believing

that if I spoke, I would be listened to. That I would be heard. Instead, I sit on the bus in shock. No sound stirs inside me. Just blank space, silence. I cannot feel. I am numb, bruised and unable to withstand the wave of powerlessness and hopelessness that engulfs me. I have never been made to feel so small and insignificant in all my life by a person in a position of such power, someone so responsible for decisions over my children's lives.

You do not know how hard I have worked to stitch myself back together since the end of my marriage.

You do not see how I am now, once again, in pieces.

You do not know your complicity, nor the damage you have done to me, in front of him.



Some (m)others engaged in Family Court processes within Aotearoa New Zealand experience dismissal, denial and minimisation of past experiences of intimate partner violence by Family Court actors (Elizabeth et al., 2011; Elizabeth et al., 2012b; Mackenzie et al., 2020; Morgan & Coombes, 2016; Pond & Morgan, 2008). In contrast to the family violence campaign ‘It’s not OK’ (Ministry of Social Development, 2024), which teaches women that abuse within intimate partner relationships is not acceptable, women who enter Family Court processes after separating from abusive partners report not being believed about experiences of abuse during processes that, instead of assisting them to protect themselves and their children, result in the perpetuation of state-endorsed violence against them (Mackenzie et al., 2020). The contradictory message from the Family Court to these women is “‘it’s not OK’, but ‘it’ never happened...” (Mackenzie et al., 2020, p.106). This response from the system constitutes an “alternate reality” (Mackenzie et al., 2020, p.106) that makes (m)others, many of whom have escaped the unreality of emotionally and psychologically abusive relationships (Williamson, 2010), doubt themselves and their actions to find safety for themselves and their children (Mackenzie et al., 2020).

Informing this denial of women's experiences of intimate partner violence by the Family Court is the pervasive belief among actors within the court system that (m)others are vindictive (Towns & Adams, 2016), hostile, obstructive, mentally unwell and that they fabricate or exaggerate their experiences of abuse in order to limit or restrict contact between fathers and their children as a form of revenge (Mackenzie et al., 2020). Pond and Morgan (2008) found lawyers within the Family Court in Aotearoa New Zealand believed (m)others lied about experiences of intimate partner violence and constructed such (m)others as "calculating, vindictive and manipulative" (p.465), arguing that their use of protection orders, rather than a mechanism through which to obtain safety, was a means to limit father's contact with children and gain advantage in custody disputes. The figuration of (m)others as vindictive and hostile stems in part from the pervasive existence of discourse regarding parental alienation syndrome within the Family Court system (Elizabeth, 2020; Mackenzie et al., 2020; New Zealand Psychological Society, 2015). Introduced in the United States in the 1980s and later spreading to Aotearoa New Zealand's Family Court system, the syndrome supposedly manifests in children as a result of "the misuse of maternal power" (Elizabeth et al., 2010, p.254), with (m)others' allegedly unwarranted and obstructive behaviour resulting in children either rejecting their fathers and/or making false accusations of abuse against them (Rathus, 2020). Despite hundreds of research studies concluding there is no scientific evidence to support such a syndrome (Mackenzie et al., 2020; New Zealand Psychological Society, 2015; Rathus, 2020), and the rejection of the syndrome as a psychological diagnosis by the American Psychological Association (Morgan & Coombes, 2016), parental alienation syndrome continues to infiltrate the Family Court system, influencing the way judges, lawyers, mediators, counsellors and psychologists respond to (m)others who resist father's claims for increased care time with their children (Elizabeth et al., 2010; Mackenzie et al., 2020). In practice contrary to recommendations by the New Zealand Psychological Society (2015), Mackenzie et al. (2020) found of all Family Court actors, psychologists were the most likely to accuse (m)others of parental alienation, their assessments for the court "providing a prism through which a parent's actions (or inaction) are framed" (p.110) and greatly influencing recommendations made by lawyers for child.

(M)others face increasing pressure from all Family Court actors to make concessions to father's demands for care time, many acquiescing despite concerns about their children's safety in order to avoid being labelled as alienating, an accusation that increases the likelihood

that they will not be believed about previous experiences of intimate partner violence and leads to further erosion of the safety of women and children in subsequent care arrangements established by the Family Court (Mackenzie et al., 2020; Elizabeth et al., 2012a). The existence of parental alienation discourse often results in (m)others' reluctance to disclose histories of abuse at all (Elizabeth, 2020). Mackenzie et al. (2020) found that women who had been accused of parental alienation were more likely to have evidence supporting their claims of intimate partner violence excluded from court proceedings, with 37% of women accused of parental alienation advised by their own lawyers against raising histories of violence "in case it rebounded on them" (p.115). (M)others who do not concede, or who do raise concerns regarding the safety of their children due to previous experiences of intimate partner violence, are more likely to be pressured by Family Court actors (Tolmie et al., 2009) and viewed as hostile (Elizabeth et al., 2012a; Mackenzie et al., 2020; Tolmie et al., 2009), "vindictive bitches" (Robertson & Masters-Awatere, 2017, p.92). Rather than having their experiences of abuse validated, accepted best practice when supporting the recovery of women who have experienced violence (Mackenzie et al., 2020), these women are less likely to be believed, more likely to be accused of parental alienation (Mackenzie et al., 2020; Morgan & Coombes, 2016) and face accusations of psychological abuse against their children, the abused becoming the abuser in the eyes of the court (Mackenzie et al., 2020). This pattern exists even when there is a proven history of violence by men (Elizabeth et al., 2010), 40% of women in Mackenzie et al.'s (2020) study being accused of parental alienation despite fathers having previous convictions for violent assault. Indeed, a history of violence does not preclude abusive fathers from gaining unsupervised care of their children (Morgan & Coombes, 2016). In their study examining decisions regarding care arrangements for children under the age of 4 by judges within the Family Court of Aotearoa New Zealand, Woodhead et al. (2015) found in cases where either intimate partner violence or child physical or sexual abuse had been proven, overnight contact was often granted. Decisions by the court that children are safe in the care of abusive fathers may reflect the belief that it is possible for men to be violent partners but good fathers (Pond & Morgan, 2008), a discourse that simultaneously dismisses the harm done to child witnesses of violence (Callaghan et al., 2018; Morgan & Coombes, 2016) and positions violent fathers as innocent victims of (m)others' obstructive behaviour (Pond & Morgan, 2008). The pervasive belief among Family Court actors that disruption of father/child relationships is more harmful than "being violent to a partner and inducing fear in her" (Pond & Morgan, 2008, p.467) further dismisses women's experiences of victimisation, shifting the focus from abusive behaviours of fathers and making (m)others responsible for

the emotional work required to ‘overcome’ their fear. Thus, rather than finding the support and help that they expect within the system, women who have experienced intimate partner violence are exposed to secondary victimisation through processes that disempower and blame them for their victimisation “as they take proactive steps to protect their children from further harm” (Morgan & Coombes, 2016, p.61). The figuration of (m)others as vindictive, hostile, obstructive and alienating serves to silence their efforts at help-seeking while at the same time further enabling abusive fathers, many of whom employ Family Court systems as a mechanism through which to continue controlling and abusive behaviours (Elizabeth, 2015), to in effect “swap their fists for the system” (Elizabeth et al., 2012a, p.244). The spotlight is shifted from the abusive behaviour of fathers, turning instead toward (m)others’ resistance to father-child contact (Elizabeth et al., 2010), this scrutiny forcing women to perform a “delicate dance...of ambivalent support for fathers” (Elizabeth, 2020, p.119) that runs contrary to their own beliefs regarding what is required for the care and safety for their children.

Also contributing to the denial and minimisation of women’s experiences of intimate partner violence and the figuration of (m)others as vindictive and alienating is a general view of women within wider society as unreliable (Mackenzie et al., 2020) and lacking in integrity (Pond & Morgan, 2008). Decisions to leave abusive relationships, thereby dismantling the family unit, leave women vulnerable to being viewed as “morally questionable” (Elizabeth et al., 2010, p.257) and (m)others who seek to protect their children as “bitter or over-anxious” (Tolmie et al., 2009, p.678). Elizabeth (2020) highlights that mothers are negatively characterised as displaying “possessiveness, suffocation, excessive intimacy, hysterical imagination and selfishness” (p.121) and that failure to adequately fulfil their normative post-separation role as facilitator of father/child relationships also leads to their construction as hostile and alienating. Further, (m)other’s whose help-seeking behaviours or survival tactics do not match those expected of them have their actions misinterpreted and held against them as proof of their own complicity in violent relationships (Black et al., 2020; Morgan & Coombes, 2016), perpetuating a culture of victim and (m)other-blaming that makes women responsible for the abuse they experience and at the same time denies them access to the help they need, resulting in experiences of secondary victimisation within the Family Court system (Elizabeth, 2020; Mackenzie et al., 2020; Morgan & Coombes, 2016). In Aotearoa New Zealand, the prevailing stereotype of an abusive man or father is constructed in “highly

racialised terms” (Elizabeth, 2015, p.38), enabling abusive middle class Pākehā men to remain “invisible in plain sight” (Stark, 2007, p.14). The binary construction of ‘individualised violent men’ who enact discrete acts of violence against women, versus the ‘morally admirable us’/‘men of conscience’ whose abusive behaviours are both enabled and hidden by norms of heteronormativity that privilege the dominance of man, reinforces this stereotype and makes invisible the ways in which ‘men of conscience’ enact violence through “masculinities of privilege” (Morgan et al., 2019, p.593). Suspicion of (m)others’ motivations (Pond & Morgan, 2008) and attacks against their credibility (Elizabeth, 2015) are further enabled by the nature of Family Court proceedings, which arguably provide a suitable forum for these men, many of whom are experienced in the business world and “adept at public impression management” (Elizabeth, 2015, p.39), to present themselves as reasonable and respectable men of conscience while at the same time attacking the character of (m)others and thus “contaminating the views of them held by the professionals” (Mackenzie et al., 2020, p.111) of the Family Court.



Following my experience at the Judicial Settlement Conference, the silence within my body lingered. It settled within me like an opaque, heavy mist, the feeling of emptiness preventing me from hearing the way forward and knowing which path I should take. It took a long time for sound to begin vibrating within me again and, when it did, self-doubt, fear, anger and shame rang out loudest: a nasty discordant tune imposed upon me by the words and actions of others and the system in which I was embedded. I found my way back to my own song, my inner knowing, by seeking out and engaging with the academic literature regarding other (m)others’ experiences in the Family Court in Aotearoa New Zealand. I joined with other researchers in a space of knowing in order to shift my own understanding and begin the process of moving myself away from pathologisation and pain. Deciding whether I should continue to resist the care regime my children’s father was seeking was not easy and to find an answer to this question I listened hard to my body. The reading I had done in my process of collective becoming-with (Haraway, 2019) had helped me understand the genesis of my embodied and embedded experience and had brought the bars of my epistemological cage into sharp relief. It had also taught me that I had very little chance of success at a court hearing,

and I knew I had so much to lose by exposing myself once again to the figuration of Vindictive (M)other. I did not know how much more my body was able to endure. In the weeks that followed, I thought long and hard about what sort of mother I would be if I didn't go to a hearing, if I just gave in and agreed to the demands of the Family Court and my children's father. I re-member how, as my own situated knowledge composted with that of other researchers (Haraway, 2019), my eventual decision to go ahead with the court hearing flowed from listening to the song that continued to sing loudly from within, reminding me of my need to protect my children. Now, as I re-member the embodied pain of this moment, I seek to re-tell myself away from the figuration of vindictive, hostile, obstructive and alienating (m)other that attempted to silence me and induce my compliance.

Throughout my embodied memory, I hear the affective traces of many moments in which the privileging of masculine, colonial, patriarchal knowledge did not make space for my own embodied and embedded experience, a denial that resulted in the perpetuation of structural violence against me. As I listen to the flows of affect permeating my embodied memory, waves of feeling begin to vibrate and lead me to thoughts of my children. I hear the need in my embodied memory to protect them and ensure that the care arrangements established would support their future wellbeing. I re-member how the boundless love and care I have for them motivated every decision I made as I moved through my separation and subsequent Family Court processes and as I re-member, I ache for the (m)other who sat in the court room and was silenced, having her right to speak about her children denied. Mostly, I ache for my children as I re-member how, during a process so pivotal to their future lives, they were also unheard, the nuances and needs of their beautiful, unique personalities going unspoken. My love and care for my children sings strongly to me now and reminds me of why, when pulled into the Family Court system by my children's father, I chose to resist his request for more care time. In reflecting on this moment, I recognise that the denial of an opportunity to speak about my children enabled the Family Court actors present to continue to turn a blind eye, avoiding consideration of my children as living, breathing flesh for whom determination of 'best interests' required consideration of a complex web of social, psychological, physical, educational and relational factors, not just the imposition of a single patriarchal story that the wellbeing of children is best supported by substantial amounts of father care time. I also understand how the figuration of Vindictive (M)other operated to silence me and my concerns. Its imposition, enabled through majoritarian, masculinist, patriarchal knowledge

that positions women as the second sex (Braidotti, 2011) and insists that ‘good’ post-separation mothers are facilitators of father-child relationships (Elizabeth, 2020), prevented space for consideration of the complex and multiple reasons I had for my resistance (Elizabeth et al., 2010). My failure to conform to post-separation norms of ‘good’ mothering meant I was immediately figured as a hostile, obstructive (m)other, my difference and othering resulting in attempts to explain myself going unheard. I also recognise how my figuration as Vindictive (M)other worked to obfuscate the many and varied ways I had tried until that point to encourage my children’s relationship with their father (Elizabeth et al., 2010), the “delicate dance” (Elizabeth, 2020, p.119) that I had been performing between protecting my children’s needs and supporting their relationship being made invisible. Consideration was not given to the Father’s Day cards I had helped them make, the Christmas and birthday presents I had helped them buy, the gentle encouragements I had offered to them to talk to their father when we saw him on the side of the sporting field. None of these were heard. Instead, the single, patriarchal story of Vindictive (M)other operating through the Family Court became the dominant story through which my actions and decisions were judged, resulting in the distortion, mis-interpretation and denial of my truth. Had the judge given me the opportunity to speak, she and the other family court actors may have heard and understood that my ‘why’ was not revenge. That I was not motivated by a petty, hostile need to obstruct and control but, rather, by love and care for my children, my actions informed by my own situated knowledge and lived experience as their mother and encompassing a holistic view of all the factors important to their wellbeing.

To his lawyer:

No.

*Leaving the way I did was not evidence that I am
controlling.*

In continuing to reflect on my embodied memory I hear the loud, crashing sounds of red rage that engulfed me as I endured another form of denial: the dismissal and minimisation of my experience of abuse within my marriage. I hear the confusion and anger building within me as I struggled to comprehend how the history of my relationship and the impact that it had and

continued to have on me and my children was not relevant to decisions being made regarding their wellbeing within the Family Court. I re-member feeling the slap of denial as I was told that I *chose to marry this man*, the utter disbelief I felt at the lack of understanding the judge showed regarding the coercive and controlling dynamics of intimate partner violence. I remember the hot sting from that slap moving through my whole body as I fought hard to resist the internalisation of blame for my victimisation, the panic I felt as it became apparent that I was expected to bury my concerns for my children's safety and trust that their father would 'step up' to the challenge of parenting (Tolmie et al., 2009) and the eerie, quiet mist of shock that settled within me as I left the courthouse. As I re-member, I now recognise the perverse contradiction operating between hegemonic, neoliberal discourse that had taught me 'it' was not OK (Mackenzie et al., 2020) and made me responsible for ensuring my own individual safety and that of my children by presenting me with the binary choice of staying versus leaving, and the way I was held to account after leaving for transgressions against normative post-separation motherhood (Elizabeth, 2020). I re-member the desperation and powerlessness that flowed within this embedded lose-lose location. The sense that no matter what I did, it was going to be the wrong thing. My body, rigid and stuck, felt hopelessly wedged between a rock and hard place (Elizabeth et al., 2010) as the bars of my epistemological cage continued to press in on me. In reflecting on this moment, I now recognise that the judge's position failed to make space for the complexity of my embodied and embedded experience. I understand how, through the dialectical construction of Same/Other of the Same, Majority/Minority that privileges majoritarian, masculinist knowledge and defines 'woman' by her lack (Braidotti, 2011), the judge's assertion that I chose to marry my children's father provided proof of his upstanding character as a credible man of conscience (Morgan et al., 2019), while simultaneously positioning my claim that my actions were motivated by a need for safety as in-credible, further contributing to my figuration as vindictive and vengeful. Further consideration of the judge's assertion that I chose to marry my children's father opens additional understanding that it made me responsible for my own victimisation, pathologising me as a result of my apparent failure to make 'good' life decisions in order to avoid the experience of abuse. The focus on individual responsibility implicit in this statement denied any consideration of relational flows and socio-cultural forces that constituted the matrix of domination (Tolmie et al., 2024) in which I was embedded and entrapped. In seeking to move myself away from pathologisation and blame, I re-tell my decision to marry my children's father as one motivated by love and hopes for the future, made within the context of Western, colonising heteronormative norms that

reinforce the Same/Other dialect through discourses that emphasise surrender to romantic love, coupledness and feminine submission and responsibility to care (Mouat et al., in press). I reject the single story that by choosing to marry my children's father I also chose to become a victim, by upholding and affirming my innate human desire for connection and love in relationship and the small but significant ways in which I resisted the experience of abuse from within my marriage as romantic love morphed into confusion, disorientation and pain.

Yet another denial within my embodied memory causes my breath to catch in my throat: I remember the inner scream that pushed at my insides as the judge mocked my request for support at Family Court counselling. I understand this denial as another enactment of masculinist, patriarchal knowledge that apportioned strength, reason and rationality to the masculine Same, while diminishing women through their minoritarian position as 'Other' of the Same, a position of lack inscribed by norms of femininity that insist on submission and weakness and make women vulnerable to accusations of hyper-emotionality, sensitivity, irrationality and mental instability. In reflecting on this moment, I understand the judge's insistence that counselling would be *more effective* if I attended alone serves to uphold the status quo that supports men's interests while continuing the perpetuation of oppression of women in their subaltern position within heterosexual relationships. Informing the judge's assertion was an individualised, masculinist, colonial knowledge system that denies the flow of forces between individuals in relationship, pathologises and blames women for their affective distress and makes them responsible for managing their own emotions while remaining embedded within social and structural institutions that perpetuate violence against them. Through this masculine viewpoint, my need for support at counselling was judged as a sign of my weakness and lack, evidence of my inability to 'pull myself together' and act rationally and reasonably for the sake of my children. I recognise now that this viewpoint made no space for the multiplicity of reasons I needed support. The judge did not want to hear about the uncomfortable edge of fear that simmers at my consciousness and tugs at my gut every day and is reactivated easily when in the presence of my children's father, the difficulty this causes me in concentrating and articulating myself clearly when we meet, and the exhausting emotional work that is required for me to prepare and restore myself prior to and following such an encounter. Nor did the judge consider the advantages to having a support person at counselling, the strength that I could have gained through having someone beside me to ground me and remind me to breathe, the practical assistance the support person could

provide in helping me to gather my thoughts and synthesise information. Rather than a symptom of individual feminine failure and lack, I understand that my affective response flows from the dynamics of our relational history, dynamics that are still active in the present despite our separation. As I re-member here in this space, I resist the figuration of weak, unstable woman and affirm my right to request the presence of a support person at counselling. Rather than a sign of deficit and lack, I interpret my request as a reasonable and rational one, intended to protect my own safety and create the optimum conditions for constructive and productive parental negotiations within a forum that I had no choice but to attend.

As I tune into the affective flows within each moment of my embodied memory, the pain and sense of injustice I experienced resurfaces easily, flows of feeling rippling through my body and singing to me loudly in the present as my wounded, splintered flesh is once again exposed. In seeking to re-tell myself away from this pain and the figure of Vindictive (M)other that enabled it, I turn to an understanding of the denial and silencing of my experience as a denial of my minoritarian, situated, embodied and embedded knowledge (Braidotti, 2011; Haraway, 1988). I understand the Family Court system's failure to allow me to speak and be heard as the perpetuation of epistemological violence in which the privileging of masculine, colonial, majoritarian knowledge (Braidotti, 2011) renders the experiences of (m)others irrelevant and unknowable (Morgan et al., 2019) and enables the continuing pathologisation and problematisation of women (Morgan & Coombes, 2016). I understand my experience of gaslighting within the system as the enactment and embodiment of structural power that aims to restrict (Braidotti, 2013) and control women, a continuation of Western colonial processes in which Māori and other minorities continue to speak loudly but remain unable to be heard (Waitere & Johnston, 2009). I understand how my figuration as a vindictive, morally questionable (m)other, allowed my experience and knowledge to be dismissed on the basis of my feminine lack (Braidotti, 2011). Having an understanding of the operation of power on me in my figured location, I now seek to take a line of light towards new possibilities for flourishing by providing space for my song to be unleashed in a glorious celebration and affirmation of my own inner knowledge and difference. I affirm my decision to continue to resist the majoritarian demands of the Family Court and my children's father and interpret my actions as a refusal to remain muzzled. My decision to proceed with a hearing represents active resistance to the silencing of my minoritarian knowledge through the

figuration of Vindictive (M)other, affirms the value and importance of my embodied and embedded knowledge and insists on my right to be heard and to protect my children. Affirmation of my situated, minoritarian knowledge (Braidotti, 2011) and the loving desire that continues to motivate decisions I make regarding my children, allows me to dis-identify from the figuration of Vindictive (M)other that has held me entrapped for so long and caused me so much pain. I seek to re-tell myself as a loving, mindful mother, through an interpretation of my love and care not as a smothering, vindictive act of control, but a driving force that guides my every decision.

When I listen hard to the affective flows within this memory, sedimented affects of pulsing shame and self-blame are hardest to shift, together with the rude disbelief I felt as I left the judge's courtroom that after spending so long tending to the wounds of my flesh, fragile scabs had been picked clean in an instant by a person in a position of such authority. I hear the anger that I felt, knowing that my children's father would interpret the judge's treatment of me as validation of his position and the implications this would have for me as I continue to attempt to co-parent with him. I am grateful now for this privileged space in which to re-member and re-tell myself away from the figuration of vindictive, weak, obstructive, alienating (m)other, a figure that enabled me to be blamed for my victimisation, made me responsible for managing the affective burden I carry as a result of it, and denied the minoritarian knowledge that informed my resistance to requests for care time by my children's father. Re-membering nomadically (Braidotti, 2011), I turn towards rejecting and shaking off the shroud of shame and self-blame enabled by this twisted figure and opening myself proudly to affirmation of my difference, my worth, my strength, and my right as a mother to act according to my situated, minoritarian knowledge developed within my complex embodied and embedded location.

Apocalyptic Knowledge

The Women's Refuge model is one model, but it is not the only model...

(Court-appointed Counsellor)

Listen.

Can you hear that?

*It is the sound of the Four Horsemen arriving to
proclaim the apocalypse.*

*Their hooves drum a steady, threatening beat,
loud, louder, louder.*

*You invited them in, didn't you know, when you decided to
leave your marriage the way you did.*

Selfish.

Uncaring.

Thoughtless Woman.

What's that?

You say you didn't feel safe leaving any other way?

Well go on then, prove it.

I need detail.

I won't believe you without detail.

Hmmm, I'm not sure if I believe you even still.

You had agency, didn't you?

There is a difference between a boundary and a wall you know...

And on he goes...

*I sit opposite the counsellor, shock ringing in my ears as the
red-hot poker of blame buries itself deep within me,
insinuating its way, once again, into my
tender flesh.*

*Rage bleeds into every crevice of my body but I tell it to
be quiet,
push it down.*

Muting myself is easy:

I've had lots of practice.

*I try to answer his questions to help him understand
my truth,*

to prove to him I'm

not crazy,

but later I feel dirty, exposed, violated.

I am angry with myself for being so willing to comply.

I know I needed him to believe me:

it's hard enough believing myself when the other

voices in my head

have drowned out my own song for

so long.

I did not choose to come here.

Thundering hooves rattle my bones and



“The ‘no-contact mother’ has become the paradigmatically bad mother of family law: she is ostensibly immature, unable to recognise the best interests of her child, prioritises her feelings over her children’s needs, is depicted as in need of therapy and, more recently, punishment”
(Elizabeth et al., 2010, p.259).

The figuration of (m)others within the Family Court System as selfish, uncaring, unreasonable, mentally unstable, morally ‘lacking’ and unable to put the needs of their

² By suggesting to me that the ‘terms of disengagement’ set the scene for the parenting relationship following separation, and forcing me to watch a video outlining the relationship model ‘The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse’, the court appointed counsellor made me responsible for the ongoing difficulties in our parenting situation and the ‘dispute’ over care arrangements for my children. I was asked to consider how my ex-husband would have felt when I left the way I did, and it was suggested that the communication boundary I had established following separation was ‘stonewalling’. My own experience within the marital relationship was minimised and my concerns for safety marginalised. The message delivered loud and clear was that I had failed in my duty to prioritise the feelings and needs of my ex-husband and I continued to fail by refusing to expose myself to a situation in which my own safety would be compromised. In response to my transgressions and in order that I might be encouraged to step back into line, I was confronted by a model with strong foundations in Christian patriarchal knowledge.

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse relationship model describes the four factors present within a relationship that predict it will fail and is based on figures from John’s book of Revelation in the Bible’s New Testament. Violent and vengeful images within John’s Apocalypse (Skaggs & Doyle, 2007) tell the story of end times (Pippin, 2014), depicting in vivid detail (Rowland, 2005) stories of man and beast. While the Horsemen are given authority to declare the coming of the end, women are variously portrayed as either Jezebel and Whore or Virgin Bride, the subject of man’s desire (Rowland, 2005; Pippin, 2014). These images of women within Revelation have greatly influenced socio-cultural understandings of feminine subjectivity (Pippin, 2014), influencing the Western cultural imaginary to such an extent that in his examination of portrayals of the Apocalypse throughout art history, Rowland (2005) concluded “there are few biblical books that have been illustrated more than the Apocalypse” (p.303).

While acknowledging the confronting images and abuse of women’s bodies in Revelation, some argue it creates space for further consideration of gender and women’s spirituality within contemporary times (Huyen, 2003, as cited in Skaggs & Doyle, 2007; Rowland, 2005). Despite this, the book is widely acknowledged to be “blatantly sexist and violent” (Pippin, 2014, p.72), upholding a misogynistic view that “presents Christ, together with his Christians, as icons of masculinity, reserving feminine imagery for the enemy” (Moore, 2001, as cited in Pippin, 2014, p.68). In acknowledging the performativity of gender, Huber (2019) argues of Revelation that “gender is being done, and perhaps undone, across the text...if we imagine Revelation as a discourse emerging from and addressing audience members living within a certain place and time, it is instructive to imagine how the text might participate in the ‘doing of gender’ of that historical moment and others” (p.352). As a discourse that articulates so closely with the gendered violence present within Revelation, it is difficult to imagine how The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse relationship model does not continue to shape gendered expectations in ways that uphold the dominance of man and continue to demonise women within contemporary times.

Appropriation of the Bible’s story of The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse by a Western psychological model exemplifies the harm that is enacted through the commodification of knowledge existent within advanced cognitive capitalism (Braidotti, 2019; Braidotti, 2022), a knowledge economy that “profits from the scientific and economic understanding of all that lives” (Braidotti, 2019, p.96) while continuing to perpetuate “patterns of sexualized and racialized oppression” (Braidotti, 2022, p.55). The epistemological violence enacted through the hawking of this Bible story is immense. The use of The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse in relationship settings perpetuates demonising views of women and privileges masculine patriarchal knowledge, shaping social power relations that sustain women’s oppression. This model, applied with no consideration to the social context that contributes towards women’s entrapment (Tolmie et al., 2024), has no place within Family Court counselling settings. I choose, with purpose, not to cite the author of this model in resistance to the violence of this response to my embodied and embedded experience, and the subsequent harm that it caused me.

children before their own (Elizabeth, 2020; Elizabeth et al., 2010; Mackenzie et al., 2020; Tolmie et al., 2009) is closely linked to that of the alienating, Vindictive (M)other. Within the Family Court, intimate partner violence is viewed as a relationship issue (Tolmie et al., 2018). Women are expected to accept that histories of abuse are in the past and confined to issues within the intimate partner relationship, thereby not affecting children (Elizabeth et al., 2012a; Mackenzie et al., 2020), and that, given the chance, fathers will rise to the challenge and develop parenting skills that they have not previously demonstrated (Tolmie et al., 2009). This post-separation neutralisation of gender is “at odds with the ongoing gendered division of labor within most intact families” (Elizabeth et al., 2012a, p.242) and disregards established patterns of care prior to separation. The construction of violence as ‘in the past’ contributes towards the denial and minimisation of women’s experiences of coercive control, deflecting attention away from histories of abuse and the ongoing controlling behaviours of fathers through and within the Family Court system (Elizabeth, 2015), to which family law professionals, including judges, lawyers, psychologists, mediators and counsellors, turn a “blind eye” (Elizabeth et al., 2012a, p.249). The spotlight is instead shone on the actions and attitudes of (m)others towards fathers, especially when (m)others resist fathers’ attempts to gain increased care time with their children (Elizabeth et al., 2010; Mackenzie et al., 2020). Significantly, the focus on (m)others’ resistance to fathers also works to conceal positive and loving interactions that mothers have with their children and the actions they prioritise to ensure their safety (Elizabeth et al., 2010) while obscuring the desire many (m)others have to maintain relationships between fathers and children. Tolmie et al. (2010b) concluded that all (m)others in their study “were committed to their children having a relationship with their fathers (some expressed this very strongly) but, without exception, had a negative view of the putative benefits of shared or substantially shared day-to-day care (50:50 or its close approximation)...” (p.146). Focus on resistance thus hides not only the desire (m)others have to maintain father-child relationships but also the “holistic picture of their child’s well-being” (Elizabeth et al., 2012b, p.470) that (m)others consider when advocating for their children’s needs. Evaluation of (m)others’ actions in relation to fathers occurs within the socio-cultural matrix of Western patriarchal knowledge systems that drum an incessant, menacing, percussive beat. Its sound, too loud and pervasive to be ignored, drills into and reverberates through women’s consciousness, forcefully demanding a normative performance of femininity based on submission, nurture, selflessness and care (Mouat et al., in press) and compliance with post-separation norms of ‘good’ mothering that require women to act without consideration for their own needs and instead prioritise the needs of their children,

even when this results in considerable personal sacrifice and reduction in their own safety (Elizabeth, 2020; Elizabeth et al., 2010, 2012a). Further, Family Court legislation supports the ideological stance that contact with both parents following separation is in the best interests of children (Mackenzie et al., 2020; Morgan & Coombes, 2016; Tolmie et al., 2009) and ‘good’ mothers are constructed as those who willingly give up time with their children and facilitate the relationship between fathers and children (Elizabeth et al., 2010). (M)others who make decisions to leave violent relationships and resist fathers’ attempts to gain more care time within the Family Court system fail to meet these norms of femininity and ‘good’ mothering (Elizabeth et al., 2010) and are subsequently pathologised (Morgan & Coombes, 2016) and figured as selfish, obstructive (Elizabeth, 2020) and morally lacking (Elizabeth et al., 2010), deficits that make them accountable for disputes over care arrangements and set them running from hooves that relentlessly hunt them down, demanding and compelling their compliance.

Family Court processes in Aotearoa New Zealand emphasise the need for negotiation, cooperation, conciliation and settlement between (m)others and fathers (Elizabeth et al., 2011; Mackenzie et al., 2020; Tolmie et al., 2009). Parents are encouraged to avoid the need for a court hearing by working together to agree on care arrangements for their children within Family Dispute Resolution (FDR) mediation and court-appointed counselling settings (Ministry of Justice, n.d.). Operating on the assumption that intimate partner relationships are “based on mutuality and choice” (Tolmie et al., 2018, p.201), mediators and counsellors are charged with facilitating agreement between parties, an agenda that often results in women being pressured into care arrangements against their wishes (Elizabeth et al., 2011; Mackenzie et al., 2020; Tolmie et al., 2009), the emphasis on cooperation making women vulnerable to figuration as difficult or obstructive in the context of gendered norms that require women to be submissive in response to the dominant control of men (Morgan et al., 2019; Tolmie et al., 2009). The assumption of choice in relationship denies the reality that women never choose to become victims of violence (Mouat et al., in press) and does not account for social and institutional forces that generate, perpetuate and amplify the beating demands of normative femininity, contributing towards women’s entrapment within violent intimate relationships (Mackenzie et al., 2020; Tolmie et al., 2024). Instead, violence is reframed as the manifestation of problems in relationship and women are blamed and made responsible for their contribution to ‘conflict’ and any safety-seeking decisions they make (Tolmie et al., 2018). Mediation and counselling within the Family Court therefore proceed on the basis that

(m)others and fathers are on equal footing. Gendered differences in wealth and employment, division of labour within the home prior to separation and, importantly, the presence of intimate partner violence within relationship, are not always accounted for (Elizabeth et al., 2011) and it is assumed “decisions are the result of consensus rather than coercion” (Elizabeth et al., 2011, p.2).

That Family Court mediation and counselling proceeds on the assumption that relationships are cooperative, gender-neutral and equal, overwrites the reality that “...gender enters into almost every dimension of the conciliation process, from the bodies of the actors to the nature of their interactions, and to the solutions advocated in ways that bolster fathers’ power and serve their interests” (Elizabeth et al., 2011, p.5). The gender-neutral stance is informed by postfeminist ideals permeating the Family Court that “the vast majority of heterosexual relationships, including those between former partners, have been reconfigured along egalitarian lines” (Elizabeth et al., 2012b, p.460). Father’s rights groups also promulgate the notion that equality between men and women has been achieved and, together, these movements deny the ongoing gendered disparities that continue to provide the framework in which subjectivities are embedded and either constrained or enabled (Busch et al., 2014). In their study of women’s experiences of the gendered dynamics in Family Court counselling in Aotearoa New Zealand, Elizabeth et al. (2011) found that some women were exposed to the “wrath of their ex-husbands” (p.11) in counselling sessions led by both women and men. Women were made vulnerable to patterns of dominance and control present within the relationship prior to separation, patterns that are not always identifiable by others and lead to victim-survivors being more likely to acquiesce and appease (Elizabeth et al., 2011).

... The (horse)man’s demands, imperceptible to others, echo loudly in my ears...

According to Elizabeth et al. (2011) “not only is this pattern of interaction called forth by the presence of the abuser in close physical proximity, but it is also actively encouraged by the process of conciliation that seeks compromise solutions” (p.3). Of significance, not only did counsellors who were men operate from a masculine point of view, resulting in women experiencing bias against them, women counsellors also adopted a masculine perspective in

order to avoid being seen as having gender-based bias and, because of this position, showed “high levels of tolerance for performances of aggressive masculinity” (Elizabeth et al., 2011, p.10). Family Court counsellors also dismissed women’s concerns about histories of violence, instead conflating fathers’ interests with those of children (Elizabeth et al., 2011).

“Throughout the history of patriarchy, men’s ‘truth’ prevailed and women’s voice was silenced. One of the most effective silencing mechanisms...was to declare women’s voices to be lying. Women, it was alleged, either deliberately tell falsehoods, or are so deceived that they do not know their own minds. Either way, the word of a woman counts for little” (Jordan, 2004b, p.2).

In considering the “matrix of domination” (Tolmie et al., 2024, p.63) in which intimate partner violence and subsequent Family Court processes are experienced by some women, it is important to consider the colonising Western patriarchal framework that continues to figure women as less credible than men (Jordan, 2004b; Elizabeth et al., 2011). In Aotearoa New Zealand, as in other Western countries with socio-cultural histories built on patriarchal knowledge, the credibility of women is placed under greater scrutiny than that of men, who’s knowledge and experiences are equated with objective reality and afforded truth status while “the gender class ‘women’ [is] regarded as wrong, full of falsities and lies” (Jordan, 2004b, p.1). Jordan (2004b) argues that in Western societies built on binary constructions of man/woman and right/wrong, the credibility of men was and is dependent on the opposing lack of credibility of women. The figuration of women as ‘in-credible’ (Jordan, 2004b; Kelly, 2010) therefore serves to perpetuate social power relations that uphold the rights and privileges of men while contributing to the continued subjugation of women. The outline of this dichotomous relationship can be seen sketched in some of humankind’s earliest stories, in which women are described as unreliable, manipulative and untrustworthy and therefore not to be believed. In the Garden of Eden it was Eve who disobeyed God and took the first bite of the forbidden fruit, subsequently being cursed with the pain of childbirth and subordination to her husband (*New Revised Standard Version Bible*, 1989, Genesis 3:6-17), and through Greek mythology we learn the story of Cassandra, daughter of King of Troy, who is given the gift of prophecy by the god Apollo but, in punishment for rejecting his sexual advances, is cursed by him to never be believed. Her prophecies go unheeded and she is disgraced, suffering hateful

and humiliating attacks on her character that serve to further damage her credibility (Payne, 2022). Women's credibility has also been diminished throughout history by the regulation, stigmatisation and pathologisation of 'outspoken' or 'difficult' women, first as 'witch', then 'hysterical' and, in the 20th and 21st centuries, through psychological diagnoses that focus on the emotional 'excess' of women, pathologising femininity (Ussher, 2013, 2023). Significantly, Freud developed one of the most influential theories of psychosocial development based on the idea that "women's stories of sexual violence were not fact, but fantasy" (Epstein & Goodman, 2018, p.434), a view that is echoed within the New Zealand Police where women's accounts of rape have historically been viewed as "'beyond belief'" (Jordan, 2004a, p.33). The disbelief with which women's words are received is not, of course, limited to Aotearoa New Zealand but also forms part of the social matrix within other Western patriarchal countries. Epstein and Goodman (2018) found that within American legal and social service settings "the tendency to discredit women *because they are women* is deeply embedded" (p.436). In responding to women's experiences of intimate partner violence and the subsequent muting, dismissal and discrediting of their voices within the Family Court system, it is therefore vital women have access to a safe space where their voices are heard and believed (Mackenzie et al., 2020). One such space in Aotearoa New Zealand is Women's Refuge.

The Women's Refuge movement began in Aotearoa in the 1970s. Its inception followed women's activism during the 1960s and 1970s that fought for women's rights to equality in both public and private spheres, including their right to live free from violence within the home (Busch et al., 2014; National Collective of Independent Women's Refuges, 2022). Following the opening of the first refuge in Christchurch in 1973, the National Collective of Independent Women's Refuges was formed in 1981 and there are now 40 affiliated Refuges across the country (NCIWR, 2023). Women's Refuge's vision is for all women and children in Aotearoa New Zealand to live free from domestic and family violence (National Collective of Women's Refuges, 2021). Women suffering psychological, emotional, financial, digital, sexual, reproductive and spiritual abuse are supported to understand their experience as a gendered pattern of coercion and control and to make choices that support their safety (NCWR, 2021), with advocacy services providing support either within relationship or in the immediate aftermath of separation (Busch et al., 2014). The privileging of women's rights to live free of violence contrasts with discourse within father's rights groups in which "by

conflating the rights of children with those of men, women are excluded from talk of rights, and simultaneously burdened with responsibility for supporting children as well as fathers” (Busch et al., 2014, p.452). Father’s rights groups criticise Women’s Refuges, claiming that by supporting women they create injustice for men (Busch et al., 2014). This continuation of gender-neutral discourse that purports to champion equal rights between men and women but obscures the very real gendered inequities experienced by women within their embodied and embedded social locations, marginalises women’s rights to safety (Busch et al., 2014), contributing to the affective burden that women carry (Elizabeth 2019, 2020) and the “traditionally patriarchal responsibility that women bear for provoking and ameliorating intimate abuse” (Busch et al., 2014, p.450). Such discourse perpetuates the demonisation of women, encouraging “a return of mythical patriarchal images of woman: figures of malicious liars, hostile harridans and greedy, selfish killers” (Busch et al., 2014, p.453) and contributes to the figuration of women who resist increased father care time as selfish and driven by malice. Despite advances made for the safety of women within the home since the beginning of women’s rights activism (Busch et al., 2014), including the passing of the Domestic Protection Act in 1982, the Domestic Violence Act in 1995 (NCIWR, 2022) and the Family Violence Act (2018), the threat of approaching hooves is ever-present with father’s rights discourse permeating Family Court processes and constituting a challenge to women’s rights to safety. Responding to the situation in Australia, a country also built on Western, colonial, patriarchal knowledge, Flood (2010) argues “the father’s rights movement has exacerbated our culture’s systematic silencing and blaming of victims of violence and stymied community and government efforts to respond to the victims and perpetrators of violence” (p.342).



The shockwaves of this re-remembered moment within court counselling moved violently through my body, shaking me to my core. My flesh, only just able to absorb and withstand the affective intensity generated by the forces and flows in this interaction, was deeply wounded: the splinter of negativity burned red-hot and threatened to once again overwhelm me. I was rattled and running again. Running, to escape the heavy burden of blame, shame and responsibility that had been placed on me and that I carried through my days. Running, from the beat of thundering hooves that chased me down and demanded my compliance: systemic

processes that continued to impose upon me a Western, patriarchal, binary conceptualisation of gender that demanded a performance of femininity from which I had been found lacking. Running, with no destination in mind, fuelled by a desperate desire to be heard and believed and to escape the pain of my gendered, epistemological cage.

I felt the accusation of my failure to fit within the norms of femininity deeply, and yet my body also raged against the injustice of the disorientating violence of this structural response. An inner scream rose once more in my throat, unable to be ignored. In the midst of my gendered captivity, I had to constantly work to resist to the forceful demands on my femininity made time and again within the Family Court system, attempting instead to walk my own path and in doing so to lead my life towards safety. Although still relentlessly hounded by pounding hooves, through engaging with Braidotti (2008, 2011, 2013) my footsteps eventually began to slow long enough to allow me to hear the rhythm of my own song once more. I heard its melody too, continuing to weave with those of others, as composted and composing knowledge gathered through my process of collective becoming-with (Haraway, 2019) provided the fertile conditions necessary for it to grow and develop. My song was a constantly evolving composition of inner knowing, reminding me that the complexity of my experience could not be diminished to fit neatly within the bounds of hegemonic femininity. I realised I was no longer just running away from threat but had also begun running towards the possibility of a different life. Yes, I ran to escape the gnarly figuration of selfish, uncaring, crazy, Vindictive (M)other, but in doing so I also rejected the distillation of my complex embodied and embedded experience into a flat two-dimensional figure. I began to understand my difference as a site from which I could take a line of flight (Braidotti, 2013) and with this developing understanding the meaning of my running began to change, now also representing movement *towards* the potential of something new. Now, in this privileged space of knowing in which I re-member and re-tell myself and my story differently, my eyes lift to the horizon. My gaze shifts away from self-blame, deficit and lack, internalised through the operation of Western patriarchal knowledge systems that have held me entrapped for so long.

In my embodied memory I recognise the figure of the selfish, uncaring, uncooperative, crazy (m)other, enabled through dialectical understandings that define Woman by her lack, the

minority 'other' of the same (Braidotti, 2011), and prescribe an acceptable and unitary feminine subjectivity. In my embodied response, I recognise opportunities for resistance to this epistemological gendered cage. I hear affective flows that sing to me and open space for movement towards becoming-woman, becoming-other. I notice the discomfort felt as I interpreted utterances made within counselling as compliance, my resulting unease the embodied cost of an interaction in which I was forced to relive and become accountable for abuse experienced within my marriage. I recognise the anger generated by my compliance, which later caused me more distress as I chastised myself for not being 'stronger' and 'standing up' to the counsellor, for not refusing to provide him with details of memories so personal and painful that I had not spoken of them before. In reflecting now on this embodied memory, I am unsettled by the anger I felt toward myself for my complicity, especially as my compliance was not met with understanding, and I recognise the forces and flows that were acting upon me within my embedded location, coercing me to comply. I recognise the authority of the counsellor and how my responses to him were shaped by an imbalance of power within the relational space, an imbalance that flowed from his position as an actor for the Family Court and gendered, forceful demands made on my femininity to remain subordinate and compliant. Acknowledgement of the co-creation of what transpired in this moment through an understanding of relational and process ontologies (Braidotti, 2013; Haraway, 1988, 2016) allows me to turn away from the internalisation of blame encouraged by the counsellor's individualised and masculinist view and instead look to alternative meanings for my 'participation' within a process over which I had no control.

In seeking to tell myself away from the pain of embodied shame and self-blame experienced as a result of my embedded location and figuration as selfish, uncaring, crazy (m)other, I return to Braidotti's (2014) argument that we speak our-selves into being and that the desire to speak generates processes of self-actualisation and becoming enacted through language. I recognise the desire felt in my embodied memory to account for myself and my experiences within my marriage in a way that would generate understanding in the counsellor, a need to bring to life through speech the containment of my subjectivity within marriage. I also recognise that in attempting to speak I struggled to choose the right words, every phrase, every story seeming inadequate and unable to bring into full being the complexity of my experience. I now also understand how, in choosing to tell certain stories, others were left unsaid (Haraway, 2019). Ever fearful that I might say something that would reinforce the

counsellor's view of me as selfish and uncaring, I re-member words that I chose not to say. Moments where I remained silent. Listening to the affective flows in my story, I re-member the pain and panic that flowed from the realisation that while I spoke, I was not being heard.

In engaging Braidotti's (2013) non-unitary vision of subjectivity, which opens space for multiplicities of meaning and the affirmation of difference, and thinking with Morgan and Coombes (2001), I attempt to unlock alternative meanings found in my compliance and silence. Following Morgan and Coombes' (2001) argument that "silence may also be understood as a speech act, open to multiple meanings, performing various functions and positioning participants" (p.363), I recognise that an experience or moment of silence may be understood as an act of unsaying. This understanding enables an alternative reading of my compliance and silence within counselling as deliberately employed speech acts through which I chose to speak myself into being (Braidotti, 2014). Rather than understanding my silence and compliance in this embodied moment as evidence of individual weakness, deficit, submission and lack, an interpretation encouraged by a dialectical conceptualisation of normative femininity (Bartky, 1998; Braidotti, 2013; Morgan et al., 2019) and a singular interpretation of the meaning of silence (Morgan & Coombes, 2001), I choose to view it as an act of resistance, an expression of strength different to the kind prescribed by phallogocentric understandings of dominance and control (Braidotti, 2013), one that goes "beyond the logic of dialectical reversibility" (Braidotti, 2013, p.346) and rejects the power-struggle between Majority/Minority, Master/Slave (Braidotti, 2013). I understand my silence as a purposeful re-positioning of myself, away from weakness and the figuration of selfish, uncaring, crazy (m)other encouraged by my position as 'other' of the Same, towards a partial and incomplete subjectivity that embraces difference as the starting point of a process of becoming-minor, becoming-woman (Braidotti, 2013). I affirm, joyfully, my decision to suppress my rage and turn my energy towards dancing to my own tune with dignity and in accordance with my own values. Interpreting my silence in this way helps move me from my subaltern position. I see the potentials able to be unlocked through the act of remaining silent and an understanding that 'power-over' is not the only form of strength. I re-tell myself away from weakness and lack, turning instead towards an interpretation of my silence and compliance as small resistances to the thundering hooves that forced their way into my consciousness, violating and rattling my flesh.

As I continue to reflect on my embodied memory, I hear echoes of the single story the counsellor came back to time and time again, his insistence that my communication boundary with my ex-husband was stonewalling and that effective communication was dependent on in-person contact. Interpreted by the counsellor within a dialectical understanding of normative femininity that privileges submission, cooperation, selflessness and care, my silence in this context is also worthy of reflection. I re-member the accusation that my *boundary was a wall* hitting me with blunt force, the confusion I felt as, yet again, I was forced to defend my decision not to meet with my children's father in person but instead communicate, often extensively and always prioritising my children's best interests, via email and text message. I re-member the notes of my song pushing at my insides with increasing urgency in an effort to escape and convince the counsellor that I had not ceased communication with my ex-husband but, rather, now communicated in a way that protected my safety. I re-member my song falling on deaf ears, the sense that my silence and refusal to speak directly with my ex-husband was still being interpreted as proof of my malicious, selfish, immature character and my failure to care for my him.

...how is it possible that what was intended as an act of care towards the father of my children at the time of separation has been interpreted within the Family Court system as 'mean-spirited'? My truth is, once again, painted over and my character found wanting: I am tarred with a different brush. My head spins and I have forgotten which way is up...

Re-membering the rage that burned within me in response to the figuration of malicious, selfish and uncaring (m)other, I understand a limit was reached. Embodied, affective flows stimulated within the relational process of counselling reached an overwhelming intensity. Now, as I reflect in order to dis-articulate myself from this experience of suffering, I understand the counsellor's view as just one view, reflective of a dominant, masculinist, single story (Fine, 2017) that took no account of my need for safety and made me responsible for ensuring effective communication with and the emotional care of my children's father. In reaching a limit and listening to affective flows, I am presented with an opportunity for new understanding. My point of difference and suffering becomes a site from which new possibilities can emerge through a process of becoming enabled by a non-unitary and fluid subjectivity that shifts and transforms as I take flight away from pejoration and deficit

(Braidotti, 2011, 2013). I understand that my boundary represents resistance to the dominant, single, patriarchal story that insists in-person communication is the best and only way to co-parent. Following Morgan and Coombes (2001), who argue “to refuse to speak becomes a form of unsaying and undoing the abusive relationship” (p.371), I interpret my silence with my children’s father as a refusal to continue in relationship with him. I tell myself away from the story that insists my failure to communicate in person is a failure of care and evidence of my unwillingness to co-parent cooperatively. Rather than lack of care, I interpret my silence as evidence of care directed towards myself, a prioritisation and affirmation of my own right to safety. As an act of care towards myself, my silence also represents an act of care towards my children given that any increases in my safety and wellbeing flow through to them, enabling me to parent mindfully and effectively (Elizabeth, 2019). My use of silence is, of course, not fixed and rigid but instead makes space for alternative action and meaning. I remember moments when silence has not been possible, times when the presence of my children has necessitated respectful interaction between their two parents. I recognise my decision to break my silence in these moments as one motivated by the need to protect the wellbeing of my children but always return, when possible, to enacting my right to silence-as-self-care in order to open potentials for my own flourishing.

Just as I re-tell myself away from the figure of selfish, uncaring, difficult and uncooperative (m)other through an alternative interpretation of my use of silence, I also seek to dis-articulate myself from the single patriarchal story that my use of Women’s Refuge was selfish, uncaring and the cause of our co-parenting difficulties. In my embodied memory I hear the court counsellor’s accusation that I *had agency* when he challenged the way in which I chose to leave my marriage. I re-member the embodied shock that flowed from having my use of Women’s Refuge questioned, the creeping internalisation of blame as melting flesh and brittle bones gave way under the weight of thunderous hooves. In reflecting on the counsellor’s use of this single story to induce my compliance I understand it was informed by a Western socio-cultural framework that privileges masculine knowledge and entangled with dialectical categorisations of women as survivor/victim and agent/victim. The use of these binary categories insists women must be either/or and places onus on individuals to take responsibility for their own victimisation and/or movement towards safety (Morgan et al, 2019), obfuscating the multiplicity of experiences of the ‘Other’ of the Same (Braidotti, 2011) and resulting in the distortion and misinterpretation of actions taken by women within the

context of complex embedded social locations. By categorising me as agentive, the counsellor dismissed and denied my experience of victimisation - I could not simultaneously be both agent and victim – and called into question my need to use an organisation that creates space for minoritarian knowledge (Braidotti, 2013) and prioritises the safety of women over the rights of men. Thinking with Braidotti (2011, 2013) enables me to move away from this reductive conceptualisation of my complex embodied and embedded experience, opening space through non-unitary subjectivity for consideration of the multiplicity of positions I held prior to and following my separation, positions that were never static nor final but always moving with the affects and flows of energies in relationship and the socio-cultural conditions that shaped my subjectivity and therefore my scope for action (Tolmie et al., 2024). By remembering and re-telling myself in this moment, I am able to identify the complexity of these positions. I re-member that at the time of my separation I did not feel I had agency, yet I still managed to leave. I re-member the years of indecision that led to me finally leaving, the various ways I had already tried to leave over the years of our relationship, how I oscillated between staying and going and how my decision was made extremely difficult by the social conditions that constrained it (Morgan et al., 2019; Tolmie et al., 2024). I also re-member how my body, wound tightly and void of song, flooded with relief when I made my first phone call to Women’s Refuge and found a space in which I felt not only listened to but also heard. How the clouds of confusion and shame began to lift as I began to understand that it was acceptable to put myself and my safety first. In re-telling my experience in all its complexity, I move away from “normative expectations of agency [that] reconstitute victims as the site of the problem of their victimisation” (Morgan et al., 2019, p.596), resulting in the pathologisation and blaming of women. In doing so, I dis-articulate myself from the story that would figure me as selfish and uncaring for leaving the way I did. I reject the individualised apportioning of blame for difficulties in our co-parenting relationship made by the counsellor and instead recognise the rupture created by my leaving as one that flowed from all that had gone before in relationship. I re-member the moment of my leaving as one of great pain but one in which, with the help of Women’s Refuge, I was finally able to hear whispers of my own song and turn towards caring for myself by prioritising my right to safety. I affirm, unapologetically, my right to choose safety, to define what that looks and feels like to me and to determine the mechanisms through which I achieve it.

(M)other-wise Knowledge

Who do you think you are?

You sit in your privileged cocoon,

diamonds dripping,

while contrived, rounded vowels do their work to elevate you:

Learn-ed Lawyer.

*Your painted face and tilted head indicate you are listening, but I know you
don't hear.*

You believe you have the measure of me.

I feel as though I am being held at arm's-length: I am a

(M)other in need of managing.

So, I manage myself.

*I swallow my panic and watch what I say, careful not to appear
unhinged.*

I reveal just enough to convey my concerns,

no more,

while you fail to ask questions that you should.

My insides scream at your nonchalance.

*We are engaged in a dance, you and I; an awkward, disjointed two-step where
imbalance of power removes any hope of even-footing.*

You think you are the expert on my children's lives, but you forget

I am their mother.

(M)others who are primary caregivers for their children prior to separation acquire nuanced, situated knowledge and expertise regarding the needs and best interests of their children through their love-labour (Tolmie et al., 2010a), knowledge that informs some (m)others' attempts to protect their children from experiences of violence by resisting fathers' claims to increased care time in arrangements established post-separation. Rather than being 'exposed to' or 'witnessing' intimate partner violence, reductive conceptualisations that fail to adequately capture the impact of violence in the home on children, Callaghan et al. (2018) argue that children are direct and equal victims of intimate partner violence who, rather than acting as passive bystanders, *experience* it "with all their senses" (Øverlien & Hydén, 2009, as cited in Callaghan et al., 2018, p.1556). Experiencing, viscerally, intimate partner violence inflicted upon their mothers within the home, makes children vulnerable to poorer outcomes across a range of areas in their own lives, including higher risk of mental and physical health and educational difficulties, involvement in criminal behaviour and the judicial system, and vulnerability to sexual abuse and violent intimate partner relationships of their own (Callaghan et al., 2018). (M)others' attempts to care for and protect their children from violence and its outcomes are distorted by the failure of Family Court actors to acknowledge children as direct victims of intimate partner violence and to give weight to (m)others' expert situated knowledge regarding its impact on their children. The conceptualisation of violence as in the past and confined to the intimate partner relationship (Elizabeth et al., 2012a; Mackenzie et al., 2020) and the privileging of masculinist knowledge that insists on gender-neutrality and positions (m)others and fathers as equal and exchangeable parents despite previous patterns of care and histories of violence (Chadwick et al., 2014; Elizabeth et al., 2012a; Mackenzie et al., 2020; Tolmie et al., 2010a), leads to the mis-interpretation of (m)others' protective behaviours as obstructive and "interfering with the fathers' 'rights' to equal parenting" (Tolmie et al., 2010a, p.323). The fathers' rights movement has powerfully and persuasively mobilised these arguments to support the push for men's entitlement to equal parenting (Busch et al., 2014), gaining traction through the appropriation of egalitarianism and promulgation of post-feminist gender-neutral discourse that positions men and women as enjoying the same equal rights within families and society, thereby invisibilising gendered power relations that continue to flow from patriarchal knowledge systems and shape feminine subjectivities and mothering realities (Busch et al., 2014). Such forceful demands by fathers'

rights groups were made on the basis that men were victimised by “legislation, policies and practices that were biased in favour of women” (Busch et al, 2014, p.444) and that these policies resulted in injury to fathers’ relationships with their children. By emphasising egalitarianism and gender-neutrality and conflating children’s rights with those of fathers, the fathers’ rights movement has reinforced relationships of domination and subordination traditionally present within patriarchal nuclear families, allowing fathers authority to regulate the lives of women and children through Family Court action and simultaneously denying women’s rights to safety and autonomy (Busch et al., 2014). As a result of the fathers’ movement, (m)others’ voices “have become increasingly muted in the family law arena” (Elizabeth et al., 2012a, p.243), with priority currently given to sustaining relationships with both parents over and above other important considerations, such as the safety of children and (m)others, the maintenance of secure and loving relational bonds with primary care givers and stability and consistency of care at a time when children’s lives are impacted by considerable change (Tolmie et al., 2009). Consequently, some women report that rather than assisting them to protect their children, the Family Court is a barrier to achieving safety, actively producing situations in which they and their children are unsafe (Mackenzie et al., 2020; Morgan & Coombes, 2016).

Should (m)others’ attempts to protect their children result in disputes over care arrangements reaching the Family Court, lawyers for child are then charged with promoting the welfare and best interests of children they represent (Ministry of Justice, 2019). Under the Care of Children Act (2004), principles that lawyers are required to consider when determining a child’s best interests include, but are not limited to, the need for a child to be protected from all forms of violence from all persons and the need to ensure continuity in a child’s care, development and upbringing, which should primarily be the responsibility of parents who work together co-operatively. While these principles provide a framework for decision making, they do not account for situations in which a history of intimate partner violence precludes effective and safe negotiation and cooperation between parents following separation (Elizabeth et al., 2012b) and the precise factors that constitute a child’s ‘best interests’ remain “notoriously indeterminate” (Elizabeth et al., 2012a). Underpinning family law practices and decisions regarding the best interests of children is the logic of present and future temporality that directs attention away from past experiences of coercive control within intimate partner relationships through its singular focus on the future (Elizabeth et al., 2012a). The

“valorisation of the future as the only relevant temporal point of reference in considerations over child care and contact arrangements” (Chadwick et al., 2014, p.13) was identified in speeches given by the Principal Family Court Judge between 2005-2012, the focus on the future representing an “informal philosophy” (Chadwick et al., 2014, p.13) likely influencing the professional practice of lawyers within the Family Court (Chadwick et al., 2014). The obfuscation of past lived experiences through this guiding logic “legitimizes a collective amnesia among legal actors” (Elizabeth et al., 2012a, p.249), rendering past experiences of abuse and violence irrelevant to future child care arrangements. It also leads to failure by family law professionals to adequately consider past patterns of care, with post-separation fathers positioned as capable of care through an interpretation of their “*caring about* as an indicator of their capacity to *care for* even when [they] lack a history of undertaking this work and therefore may lack the required practical and emotional skills” (Elizabeth et al., 2012a, p.242).

In addition to a focus on the future at the expense of consideration of histories of violence that have relevance to the future safety of children, some lawyers do not have an adequate understanding of the dynamics of intimate partner violence (Mackenzie et al., 2020; Ministry of Justice, 2019; Morgan & Coombes, 2016; Pond & Morgan, 2005), nor the ongoing tactics of coercion and control that persist following separation (Morgan & Coombes, 2016). The failure of lawyers to comprehend dynamics of intimate partner violence results in (m)others being figured as unreasonably hostile, obstructive and alienating should they raise histories of abuse (Elizabeth, 2020). In their study with women who had experienced intimate partner violence prior to separation, Mackenzie et al. (2020) found 43% of (m)others had been accused of parental alienation by lawyers for child. Despite the weight of responsibility held by lawyers when making recommendations to support a child’s welfare and best interests, a review of Family Justice Services (Ministry of Justice, 2019) found “lawyers don’t have the appropriate knowledge and skills to advocate for children” (p.86). The review found statutory criteria for the appointment of lawyers for child did not take account of a lawyers “personality, cultural background, training, qualifications or experience” (Ministry of Justice, 2019, p.86) and that procedures and working practices varied between lawyers. Māori wāhine and whānau face additional barriers to safe and culturally competent treatment and decision making within the Family Court, many experiencing it as “foreign, isolating and intimidating” (Ministry of Justice, 2019, p.37). As a result, community knowledge and expertise about how

best to support tamariki and their whānau is devalued and denied (Ministry of Justice, 2019). Included in the review's recommendations was an invitation to the New Zealand Law Society to strengthen the selection and professional development processes for lawyers for child, including the inclusion of a child development expert on the appointment panel, and amendments to the Care of Children Act (2004) to ensure Māori children are represented by Māori lawyers for child (Ministry of Justice, 2019). Despite these recommendations, the Family Court and actors within it continue to form part of the "infrastructure of colonial violence" (Tolmie et al., 2024, p.62) that holds women trapped within coercively controlling relationships, by individually responsabilising them for the protection of their children and, simultaneously, the maintenance of father-child relationships (Morgan & Coombes, 2016). The imposition of such a double and contradictory burden through the privileging of colonial, masculinist knowledge over the situated, embodied and embedded knowledge of women, constitutes state-sanctioned violence against (m)others who have attempted to move their lives, and those of their children, to safety.

Within the context of parental alienation discourse and the figuration of (m)others as obstructive and vindictive, women report engaging in self-disciplinary strategies to demonstrate to Family Court lawyers that they are not "simply ill-disposed to fathers of their children" (Elizabeth, 2020, p.124) and in doing so avoid being accused of parental alienation (Elizabeth, 2020; Elizabeth et al., 2010; Mackenzie et al, 2020). In their interactions with Family Court lawyers, (m)others censor their own talk regarding fathers' parenting abilities and histories of abuse (Elizabeth, 2020; Elizabeth et al., 2010). They also work to manage their emotions, taking care to avoid any display of emotion that would reinforce their figuration as vindictive and hostile, including anger, which remains a less socially acceptable emotional response for women than it is for men (Elizabeth, 2020). Dancing around full disclosure in this way, (m)others attempt to work towards outcomes that ensure the safety of both themselves and their children, while understanding that the reasons for their resistance are under close scrutiny by lawyers, some of whom treat them with suspicion (Mackenzie et al., 2020; Pond & Morgan, 2008). As far back as 2005, Pond and Morgan identified that in addition to a lack of understanding about intimate partner violence, the poor interpersonal skills of some lawyers prevented them from interpreting and responding appropriately to the behaviour and emotional distress of (m)others who had survived violence, with some (m)others reporting having been dismissed as over-emotional and over-reactive. In the same

study, some (m)others also reported a sense that lawyers were motivated by money and not genuinely interested in the outcomes of their case, nor the consequences that they and their children were forced to live with. Despite the passing of time, (m)others continue to report that lawyers question and minimise their experiences of victimisation (Mackenzie et al., 2020), their resistance to ex-partners not aligning with the dominant positioning of abused women as passive and submissive, thereby throwing doubt on their credibility (Morgan et al., 2019; Pond & Morgan, 2005; Tolmie, 2018). Tolmie (2018) argues that a woman who is able to remain coherent and strong under cross-examination “may undercut her claim to have been the victim of coercive control” (p.56). Significantly, the ideological and idealised stance amongst lawyers that favours father-child contact over other considerations such as the presence of intimate partner violence (Morgan & Coombes, 2016; Tolmie et al., 2010b) is also apparent among lawyers for child (Mackenzie et al., 2020), some of whom are “more concerned with the abusive non-custodial parent’s unrestricted access to the child than the best interests and safety of the child” (Pond & Morgan, 2008, p.472). The pro-fathering stance adopted by some lawyers encourages incomplete investigations into all the factors that contribute to a child’s safety and wellbeing, with Pond and Morgan (2005) finding recommendations by lawyers for child regarding care arrangements were often made after just one meeting with the child. Such a narrow approach to assessing the needs and best interests of a child is not likely to identify intersecting axes of oppression that form the social framework of children’s lives (Tolmie et al., 2024), nor is it likely to identify threats to children’s safety (Pond & Morgan, 2005), risking the establishment of care arrangements that diminish rather than increase the wellbeing of children. According to Tolmie et al. (2010b) “the lived reality of shared day-to-day care could be quite traumatic for the child, even in cases where the child had expressed to family law professionals, such as the lawyer for the child, a desire to stay with each parent for equal periods of time” (p.152). In response to the narrow assessment approach taken by many family law professionals in the context of (m)others’ opposition to fathers’ increased care time, Elizabeth et al. (2010) argue a strict focus on the present and future produces “decontextualised and reductionist accounts of care and contact disputes that unjustifiably pathologise mothers” (p.271) and they encourage lawyers to instead explore the reasons for (m)others’ resistance in detail, giving careful consideration to contributing historical factors such as intimate partner violence that, in many cases, informs (m)others’ attempts to protect their children. Against the backdrop of gender-neutral discourse (Chadwick et al., 2014) that fails to account for the gendered division of care work both prior to and following separation (Tolmie et al., 2010a), the exclusive

examination of the present and future to the detriment of consideration of a harmful past reproduces patriarchal gendered power relations that deny the knowledge and expertise of (m)others, silencing their attempts to care and protect by devaluing mothering and motherhood (Tolmie et al., 2010a) and, crucially, damaging relationships of care between (m)others and children that remain vital to children's ongoing development and wellbeing (Tolmie et al., 2009; Tolmie et al., 2010b).



Tuning into my embodied memory I am confronted by mute disbelief and screaming silence, affects that flow as hope for assistance abruptly evaporates. Panic, fear and anger flow in equal measure as I come to realise I will not find an ally in my children's Family Court lawyer. As I listen, I re-member giddy disorientation, a feeling of being caught off balance and the uncomfortable push and pull of forces in relationship as I tried to find a way to convey what I needed to while also protecting myself from figuration as Vindictive (M)other. I hear the injustice felt as I understood the lawyer had no intention of looking beneath the surface, the feeling that she had already made up her mind about what was best for my children and there was nothing I could say to shift her position.

As I reflect on my memory, I am struck by the disconnect between the lawyer and myself. I recognise how the relational space between us was closely guarded by the lawyer and, consequently, how I found it impossible to cross the gulf that separated us in order to be heard. I re-member having to approach the lawyer myself to request time to speak and my confusion and shock when I realised she had not intended to talk to me before formulating her recommendations, that she was not interested in hearing what I had to say. I understand the deliberate divide created by the lawyer as a refusal to hear (Fine, 2017) and recognise this refusal as an enactment of structural power, one intended to keep me contained within my subaltern position and in doing so maintain the lawyer's elevated position of dominance and authority over proceedings. Thinking with Braidotti (2011), I recognise the operation of majoritarian/masculine, patriarchal and colonial knowledge and restrictive power through the institution of the Family Court, the perpetuation of a dialectical relationship of strength versus

weakness that kept me locked within my epistemological cage. I hear lack of understanding and care on the part of the lawyer and a superficial investigation into the needs of my children. A clinical, unpersonal, uncaring approach that reinforced the value and superiority of masculine knowledge as it simultaneously rendered my minoritarian situated knowledge inferior and unknowable (Morgan et al., 2019). I understand how by keeping me at arm's length, the lawyer was able to remain safely within her institutional cocoon, undisturbed by her decision to continue to turn a blind eye to the complexities of my children's situation. I question why, in such a personal and emotive area of law, I was not permitted to relate personally and emotively, and recognise this denial of vulnerability as the privileging of masculine knowledge that figures emotionality as weakness and a sign of unreliability and incredibility. I recognise how the operation of majoritarian knowledge (Braidotti, 2011) did not allow for careful consideration of my concerns, presented as they were by a (m)other in danger of being figured over-anxious, hyper-sensitive and hysterical as a consequence of the slightest display of emotion.

As I continue to listen to my memory, I hear the embodied unease that flowed as I realised the need to switch off all emotion and relate to the lawyer according to the masculinist rules of the institution. Re-membling here in this space, I hear myself desperately trying to resist the figuration of crazy (m)other in the attempts I made to push down my panic and hide my difference, to squeeze myself into the normative mould of 'good' mother. I interpret my attempts to resist this figuration as a response to the operation of masculine knowledge that locates women as 'Other of the Same' and pathologises them for their over-emotionality (Braidotti, 2011), my acts of self-regulation therefore the result of the internalisation of the normalising, disciplinary gaze (Bartky, 1998; Elizabeth et al., 2010). I re-member the effort required to regulate flows of affect that were raging through me, the embodied fear of being misunderstood and misinterpreted, my confusion as I began to realise that I needed to be careful not to say too much and the disbelief and anger that flowed as I understood I could not tell the lawyer things she needed to know in order to make a recommendation that would enhance the safety of both myself and my children. I hear the embodied 'stuckness' that held me rigidly locked within the bars of my epistemological cage, preventing me from authentic expression from within my location of difference; my understanding that I needed to contain my feminine 'excess' in order to avoid making my situation, and that of my children, worse. I hear how within the figuration of crazy, Vindictive (M)other I struggled to stand with strength

in my own knowing, free of shame and self-blame, able to listen to and truly hear the embodied affective flows of meaning making that sang to me and, through my difference, made me other-wise (Buckingham, 2022). How the imposition of masculine power forcefully provoked flows of self-doubt, how I continued to question myself and the reasonableness of my position. I hear fear that prevented me from telling my story, a feeling that I needed to keep it hidden to avoid further judgement, blame and risk to my children. And I hear the ongoing epistemological violence of a patriarchal, colonial knowledge system that made me responsible for carrying my story and managing the associated affective burden while at the same time denying its validity (Mackenzie et al., 2020).

Most of all, I hear rage. Rage that flowed from the knowledge the lawyer had met with my children only once, briefly, months before she made her final recommendations to court. Rage that she had sought no collateral information nor expert advice regarding my children's emotional, relational, developmental and educational needs. Rage in response to the denial and silencing of my minoritarian knowledge, the apparent assumption that it was not relevant, nor necessary. Rage that the recommendations she made to court made me less safe by shifting the change of my children's care from school days to 'in person' weekend changeovers, an arrangement that would also prevent me from ever having a weekend with my children. Rage that flowed in response to the message delivered loud and clear that, despite having no knowledge of the complexity of my lived experience, the lawyer knew best. And alongside this rage, anger towards myself for naively hoping that this interaction would be a constructive one that would support the future safety of my children.

In response to the operation of masculinist, colonial knowledge and power within my embodied memory, I seek to re-tell myself away from pathologisation and the figuration of crazy, over-emotional (m)other. I dis-identify from the dominant, patriarchal story that privileges masculine strength and reason and links emotionality to weakness, thereby reducing my affective experience to a symptom of feminine excess, weakness, deficit and lack. I turn again to acknowledging the immense effort required to carry myself through this embodied memory with dignity, always motivated and guided by the needs of my children and my own situated embodied and embedded minoritarian knowledge. I turn to affirmation of the value of that knowledge and its relevance to decisions made about my children's 'best

interests' and future lives and resist the patriarchal story that would figure it as in-credible and unreliable on the basis of my feminine lack. I affirm my desire to share my knowledge and have it heard, and the affective response that flowed when words spoken failed to penetrate the hermetic seal held tightly closed by the lawyer (Fine, 2017). I affirm the affective flows within my memory as an understandable response to relational forces experienced within my embedded location, and my right to feel and express emotion about a subject so fundamental to my own and my children's wellbeing. I affirm my right to rage, the appropriateness of this affective response to the superficial investigation carried out by my children's lawyer, my decision and ability to keep it contained within the bounds of my flesh, and the embodied cost of my choice to do so.

By dis-identifying from the pathologising figure of crazy (m)other, I seek to let go of the need to manage and regulate myself according to the normative rules of femininity and post-separation mothering. I resist the misinterpretation of my actions and my truth and the subsequent flow of fear by leaning into and affirming the value of my difference as a starting point from which, if I move with an open mind and continue to notice and question habits of thought that threaten to hold me locked within the dialectical struggle of Master/Slave (Braidotti, 2011), I might cut a new line of flight and free myself from my epistemological cage. I resist the muting of my song by affirming my right, here in this space, to tell my story and be heard. I am (m)other-wise.

Loss as (M)other

Who am I?

I was once your mother but now I am

drifting,

lost,

untethered,

desperately trying to make my way back to you

week after week.

I search the darkness, arms reaching

wide in a frantic attempt to

hold you and protect you.

Failure endlessly licks at my heels, its hot breath chasing me with

accusation.

You are my everything, but there are times now when

I don't feel like your mother at all.

Times when the walls of my home, usually so full of happy chaos, fall silent;

threaten to collapse in on me.

Or times when you are here but so full of anger that

I don't know how to reach you;

can't reach you.

Whole weeks go by when I know nothing of how you are, can't be there to help you when you fall: don't even know if you have.

That privilege has been taken from me.

*When you go you disappear into a black hole, a void so deep that I am left
reeling,
spinning in a perpetual circle of grief.
The silence is deafening, my existence
so far removed from the one I imagined when I first brought you into this world.
Bouncing babies; smiles full of sunlight,
laughter the happiest of melodies.
Like phantom limbs, your absence gnaws at my core;
it is an ache that
never lets go.
If I focus too closely on it my world contracts.
I try to lean into my song, to fill the walls of my home with music,
but some days all that emanates from me is a low, heavy moan.
Raw,
guttural.
What sort of a mother am I?
How do I say 'I love you' when you are not even here?*



(M)others who lose care time with their children against their wishes through Family Court processes experience an unimaginable sense of loss (Elizabeth, 2015, 2019) that is “almost too much for some mothers to bear” (Elizabeth, 2020, p.126). It is an experience that is becoming increasingly common as Family Court orders reflect a gender-neutral ideology that promotes maintenance of father/child relationships through substantial care time (Elizabeth, 2019), but one that is not well acknowledged nor understood. According to Elizabeth (2019),

(m)others’ “grief over their involuntary loss of care time barely features in our cultural landscape” (p.36). Family Court orders that reduce (m)others’ care time with their children open women to a black hole of grief that threatens their wellbeing and sense of personhood while also presenting challenges to the wellbeing of their children.

(M)others in Aotearoa New Zealand who lose care time with their children through Family Court processes are embedded within a Western socio-cultural matrix and norms of hegemonic femininity that emphasise intensive mothering within intact families (Elizabeth, 2019). Despite post-feminist sentiment and discourse from the fathers’ rights movement that emphasise egalitarianism between men and women in relationship (Busch et al., 2014; Elizabeth et al., 2012b), parenting responsibilities and work within the home continue to be highly gendered, women carrying the load within most heterosexual relationships (Tolmie et al., 2010a). According to gendered norms, ‘good’ mothers are those who sacrifice their own needs and desires for the good of the family unit and open themselves to the demands of intensive mothering by being highly attuned to their children’s needs and consistently present and available to tend to them (Elizabeth, 2019; Elizabeth et al., 2010). (M)others who lose care time with their children are no longer able to maintain consistent close physical proximity and emotional attunement with their children and are therefore forced to adapt to new patterns of mothering that in many cases do not reflect pre-separation realities. Elizabeth (2019) found that, rather than closeness and maternal attunement, the mothers in her study were “compelled to ‘live with’...an order of mother-child relationality that was, to varying degrees, marked by imposed unavailability and absence...the antithesis of the mothering they had hitherto practiced and wanted to continue practicing” (p.46). While research into the affective burden carried by post-separation (m)others is sparse (Elizabeth, 2019), these findings suggest (m)others’ experiences of mothering post-separation are in direct conflict with socio-cultural norms of mothering that govern their parenting decisions and the realities of their relationships with their children prior to separation.

‘Good’ mothers are also protective mothers (Elizabeth et al., 2010; Morgan & Coombes, 2016) who ensure their children’s physical, emotional and psychological safety by providing an environment in which they can develop and grow free of violence. Mothers living within coercively controlling relationships are forced to decide between staying versus leaving, a

binary decision that “does not take account of the consequences of either choice for the women and their children” (Morgan & Coombes, 2016, p.72). By deciding to stay, women relinquish their ‘good’ mothering identities by exposing their children to violence and in doing so become vulnerable to regulation by the state through failure to protect laws (Morgan & Coombes, 2016). The decision to leave reinforces ‘good’ protective mothering identities but simultaneously makes women vulnerable to financial precarity (Robertson & Masters-Awatere, 2017) and the unreality of Family Court processes that deny and minimise their experiences of violence (Mackenzie et al., 2020). (M)others who do leave coercively controlling relationships and subsequently lose care time with their children through Family Court processes, experience an ongoing burden of stress and worry for the safety of their children while in their father’s care (Elizabeth, 2019, 2020; Mackenzie et al., 2020). In addition to concerns about their children’s physical, sexual and psychological safety (Mackenzie et al., 2020), the anxiety (m)others’ experience about the quality of care their children receive when with their fathers flows from relational histories in which fathers have shown little to no interest in caring for their children (Elizabeth et al., 2012a; Tolmie et al., 2010b) and therefore can be interpreted as a “legitimate concern about male lack of experience, rather than, necessarily, an attempt to control and exclude” (Opie, 1990, as cited in Tolmie et al., 2010b, p.153). Court orders that reduce (m)others’ care time are therefore experienced by women as a denial of their responsibility and right to protect the wellbeing of their children, resulting in the ongoing embodiment of unease as their sense of powerlessness continues to lick at their heels (Elizabeth, 2019).

The discrepancy between expected ‘good’ mothering and the realities of mothering post-separation opens women to embodied experiences of loss and grief that are not easily overcome (Elizabeth, 2019). Elizabeth (2019) found women experience the loss of care time with their children as a “‘horrible’ absence” (p.43) and “sense of ‘nothingness’” (p.43), new moments of time free of child-centred activity creating a deep void in their lives. (M)others also experience anger, shame, stigma, tearfulness, anxiety, depression and physiological manifestations of pain (Elizabeth, 2019). Some (m)others suffer a “crisis of the self” (Elizabeth, 2019, p.42) in response to Family Court orders that render their love and care, previously central to the establishment of their sense of self and mothering identity, replaceable and non-essential. Elizabeth (2019) suggests the loss of care time is embodied by (m)others as an “invisible wound” (p.34), one that goes unacknowledged and unvalidated

within socio-cultural responses to post-separation (m)others and is therefore carried as an experience of disenfranchised grief. In addition to this isolating experience, (m)others must endure constant re-activation of their grief in a never-ending cycle that ebbs and flows with the movement of their children between two homes, such that grief becomes the “emotional background” (Elizabeth, 2019, p.45) of their lives.

The cyclical re-activation of grief is an experience shared by children, whose own emotional states are challenged by constant movement between two households (Elizabeth, 2019, 2020). (M)others are faced with not only bearing the ongoing weight of their own complex grief responses but also providing emotional support to their children and managing behavioural challenges that arise during times of transition (Elizabeth, 2020). Some (m)others report children become unsettled, clingy, oppositional, and/or resistant when transferring into and out of their fathers’ care (Elizabeth, 2020). Children sometimes call or text (m)others for emotional support while in their father’s care, while older children want (m)others “to act as sounding boards, enabling [them] to make sense of what had transpired while at their father’s home” (Elizabeth, 2020, p.125), forcing (m)others to walk the line between empathetic care for their children and minimising their own exposure to accusations of parental alienation (Elizabeth, 2019, 2020). The emotion work required to support children with their transitional lives increases the affective burden carried by (m)others, especially in cases where they are concerned about father’s abilities to parent safely (Elizabeth, 2020; Mackenzie et al., 2020), (m)others becoming “stressed or depleted” (Tolmie et al., 2009, p.673) by their struggle to provide children with a stable, loving and safe home life. This struggle, however, is often viewed by actors of the Family Court as irrelevant to the wellbeing of children and one which (m)others are made responsible for managing on their own (Elizabeth, 2019; Tolmie et al., 2009).

The view within the Family Court system that the wellbeing of (m)others is irrelevant to the wellbeing of children draws on Western, colonial, individualistic knowledge systems that do not make space for the flow of affects within relationship, thereby denying the reality that the “needs and interests of children are closely entwined with those who love and care for them” (Elizabeth, 2019, p.36). Children who have received care primarily from their mothers prior to separation are affected by disruptions to the continuity of that relationship and the grief they

both experience as a result. Elizabeth (2019) found that “loss, grief and distress were...mutual experiences, something mothers and their children shared” (p.48) and challenges the individualised approach to children’s wellbeing in which (m)others’ grief is either considered irrelevant or evidence of selfishness and hostility. She proposes a relational welfare approach that would “insist on the salience of mothers’ grief to a child’s wellbeing because children’s interests are entangled (although not coincident) with that of those who undertake their love labour” (p.47). The reduction in care time by (m)others also presents challenges to the maintenance of strong relational bonds between children and their primary caregivers, both as a natural consequence of physical separation and through deliberate attempts by some fathers to disrupt the mother/child relationship (Elizabeth, 2015; Elizabeth et al., 2012a; Tolmie et al., 2010b). Children whose (m)others embody the affective burden derived from difficulties in court-imposed post-separation parenting arrangements are vulnerable to poorer outcomes, such as internalising, externalising, social and health problems and academic difficulties (Tolmie et al., 2009). Rather than weakening relational bonds with primary carers post-separation, research therefore finds “it is vital that this relationship is strengthened and that the primary care-giver is well-resourced so that they can parent at their optimal capacity” (Tolmie et al., 2009, p.665).



Listening hard to this embodied memory is not easy. Flowing within it are affective traces that not only remind me of where I have been but also of where I remain, flows that are equally painful in the present as I continue to experience the rollercoaster of my mothering reality. As I listen, I hear the weeping grief of a (m)other skewered by a loss she is unable to escape. She is stuck, seemingly powerless, held in place by the pointy instrument of masculine power and knowledge operating through the Family Court of Aotearoa New Zealand. Now, as I seek to free myself and move away from this heavy burden of pain, I first open myself to hearing the song that my embodied memory is singing to me.

As I open my senses to the flows of my song, I hear the imposed disconnection between a (m)other and her children. An amputation. The most painful of physical separations that

causes injury to loving bonds between mother and child carefully nurtured since birth. I hear a (m)other so cut off from her children during times they are with their father that she begins to wonder if she is their mother at all. A (m)other who stands at school and sporting events with her heart slowly breaking as her children pass with their father, just metres away, without acknowledging her presence: themselves navigating the unknown waters of what is acceptable, and how, within the bounds of fractured family relationships. A (m)other who aches with emptiness when she spends special days without her children: birthdays, Christmases, Matariki. Days when the dominant story tells of the togetherness of whānau. A (m)other who journeys alongside friends mothering within intact families and envies the close intimacy they continue to enjoy with their children. I hear a (m)other who desperately attempts to maintain the strong relational connections developed in her children's early years in the face of affective struggle in relationship with children who, forever on the move between houses, are themselves exhausted by constant upheaval and transition. I hear a (m)other who attempts to hold her children in their distress, who walks the tightrope of listening and validating empathetically despite fears that she might say the wrong thing and invoke the ghost of the hostile, Vindictive (M)other who haunted her through Family Court processes. I hear a (m)other who struggles but never stops trying to create some sense of routine and stability for her children when they return to her home, routine that is upended every time they leave, its implementation starting anew each time they return. Within the context of physical absence, I hear affective flows of care that remain, a (m)other who still desperately wants to love, care for and protect her children but whose ability to do so has been severely restricted by the care regime imposed upon her. In the deafening void of silence left by her children each time they move to their father's home, I hear a (m)other who is cut off from care, and children who are cut off from their mother's gentle love. I recognise the ongoing affective struggle that flows from co-parenting difficulties and anger felt towards the Family Court for being made responsible for managing the emotional and logistical consequences of a life she did not choose. I hear the loneliness and isolation of a (m)other who walks the path of difference believing she is on her own, who struggles to articulate her experience to others and feels her grief is never quite understood. I hear a (m)other who feels ashamed of the persistence of her grief, amidst societal expectations that she ought to move on and adapt to her new normal.

Continuing to listen, I hear the wounds of a (m)other who feels she has failed her children. She runs, attempting in vain to escape the hot breath that whispers in her ear the story of her failure, an affect that flows from her situated, minoritarian knowledge. I hear too, the affective distress that flows from failure to fit normative 'good' mothering expectations, her location as a (m)other who left her marriage and resisted care arrangements sought by her children's father opening her, through masculine, dialectical knowledge systems that obfuscate her truth and penalise her for her difference, to the figuration of 'bad' mother. I hear a (m)other who struggles to retain her mothering identity within this location, who feels as though her world has been turned upside down and inside out and has no compass to navigate her way through vastly different mothering terrain. A (m)other who struggles against this figuration and tries to hold onto her truth, who attempts to listen to her own song, reminding herself she is a loving, caring, supportive mother. In my embodied memory I also recognise the operation of restrictive structural power (Braidotti, 2011), decisions made about children's lives against the wishes of their (m)other that continue to have an ongoing impact on her vitality and life force, and that of her children. I recognise epistemological violence and hear the desperation and powerlessness that flows within this location, the anxiety and worry she feels for her children, her inability to escape the affective burden that has been imposed upon her.

Also within my song, I hear a (m)other wrestling with the loss of a lifetime of hopes and dreams about the kind of mother she would be. I recognise how the loss of those hopes and dreams, shaped within the socio-cultural bounds of Western colonial heteronormativity in which 'good' mothers are intensive mothers (Elizabeth, 2019), contributes to an endless circling of grief that threatens to overwhelm her. I hear the rasping, animal-like sounds of loss that reverberate within the walls of her home as she struggles to reconcile this new experience of mothering with the one she embodied prior to separation, an intensive form of mothering shaped by a normative mothering 'identity'. I hear a (m)other whose song is weighed down by the never-ending reactivation of loss and the effort required to persevere as each week the cycle renews itself. I hear heavy, mournful tones as they interrupt and drown out attempts at playful improvisation and self-expression. Despite her struggle, I also hear a (m)other who stumbles but refuses to fall, who picks herself back up with each new challenge and is committed to seeking out and choosing vibrancy, joy and life, her song tenaciously and stubbornly providing a lifeline and leading her forward to tomorrow. I hear this (m)other and I affirm her struggle but also her strength. I celebrate her willingness and drive to keep going

and stand in her own space, complicated and challenging though it be, in the understanding that today, here, is a moment in time in which she carries all that has been but one from which she can still look bravely to the future to imagine what might yet be. A (m)other who doesn't yet know what that future looks like but who holds fast to the love of her children and continues to meet each day holding her values and knowledge close, allowing them to guide her to the unknown. I affirm the courage and mana of this (m)other. I affirm *myself*, in all my difference, as I move through the process of becoming-(m)other, becoming-woman.

As I seek to tell myself away from this story of pain and suffering, I turn to recognition and affirmation of my difference in order to dis-identify from the dominant story that emphasises deficit and lack through my figuration as 'bad' (m)other. I also commit to dis-identification from "self-representational practices" (Braidotti, 2013, p.348), habits of thought developed in the context of my embedded socio-cultural location that threaten to hold me tied to a single, unitary notion of what it means to be a 'good' mother. I affirm my position in relationship with my children as one of love, care, guidance, support and nurturing, affects that continue to flow both in their presence and when they are missing. I acknowledge the impossibility of turning off these impulses to care during times when my children are not with me and instead move towards affirming the maternal ties that will forever connect me to my children, even during times of physical absence, and my desire to continue to support them to flourish in their own processes of becoming. I recognise the difficulty and affective burden this position of difference creates and the loneliness and emptiness that flows from being located outside normative expectations of 'good' mothering. I affirm my ongoing efforts to carry this grief alone, and yet not alone, remembering that there are other (m)others out there also experiencing epistemological violence within the Family Court system, and my determination to always keep my grief hidden from my children and relentlessly continue to put their needs first. I recognise the effort required to manage this affective burden, the acts of self-care that I continue to proactively engage in, acts that also extend care towards my children in the understanding that our affective experiences within relationship are inextricably entwined. I affirm the opportunity for personal growth and new potentials that are unlocked by embracing my difference and taking a line of flight from my location: the forward movement and empowerment experienced through the transformation of knowledge and knowledge systems, the possibility for the development of new interests, and deepening relationships with friends and family who join with me in a collective process of becoming-with. I dis-identify from the

story that I am a 'bad' (m)other due to my failure to mother within the norms of patriarchal heteronormativity and embrace the power of potential that flows from freeing myself from a unitary 'mothering' identity, instead moving flexibly with flows of fluid subjectivity, shifting and adapting to the everchanging relational and structural forces in which I am embedded. I celebrate and affirm, joyfully and with conviction, my (m)other-wise knowledge and care for my beautiful children, care that continues to spring from a well overflowing with infinite love. I am (m)other.

And on it goes...

Where is peace?

I catch glimpses of freedom in my children's laughter or in connections with friends, moments when I begin to forget and almost start to believe in a different life. My lungs begin to expand and fill with fresh, clean air and hope simmers at the edges of my awareness, teasing me with the promise of music, of joy. A creative spark ignites within me, something new swirls and fills me up, I begin to hear my song once more. I tentatively practice its release: sounds begin to escape from my lips, snippets of feeling and thought delivered from a place deep inside. Not yet a cohesive melody, but snatches of notes full of clarity and truth, uncontaminated by the voices of others, released in places I know are safe. With people I trust. I am beginning to remember my own power, the strength I once had.

But no sooner do I risk an opening when my lungs are once again crushed by the hand of fear, my song is interrupted, its release denied.

Almost a year has gone by but here I am again, explaining myself to the court counsellor. Here again, at the request of the father of my children.

Again, feeling trapped. Forced to decide between my own wellbeing and compliance with the court system. Fearing the repercussions should I not comply.

Again, defending my position; accounting for my need for safety.

Again, and again.

I work hard to tune into my own voice and turn down the volume on his, but the counsellor is not listening because I refuse to dance to his tune.

*I could shout until I was blue in the face and
still not be heard.*

Even the presence of my support person requires explanation.

Dissonance returns, exhaustion returns.

Silence returns.

I am once again sluggish and weighed down,

unable to lift my eyes to see past today.

Once again on the lookout for the next threat, the next undermining of my-self

and my ability to mother my children.

Where is peace?

Where is freedom?

Where is that longed-for place where I can release a long, slow sigh and

Let Go?



“...despite the rhetoric of gender neutrality and equality, the late modern state’s governance of gender often reproduces patriarchal gender regimes that are characterized by men’s dominance of women, the privileging of men’s interests, and the appropriation and exploitation of women’s labor” (Elizabeth et al., 2012a, p.240).

(M)others who have left coercively controlling intimate partner relationships remain vulnerable to ongoing tactics of coercion and control by their ex-partners, enabled and legitimised through the Family Court system (Elizabeth, 2015; Elizabeth et al., 2012a, 2012b). In some cases, fathers who have previously not played an active role in their children’s upbringing may attempt to continue to control (m)others in protracted custody battles in which children “suddenly become mere pawns” (Stark, 2009, p.311). In addition to the logics of gender neutrality and present and future temporality discussed previously, custody law in Aotearoa New Zealand turns to a third logic when determining the best interests of a child, that of durability (Elizabeth et al., 2012a). The logic of durability argues “once a parent always a parent” (Elizabeth et al., 2012a, p.241), reinforcing the requirement for ongoing relationships between children and both parents following separation and, by extension, necessitating an ongoing co-parenting relationship between (m)others and fathers. When applied together through custody law, the three logics work to support father’s claims to substantial or equal shared care of their children while at the same time preventing

(m)others from moving their lives to safety, a situation which Elizabeth et al. (2012a) suggest is “an instance of the governance of gender” (p.240), in which fathers are supported in their “*nonreciprocal capacity*....to intervene and regulate the lives of women/mothers through the threatened or actual instigation of family law processes” (Elizabeth et al., 2012a, p.244). While (m)others are unable to enlist the court’s help to force contact between fathers and children (Elizabeth et al., 2012a), some become ensnared time and again within Family Court processes initiated by fathers (Elizabeth, 2015; Robertson & Masters-Awatere, 2017). In addition to experiences of litigation, or ‘paper’ abuse (Elizabeth, 2015; Elizabeth et al., 2012a), (m)others continue to carry the affective burden that results from facilitating father-child relationships (Elizabeth, 2020), perform transactional and logistical work required to facilitate the movement of their children’s lives between two houses, such as negotiations with fathers regarding children’s expenses, schooling, activities and holidays and the washing and packing of items such as toys and clothes (Elizabeth, 2020), and are prevented from geographic movements that would allow them to live closer to family support and otherwise enhance their lives (Elizabeth et al., 2012a; Tolmie et al., 2009). Enforced disconnection from family can have particularly devastating consequences for wāhine Māori, for whom connection to whānau, hapu and iwi is integral to wellbeing, the loss of this support constituting ongoing colonisation by an institution of the state guided by Western patriarchal norms that privilege individualism and the importance of the nuclear family over relational bonds that continue unbroken through whakapapa (Mikaere, 1999; Wilson, 2016). Thus, due to care arrangements established by the Family Court, (m)others are commonly unable to make a “clean-break” (Elizabeth et al., 2012a, p.242) from abusive relationships. Instead they often remain locked in relationships with the fathers of their children, child contact becoming a site through which some fathers continue their tactics of dominance and control (Elizabeth, 2015; Elizabeth et al., 2012b), a situation that amounts to the “state-endorsed entrapment” (Elizabeth et al., 2012a, p.252) of (m)others within coercively controlling relationships.

Against the ever-present fear that they will be drawn back into Family Court processes by the fathers of their children (Elizabeth, 2015; Elizabeth et al., 2012a) and despite shared care arrangements that place them under increased amounts of stress, (m)others continue to attempt to provide stable, effective care for their children (Tolmie et al., 2009). In doing so, they endure ongoing realities that are vastly different to the accepted dominant story that describes joint parenting relationships as cooperative, amicable and conflict-free (Elizabeth et

al., 2012b), relational characteristics that are unlikely to be present in cases where there is a history of violence (Elizabeth et al, 2012b). When considering the suitability of shared-care arrangements in the absence of cooperative parenting relationships, Tolmie et al. (2010b) point out the “apparent illogicality in insisting on shared parenting at the point when the parent’s relationship becomes most problematic when we do not, as a society, insist on shared parenting whilst parents are together” (p.160). The implementation of such arrangements by the Family Court, despite histories of intimate partner violence, is a form of structural violence that contributes to the ongoing precarity and oppression of women who have attempted to move their lives to safety (Robertson & Masters-Awatere, 2017).



As I attempt to tune into my embodied memory of sustained entrapment, I feel the weight of ongoing affective burden dragging on my shoulders and pulling me down. I am heavy, leaden, colourless. Re-remembering this moment requires me to re-turn to a time of intense pain. A time I would rather forget but one that my body refuses to let go of, its reminder etched into the marrow of my bones. The end of our Family Court process and subsequent establishment of 50:50 equal shared care of my children coalesced with an unexpected health scare and life-changing surgery. In a cruel twist of fate, after months of waiting for an outcome from the court I received the court judgement and health diagnosis on the same day. Unable to bear any more pain and having reached a limit of endurance at which my body screamed ‘enough!’, I crumbled under the weight of grief and turned to the love and support of family and friends to sustain me. This memory is located in the time following my surgery. Not even a year had passed and I was dragged back into the court process again, wondering when I would ever get a chance to breathe. Tuning into this memory therefore re-presents a re-turn to fear that I had naively hoped I might put behind me at the conclusion of our court hearing...

Settling into this heavy place and opening myself to the affective flows within my memory I first hear sunlight, the abundant freshness of pure, life-giving air and the shimmering potential of new beginnings. I hear new vibrations of possibility, a song waiting eagerly to be sung, its unique composition shifting and transforming with the flows and forces of composted and

composing knowledge (Haraway, 2019) forming within my embedded location. I hear movement made possible by the process of collective becoming-with (Haraway, 2019), openings in relationship in which my knowing joins with that of others and my song becomes richer, deeper, more certain as together we weave our tapestry. I hear a body that stands taller, feet that plant more firmly into the earth, arms that stretch wide to the sky and a heart rate that slows, pulsing a steady, leisurely beat against which the melody of my song falls easily and comfortably into step. I hear harmony and an opening to freedom, borne of limits (Braidotti, 2006).

Harmony does not last, however. As I am lulled by the ease with which my song begins to open to the world, it is disrupted by the forceful crash of an abrupt and violent *sforzando*. Dissonant, sharp, spiky chords punctuate the air and my breath, no longer expansive, catches in my throat as fear once again makes itself an unwelcome guest. I hear the fizzy flow of senses once again alert to danger and a body tightly wound against threat. I hear the truncation of vitality, of the generative life force that had begun to swirl freely within me and stimulate new awakenings (Braidotti, 2011), and in its place I hear panic that flows from the reminder that I am cornered and unable to move from the location in which I find myself, physically and emotionally, stuck. I hear an endless struggle to stretch my wings and soar and the clipping of wings by relational and structural forces that continue to attempt to keep me small and prevent my flight. I hear utter exhaustion, flowing from the gruelling and inescapable responsibility to care, an individualised responsibility forcefully placed on me by a system that insists I remain in relationship with my children's father. I hear the privileging of his rights over my own, ongoing threat to my safety and a system that refuses to hear, and I recognise these as the ongoing enactment of epistemological violence that renders my knowledge invalid, my experience unknowable and the burden I carry inconsequential to anyone but myself and my children.

As I continue to listen, I hear the operation of masculine power: paralysis induced and sustained by the echo of thunderous hooves that circle and surround me, their menacing presence a constant warning that seeks to induce my compliance. But I also hear resistance to those hooves, resistance that grew in strength as my knowing continued to transform through a process of onto-epistem-ological becoming (Barraclough, 2018) and I opened myself to

becoming-woman and becoming-(m)other (Braidotti, 2011). I hear resistance in my attempts to hold my ground with the counsellor and insist on my right to safety through my continuing refusal to meet in person with my children's father. I hear resistance in my deliberate decision to take a support person with me, something I did not feel permitted to do in my first meetings with the counsellor. I hear resistance as my habitual feminine instinct to apologise shifts to anger at being forced to explain what the presence of my support person said about my *engagement in the process*. I hear resistance to the need to explain and the insinuation that because I had a support person with me, I was somehow less prepared to engage in constructive discussions regarding the care of my children. I hear resistance in my realisation that the counsellor did not want to hear and a shift in my own understanding regarding the relational power imbalance present in the encounter. And I hear resistance in my continuing belief in my right to safety and my attempts to focus on my own knowing and not allow my song to be drowned out by the counsellor's story. In these acts of resistance, I hear small steps being taken towards the decolonisation of my own mind, a process of becoming-woman stimulated and enabled by the transformation of knowledge through which I had begun to question masculine, patriarchal power and ways of knowing and instead affirm the legitimacy and credibility of my own embodied and embedded (m)other-wise knowledge. I hear how this process sparked, then wavered, as I continued to practice resisting habits of thought built over a lifetime embedded within the norms of patriarchal heteronormativity (Braidotti, 2011). I hear the effort required to continue to engage in that process while remaining embedded within a system that unremittingly imposes colonial, masculinist knowledge and denies my own. I recognise my efforts to resist as attempts to pry open the bars of the epistemological cage that continued to clang and rattle tightly around me.

Re-memembering here in this space, I once again turn towards dis-identifying from the story that would figure me as weak and obstructive on account of the boundaries I continue to work to protect. Hearing the affective distress that flowed from the need to comply with the Family Court system to prevent making my or my children's situation worse, I also search for an alternative meaning to my compliance. Looking back in order to transform my understanding in the present and reshape possibilities for my future, I identify a line of flight that allows me to turn away from the interpretation of my compliance as submission and weakness, towards a vision of my-self as a strong, purposeful (m)other who did and continues to do everything she possibly can to support the needs of her children. I affirm my decision to return to counselling

but this time on my own terms, a decision that prioritised the wellbeing of my children but also protected my own and represented a refusal to completely open myself once again to the epistemological violence that I experienced in my first encounters with the counsellor. I affirm my right to the use of a support person at counselling and disidentify from the story that my desire for support is a sign of weakness and disengagement from the process. Rather, I affirm my decision to use support as one designed to increase my ability to engage and thereby facilitate better outcomes for my children, one that enabled me to walk into the counselling room with greater strength and presence of mind knowing I had someone there to listen to and note important information, provide me with gentle reminders about things I wanted to say but might not remember to under the pressure of the moment and offer me the emotional support required to enter such a difficult, masculine environment. I affirm the courage it took to return to that room, following the embodiment of shame and self-blame that flowed from my meetings with the counsellor almost a year prior. I affirm my strength, endurance and determination to keep going and to keep putting the needs of my children above anything else, including my own needs, despite the exhaustion that continued to flow as I remained entrapped within my epistemological cage. With the return of exhaustion I hear the return of silence and, thinking again with Morgan and Coombes (2001), I turn away from the interpretation of my silence as weakness towards affirmation of my intentional decision to remain silent as a means to preserve my energy in the knowledge that no matter what I said I would not be able to make myself heard. I affirm my use of silence as a functional tool, one that enabled me to endure the embodiment of affective flows in this moment.

Finally, I reach the refrain that returns time and again as the limits of my endurance are tested: I hear the search for freedom, and for peace. I hear an urgent desire for the languid warmth and ease of sunlight and fresh air to remain and fervent reaching towards a time, space and place where sunlight and song might be sustained despite shadows that continue to be cast by the horsemen and their hooves. I attempt to satisfy that burning desire and turn away from inescapable suffering now, through the acknowledgement that freedom can be found in the awareness and reaching of limits (Braidotti, 2011). Re-membering here in this moment, I sense potential and an opening to something new. I hear vibrations unlocked and set in motion as a limit was encountered and I recognise that it is only by being pushed to the edges of my endurance that I found the permeable threshold across which to step and open new possibilities for becoming. I dis-identify from the story that my inability to escape my

epistemological cage means I will always suffer and turn instead towards gratitude for and acceptance of my embodied and embedded experience as one that has gifted me the opportunity to grow through a process of becoming, in which the transformation of my knowledge and knowing has resulted in greater awareness of the operation of masculine power and its effects. Awareness and understanding of the location in which I am embedded will not prevent the embodiment of pain in the future, but it does present me with new power and a sense of agency, inviting me to live my life more completely by turning away from suffering and identifying opportunities for new lines of flight as I move through my process of becoming-conscious, becoming-strong, becoming-response-able (Haraway, 2016) and becoming-me.

Cadenza: Beginning Again

“Because critical theory without alternative visions is a sterile exercise in negativity, feminists, like all freedom-fighters, have to trust their dreams and to imagine a generative future” (Braidotti, 2022, p.238).

As my process of nomadic re-membering in this space begins to draw to a close, I re-turn to thoughts that demanded my attention at the start of this journey and that will continue to tug urgently at my awareness long after I cease writing. I am reminded of the drive I had as I set out to not only tell the story of state-sanctioned epistemological violence enacted upon (m)others within the Family Court system but to also incite change, both personally and politically, through the transformation and decolonisation of my own knowing and the structural and institutional knowledge systems in which I remain embedded. Not content with merely mapping the conditions of the present through the cartographic figuration of my embodied and embedded experience, I sought to re-tell myself away from pathologisation and suffering and move, politically, towards the actualisation of an alternative, re-imagined future (Braidotti, 2013), in which (m)others who have left abusive relationships might be permitted the right to freedom and flourishing. A future in which motherhood, mothering and (m)other-wise knowledge might step out from the shadow of patriarchal, colonial, masculine power and instead be heard, legitimised, valued, and upheld.

Following Braidotti (2011) and Fine (2017), I understood that in order to tell this story of epistemological violence and also provoke change it was not enough to simply replicate women’s stories of pain, thereby adding to the quantitative multiplication of stories already told, without contributing to transformational change of the structural and institutional systems that had perpetuated my embodied and embedded experience of pain and suffering. Rather, I recognised that it was ethically necessary to engage with the conditions of our time in a way that allowed for the creative re-imagining of a different, more just, future and that in order to do that I needed to join with a long history of feminist thinkers who have challenged accepted Eurocentric forms of thought by embracing transdisciplinarity (Tamboukou, 2024) to enable connections across discourses of science, art and philosophy, that bring into view “new vistas

wherein socio-political realities can be seen and understood, and philosophical inquiries can further be unfolded” (Tamboukou, 2024, p.14). Striving to stimulate new awakenings and collective imaginings (Braidotti, 2022; Fine, 2017), I recognised I needed to work creatively as well as critically (Braidotti, 2022), centring affect and affectivity as the relational force through which I might move and be moved (Zarranz, 2017), shifting sediments of thought and opening new forms of knowing (Braidotti, 2011). Driven by hope for transformation, I understood that the ethical instance was to be found in not only singing about the dark times but in methodological processes of nomadic affective re-membering, dis-identification and joyful affirmation that would enable movement away from my embodied and embedded experience of suffering and oppression, transforming knowledge systems by contributing to collective creative imaginings that “construct possible futures and, in so doing, make for a more bearable present” (Braidotti, 2022, p.237). Braidotti’s (2011) concept of transpositions brings into view the creative potential unlocked by transdisciplinarity, illustrating how the transfer of concepts and knowledge across disciplines contributes to the production of new forms of knowledge not only through the coming together of ideas but in the creation of space that allows for seismic shifts in the imaginary, “...playing the positivity of difference as an ontological force and...setting up adequate frames of resonance for their specific rhythms of becoming” (Braidotti, 2011, p.226). She looks to the field of music to elucidate this concept, outlining how the repetition of musical concepts within adjacent but qualitatively different tonal frames not only allows their examination from new angles but also promotes a shift in perspective (Braidotti, 2011). Much as a musical sequence, phrase or idea is transposed to a different key to bring to it a new quality and thereby change the affective force and embodied experience that it enacts and enables, Braidotti (2011) argues that examining concepts or phenomena through transdisciplinarity generates radical change to concepts being examined, through “boundary crossings” (p.225) that provide a “qualitative leap of perspective” (p.225), allowing new ways of knowing to unfold.

By choosing to tell a story that has been told from different angles many times before but this time through my creative process of affective re-membering, I have attempted to transpose it to a different key, turning the intensity up on affectivity and singing my song using new colours and sounds in the hope that it would be heard and open space for new ways of knowing (Tamboukou, 2024). I have mapped the sequence of my situated, embodied and embedded experience through cartographic figuration and it is that sequence/figuration that I have

transposed in order to move myself away from pain and suffering, my process of becoming-woman and becoming-(m)other allowing me to disidentify from the norms of heteronormativity and turn towards affirmation of my difference. I have also sought to move others in order to decolonise and transform knowledge systems, consistently being guided by the feminist desire to “dislodge ‘difference’ from its hegemonic position as an instrument of world-historical systems of domination, exclusion, and disqualification” (Braidotti, 2011, p.225). I will always carry the embodied effects of my difference with me but rather than pejorative proof of deficit, those scars now remind me of the place I have been, a place I am now privileged to have the opportunity to move from. Through my process of affective re-membling, in which I have disidentified from masculine, colonial, patriarchal knowledge and power that perpetuates the oppression of women by upholding the dominance of men, and moved instead towards affirmation of my own (m)other-wise knowledge, I have challenged socio-cultural and epistemological assumptions that rational and reasonable thought remains the “expression of a white, masculine, adult, heterosexual, urban-dwelling, property owning subject” (Braidotti, 2011, p.6) and that objective knowledge must be gained through an impartial ‘Gods-eye’ view (Haraway, 1988). I have turned away from the dominant masculine story that continues to demonise women and render their knowledge inferior and in-credible due to their dialectical position as other of the Same (Braidotti, 2011), a story that figured me as vindictive, selfish, uncaring, obstructive and weak and, in doing so, silenced my cries for safety. By turning away from this dominant story towards my own situated embodied and embedded knowledge, I have turned up the volume on the experience of gendered captivity and epistemological violence experienced by some women within the Family Court of Aotearoa New Zealand, offering my view from somewhere as one node in the web of connections that collectively builds strong objective knowledge, always partial and never complete (Haraway, 1988), about the embodied effects of living within this figured location. I have shown how the privileging of phallogocentric knowledge (Braidotti, 2011) and simultaneous denial of the (m)other-wise knowledge of women perpetuates experiences of abuse and how, rather than supporting the wellbeing and flourishing of women and children following separation from coercively controlling partners, the Family Court perpetuates harm against (m)others who have already suffered so much. By adding my voice to the chorus of others who have already raised their songs and yet have still not been heard, and by rendering my embodied memories using poetry and poetic language, I have sought to provoke affective transpositions and open new space, or “frames of resonance” (Braidotti, 2011, p.226), in which our collective lament might be heard, creating a fault-line in current understandings along which something new needs to be built and

encouraging new ways of knowing to come into view (Tamboukou, 2024). I have also opened space for movement away from suffering, the vibrations generated by my song sparking a new composition of possibility and hope, transposing my knowing to a place where I can begin again (Zarranz, 2017).

Zarranz (2017) draws a connection between affect and ethics, asking: “what are the implications of living a life you loathe? What kind of affective transpositions would be necessary to live a life you love instead?” (p.51) and argues that through affective transpositions we can map alternative cartographic figurations in which spaces of “possibility, change, and renewal” (p.50) enable the transformation of our subjectivity. Thinking with Zarranz (2017), I understand how my project of nomadic, affective re-membling has allowed me to move away from the figuration mapped by my memories in which my embodied experience of suffering had become unsustainable, towards positive affirmation of my difference and an opening out of my self through new awareness of both the limits and the potential of my embedded subjectivity (Braidotti, 2011). I have become more response-able (Haraway, 2016), capable of opening myself more fully to moments of “floating awareness, when rational control releases its hold, [and] ‘Life’ rushes on toward the sensorial/perceptive apparatus with exceptional vigor and higher degrees of definition...” (Braidotti, 2011, p.152), moments that continue to fuel my process of becoming by provoking ontological shifts that demand an ongoing and open-ended “metamorphosis of the self” (Braidotti, 2011, p.164). Through this process of affective transposition (Braidotti, 2011; Zarranz, 2017), I continue to move towards re-imagining a life that I love and, most importantly, maintaining a sustainable relationship with myself within my epistemological cage. I seek potential, *potentia* (power) (Braidotti, 2011) and freedom from the shackles of gendered captivity by turning away from the norms of heteronormativity in which I have been figured as a vindictive, obstructive, weak and in-credible mother, and lifting my face to the sun to feel the infinite ripples of possibility that flow to allow the transformation of my embodied and embedded subjectivity (Zarranz, 2017).

Through my process of nomadic re-membling and becoming I have sought to make peace with my embodied and embedded experience of epistemological violence within the Family Court of Aotearoa New Zealand. By ‘making peace’ I do not intend to suggest passive acceptance of my experience and the present state of affairs in which (m)others who leave abusive

relationships and attempt to move their lives and the lives of their children to safety are subjected to the perpetuation of abuse and harm through Family Court processes. Rather, making peace implies my desire to move away from the splinter of negativity (Braidotti, 2013) that would, should my gaze remain singularly turned inwards, forever hold me fixed in a space of suffering and pain, a space devoid of vibrancy and song in which my life force, my *potentia*, would become calcified and rigid and my relational capacity diminished (Braidotti, 2008). Turning away from this destruction of the self (Braidotti, 2008) and instead choosing Life by engaging in a process of becoming-with, I have sought to accept and learn from my embodied and embedded experience in order to endure and co-exist with it (Braidotti, 2008) by transforming negative affective flows into positive, generative, life-giving forces that open up a boundless horizon of new possibilities. In doing so I have transposed my frame of reference, opening my senses to the buzzing flow of potential and possibilities within and all around me. I have laboured to become worthy of what has happened to me, and in the process leave something behind that is of use to others (Braidotti, 2008; Morgan 2013), by dis-identifying from negativity and suffering and re-telling myself away from pathologisation and pain, moving hungrily towards affirmation of my difference, fuelled always by the desire to unlock and nurture the generative life force within me and make space for the creative re-imagining of new possibilities for my own, and our collective, futures.

Luxuriating in the lush potential found as I move with generative flows of becoming, I choose to end my writing with words that open space for yet another new beginning, words originally intended for my newly separated self but that resonate with and are just as important to me here in the present, as they will be in the future. I record these words here not only as a reminder to myself of my own ongoing, open-ended, zigzagging process of becoming-woman, becoming (m)other, becoming-me (Braidotti, 2011), but also for other (m)others who may be out there believing, just as I once did, that they are alone in their experience of gendered captivity and epistemological violence. My final words are for you. We are not the same, but we are in this together, and you are not alone...

You are made of fire.

You don't know it yet, but the sparks that

spit and crackle within you will one day

ignite

and become a

hot burning glow.

Song, joy and desire will

burst into flame to sustain you through days you think you will

not endure.

You will feed off the flames of others,

their energy breathing life and being into yours, and you will be

thankful you gave your spark the chance to

find air.

You will re-member the dark times and

sing about them, but you will not let your fire

be extinguished.

*It will continue to flicker, its heat fuelling your song, generating energy for the opening you
have been waiting for:*

Your cadenza.

Unfettered,

expansive,

breath of life.

Every new note a vibration that unlocks the unknown.

Raging with radiant promise,

your song burns...

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