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**Dancing and Laughing: Women's Narratives of Becoming
Single Again at Midlife in Aotearoa/New Zealand**

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Aileen Perrin

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Abstract

This research project had as its focus the narratives of women becoming single again at midlife. Heteronormativity coerces our complicity in gendered power relations of domination and subordination, and in particular, through the institution of marriage. Women not in long-term relationships are often marginalised, with single women positioned as outsiders. This research used a relational narrative methodology to bring together the voices of six single again women in a counter narrative of our becoming. Through the analysis, three processes of becoming were identified that moved our becoming from painful memories into stories of living joyously and flourishing: reckoning, embracing freedom, and embodying new spaces joyfully.

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To women in relationships that don't serve them and are wondering about what it may be like to become single again at midlife: there are lots of us over here. It's not always easy but, shake it off, come and dance and laugh with us!

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Curiously Single Again at Midlife

I was in my mid 40s when my 18-year marriage came to a traumatic end over a grueling six-month period. My imagined happily-ever-after fairy tale imploded in a dramatic fashion. I had believed that marriage was forever, that we were soulmates, that you do not give up on marriage, and that it's best for the children to stay together. I was scared about what it would be like to be single again. When I had last been single in my twenties it had been normal. Becoming single again in my mid-forties would be "abnormal" in my peer group. I feared being lonely, miserable, and financially burdened. As I tried to make sense of what to do by tentatively sharing my story with other people, I heard messages that seemed to reinforce these beliefs. Messages that I should work to fix my marriage, that I needed a man, that marriage was really important, that I would be broke, that I was being selfish, that I would harm my children if I left, and that "being single at your age would be awful."

I felt distraught and overwhelmed with impending doom and fear. Mentally and physically, I wanted the nightmare to end, and I wanted to run away. I dragged myself several mornings a week to a little dark room with loud music and did a spin cycle class before going to work. I was doing everything I could to fix the pain. I lost weight, I was tired, stressed and I couldn't sleep. I was numb, on autopilot and fed my kids the same two dinners for months. I couldn't make decisions at work. I did not know if I was coming or going. Some mornings I did not even make it into the gym. I felt emotionally exhausted and I just sat in the carpark and cried as the sun rose. I did not know what my life would be like if I was not married. I felt pathetic and embarrassed. I was worn out, depleted, empty and scared. I had never felt anything like it. As an intelligent woman who could normally figure stuff out, becoming single again felt too much.

As I grappled with all of the emotional layers and the meaning of becoming single again, some women came across my path and shared their stories with me about how they had survived leaving their long-term marriages. They were some years down the track and their experiences were different to the messages I had been hearing. They weren't just content, they seemed happy. One woman told me that she would have never thought that life could be so good and that she felt reinvigorated. These were real women, a little older than me, that seemed to enjoy being single! They had tapped me on the shoulder, and with kind faces and

caring voices, they had offered me hope. I felt supported, as though they wanted to let me into a secret: that women often thought they should stay married, but that alternatives could be imagined. They offered potential.

Once I made the decision to leave my husband and started to share this news, other women on similar journeys started to speak with me about their experiences. Friendships were borne out of that sharing and, for years now, we've been supporting one another. We spoke about ourselves in new ways as we went about reconstructing ourselves, figuring out new roles and relationships, and rebuilding our lives. Some of our conversations were about practical problems as we tackled new jobs that were previously done by our husbands. There were also more abstract and philosophical conversations about this mysterious and bad thing called "the patriarchy", the institution of marriage, and what it meant to leave and become single again. As time went on, we started to find our feet and new stories started to emerge about how we actually loved being single! These were stories about new experiences, new places, new homes, new jobs, new friendships, new sex, travel and the challenge and joy of single parenting. We looked back on our former married selves and we were curious. Why had we ever thought this would be a problem? We had a tribe of single again women and we were rocking it. We would have lunch, ride our new e-bikes, play, drink, walk in the bush and dance. We felt free. We would even help each other fix stuff without getting angry! We would laugh at mistakes that happened when we did renovations (like the time I mistook a notched trowel for a knotted towel)! We would often laugh so hard that we fell over.

Around the time my marriage broke up, I took an Advanced Psychology of Women postgraduate paper as part of my ongoing studies with Massey University. This helped me understand my experiences in new ways. I delved into concepts such as disciplinary power, self-surveillance, heteronormativity, and the privileging of marriage. I began to understand how social power had played out in my life (and my friends' lives). Despite my stoicism I was getting just a little bit angry. I felt as though I had been duped into protecting my marriage at all costs and I knew, listening to the stories of others, that I wasn't the only one who was caught in the narrative of failure. So, I began to make sense of why I had been so fearful of being single again when I was married. And, alongside my tribe of other single again women, I recognised our becoming as forging our own paths. Sure, we had ups and downs, but we were joyful. Where were our voices? I had a strong desire to understand this and get the stories out in the world that I was hearing: that becoming single again at midlife could be

great! I wanted our stories to be known and I wanted to offer hope to other women. This research then, follows the narratives of the joys of becoming single again.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Crazy Cat Ladies: The Stigmatisation of Single Women

Perplexed by the negative and sexist messages I came across while becoming single again, I turned to the literature for some answers and found research that perpetuated largely deficit based accounts of being single (Byrne, 2003; Byrne & Carr, 2005; DePaulo, 2006; DePaulo & Morris, 2005; DePaulo & Morris, 2006; Slonim, Gur-Yaish, & Katz, 2015). For example, DePaulo and Morris (2006) found that, in comparison to married people, single people were described as more insecure, unhappy, ugly, and lonely. Unfortunately, it appears to be even worse if you are not only single, but are voluntarily single. In these instances singles continue to be perceived as lonely and miserable, but are also regarded as “less warm and sociable than singles not by choice” (Slonim et al., 2015, p. 35). Delving into research with single people, I could see that negative stereotypes for single women, in particular, are prevalent. Single women are regarded as “fussy, selfish, choosy, particular, spinsters” and women who “had something wrong with them” (Byrne, 2003, p. 451). Other descriptors for single women include: deviants, problematic, tragic, flawed, lonely, miserable, desperate, and troubled (Budgeon, 2008; Budgeon, 2016; DePaulo & Morris, 2006; Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003; Sandfield, 2006; Sandfield & Percy, 2003; Taylor, 2011). The deficit based accounts of single people are so prevalent in our everyday lives that DePaulo and Morris (2006) coined the term *singlism* to describe what they found as an unrelenting and socially acceptable stigmatisation of people who are single. It is a form of discrimination that targets women and is often so invisible within the framework of heteronormativity that most people do not notice, so normalised that it simply goes unacknowledged (DePaulo, 2006).

In addition to a general stigmatisation of single people, older single people are viewed particularly harshly by society. The literature indicates that being single when older (over 40 years old) is regarded as negative and carries more stigma than being young and single (Hertel, Schütz, DePaulo, Morris, & Stucke, 2007), with divorced women encountering oppressive ageist attitudes (Sakraida, 2005). Lahad and Hazan (2014) highlight negative labels of older single women with references to the “terror of the single old maid” (p. 127) and “the crazy cat lady” (p.130). The crazy cat lady is a woman who lives with lots of cats because she cannot get a man, and is someone regarded as today’s equivalent of the miserable old maid (Lahad & Hazan, 2014). In their research that reimagines the image of the “old maid” and aging in connection with contemporary discourses of singlehood, Lahad and Hazan

(2014) found that older single women faced a “triple disfranchisement based on their age, gender and single status” (p. 127).

It is at this intersection of gendered social power relations that has led to the focus on the categorisation of the effects of divorce on women’s everyday lives; ongoing chronic stress (e.g. health problems, parenting demands, and supporting older family members) and new stresses relating to changes in finances, needing to work more, and/or caring for children alone (Thomas, Mitchell, & Woods, 2019). Divorce can impact physical and mental health, financial stability, parenting, lifestyle, employment, social connections, spirituality and future imagination (Blum, 2018; Sools, Murray, & Westerhof, 2015). Reading the literature, I noticed the figuration of our “problem.”

I’ve Failed: Heteronormativity and Coercion

Curious, I looked deeper for some context to make sense of the narrative that renders visible the “problem” of single women within our social conditions. It turns out that single women present some fairly significant problems for the dominant social imagination. The othering and exclusion of single women, our invisibility, reminded me of Sandra Bartky’s feminist theorisation of Foucault’s Panopticon model and disciplinary power. She examined Foucauldian principles in relation to disciplinary practices of femininity, which includes how these practices inscribe our bodies with meaning (Bartky, 1998). She states that “in contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment” (Bartky, 1998, p. 34). Women are effectively constituted as the patriarchal Other and gendered power has become so normalised that we surveil ourselves into conformity. What then happens in the normalisation process, is that power becomes unidentifiable, and comes from everywhere and nowhere, through discursive and symbolic legitimacy, contributing to the subordination of women to the performance of femininity as if it was voluntary or natural (Bartky, 1998). However, where women resist or refuse to comply with feminine ideals (disciplinary practices) they face sanctions in a world dominated by men, including restriction on our movements, rejection, loss of intimacy, and economic precarity (Bartky, 1998). The overhanging threat of sanctions coerce sexual subordination and creates women who are “docile and compliant companions of men” (Bartky, 1998, p. 37). Bartky (1998) argues that patriarchal standards are both enacted and embodied. Not only does Western gendered power sanction women who do not comply with patriarchal standards, the

disciplinary practices of femininity are so effective that women punish themselves and feel shame if they do not meet them (Bartky, 1998). This can threaten a woman's identity, desirability and even social relationships (Bartky, 1998).

At the core of the “problem” of single women is that their figuration is entrenched within heteronormativity, which is regarded as the cornerstone and organising feature of gendered social power relations (Pickens & Braun, 2018). Single women are in a marginalised space outside the privileged position of the heteronormative, familial, coupled feminine norm (Gilchrist, 2021; van Schalkwyk, 2005). Heteronormativity as a Western gendered power relation of masculine domination and feminine subordination (Gavey, 1992), configures women as responsible for the feminised emotional labour of care for relationships, centering on traditional assumptions of monogamy, beauty standards, passive sexuality, coupling, childbearing and so on (Pickens & Braun, 2018; Van Anders, Herbenick, Brotto, Harris, & Chadwick, 2022). Budgeon (2016) has argued that the “problem” with single women, is their resistance to the rules of heteronormativity and, by extension, the practices of contemporary (Western) femininity. Single women therefore violate gender norms, operating “outside the realm of legitimate gender performance”, and are therefore understood as a deficit (Budgeon, 2016, p. 412).

Research by Gilfoyle, Wilson, and Brown (1992) helped me to further understand how disciplinary power is embedded within heterosexual relationships. Drawing on Wendy Hollway's (Hollway, 1984, 1989) influential analysis of people talking about heterosexual relationships that produced distinct discourses that serve to “inform people's talk and which provide gender-differentiated subject positions” (Gilfoyle et al., 1992, p. 211), the research brought to life how deeply entrenched heteronormativity is in structural and social power relations. The have/hold discourse centres monogamy, partnership and family life, and guides how a man and woman relate to one another within this relationship. The man is the “head of the family” with overall responsibility for the family (Gilfoyle et al., 1992, p. 211). The woman is primarily concerned with looking after her relationship with her husband and children. This responsibility extends to the construct of “good mothering”, which requires that women are solely responsible for proper caregiving, would do anything for their children (never putting own their needs first), and are happy doing this (Goodwin & Huppertz, 2010; Jacques & Radtke, 2012). Essentially, in the have/hold discourse the man gets to “have” the object position, and the woman has the “hold” subject position, which is all encompassing

caregiving. Gilfoyle et al. (1992) identified a new, related, discourse in heterosexual relationships, the pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse. I understand this as an extension of women caring for men by being passive and giving themselves completely (including sexually) to men. According to this discourse men, in turn, try to please their partner, including “giving” women orgasms (Gilfoyle et al., 1992). The discourse is prefaced by the word “pseudo” as Gilfoyle et al. (1992) recognised from the outset that the “gift giving” of this nature within heterosexual relationships was not equal or mutual. The man’s part requires an activity (sex), whereby the women’s part requires her whole being. Gilfoyle et al. (1992, p. 220) describes this as “a relentless giving on the part of women.” Gavey (1992) notes how heterosexual norms can, and do, foster the conditions for heterosexual coercion. This can lead to women engaging in unwanted or undesired sex:

By appealing to these nurturant or pragmatic reasons for having sex, women are ‘disciplined’ – our behaviour is regulated in ways which the gender-specific operation of power is disguised. This invisible operation of power is extremely efficient because it obviates the need for overt force and violence (Gavey, 1992, p. 348).

The regulation of behaviour and the coercion implicit in heteronormativity, is the gendered power relationship that form the conditions for the potential exploitation and subjugation of women. Stark (2009) wrote extensively about the entrapment of women by men in personal lives and coercive control in heterosexual relationships, where men adopt controlling behaviours and tactics to limit women’s liberties. Stark reminds us of the risk of social sanctions for violating gender norms, targeting gendered expectations of women for micro-regulation (Stark, 2009; Tolmie, 2018) to ensure our compliance to the rules of heteronormativity. Stark (2009) likened coercive control to women’s personal lives being a cage, with the cumulative effects of controlling behaviours the bars that hold women hostage to the point of entrapment. With Gavey’s understanding of heterosexual coercion (Gavey, 1992), and Stark’s coercive control (Stark, 2009), it is heteronormativity, the social power relationship of dominant masculinity and subordinate femininity, that hold women prisoners in the conditions of their everyday lives.

It is a curious thing that heteronormativity, as a gendered power relationship, is so powerful that it extends its influence beyond coupledness, with perceived limits on a responsible age range for being single. Recent research in Aotearoa by Pickens and Braun (2018) found that single women who are “older” (ages 25-35) are discursively produced as becoming a “problem.” Negotiating complex and sometimes rigid (but abstract) rules, such as

women must be beautiful but not girly, men must be in control and superior, women must be sexy but not sexual, and women must be happy with singleness but not be single (Pickens & Braun, 2018). Single women felt increasing pressure (as they aged) to perform femininity in accordance with these heterosexual norms or face social sanctions. A major and central tenet of their performativity was securing a committed heterosexual relationship (the most desired relationship status) by a certain age, 30 years old was regarded a cut-off point (Pickens & Braun, 2018). As women got older, being single became less acceptable and they were viewed as less sexually attractive, abnormal, desperate and defective (Pickens & Braun, 2018). The perceived fussiness, dysfunction and unsuitability of older single women is seen as such a deficit that they are framed as “stroppy bitches” (Pickens & Braun, 2018, p. 431).

Other research has also found that heteronormativity and perceived feminine ideals contribute to the ongoing privileging and idealising of heterosexual marriage, and that single women challenge this idealised relationship (Lesch & van der Watt, 2018; Sandfield, 2006; Sandfield & Percy, 2003). Heteronormativity and the culturally produced, socially embedded discourses relating to heterosexual relationships, offers a way of understanding how women come to police themselves in accordance with discursive sanctions. Sandfield and Percy (2003) found that marriage remains an important identifying relationship, with heterosexual discourses that privilege marriage over other forms of relationships dominating (Sandfield & Percy, 2003). Research by Farvid and Braun (2013) and Gavey (1989) also critique the sanctity of marriage as culturally, socially and politically produced to serve the interests of white Western men. Similar to the findings by Pickens and Braun (2018), heterosexual marriage is regarded as the ideal relationship, and other ways of doing relationships are seen as less favourable (Farvid & Braun, 2013). Normative heterosexuality and a monogamous relationship with “The One” is the top of the hierarchy of relationship respectability (Farvid & Braun, 2013). Securing a loving, committed relationship with “The One” or “Mr Right” is thus essential for women’s ongoing happiness and security. Further, if women are lucky enough to find “The One”, then the heteronormative imperative urges women to keep them at whatever cost (Farvid & Braun, 2006). This imperative helps explain why relationship status is a determinant of a woman’s position within our androcentric, heteronormative social power relations. Sandfield (2006) found that discourses about divorce reinforced heterosexual marriage (the dominant story) as the most desirable position for women, and those who did not comply were rendered “other” as single women (p. 169). A body of literature supports the argument that women who do not comply with accepted norms that serve to perpetuate men’s

interests (such as staying married) face various social sanctions (Lesch & van der Watt, 2018; Pickens & Braun, 2018; Reynolds, 2008; Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003; Sandfield, 2006; Sandfield & Percy, 2003). Reynolds and Wetherell (2003) found that the social exclusion of single women, depended on the assumption of the problem of singleness where women were blamed and held accountable for their single status. They were regarded as being failures at relationships, having poor problem-solving skills and possessing a degree of selfishness in connection with their actions (Sandfield, 2006; Sandfield & Percy, 2003).

I find myself contemplating the pervasiveness of heteronormativity in Western society and feeling disheartened about the heaviness of this journey. I think back, working with my own memories, as I come to understand the coercion of heteronormativity in our childhood fairy tales, and think about the technologies of power as we travel in and through popular culture, with this becoming embodied (Ismail, 2023; Rowe, 2014). Traditional fairy tales, the narratives of bedtime stories, serve to reinforce heteronormative values and the ideal performance of femininity. Ismail (2023) argues the narrative encourages girls to imagine themselves as princesses, waiting patiently to be saved by a prince who will one day transform their lives. Princesses are valued in these stories for their submissiveness and physical beauty, often with the Prince falling in love with them at first sight (Ismail, 2023), no personality apparently required! Further, in many fairy tales, the ultimate reward that the Princess is aspiring to is marriage to her handsome Prince (Ismail, 2023). The cultural imperatives produced by fairy tales do translate to real life, where there is significant pressure on women to fulfil the fairy tale script, by being rescued by their Prince Charming and securing marriage (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Rowe, 2014). The fairy tale embraces feminine subjugation and becomes something of a roadmap of our dreams (Rowe, 2014). Rowe (2014, p. 222) argues that even in a “liberated” modern society, “many women internalised romantic patterns from ancient tales” that normalise submissive positions in relationships and demean women (Ismail, 2023). If women do not pursue the idealised fairy tale (the heteronormative script), eventuating in the prize of marriage, they are usually portrayed in fairy tales as “bad, older women”, often represented as non-human in the form of witches or trolls (Lieberman, 2014, p. 196). The message to single women is stark and clear: play the patriarchal game and find your Prince or risk being ostracised by society.

What does this all mean to single women living in a patriarchal society underpinned by heteronormativity, with gendered power relations socially embedded and even celebrated

in stories we tell children? The research highlighting the stigmatisation of single women, along with the literature around heteronormativity, contributes to an understanding of a generic deficit-based category of “single women.” The literature paints an overall depressing picture for single women and, particularly, women who are single again at midlife. Heteronormativity positions older single women as outsiders, evident by the offensive labels attributed to them such as stropy bitches, crazy cat ladies, trolls and witches. This stigmatisation is the tip of the iceberg, with heteronormativity (and sometimes by extension, coercive control) designed to keep women in their place: firmly ensconced within heterosexual relationships and the imagined fairy tale of happily-ever-after. But, where does this leave representations of single again women at midlife in Aotearoa? Is there literature that offers alternative positions and hope for single women at this life stage?

Joyfully Single Again: Collectively Moving Towards Other Ways of Being

My research interest lies in challenging the (individualised) deficit-based accounts of women’s failure at heteronormativity that inform understandings of single again women. In this research the term “single again” is used purposefully as a challenge to the (negative) singular story of the category of “divorced woman” (van Schalkwyk, 2005). In her exploration of women’s post-divorce experiences, van Schalkwyk (2005) makes the distinction between someone who has always been single and someone who has, following divorce, become single again. This is because women who are single again have been in a committed relationship or marriage, which is a position that is embedded in diverse cultural, social and other organising narratives. When the relationship ends, women return to a previously held position, that of being single. According to van Schalkwyk (2005), the term “single again” recognises the process of becoming single again is about more than the act of leaving a relationship: women continue to evolve and find alternative (new) ways of being that are separate to being in an intimate relationship.

In recent years, the move towards research that affirms being single again appears to be gaining some momentum. Recently, DePaulo (2023) called for research that transcends the deficit narratives of single life to hear the stories from a singles standpoint (rather than being couples centred). As a researcher, it is her aim to make visible the “joyful, meaningful, psychologically rich, and fulfilling lives” of single people (DePaulo, 2023, p. 4). Although DePaulo (2023) does not focus specifically on women (where my interest lies), which means that the forces of heteronormativity are not explicitly acknowledged, she nevertheless makes a

strong case for singles research. DePaulo (2023, p. 1) provides an overview of some of the (research based) positive outcomes single people experience, which she terms “flourishing.” Her understanding of single people flourishing includes singles feeling happier as they age, enjoying their autonomy and freedom, and having social networks of multiple relationships that enrich their lives. DePaulo (2018) strongly challenges the ideology and normativity of “The One” true love and offers a counter narrative of “the ones”, the multiple and flexible affirmative relationships that single people can enjoy. Single again people often have the energy and time to engage in relationships that nourish and enrich them emotionally without relying on a partner or nuclear family unit (DePaulo, 2018). Relationships that may make up a community of “the ones” could potentially include friends, neighbours, colleagues, siblings, and others (DePaulo, 2018).

After considering alternative (more affirming) accounts of being single again, I returned to the problem of being middle aged and a single again woman. A young single woman is not a crazy cat lady, but an older single woman with cats can certainly be (Lahad & Hazan, 2014). An essay on the feminist origins of “the midlife crisis” interested me as it offered new potentialities for women at this life stage. Schmidt (2018, pp. 504-505) sought to “expand and complicate research on age and gender by making visible how women used the notion of midlife change to undermine gender hierarchies”, a flourishing of political becoming. She gives an overview of the double standard of ageing where men’s permissiveness is tolerated and women’s freedoms denounced. At a stage in life when women’s responsibilities have often eased off (e.g., caring for a husband, children and a home) and she is able (finally) to consider what she may want, the dominant representation of her was the figure of her decline, and a (pathologised) menopausal body. However, Schmidt (2018) found that, in comparison to historical deficit based frameworks of middle aged women (which were largely medical and psychiatric), sociological perspectives were more likely to give positive accounts of midlife for women as a period of new beginnings, success, empowerment, and self-actualisation. Sociological approaches to generating knowledge about women at midlife, that considered the whole person, and spoke with women at midlife directly to hear their stories, introduced alternative, positive concepts that served to undermine traditional gender roles and challenge male privilege (Schmidt, 2018). Similar to the generic research about single women, I became increasingly aware that how knowledge is produced matters.

As a Pākehā woman living in Aotearoa, embedded within a bicultural whānau, social and professional networks, considering how knowledge has been produced about wāhine Māori who may become single again women at midlife also matters greatly. When thinking about affirming difference, I sought literature that may have relevance to becoming single again that centres wāhine Māori. There have been narrow representations of single women in previous research, predominantly with a focus on white, heterosexual, middle class women, mostly in their 20s or 30s with no children (Budgeon, 2016). These narrow, Eurocentric representations produce knowledge that contribute to shared understandings of single women (Budgeon, 2016). To conduct research that affirms difference here, in Aotearoa, means that we also need to take into our practice the enduring effects of colonisation and the imposition of patriarchy, the gendered Eurocentric understanding of relationships and family (Wilson, Mikahere-Hall, Jackson, Cootes, & Sherwood, 2021). Wāhine Māori, through the process of colonisation, were stripped of their mana and gendered according to Western patriarchal norms (Wilson et al., 2021). Subsequent Eurocentric perspectives of wāhine Māori failed to recognise how these ongoing and harmful effects of colonisation, including historical trauma and marginalisation, specifically impacted wāhine Māori (Wilson et al., 2021). Consequently, knowledge of wāhine Māori relational practices and understandings of heterosexual relationships and love have largely failed to be culturally informed or responsive. However, research by Wilson et al. (2021) brings meaning to Māori women's sociocultural constructs of love and the role of cultural values in relationships. Their research found that wāhine Māori constructions of concepts such as love (and decisions about staying or leaving relationships) differs from the norms western knowledge has produced. Although influenced by Western concepts of romantic love and heteronormativity, wāhine Māori may approach intimate partnerships and decisions concerning these relationships very differently to Pākehā women due to underlying cultural imperatives. Wilson et al. (2021, p. 9809) identify two critical Māori cultural concepts that strongly influence wāhine Māori in partnerships, “*aroha* (compassion, empathy, and respect) and *manaakitanga* (hospitality, sharing, and caring for others).” These cultural concepts go beyond what a Western understanding of what love may mean in romantic partnerships – they are strongly connected with *whakapapa* (genealogy) and *whanaungatanga* (connections). In practice this may mean complex competing tensions for wāhine Māori in partnerships. Wilson et al. (2021) identified some of the themes in the process of wāhine Māori leaving violent relationships. The narrative here starts with beginnings and connections, the process of downplaying abuse, to needing to leave. The connection wāhine Māori had with partners was underscored by love, compassion, obligation

and caring, which occurred in the context of increasing control and surveillance. The research found wāhine Māori downplayed signs of abuse, understanding that partners had their own trauma histories, and felt as though they needed to continue caring and supporting partners (and others) in order for healing to occur (Wilson et al., 2021). Over time, the ongoing emotional and psychological abuse affected women's confidence. Wāhine Māori came to realise that there were significant problems in the relationship that their aroha and manaakitanga could not resolve. At this stage in a violent relationship, wāhine Māori would likely consider their own and their tamariki safety and want to leave (and eventually leave), but at the same time feel conflicted due to caring obligations towards both their partner and wider whānau (Wilson et al., 2021). These obligations are relational, and the complexities of histories and connections are lifelong and enduring, embodying the cultural concepts of whakapapa and whanaungatanga. As Wilson et al. (2021) argue, relying on Western relational concepts alone is unlikely to be sufficient if wanting to go beyond Eurocentric representations of single again women in Aotearoa.

Decolonising Western centred knowledge about single again women also underscores the importance of bringing an intersectional perspective into the discussion. Kislev and Marsh (2023) warn of the tendency for researchers (and others) to view single people as one homogenous group and promote that an intersectional approach gains a more intricate and meaningful understanding of single people's experiences. Challenging the deficit-based accounts and heterosexual norms that inform understandings of single again women is about more than thinking about women existing outside of a relationship, as that ignores the complexity of experiences and life course (Kislev & Marsh, 2023). How single women experience life can be different from single men due to the impact of gender, culture and societal norms (Kislev & Marsh, 2023). An intersectional approach to singlehood extends the triple disenfranchisement (being age, gender and single status) of older single women identified by Lahad and Hazan (2014) to acknowledge additional aspects that shape women's experiences such as race or ethnicity, sexuality, religion, ability, citizenship and income (Kislev & Marsh, 2023). Overall, these factors "interact and intersect to shape complex experiences stretching over time and space" (Kislev & Marsh, 2023, p. 421). This makes sense, as single women do not arrive at midlife with uniform experiences, but rather are the product of multitude life experiences depending on life courses up to that point. Kislev and Marsh (2023) suggest that taking an intersectional approach to understanding single women

can offer an opening to challenge dominant cultural narratives of the singular story of single women.

Considering approaches that allow for openings of new spaces and affirming difference for women becoming single again at midlife in Aotearoa, research by Wolfe and Hook (2019) offers ideas about how this might come about. By “creatively flattening and traversing reductive accounts of subjectivity into encounters of affirmation” the authors collaborate to mobilise difference and create their own counter narratives of being single (Wolfe & Hook, 2019, p. 1). They adopt a purposefully collective stance, defining this as “anti-individual”, to support “other pathways of being” for single women (Wolfe & Hook, 2019, p. 5). Wolfe and Hook (2019) assert that collective voices, heard through narratives, is what makes it possible to disrupt heteronormativity and coupledness to reimagine lives as flourishing single women. By sharing a physical space, storytelling and creating together, Wolfe and Hook (2019) generate accounts of the joy, happiness, celebration, and freedom of being single women. By telling stories and coming together through narratives, the approach taken here suggests that there are openings for affirming difference for single women and generating new potentialities. The research by Wolfe and Hook (2019) resonates with me: I get a strong sense of a shining light at the end of a depressing (deficit-based) literature tunnel! Although the bulk of the literature was determined to tell people otherwise, I know from the single women in my life that we were not all crazy cat ladies and failures! I imagine that Wolfe and Hook (2019, p. 5) may have felt similar when they declared of their research that it was “a speaking back, a collective scream, a life becoming liveable.” The joyfulness and affective flow that shines through this research reminds me of the power of stories and how narratives can enable research to exceed categories and affirm difference.

In summary, this literature review initially highlights the ongoing stigmatisation of single women and the gendered power relations that individualise these perceived deficits to hold them in place through principles of heteronormativity, social coercion, and entrapment. However, the review then seeks openings in literature that exceed the limits of this recognition of single women. Openings that may affirm differences and move away from the universal categorisation of single women. These openings challenge stereotypes and offer different ways of being for single women at midlife, ways that may even be positive and joyful. The literature that exposes these openings centre single people (DePaulo, 2023), acknowledge sociological perspectives (Schmidt, 2018), are culturally responsive (Wilson et

al., 2021), take an intersectional approach (Kislev & Marsh, 2023), and use narratives (Wolfe & Hook, 2019) to challenge the near vilification of single again women at midlife. Taken collectively, these openings inform my methodology to answer the question, how do women experience affectively becoming single again?

Chapter 3: Methodology

The Problematisation of Single Again Women

To answer the question “How do women experience becoming single again?” requires an understanding of how we produce knowledge. Feminist standpoint epistemology acknowledges women’s lived experiences are a legitimate source of knowledge and attends to the social power relations that form the conditions of their everyday lives. As I transitioned out of a long-term marriage, Sandra Harding’s standpoint theory contributed to my understanding and consciousness of the gendered hierarchy and how this impacts socially situated knowledge claims (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1992), and I became hopeful that that there would be counter knowledges that acknowledged the stories of women marginalised and silenced by heteronormativity. Haraway argued that “gender is a field of structured and structuring difference” (1988, p. 587). I was seeing (and feeling) how knowledge was generated and produced by the activities of Western heteronormative power relations and how this limits what can be understood about those situated in other layers of the gendered social hierarchy. I had a growing (initially uneasy) awareness of the experience of my complicity in the performance of femininity. I recognised the affective flows in the understanding of what knowledge produces knowledge, in the painful memories of my displacement in the gendered social hierarchy, and I experienced the excitement of counter stories that might become possible.

With the potential legitimacy in my own process of becoming, I was hearing stories as I moved with other women who also were moving from being (just surviving and hanging on) to becoming. We were experiencing life differently as single again women. Our storytelling was rich and meaningful and held a collective wisdom. Then I started to wonder... what if we could share these marvellous stories of becoming? How would that happen? How could I, as an insider in this process, come alongside single again women to affirm our difference? How does that ethically happen? If I assumed the role of researcher and invited single women to collaborate with me to legitimise this knowledge, how would stories be told and how would I listen?

Challenging Dominant Stories and Identifying Resistance

Hopeful now that our stories can be legitimated, enables me to address the ongoing “problem” of single women. Our stories, our knowledges are situated, historically, culturally

and socially, and are also embodied (Haraway, 1988). This recognises that gender is a situated difference. Knowledge then is always partial and incomplete, but is constantly moving through our narrative location. It is knowledge production that allows us to share knowledge from partial perspectives “to see together without claiming to be another” in critical positioning and interpretation through connection and community (Haraway, 1988, p. 586). And moving with Haraway’s (1988) notion of the God trick, the normalisation of knowledge that appears to come from nowhere (heteronormativity), the façade of objectivity is acknowledged and rejected: the knowledge produced here, comes from somewhere in particular. It comes from women in my community that have “complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured” bodies (Haraway, 1988, p. 589). This allows me to engage with women in power-sensitive conversations, with a critical vision to join partial perspectives into a collective narrative of becoming. This recognises that it matters what stories tell stories and the situated knowledge, from somewhere in particular, is “the only way to find a larger vision” (Haraway, 1988, p. 590). Our knowledge, our wisdom, in our narratives of becoming can be understood as “embodied objectivity” (Haraway, 1988, p. 581). And, as I reflect on the legitimacy of our knowledge, I begin to wonder how purposeful listening, in the production of situated knowledge, opens the space for the stories of “my tribe” to be told – the embodied objectivity of our producing knowledge together.

Interested in our narrative becoming, narrative inquiry creates the space to circulate narratives and legitimately produce knowledge from my community by rejecting the neoliberal insistence of the single heteronormative story that defines us. This is a “deeply peopled project” which allows for, and recognises our social world, and our connections with others, past, present, and in the future (Fine, 2017, p. 119). It is a narrative responsibility to situate lives in history and place so that we can radiate beyond this space (Fine, 2017). Thinking with the potential for this research, I am able to imagine stitching together new stories to create possibilities for revisioning by identifying pockets of resistance and potentialities, and “radiate out” with the hope of collectively moving forward (Bradbury, 2017, p. 111; Fine, 2017). Recognising the journey and mobilisation of stories of single again women makes it possible to challenge the knowledge that serves the interests of Western capitalism and encourages me to “insist on a better account of the world” for my community (Haraway, 1988, p. 579). Narrative inquiry too comes with narrative responsibilities and relational obligations (Fine, 2017). The notion of “passing on stories” (Fine, 2017, p. 108) is an ethically relational process of meaning making, delicately and responsibly telling,

listening, hearing, writing and re-imagining our potentials. These are how stories tell (new) stories to make connections to other ways of knowing.

And as I was thinking about our ethical responsibilities and relational obligations I was reminded of Lee-Morgan's (2019) work with *pūrākau*, and challenge, to circulate stories that decolonise Western knowledge production. Lee-Morgan (2019, p. 151) explains that “*Pūrākau* literally refers to the *pū* (base or foundation) of a *rākau* (tree)” and is regarded as a source of sustenance and growth from a Māori worldview. By conceptualising stories as *pūrākau*, it makes sense that *pūrākau* do not stand alone but rather, need other *pūrākau* alongside them to make sense and grow (Lee-Morgan, 2019). In this way, *pūrākau* are inevitably connected and relational, and affirm the colourful differences of life becoming liveable.

The conceptualisation of *pūrākau* as the entanglement of stories (Lee-Morgan, 2019) is something that resonates with me both abstractly and literally when thinking about narrative methodology. I live in Te Tai Tokerau (Northland) and I am fortunate to be able to access dense areas of native bush close to my home. When in the bush there is an understanding that the native trees and plants grow alongside each other in synergy, each with their own particular purpose and function, all needing the other in the larger canopy. There are different sizes and shapes of flora and fauna, various hues, different textures and smells etcetera. Together, they combine to become “The Bush” with all the sensory wonder and healing magic that this entails. Together the trees and plants offer more than the sum of their parts. I have spent a fair amount of time in the past few years walking through The Bush with other single again women, telling stories to one another about our processes of becoming. Any one story told on any one day offers only a partial view of our experience. However, taken together, over many bush walks, the chorus of voices generated from storytelling together started to be a way of understanding and making sense of our experiences. In The Bush in Te Tai Tokerau something joyful (and powerful) happened with the telling of stories that came together organically. This too is the hope for this methodology, the collective weaving together of narratives, but this time purposeful and occurring within a formal research context to affirm our processes of becoming single again women, research that circulates responsible stories.

Upholding the Mana of Wāhine Māori

A better account of the world also turns attention to decolonising Eurocentric knowledge and recognising the dignity and authority of mana wāhine. Hine Waitere and Patricia Johnston wrote about “echoed silences”, where the homogenising processes of colonisation rendered Māori women in Aotearoa invisible and written out of their own stories (Waitere & Johnston, 2009, p. 14). Narrative inquiry can revision our stories by meaningfully engaging mana wāhine in knowledge production (Fine, 2017; Waitere & Johnston, 2009). This demands more than Māori women being physically present in the research process. It is about adopting a way of collaboratively producing knowledge through storytelling that upholds mana wāhine (Waitere & Johnston, 2009). A part of my responsibility for hearing partial and multiple stories is responding to the historic silencing of voices of mana wāhine. I am reminded by Waitere and Johnston (2009) that mana wāhine face structural and procedural barriers to being heard. Waitere and Johnston (2009) call for spaces where links and connections that bring mana, an ethical encounter, to the hearing, and in the relationships that link spiritual, human and physical elements. It matters what stories tell stories. I am reminded of how Fine (2017) spoke about narratives recognising and hearing partial and multiple stories to contest the single story. I acknowledge that, although we are all located in Aotearoa, our differences matter. We might be in this together but we are not the same. As a relational process, narrative inquiry enables me to create a space for mana wāhine to be heard within the complexities of their situatedness (Waitere & Johnston, 2009). It is important to note that the presence of wāhine Māori in this research does not represent all wāhine Māori (Waitere & Johnston, 2009). However, it is a space which makes possible the hearing of partial perspectives of Māori women’s experiences. This is a relational space where myself, as non-Māori, is responsible too in supporting wāhine Māori “to identify their own interests and agendas” and to “contest, deconstruct and revitalise after the onslaught and destruction produced by colonisation” (Waitere & Johnston, 2009, p. 27).

Prioritising Connection and Embodiment

Clandinin, Caine, and Lessard (2018) spoke about relational ethics being at the heart of narrative inquiry and this project is definitely a heart project. So I began to think about relational space and the embodiment of genuine storytelling in a respectful way that

prioritises connection. Margareta Hyden wrote about how relationally safe spaces are what bridges the gap from “experiencing to knowing” when building knowledge (Hydén, 2014, p. 799). Relational practice is an active process, where there are no set rules or criteria as it is about valuing the whole person and the story they bring (Hydén, 2014). I am reminded of the relationally safe spaces created on my many bush walks with friends where we spontaneously told stories to one another about our lives. Conversation was not planned or predetermined but, as Hydén (2014) notes, if we give people space for storytelling it does indeed often happen. Storytelling is how we make sense of our world (Hydén, 2014). I would start a bush walk with a friend, stories going back and forth, to emerge an hour or so later out of the bush with a new knowing. I would sense a lightness, the feeling of having been both heard and held in that more than human space that enabled me to process the shift from experiencing to knowing. Being alongside women in relationally safe spaces as we humanise our stories (Clandinin et al., 2018), telling stories of our becoming are embodied encounters, and I therefore understand that relational ethics allows for the affective flows and embodied responses in our telling.

The space allows for authentic expression of the good, the bad and the ugly in women’s lives. It is a space where women can express a range of emotions if talking about “big subjects.” I think about Clandinin et al. (2018) who reminds me that narratives include not just what is said, but what is not said, and what is embodied. In this way, the storytelling is a dance, led by the women in this research, that is much more than any words offered (Hydén, 2014). There is no rush in this dance of narratives and there is plenty of space for reflection and movement (for both me and the women telling their story). As is the case with dances, this relational encounter can take many different turns. It can include expanding narratives through co-construction and storying together, or through connecting with other narratives (Hydén, 2014). The narrative process also recognises the organic, evolving nature of conversation and requires a willingness (on my part) to be open to improvisation (Clandinin et al., 2018). A relational process may mean that I hold space for women to safely embody and process difficult emotions that come up. However, there are no prescriptions here, and at times it could also mean there is “a special kind of energy” afforded by humour and light-heartedness (Hydén, 2014, p. 807). Through the action of conversation and storytelling, it is hoped that we can make meaning together and that women too are empowered in the narrative process (Hydén, 2014). Narrative methodology creates opportunity for not only retelling

stories, but for telling different stories and the hopefulness of what new stories may offer a community that has traditionally been marginalised.

Stories as Gifts to be Treasured

The women involved in this project live alongside me in our community and I am deeply committed to their ongoing wellbeing. I am very aware that their embodied knowledge, and any subsequent knowledge claims that I make through this research, are essentially claims on their lives (Haraway, 1988). This is a big responsibility and is why, at the heart of this relational practice, is a genuine respect and value for the women who are my collaborators in this process of knowledge production. I am reminded of Ann Oakley's concept of narrative as a gift relationship in feminist methodology (Oakley, 2016). The sharing of stories creates the conditions for a "gift relationship" where women will gift stories to me as the researcher and I am accountable to them in this project (Oakley, 2016, p. 209). Of course, generating new knowledge is dependent on what the women in my community are willing to share with me about their processes of becoming. What stories women are willing to contribute from their lives and the movement of these stories (Oakley, 2016), is understood in narrative methodology as a relational process which is a fluid encounter (Cotterill, 1992). The *stories* and the *relationship* between myself and women in this project go hand in hand – there is no separating one of these aspects out from the other. This is about me, as a researcher, holding a safe space for women through a shared intimacy, where the relationship is reciprocal and I come alongside women in their storytelling (Cotterill, 1992). It is a space and a relationship that is non-hierarchical and non-exploitative. Being offered gifts of stories will only happen where a high degree of trust is present, and women are comfortable being vulnerable in the relational space. I can help empower women in this process by creating conversational spaces led by them and "moving slowly in ways that allow for listening and living" (Clandinin et al., 2018, p. 88). This means being attentive and responsible in my care for both the women in this research and the stories they gift as we make meaning together producing counter narratives.

Chapter 4: Method

Seeking Single Again Women at Midlife

I wanted to have conversations with women at midlife who were single-again. The criteria for inclusion were women who were previously in an intimate partnership but were not in a committed intimate partnership at the time of the research. Although single again has been previously defined as people who have been married but are now single (Reynolds, 2008), it was not necessary for women to have been married to participate in this research. This recognised that approximately a quarter of women in Aotearoa are not married to their partners (Atkin, 2016). Despite this, all the women in this research had been married to their partners and were, at the time of this research, either divorced or separated. In addition, recognising the different types of relationships in Aotearoa in 2023, women were not required to have specifically been in a heterosexual relationship prior to becoming single again. However, all the women who participated in this project had exited long-term heterosexual relationships. Further, the criteria for “midlife” was interpreted broadly (again, to be as inclusive as possible), and I sought women who were aged from 35-65 years old. This is an age range that has been generally accepted in previous research as being “midlife” (Apter, 1996; Dare, 2011; Etaugh, 2018; Sakranda, 2005). While I did not collect specific demographic information, drawing on existing relationships from within my community in Te Tai Tokerau, Northland, Table 1 broadly reflects the community.

Table 1

Demographic data of women participants

Age	N
35-44	1
45-54	1
55-64	4
Māori	2
Non-Māori	4

Inviting My Community to be Co-Constructors Alongside Me

The women in this research were already known to me through social or professional networks. Some had witnessed my evolving process of becoming single again and had been walking alongside me in life for a few years. A couple of the women I had met more recently (within 12 months of their involvement in this research). All the women knew that I was single again and studying postgraduate psychology. Many of the women were aware that I had been nurturing an idea about doing research alongside single again women. As the conversations about the potentials for this research built in up in our everyday relationships, I began to be asked directly by women when they could speak with me, not to “forget” them, that they wanted to be a part of the project, and that they were thinking about what they wanted to say to me. I reassured the women that they were “on my list” and that I would come to them when I could. When I had approval from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (Ethics Notification Number: 4000026201), I sent out invitations to participate in this research (see Appendix A). I sought to have conversations with 5-8 women, and I immediately received positive responses and interest from my network.

Having Conversations in Relationally Safe Spaces

Respecting the guiding principles of whanaungatanga and manaakitanga, embedded in the methodology of narrative inquiry, any meaning being produced as knowledge from the research process was regarded as co-constructed (Coombes, Denne, & Rangiwānanga, 2016). This process of co-construction was fostered through a relationally safe space where women were the centre, understanding that I had the responsibility keeping those stories safe (Hydén, 2014). It matters what stories tell stories, but it also matters how, and under what conditions, these stories are told. Negotiating participation, we understood together that we would be talking as if it was a conversation in everyday life – remembering that as knowers of our own experiences, the formal “research” component is a process of legitimating our knowledge of the everyday. The locations for the interviews, sitting around coffee tables, sharing food, were important to the how stories are told, and of the six conversations, five came to “hang out” in my home, and one being at the woman’s own home. As the women had been given an invitation to voluntarily participate in the research, they were aware of the goals of the project. In the course of our everyday lives, however, we had had many conversations about

our becoming single again and the possibilities this afforded. By formally agreeing to take part in the research there was an established mutual understanding that we were both seeking to expand these narratives (Hydén, 2014) in the production of lives as knowledge. There was a shared energy to participate so that other women might access stories of the potentials of joyful singleness. I sought informed consent from the women, with the recognition that it would not be possible to anticipate everything that might arise during the conversations. Women signed a Participant Consent Form (see Appendix B) and consent was negotiated as an on-going, evolving process. The women were aware that the conversation could go on for as long as they wanted it to (there was no rush) and that they could have further conversations with me in the future if they wanted to add anything else for any reason. Conversations lasted from 50 minutes to 2½ hours. Often the conversations would start with me reiterating the shared kaupapa (purpose) of both of us meeting together by simply asking: “Tell me about your process of becoming single again at midlife?” The conversations were all digitally recorded (with consent) and I sat alongside the women without notes and other distractions and we talked, as we would normally talk, with a focus on our processes of becoming single. The conversations occurred about monthly over a period of six months, and this matters to the process of meaning making as I began the process of transcription after each conversation.

Transcribing, Analysing and Stitching Together Stories

Immediately after each conversation I began transcribing into a Word document, capturing as much of the affective flow in side notes as I listened to the audio of the conversation. I would note utterances, silences, laughing, crying, changes in volume and pace of speech, etc. I would also note my embodied response as I remembered the conversation. With the initial analysis starting at the point of transcription, I talked through my reactions and responses to each conversation with my supervisor. I highlighted any discoveries and surprises with her and continued to listen for the potential counter narratives that may be coming through in conversations. I reflected on the moments that might give clues to the embodiment of the process of becoming single again. I looked to see if these conversations could give a “push from below” and help build a collective voice of single again women (Campbell, Cornish, Gibbs, & Scott, 2010; Sools & Murray, 2015). When the conversations were transcribed, women were given a copy of their transcripts to review and had the opportunity to change, add, or delete anything. None of the women made any changes and all signed an Authority to Release Transcript form (see Appendix C).

Using a reflexive process following each conversation, it became apparent after the third conversation that there may be a collective voice emerging in the stories regarding a process of becoming single again. There seemed to be processes of “reckoning”, “freedom”, and the embodiment of “new spaces.” Although not linear by any means, the storytelling seemed to follow a loose pattern, with a beginning, a middle and an end. As part of my everyday life, I was often in regular contact with the women involved in this project and they were interested in the research, often asking me how it was going. I was able to share with them my wonderings about a possible emerging collective voice. I sensed strongly that the women involved in this research were invested in the process, and that the relational space was such that they embodied roles of genuine co-constructors in the research process. My co-constructors were genuinely curious about how the analysis was taking shape. They fed back that they could relate to the processes of reckoning, embracing freedom and embodying new spaces. There was interest and some excitement about these wonderings. This reflexive process contributed to the approach taken for the subsequent three conversations.

When having conversations with the last three women involved in this research, the potential stories of the process of becoming single again were kept in mind as a possible framework for the collective voice. During these conversations, I was able to identify moments in real time where the women were speaking about each of these stages of the process, and, at times, I could explicitly ask more about that process. While always keeping an open mind and letting each woman take the conversation where she wanted to go, I was curious about this possible collective voice, and I had a hunch for where the conversations may organically go and what I could listen out for. These last three conversations were different from the first three, in that the reflexivity I had experienced in the transcription phase of the first three conversations, came to enliven in real time, the three remaining narratives. There was a conscious choice made, through the supervision process, to continue to respect the women’s direction in their storytelling, but that it is also possible to bring the collective hearing into the space too.

When the six conversations were completed and transcribed, the conversations were reviewed collectively to identify any potential stories of reckoning, freedom, and embodying new spaces. These narrative becomings, of course, were not as simple to make sense of, and were creatively stitched together as I was able to reimagine the affective flows in the meaning making. During the analysis process, I also felt a strong ethical imperative to acknowledge the

special relational space that I had experienced with the women in this research by honouring the principle of reciprocity. As I sat with the joy (and at times, pain) of the women's narratives, I came to understand that, just as the women had gifted stories to me as the researcher, I also had a responsibility to model vulnerability and gift my stories to this project too in support of the collective voice that was emerging. From this analysis flowed stories of reckoning, stories of freedom, and stories of becoming and these are the focus of the following chapter.

Chapter 5: Analysis and Discussion

As I carefully listened to women's stories, there appeared to be a chronological sequence to how women spoke about processes of becoming single again at midlife. The narratives often started with when the women were still married and what they had noticed, at points in time, that were troubling to them. These seemed to be stories of reckoning, where women had a growing awareness that the relationship was over. There was a desire for movement in this state, and as the marriages ended, women then negotiating the meaning of becoming single again. When women were newly single, there were collective stories of embracing freedom. This was where women were doing new things outside of a relationship and finding their feet again as single women. As they continued in their evolving processes, collective stories of becoming emerged, where women embodied new spaces and potentialities. Collectively, the women's processes had three collections of stories that roughly flowed through a (messy at times) movement over time: stories of reckoning, stories of freedom and stories of becoming. I will start the analysis at the beginning, with stories of reckoning.

Stories of Reckoning: Knowing the Relationship is Over and Getting Out

In the stories of reckoning there are awakenings, sometimes gentle and sometimes more sudden, where women started to question the viability of their marriages. The collective voice begins to challenge dominant stories of what heterosexual relationships should be like and starts resisting and pushing back on these narratives within their own relationships. There is then a tipping point at some stage in the evolving process where women mobilise their resistance and the marriage ends.

Questioning the Position of Head of the Household. In the collective stories of reckoning there are disruptions to the dominant narratives of coupledness, where women started to question the power dynamics and gendered roles in their marriages. After years of marriage, Toni started to resist and question dominant heterosexual discourses, such as the have/hold discourse, which positions a man as the head of the household with total responsibility for the family unit.

Him saying "marriage is sacred" and "the man is the head of the household" ... these are his morals and his values and his total belief that this is the way it should be, no matter what anyone else says, that's fact. It's fact that the man has the last decision,

it's fact... The man is the one, you know, that the buck stops with. And I'm like, "Well, that's all very well but I wouldn't even let the buck stop with you"... It's just women being stupid. That's why men are in charge because we're so flighty... He really, really thinks that... That rigid belief that that is how life is, because that is what The Bible says. Even if The Bible doesn't say that 90% of the time. It is what men have said it says.

There is a slow burning, an awakening, where Toni questions heterosexual and religious norms about how marriage is meant to be enacted by women. She speaks about a particular moment of reckoning that has stayed with her. Toni tells a story about watching a movie with her husband, when he says something sexually inappropriate, and she suddenly looks at him differently. In that moment, she recognised that her husband had crossed a line, and that became the "kick off point" where Toni realised she had begun the process of leaving her marriage. Toni resisted her location in the dominant pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse and was no longer prepared to remain submissive in the relationship. She recognised a lack of reciprocity, where she was expected to give her whole self to her husband regardless of his behaviour. Toni's thinking shifted and she realised that she no longer wanted a sexual relationship with her husband.

Like, I can't be doing this anymore. Probably a year before I actually said right, that's it. Yeah, how do I do this? I'd moved into my own room, I'd said I didn't want to have him coming in anymore. He was quite demanding about, you know, it was just... The demanding side, "It's my right to, you're my wife" and I was like, ah, yuck. It became yuck. I'm thinking why the hell am I doing this? Why am I doing this? So, that went on for a while. And then <adult relative> said to <ex-husband> "Oh, it's probably menopause, that's probably it"... He thinks I will come around, as far as he's concerned... I think it was quite a shock when I actually did say, "That's it, I've had enough"... So, it was quite quick when I actually decided to do it I think...

Mary also speaks about her sexual desire for her husband waning, but for different reasons. She finds the nurturant expectations of being a wife, and the expectation to care for her husband like he was a child, a turn off sexually. This can happen in heteronormative relationships where women take caregiver roles for not only their children, but also their partners, contributing to low sexual desire (Van Anders et al., 2022). For Mary, this appears to be a key aspect of her reckoning in her process of becoming single again.

Having to clean up after them and feed them, and care for them essentially. And I've got children, and so having to do that for another adult is a lot of work... The mental load and the practical stuff of actually having to, basically, raise a man... In a relationship they default to looking for a Mum, basically. It feels like that. And then as a woman it's hard to be sexually attracted to a person that you're also in like a parent relationship with.

In some of the stories of reckoning, abuse became a site of significance, as the women became aware of the violences of heteronormativity, and how it privileges men. Anne recalled stories of ongoing psychological abuse and control in her marriage. She was aware of her politics of location as a woman who had immigrated to Aotearoa, continuing to live in a cultural and religious context that promoted men as the “head of the household” and in charge of everything and everyone in the home. This inevitably was enacted through gendered power relations where Anne was positioned in a submissive role in comparison to her husband. When Anne told her story, the affective flow was powerful and embodied. She felt captive among the flows of recognition, which was imagined in her story as being held in a cage. I sensed movement in Anne's narrative, where she initially imagined breaking free from the chains that restrained her (the entrapment of heteronormativity), and then slowly started resisting these chains in real life to claim freedom from subjugation.

I can remember throughout the marriage there were these signs that came through... You think “ah, okay”... You recognise it and you ignore it a little bit and just keep on going on... Because, in our culture, it's different, you just stay quiet, you don't tell people what's happening in your situation... And you listen to what your husband says. And do as he tells and all that... Not allowed to speak against him, you know, he can do whatever he wants, wife and children stay quiet... I felt like somebody just put me in this cage and I have no escape from this cage... But, I decided, you know, I don't care how things are, I'm an individual and I can stand up for myself, you know. So, it is that expectation of the culture and how I grew up, and I suddenly decide I don't have to do this anymore. Why do I need to do this, you know? I like to visualise things... So, I saw myself in this cage with these chains and I had to identify those chains to free myself out of the cage... And, that is the change that I had to go through. But when I went through all of that I had the freedom... I was free, I could go.

With some similarities to Anne's story, where abuse and entrapment in her relationship was normalised and imagined as a cage, Linda also experienced coercive control in her marriage. The coercively controlling behaviour of Linda's husband was so normal it was hidden in plain sight, as is often a feature of heteronormativity (Stark, 2009), with whānau recognising this power dynamic before she did. In her story, Linda's imagery is of feeling downtrodden and fearful in her marriage, with the controlling behaviour being so insidious that it was initially unrecognisable to her. Linda had a reckoning as an embodied experience, the affective flow in her narrative is of bodily sensing things were not right, not safe, but being unsure what this actually meant as there was no overt physical violence. She has a sense of release when the marriage ends. When Linda told me this story she dropped her shoulders when speaking of her relief, as though she had been holding her breath while she remembered those painful moments in her marriage. The relational space was tense and, as I sat alongside her, she let out a long slow breath and appeared to relax, safe again. We sat together in silence for a moment, before Linda nodded her head few times, looked me in the eye, and seemed to reorientate back to the present moment.

And I can remember when it was really hard, whatever I did was wrong, that was my normal. You know, I remember thinking at one stage "I should go to refuge." And then I thought "But that's only for women that get hit and he doesn't hit me." Because I didn't know. And so, you know, thinking that... I'm going crazy. It was my fault... He never hit me because he didn't have to. I was already too scared to go against him. So, he had me where he wanted me by his words and by his power... And, probably about a year before we broke up I remember his big sister... We were sitting in the kitchen... And <ex-husband> walked in and he said something and then he walked out. And, his sister turns around and she goes "If you don't tell my brother to fuck up, I will." And I went "Why, what did he do? What did he say?" And she goes, "The way he just spoke to you?" And I'm like "Oh sis, I'm just so used to it, it just goes over the top of my head." Yes, that was my absolute norm... I was too downtrodden to believe that I could do it successfully by myself... I just wanted the crap to stop. You know, because it felt constant... And, you know, it was wearing me down... Like, even though I was sad that my marriage broke up, part of me was also relieved.

There does not need to be abuse (physical or coercive) in a heterosexual relationship for a reckoning to slowly dawn. Jane's narrative about becoming single again, highlighted

how normalised gendered social power relations can be enduring and damaging (in and of themselves) even in the absence of any identifiably abusive behaviour. There is nearly a sense of death by a thousand (heteronormative) cuts. The affective flow of Jane's storytelling was embodied as she remembers shouting as she recalled her indignation when her husband identified her as a "housewife" on her child's birth certificate. This was despite the fact Jane was involved in running multiple businesses at the time. Her husband appeared to discount those aspects of Jane's being, only seeing the value in her gendered and traditional nurturant roles of mother/caretaker, in effect disempowering Jane. Further, Jane's mother-in-law was present and seemed to endorse this reductive perspective of Jane's life. Jane was emotional when telling her story and expressive of her anger.

So, part of my thing was how he thinks of women and their place in the world... He would always consider that men are the main money earners, things that men are traditionally supposed to be doing... So, for instance, on <child's> birth certificate he said that my job was a housewife. But I wasn't a housewife. I was not a housewife!!!... And I remember his Mum was here at the time and I was super offended and upset about it. And she defended him and I just thought, "What the dickens!"

Over the pursuing years, Jane experienced multiple pressure points. She had immigrated to Aotearoa, bought different houses, worked long hours in her businesses and had children. Jane was holding everything in the marriage and family but was increasingly unhappy. A breaking point came when her husband was working in another city. She had a realisation that, in fact, she did not want her husband back. Although in that moment it felt impulsive, her dissatisfaction within the marriage had in fact been "bubbling." This was representative of a process that could be likened to a slow reckoning, where, over a number of years, Jane had a felt sense that the enactment of heteronormativity was serving to disempower her and she wanted out of the relationship.

By then things really were not good. Definitely not good. So, I often said... "I'm going to leave you if we can't change this", in quite a threatening manner, when I think back on it... And, yes, I don't think he really, truly thought that I would. And then I decided that I'd had enough... And it was, in all honesty, easier for me to then say, "Hey, don't come back" ... And that's what I did... Those were painful days, very painful... And, am I ever sorry I did it? No... He would have sat in that situation... You know, I don't think I thought things through a lot before I made my decision. "This is what I want to

do, this is what I'm going to do"... And I did it. So, um... yeah, there weren't days of pondering... That was quite a knee jerk, reactive thing that had been bubbling.

A part of Rachael's reckoning was a growing curiosity about what life might be like for her outside of her relationship. She finds herself seeking evidence of how this may manifest for others. In her story she expresses how she was allowing herself to imagine the potentialities of leaving her marriage and the affective flow was one of a quietly building hope and possibly even excitement.

I was looking at some of the other people... And some of them were divorced. And I was kind of looking at them and thinking "How can they be okay? How are they so okay?" You know, they looked really happy. How could that be?... And then a tiny bit of me, thought, "Oh well, maybe, maybe it is possible?"... It was just in my head like, in this secret space, exploring what could a different like look like, could I ever?

Rachael grappled with a growing awareness of the potentialities of being single again versus the ongoing performance of an idealised femininity that involved carrying the burden of responsibility for caring for her husband and children (and what it would mean if she stopped doing this). The normalised gendered power relations that held her in place are evident in her narrative through the felt flow of fear around the potential of violating prescribed gender roles, such as the never-ending selflessness and sacrifice expected of women within a family.

For me it wasn't the idea of being single that was scary, but it was the idea of failing at marriage, like feeling like a failure, like um, I was deeply ashamed of failing at marriage. I think from the moment I decided to trust my husband and trust in that idea of being married, I felt a little bit smug about it, I think, and I felt a bit, like, um, you know, that it should be permanent and that was that... Once we had kids the idea was that it would be terrible for the kids if we split up. And that also a really strong drive. The idea of failure and the idea of destroying my kids. And so that kind of held me inside the marriage for much, much longer than I needed to. I just still felt like a failure... I didn't tell anyone any of my family about it because I was so ashamed.

In Rachael's story I am reminded of the individualisation and surveillance of women through heteronormativity. It is no accident that she would be worried about failing, as a patriarchal society positions a marriage ending as a "failure." Rachael has a felt sense of the

standards in place for how femininity should be performed, which includes the protection of heterosexual marriage and elevation of this as the ultimate relationship status. In a patriarchal society, and under the male gaze, Rachael would be held accountable for the “failure” of these standards if her marriage were to end. The affective flow in Rachael’s narrative is one of fear and shame when considering this possibility. The male connoisseur residing in Rachael’s head has a sense of disciplinary power that drives her to be a good woman and care for everyone in her family. There is an underlying felt sense that she is individually responsible for this. The movement comes in Rachael’s narrative as she imagines the potentialities of being single again, sparked through witnessing others who have left marriages, and starts to resist the enactments of an idealised wife in her everyday performance. In her process, Rachael has a moment of reckoning when out walking her dog one day and contemplating life.

I guess the contempt escalated because I actually stopped responding the way that I’d always respond... He upped the ante and that enabled me to say, “Do you know what, you don’t have to be in this.” So, I can remember the day that I was taking the dog for a walk and I just felt so upset. And I just suddenly thought “I can just leave him.” And there was so much relief.

Seeing Clearly and Escaping the Cage. The moment of reckoning for Rachael, where she recognised the social coercion holding her in place within her marriage, was the beginning of a rapid movement from understanding her entrapment to feeling free from feelings of shame. In her storytelling, Rachael physically embodies this sense of release as she makes a sweeping gesture, starting with both hands curled up by her heart to arms outstretched and wide, head up and smiling in her freedom from patriarchy. Her physical movement in this moment of storytelling is representative of her embodied emotion and the new space she claimed in the world emotionally at this stage in her process of becoming.

The scales fell from my eyes... I was just like, the imperative is too big, it doesn’t matter... It just crumbled into dust... I let it go, because that’s the way it was. And I could tell in my body how it made me feel that it was absolutely the right choice, I never had a doubt from that second... So, then I didn’t feel ashamed anymore... The further from it I get the more that I can see that it’s, you know, it’s not an accident is it that you feel shame for your marriage failing? That’s the whole patriarchy. You’re meant to feel attached to it and a failure if it doesn’t work.

Rachael recognised that failure and shame are embodied and flow with emotional meanings. She had held them inside her being. Her recognition of gendered social power relations, and how these presented in her marriage, freed her from the fear of shame and allowed a counter narrative to emerge. Rachael imagines the forces of patriarchy crumbling to dust and her body senses this release.

In her story of reckoning, Mary also recognised her entrapment (her complicity to heteronormativity) as a process of becoming institutionalised. The process though is slow, as she moves in and through moments of small resistances.

They say the prison only exists in your own mind, and I feel like that is really true. I feel like I was still restrained, I think, for quite a while. It takes a long time too to undo, you're, like, institutionalised into a relationship. So, bit by bit you dip your toe in, you sort of try this out and try that out.

Mary's story tells of a process of small resistances to heteronormativity through imagery of dipping her toes into new ways of being as she makes sense of her complicity in gendered power relations. Her reckoning is not a specific moment, rather a process of understanding the inequitable conditions of her marriage and recognising that there were other options.

I didn't do it willingly. There was a lot of friction, I guess, from him being a lazy arsehole. But I definitely jumped into traditional roles, for sure. And I kind of took pride in that, you know. Being a good wife, kind of thing, which was such a waste of my time and energy... I really wanted a white picket fence, you know. And I was stuck on the idea of it rather than the reality of what I was living. I was always hoping for it to get better somewhere down the track. And I didn't have a plan B, that was it. Mummy, Daddy, babies, that's it, the end. And, so, it took me a long time to realise, actually, there are other options... I think part of that was maturing, growing up into an adult and thinking fuck this. It wasn't really until I left that relationship, that I was like "I don't want to do that again."

As Mary reflected on her relationship, she challenged the notion that marriage was beneficial for women when they carry the burden of responsibility for the emotional labour in exchange for his protection as head of household.

It's really interesting too that in a lot of relationships the woman is the one who carries the entire mental load and, you know, does the bulk of the housework and all that sort of thing and just the organising, you know. Buying the Christmas presents for everybody, writing the Christmas cards, all that stuff, remembering birthdays. But the man is perceived as the one with the power. Isn't that strange? That they kind of just sit there and have life happen to them, without really actively participating, and then they're perceived as the head of the house... If you do things for yourself... then you're like a selfish Mum, you know. Where there's not that standard for men? They're encouraged to go out and enjoy themselves and look after their mental health... It's like an opt in thing for them, right? Where it's not for Mums. And it's not for women. Because even women who don't have children they're still expected to serve the relationship.

The collective voice of reckoning emerges in and through our stories that evoke the imagery of the harms of marriage as social entrapment – cage, chains, prison, escape and, of course, freedom. Even in painful stories, there was an overwhelming sense of relief and even a celebratory vibe was felt during conversations in the movement of becoming free. Anne expressed this sentiment when she said “we danced and we laughed” about her first night out of her marriage. Her words inspired the title of this thesis. It is an expression that, for me, encapsulates of the spirit of becoming single again.

We put on music that night and we danced! Like we had a party. Just that freedom! It was like, it was the biggest gift that I ever received. It was just fantastic to know I'm in a different space! He wasn't there. There had been this presence that was just so heavy... We put on the music and we danced and we laughed... Yeah, it was great! Everybody's happy!

As I sat transcribing and analysing these conversations with women, hearing their collective stories of reckoning, my heart hurt, a sore bit in my throat. I feel as though, however briefly, I have been inside their marriages with them as the relationships unravelled, hearing some of the worst times, the hard bits and the pain is palpable. I often cried as I sat at my laptop rehearsing the stories full of their waves of emotion. It depleted my energy to sit in that relational space, even virtually when listening to recordings. As I heard the stories again, new details and making sense of the affective flows became apparent to me, the pain, that I did not always feel at the time of the conversation. I would need to rest, have a nap, try to

process the flows and movements of the emotion in the hearing, go for a walk. In these times of reflection and meaning making, I was often taken back to my own reckoning, the evening when I sat staring blankly out a window as my husband told me he was having an affair.

I am shocked, but in the next moment I think, "This is my get out of jail free card." He keeps talking, we will be okay, blah blah. I can't take it all in. He runs out of things to say and goes to watch TV. I start making hamburgers for dinner. I am halfway through this and I think "What the fuck am I doing, carrying on like nothing has happened?!" With the food still cooking I leave the house. I call a friend, a mentor of mine who is an older married woman. I go to her house upset and I feel embarrassed about what I am telling her. She listens. She says, "Don't make any sudden decisions. He's been stupid, but is it really worth throwing your whole marriage away?" I go back home. I decide to give him another chance. I won't fail, I'll fix things, that's what I'm good at. It's six months later and I find out that he is still lying. He's getting ready for his next move. I am really angry now. I confront him and realise he will never change. He is so entitled that when I tell him it's over he seems genuinely shocked! I pack a bag and leave the house. I drive to the McDonald's carpark and sit there crying, trying to think of my next move. I call a friend again, but no happy families for me this time! I call a friend who is single and lives alone. "Can I please stay with you?" He can hear that I am crying. He asks no questions, as though this was an everyday conversation, he doesn't miss a beat, "Of course darling, I'm making up the spare bed now, see you soon."

I recognise now, the social entrapment that constituted my obligation to hold my gendered responsibilities to the care of the family was part of a process of the reckoning. Understanding the prison/cage as entrapment opens the space for escape/freedom from marriage. It is this recognition of our entrapment that becomes the movement of the reckoning into the affective flows of our bodily relief and safety. As the narratives continue to unfold, we hear the collective stories of how this process of recognising the entrapment of heteronormativity moves us into new spaces, as we breathe in our freedoms and begin to embody the meaning of those freedoms in our becoming.

Stories of Freedom: Doing New Things Outside of a Relationship

The collective stories showed growing awareness of the various ways that heteronormativity is enacted in our everyday lives and became increasingly aware of alternative spaces in which women began experiencing new freedoms. I wondered then about how freedom flowed through our bodies as we encountered new spaces for becoming. What occurs in the emotional, psychological, physical and spiritual spaces that are left when the demands for servicing as our responsibility for heterosexual relationships falls away? In the movement of women's narratives, collective stories of freedom emerged, where women started connecting with interests outside of their relationships. I recognise the movements as hearing counter narratives (new ways of understanding) and movements into new spaces where heterosexual power relations of domination and subordination are not only resisted, but re-told as stories that are enlivening. Stepping out and into the world that exceeds coupledom emerges as having exciting possibilities.

Embracing Freedom and Gaining Momentum. There is a collective change in tempo where, once the reckoning has unravelled, there is a deep, cleansing breath, a resetting. As I began to hear the flows of our bodies it was literally breath-taking. Breathing in the good, breathing out the bad. The collective breath/voice here is one of countering the shackles of our complicity with heteronormativity, the process of embracing freedom and relationships in the spaces that are outside coupledom. Where disruption to the dominant narratives occurred with reckoning, in this movement we story our awakenings and curiosities. Seeing the world with new eyes. After breaking free from the shackles of the prison of her marriage, and leaving, Mary found that she had lost a sense of connection with who she had become but started to sense the pleasures of who she was becoming.

So, when I was on my own again, I kind of floundered a little bit, I was like, "Who even am I?" But I really, really, thoroughly enjoyed finding that out and reconnecting with friends who I hadn't really seen very much of. Living for myself, which I hadn't done for many, many years... All of a sudden I was in the big wide world and was, like "Holly heck."

There is a real sense of momentum in Mary's story as her process of becoming unfolds and, new openings are available. She speaks about embracing being single again by "just doing it."

I didn't have someone holding me back. I could watch things that I enjoyed on TV without somebody having a problem with it, and do more of that, you know. Or, I could go and connect up with friends and it wasn't an issue. So, yeah, just by doing it. And as you do those things it opens the door for other things.

Freedom was experienced by Anne as the space in which she could reconnect with her sense of who she was becoming. Through her story, we recognise the affective flows of meaning making, recognising the movement from painful memories toward the potentials to come.

It was great to have that freedom... To reconnect with who I am. There was a time... It was a beautiful farm that we were staying on... So there was so much space... And I would often sit outside, you know, beautiful open skies and so and just think of, what are the things that I actually want to do and like? And, started doing new things because I can't remember about the old things. And it's like, if I want to do the old things it's like, I'm bringing the past back, and it felt, I don't want that, I want the past to be in the past... And when I realised that...I don't need to search for my old self, because we evolve over time, our likes and dislikes and our preferences and all that change. So, I had had to have that conversation with myself, to go, actually if you keep on searching for your old self, your old self is gone a long time ago, you're not going to find it also... So, who are you now and who do you want to be, you know. And, for the first time I started a journal... That gave me a way to express everything that is going on in my mind... That helped quite a lot... To navigate through those emotions... What are the things that are really important to me? Not because I was taught that way or grew up in that way... Really, what is important for me, me, myself, not everyone else. And that started forming, you know, my direction that I was going in.

Anne's process of discovering her freedoms continued as she and her children opened themselves to new experiences, new ways of coming together and experiencing the bodily freedoms of connecting and moving together in new ways. When she told this story she was full of joy and energy.

That first year... It was the first time we went on holiday without him. Just the difference... You're on holiday, so you're not rushing anywhere... So, my husband was

different... Like “we need to get from A to B.” Hardly any toilet breaks, just, too bad, unless he wants to stop, you know. We literally stopped everywhere! It was fantastic to have that freedom! “If we want to do this, we can do this!” And we were cruising, and we saw things that we never would have and we didn’t feel rushed, and we weren’t on the edge of “Is something going to go wrong?” Oh, it was fantastic to have that freedom!

Not all freedoms were experienced in the same ways. As wahine Māori, Linda experienced the inequitable conditions of becoming a single mum with four tamariki while still living with ongoing abuse from her ex-husband. Hearing this story challenges the meaning of freedom from a Eurocentric perspective. For Linda, the embodied affects of poverty and abuse impacted her wellbeing, and her turn to rongoā Māori opened her to healing and finding new freedoms.

I was going to sleep crying and waking up crying. And it was overwhelming. But it wasn’t because I thought I needed a man it was just because it was all friggin hard! The hardness of being a single Mum battling the ex... I was still getting abused... For the first year I didn’t even say no to him. And, the financial struggle of raising four kids. So, during the time that I was doing that I wasn’t eating properly for quite a long period of time because I couldn’t afford to feed myself. What was happening is that I was living on cheap \$1 bread. So, I got really fat. So, nobody knew that I wasn’t eating. And I was coming out in boils everywhere. An Aunty practiced Māori medicine and put me on Māori medicine to cleanse me and rebuild me. A few years down the track I confessed to her how bad my body was. Even she did not know. I said: “I believe that that saved me.”

Through her process of healing/becoming Linda began to use her experience and began training as a counsellor. She rapidly learned the complexities of the conditions of her everyday life, childcare, and finances, and through this process began too to recognise the impacts of her entrapment. Within her training too, she began to make sense of power and control and the sense making began to flow through how she interacted with her male colleagues as she negotiated her own safety. Through this flow of meaning making, she was able to recognise that she was not crazy and shifted the responsibility for her abuse to her partner, freeing her from her fear of men. It was the movement in this connection with others that enabled her to find her voice.

I started to realise that I was weary of men that I didn't know. And that was a bit of a shock. That was quite "far out!" Yeah, and then the challenge of learning. Getting all the kids to school and then trying to get to <training provider>. So, I couldn't afford to drink and smoke. That's the reality aye, when you're on the benefit... So going there and studying... And seeing the Power and Control Wheel for the first time... It was validation... It was like "Oh my God, I wasn't going crazy, he did this shit!" I wasn't going crazy! Yeah, I was right in thinking it wasn't right. Because you doubt yourself... I was working through that fear of men. That was a big thing. So, becoming comfortable with the men that were on the course with me. Because they became safe men... And, then I did my placement for a year in a residential Kaupapa Māori male place. And it was doing that that I realised I'd gotten over my fear of men... And coming from that abusive relationship, that changed during my course... I found my voice.

Jane's movement to freedom also involved retraining in her process of becoming. Her energising embrace of new learning was enriching, moving her from a mundane office job that she was scared of being stuck in to a new and rewarding profession.

I thought, "Shit, no, I can't do this forever, honestly!" ... And then thought, "No, I'm going to have to study." I don't even know how exactly I got to that? In fact, I looked at what the easiest way was for me to get a qualification in the area that I was interested in, is what I did. ... And that was a very empowering thing for me. It definitely was. I could mosey my way around something that I am interested in and on a subconscious level, had some of my own experiences too, you know... that stuff comes from somewhere.

In her process of experiencing freedom as a single again woman, Toni told stories about trying to understand men. She looked for new openings, new potentialities in what heterosexual relationships might be like. Toni began questioning normality and the strangeness of men as she moved into spaces of becoming single, firstly as observer, noticing difference, and wondering about sameness, listening to her own location in gendered social power relations. As she moved in these spaces reflecting on being outside, looking in, the potentials for difference came into view.

I just stopped for coffee... and I was sitting there... very much people watching and eavesdropping and... I was watching the males. What is a normal male? I just don't know what a normal male is... how does a male interact with a female on a good relationship basis? I don't know... A young couple with a child. You know, the man's organising things. It's just so foreign, so foreign to me. So, I'm still looking. I guess after 20 years of having it one way I'm looking at things, going "Ah, it didn't have to be that way... it could have been that way"... So, what's different about that man? What's different about that woman that has made them that? And I don't know what that is really? Just certain things, you know... And I listened to this group of men as well and their conversations and I hear them talking about their girlfriends or wives or whatever... They were talking about them and their work, and how they dealt with somebody else, a difficult person, and they were laughing about that. And, I think, I wonder if <ex-husband> ever had a conversation about me and my work to other people? It's just weird seeing men as "I wonder what they are thinking?" It's a change. I'm becoming aware, I guess, of men. Which is a strange thing.

And as Toni begins understanding the strangeness of new meanings, of alternative connections, she tells how a close friendship with a man showed her the potentials for being heard differently.

I'll ask him something and he'll tell me and I'm like "Wow, do you really think like that? Wow, you think about women's rights?!" Do you really? That's unheard of!

We Can Do It Ourselves. There can be a real sense of achievement and pride for single again women in conquering practical tasks that may have been in the domain of "men's work" within their relationships. Mary challenged the idea of something being a "man's job" and, by extension, challenged the singular story that "women need men" around for such jobs. By doing this she resisted heteronormativity and opened up new spaces (mentally and physically) which she found empowering.

And I remember thinking to myself, "The average plumber I've met is not a rocket scientist, I probably am capable, I just don't know. So, if I learn, I can do it." So, I just YouTube everything and it shows you step by step... I'll take my washing machine apart and unclog it and put it back together and all that sort of thing. And so, it's like, a lot of the time people who have been in relationships and never done those sorts of

things for themselves think that they can't do it, but it's actually really easy. You just don't know because you've never tried. And so they think that if they are alone they won't have all those things taken care of. I've YouTubed so many things. I've replaced a car window with YouTube, which you would think that would be really hard to do, which it is not. And I've unclogged washing machines many times. I've done plumbing, unclogged pipes and everything.

Rachael also relishes the independence of being able to do things herself. She embraces her new-found freedom by turning inwards to reconnect with her own tastes, making her home her haven. The affective flow of storytelling embodies and radiates happiness and joy.

Being able to be in your own space and have your own space exactly the way you want it. It took me a little while to get to this after we split... I've been working on making my home more how I want my home. And that's been a lovely... it sounds quite superficial but it's about connecting with your own taste and trusting your own taste and trusting yourself. They were all choices that I weren't allowed to have inside the marriage because the story was that I've got bad taste, that I couldn't choose a colour, that I couldn't... None was how I wanted it.... So, even just saying, "Actually I want that... That's something I like and I'm going to get it!" and noticing how when your environment is the way you want it how that feels really like, it's of value, it's really nice. It's not nothing... this is my haven. I love my home now, even though it's the same home.

Reflecting on the stories of embracing freedom, the pace picks up as women make sense of their painful memories in the movement toward their transformation. I felt an excitement in the stories that was both scary and exhilarating, all in the same breath. As I reflect on that breath, I remembered my own feelings of exhaustion living in the in-between, the pain and movement in a process of healing. And having been immersed in this research, I also experienced a moment of recognition, relish my freedom, and I breathe.

The pandemic has calmed down and the borders open up. With some trepidation I travel alone to Scotland, my ancestral homeland, to see my sister and my niece. My sister is single again too. We are gleefully together. We explore Scotland. We are carefree, driving around, laughing and telling stories. I am in the Highlands. It's cold

and the wind is whistling by. I stand alone on a mountain and take in the scene before me. I have a moment. It's beautiful and wild. I breathe out a long, slow breath. I think "I'm going to be okay." A few days later I am eating waffles in a little village called Kincardine O'Neil in Aberdeenshire. I learn that in that village in 1597, a woman called Margerat Bane, a "howdie" (midwife) was accused of witchcraft and executed. She was believed to have transferred the labour pains from one woman to another person in the village. I feel horror at the thought of the hundreds (thousands?) of women who have been needlessly persecuted over the centuries. I feel relief that I'm standing on these lands in 2022 and will not be accused of witchcraft because I'm a woman stepping out of line and doing things a bit differently. I go to a village hall and meet a lovely old Scottish man with rosy cheeks who calls himself Hamish Potter (he likes to think he's a Wizard). With a wink, he gives me a Gaelic "spell" to take back to New Zealand: Lachtir 'n Yer Hoose (Laughter in Your House).

Stories of Becoming: Movement and Embodying New Spaces

The gear shifts again, and new collective voices emerge in stories: voices of dynamic and ongoing processes of becoming, about *now*. There is an acknowledgement of the (not so direct) pathways that have led to "now", but there is also lightness, smiles and laughter. A different energy is embodied in the relational space of conversation. There is reflexivity, and a sense of joyfulness.

Joyfully Embracing "The Ones" as Single Again Women. In my conversations with women there were stories about finding joy and happiness in friendships outside of committed romantic partnerships. As I made connections with other single again women in the early stages of designing the research, Rachael too stories her becoming through friendships among other women that challenge the normalised story of singleness and loneliness. It was through these new connections, in new spaces and the flow of affirmative meaning making, the genuine embodied exchange of the pleasure began to emerge.

So, I was never more alone than when I was married. And what I discovered as I became single was that I always had people that would support me and connect with me and that just grew and grew. As you know, because you are one of those people, other people in that group had either had a similar experience or we were kind of able to support each other... I guess the model that society told me was the most protective

was that you've got to have a default person that they would always be there... But, now I know, the support I'd have from my friends would be way better than what I got from him anyway!... When something happens, my friends are there for me. And I hope that I'm also there for them. You know, there's this understanding that is a lot deeper and actually doesn't come with all of those awful stories that a marriage comes with of who owes who what, or what it means... It's just a genuinely supportive space. It's lovely. And I never had that... I feel less alone and I'm way less isolated because there isn't this person who's going to damage all of the relationships that I have.

Rachael's story resists the normalisation of "The One" of heteronormativity and moves from the constraints of marriage to the potentials, the richness and depth in her connections outside of coupledness, that nourish her. The story affirms her difference offering her an alternative story that connects her to new stories, the affective flows of meaning making that are multiple, and relational.

Resisting the normativity of The One, and thinking with De Paulo's idea of "the ones" (DePaulo, 2018) we begin to hear the movement in the women's stories of the multiplicity of friendships that move them toward affirmative relationships that open us to new understandings of our embodied potentials. As the women continued to make sense of their freedom, the intensity of their stories were about the multiple relationships that became possible, and as they moved in relational spaces, they are affirmed through meaningful connections where difference is reimagined as a site of relational intimacy that exceeds the confines of The One. Toni's story speaks to these new connections.

Did it make the transition easier? I think, yes. I think yes. Knowing that we've got something to do in the weekend if we want to do something or someone to do something with, that's hugely nice. And I like being able to say "I want to go away on this holiday, is anyone keen?" And people will say "Yes, I'm keen to do it." It's great. It is a new experience. I've always been a single friend sort of person... I wasn't part of a group... So having this group, it's a small group but it's a group, it's like a family. It's like a separate family, all doing our own things, and I've learnt a lot. It's changed my thinking. Opened my thinking to different ways of thinking... We are all intelligent women, we are all able to make our own decisions on what we're doing. It's really empowering to have those people... I've felt emotionally supported... Like, I can do this because I've got that group of people. So, it's a strength... Because not only are

we navigating the separation, we are navigating the empty nesting as well, and the menopause. So, there are multiple, multiple layers.

And as the stories unfolded, I noticed more and more that the affective flows in the stories mobilised new ways of becoming, that emerged as stories of empowerment and strength. There became a very clear narrative of reimagining our everyday lives as relational.

Another reimagining of relationships story emerged that celebrated and affirmed difference from the Eurocentric understanding of the nuclear family. Thinking with Wilson et al. (2021) I heard in Linda's story the affirmation of connection that enabled the continuation of her relationships with her ex-partner's whānau, as an everyday practice. As Linda told her story, the flow of meaning gave me a sense of being wrapped in a warm cloak of aroha, and the continuity of belonging enabled more connections.

His family were good to me. And, when I moved to Auckland I went and stayed with his big sister and house hunted for a rental there. And, got a place in the same area that they all lived, and that's what I'd do on the weekends. I'd would go to barbeques with them and all the cousins would play... And, she always said back then: "I love my brother, but it doesn't mean that I agree and approve of what he's done" ... So, it was like me having a big sister, it was so cool! When I studied and needed someone to look after the kids, they helped... So, through them I got my kids into the same primary school that they went to and I got into touch rugby through my niece's partner. And my kids did touch the whole nine years we were living in Auckland. So, from that first connection, I was in. I had a community... I formed really good friendships.

Listening to the collective story, the re-telling of becoming single again became a chorus of affirmation, and the flow in the intensity of the potential of joyfulness through reimagining ourselves in our process of becoming free of the entrapment of heteronormativity also led to stories of reimagining ourselves as parents.

No Regrets: Parenting as Single Again Women. When listening to the women's stories I heard a collective voice of resistance to the norms of motherhood within heteronormativity. Already burdened with the responsibility for care within their relationships, Mary drew attention to the notion of the ideal self-sacrificing mother (Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010; Jacques & Radtke, 2012) in her story, recognising how she began resisting her compliance to the norms of motherhood, remembering the painful story of her past.

We're expected as Mums to not only to mother well but mother excellently. To always be on for the kids. And if you do things for yourself that is seen as selfish... But you're actually not. That's what I've realised, you're actually not a bad mother at all. And, in fact, role modelling to your children that you don't matter, is not helping them either. That's setting them up to either be a bloody a-hole husband who will expect his wife to sacrifice her entire soul, or, if you've got daughters, they're going to grow up and sacrifice themselves. And I don't want my kid to grow up and not matter for 20 years while she raises children. That's shit. You can still be a good Mum but matter. You don't have to be the ever-suffering martyr in the background.

Through her process of becoming single again, her retelling produces a counter story that challenged gendered power relations for her children's futures. As Mary continued her story, she recalled more instances where she recognised herself as sacrificial, and how in this new space, she too, matters.

We'd sit around the Christmas tree at Christmas and everyone would open gifts and there was never anything for me. And that was the norm... So now, like last Christmas, I bought myself something really expensive, wrapped it up, put it under the tree. Because I want my kids to see that I am a person too. They wait for Christmas to get that thing that they've really been wanting. Mums can have that too. And you can do that while still parenting well, while still being there for your kids... You can balance everybody's needs. You don't have to be the sacrificial lamb all the time. I find it's easier to be on my own than deal with the needs of another person with the expectation that I would come last. And that is the expectation.

The movement in Mary's story of becoming transforms through recognising the moments of her entrapment in heteronormativity enabled not only her resistance, but new ways of doing single motherhood.

The demand of heteronormativity that women carry the burden of care for their children was evident too in Rachael's narrative. While in her process of reckoning, although she resisted the norms of marriage, she continued to worry about the impacts the end of the marriage had on their children. As her process of becoming continues, and she parents alone, she has begun to strongly challenge her complicity to the dominant narrative that women should stay in marriage for their children, recognising too, that this is a mechanism of

heteronormative entrapment. And while she feels some regret not having realised it sooner, her story turns from pain into a space where safety is felt.

My wrongly held belief about how it would affect the children when we split up... That is a major mechanism of the patriarchy... Because they kind of like need you there to be caring for everybody... That is another thing I'd say to myself ten years ago is that your children are safer with you. And, one person, where everybody knows where they are is better than two people if it's not right between those two people... That's my biggest regret really, thinking it was best for the children... There's no question it wasn't best for the children. If I could change anything that's what I'd change... to make that decision sooner for them really... Yeah. Because our home was so broken inside the marriage, and now as a three, we're great!

Anne was also fearful about how leaving her marriage would impact her children. For Anne too, it was her children who remained the last chain that held her in her marriage. As she reflects on her process of becoming single again, she regrets her complicity with the dominant narrative, understanding now that there are counter-stories in the best interests of the children.

I don't have regrets. The only regret I have is that I didn't walk out earlier. So, interesting... The justification that you find to stay there, at the end is actually a justification that causes so much more damage. Because you always hear, you know, people stick together for the families and stuff. So, you do the same... You stay because of the stability but actually it wasn't stability... But they never tell you the damage that it can cause by sticking together. And hearing it from my kids. It's like, I should have done that when they were still little... To think, yeah, I missed it totally. What you thought was best is not for them.

What became evident in the telling, were the flows of meaning that located the enactment of harms of the gendered power relations and opened spaces for Anne to realise the potentials of her becoming.

Interestingly, Linda too, talked about the feeling of regret, but not how it related to her children. As she moved into becoming single again, the whakapapa of the marriage holds the relationships together, and continues to flow in her story of her becoming. Regret here is meaningful in the embodied sadness that continued with her into her process of healing.

For me to regret my marriage would mean that I would regret having my children. And, I don't regret having my kids. I would never have had the kids that I have with somebody else. So, for a long time I've never regretted my marriage. I only have one regret... I wish wasn't as sad for as long as I was. That's my only regret.

And in her process of becoming, the strength of her marriage whakapapa and community provided her with new opportunities for her adult children and mokopuna (grandchildren), something she had not dreamed would be possible.

We decided to live together for economic reasons... So, for financial reasons and support we lived together. And that's something that if you had a partner you would not even contemplate.

And Linda's sadness is no longer with her, as her narrative unfolds. Linda's oldest moko (now a teenager) has lived with Linda for most of his life. Linda tells stories about her special relationship with her moko, describing him helping care for her when she had Covid and everyday joking around which makes Linda laugh. She speaks of the aroha and manaakitanga between the two of them. It is in this space, we hear a narrative that affirms difference, where family can and does resist the demands of coercive control. As a single again woman, she joined with her daughter in raising her moko and has emerged both emotionally and financially stronger.

Consciously Choosing Single Again Rather Than Settling. The collective voice told stories of choosing to be (and remain) single again rather than being in heterosexual relationships, resisting the social demand for coupledness. A narrative of freedom emerged in the spaces where the women found themselves emotionally and financially stronger. Mary advocates for the joys her freedoms bring as the dominant story of coupledness threads through her everyday social relationships.

The thing is though, I genuinely don't think that people are being malicious... I really think it's socialisation, it's a societal thing, you know what I mean?... And I've tried to have that conversation with them, where I'm like "I am genuinely happy" and they're like "Yeah, but, you know, you might find the right guy for you"... People just don't see it as an option.... I think people have got those barriers in their own minds where it doesn't occur to them that people would want to be single. It doesn't occur to them that you don't rely on validation from a relationship and you don't need that security

of having another person. And I get all my socialisation with other relationships in my life. It wouldn't bring anything, you know... I'm like "Mate, I'm doing whatever I want, whenever I want"... I'm single because I'm choosing me! That's the ultimate message I think.

Through her story, Mary recognises the social sanctioning that occurs in her everyday life as she continues to disrupt the norms of coupledness, by refusing to find a partner with whom she should settle. In the process of becoming, her new-found freedoms have opened space for her to demand equality in a relationship, despite being sanctioned for being over the top for having too high standards.

I'm enjoying being single and it would have to be a very particular relationship to choose not to be single. So, I'm not ruling it out but I'm also not settling. I've got pretty high expectations and standards... If some man came along that wiped his own arse, that's not going to be enough for me. Like, he's going to need to be better than that. I would expect the same amount of effort. I wouldn't want to have to nag at someone or have to ask them to do basic things that an adult should be able to do for themselves. Just like I would expect to do that stuff myself and not have to be told... And all I'm asking for is equal, you know. Equality, and equal relationship. But that's unrealistic. That's me being "over the top!"... So, um, unfortunately, there's not a lot of people that would meet that standard I don't think. So I'd rather be on my own than have an unbalanced relationship.

In this narrative, there are echoes of what Pickens and Braun (2018) identified as older single women being stigmatised as “stropy bitches” in bids to pull them into line and engage in relationships in line with gendered norms. Through her ongoing process of becoming, Mary hears these messages, and she continues to embody the joys of singleness. I also became curious about the collective story of embracing financial independence at midlife, that enabled a process of healing to flow in the stories. Through her process of becoming, Rachael experienced new freedoms in her midlife singleness, as her children became adults. This new freedom resists the norms of re-partnering, but not the impossibility of alternative ways of negotiating a relationship.

I'm financially independent, I don't require somebody else, and I definitely don't want a man that does require that again. They've got to have a J-O-B if they want to be with

me! So, I don't want to place myself as carer again, and I don't want to be dependent on somebody else. So, that's that. And I love having my space. I love that if I happen to wake up at 5am for whatever reason because I'm a menopausal person, that I can put all the lights on, play music loudly, read a book, whatever I want to do. Somebody else being there is very inconvenient. You have to, like, tiptoe around and let them be annoyingly asleep. So, um, I don't mind doing that once in a while, if you get some other benefit from them being there, but I don't want that every single day. I love having my own space... And it doesn't mean that you can't be in a relationship... I've heard like rich people saying, "Oh the thing that saved our marriage was being in separate houses, we live next door." And, it's like, great! I'm that rich person now! I'm financially independent so if I want to be in a relationship, they can have their place and I'll have mine.

In the movement her of her becoming, Rachael too reflects on her relationships among her women friends, who have provided her with alternative models of relational care that disrupt the heteronormative pseudo-reciprocal relationship, and open up the potential for meaningful reciprocity.

Those strong female relationships are a really lovely model for mutual support and why any relationship is important because it's about give and take and it's about no strings attached. You know, and reciprocity. Yeah. And none of that was modelled to me in my marriage. But, I now know from my strong female friendships it helps me know how not to just fall into those old patterns in relationship with a man because I already know what I want.

For Anne, re-partnering is not something she focusses on at this moment in her process. And while the possibility is present, so is the fear of entrapment, and she affirms her singleness, through her relations with others, including her intergenerational home.

Thinking of another partner, might have come up once or twice, but not a focus at all... When it does come up, it's like, that would be great to have someone to share with and to talk and, you know, and to do things with, separate from the family. But, at this moment, my need is filled in a different way, you can say that. Because I've always got someone to do it with me... Fearful, if I think of needing to trust another person. Can I trust another person again? I don't want to be put in jail again!

And it is the relationships with others, friends and whānau, that collectively offer alternative positions for becoming (happily) single again women. In these stories, we hear the continuous movement of becoming as women joyfully embody their new spaces.

Linda also lives in a multigenerational household. Embodying her love for life and reflecting her sense of humour, Linda tells a playful story about how her moko may have cracked the code for his Nan as a single again woman.

I don't feel like I'm missing out on anything or deprived in any way, shape or form. I'm spiritual in my belief system and I believe that if I'm meant to meet somebody the universe will stick them there when the time is right. The universe will stick them there. My girls didn't want me to have a partner when they were young... For me it's gone down to the next generation because my moko, who's turning 16 says, "You're not allowed a partner, Nan." Because I would tease him when I was going down to Auckland for my study, "Oh, Nan's going down to meet her boyfriend." He's like, "No... Remember Nan, we've had this conversation, and discovered that all you needed was the dog!"

These collective stories disrupt the dominant narrative that women who are single again at midlife are single because they cannot find a man or are too choosy (Byrne, 2003). Mary, Rachael, Anne and Linda push back on this singular story and offer an alternative narrative: that many single again women are consciously choosing not to be in a relationship because they are very happily single. In their processes of becoming there has been recognition of the mechanisms that can hold women in relationship spaces that do not serve them, such as patriarchal norms and heteronormativity. Collectively, engaging in a new heterosexual relationship is not off the cards, but would be done very purposefully with an awareness (and rejection of) culturally produced heteronormative values.

Let's Talk about Sex When Single Again. Resisting the assumption that heterosexual partnership is the most important relationship, in the process of becoming negotiating sexual relationships became a narrative of both the lasting effects of their entrapment and embracing their new freedoms for the potentials of joyful sexual experiences. And in the to and fro, past and present, I also heard stories of women exiting long-term marriages where they had had the same sexual partner for (often) decades, and their

recognition that over time, the dating scene has undergone many social and technological changes, including dating apps.

Rachael tells a story about how she realised in her process of becoming that she was “unduly scared” of having sex with new partners and decided to “explore it” by going on a dating app to see what would happen. What we hear in her story is the unfolding of her fears, as she negotiated the new space, opening herself up to new experiences that affirm her sexuality.

When I first split up I thought “Never again, hate all men” ... Wouldn't enter into another relationship! I even kind of hoped maybe I'm gay. But, I mean, I'm not... But, I also thought... I can't handle, um, testing out whether anyone else would look at me because I've been told my whole marriage that um, I'm fat, stupid and ugly. Yeah, so, I didn't really want to experience that again... I was unduly scared of that, so I decided to explore it... I've met somebody... that it turns out I quite like, which is a bit of a surprise. So, that's nice... It's nice to experience somebody liking you and telling you that you're lovable and beautiful and intelligent and all the things that I haven't been told. That's a lovely thing to allow yourself to be told... But, you know... I don't actually have to be a man hater! I can just hate that one individual man, which is a bit healthier!

As Rachael feels the joys of being heard, she is affirmed in her experiences of her changed body, and sexual intimacy opens to new possibilities. And as she moves with her new and different relational body, she begins a process of healing.

So, being adored, being touched, somebody caring for me. They're all things that never happened to me and so I pretended I didn't need them, but I do need them. So, I kind of want to make sure that they happen as well... It's healing and it's a nice thing to have and you can have sex which is obviously really nice... But that doesn't need to look anything like my previous relationship.

Mary too talked about her sexual experiences as a single again women at midlife. In her process of becoming, she refuses the unacceptability of women engaging in casual sex, despite the social sanctions that single women enacting their sexuality endure. Mary pushes back on the oppressive Madonna/Whore binary, moving into the potentials of sex and being happily single.

If I wanted to go have sex, I'd just go have sex, it doesn't mean I'd have to find a man and be in a relationship to do it... The thing is though, women who seek out sex purely for sexual satisfaction outside a relationship are shamed and stigmatised. Because if you don't want to be in a relationship, you just want to scratch an itch, so to speak, and have sex, get it out of your system and carry on being your happy, single self, that's not seen as a viable thing to do... There are so many complicated societal things around sex. The Madonna/Whore complex basically where you need to be very sexual in a relationship but if you are very sexual outside of a relationship, you're disgusting and a slut and used goods, dirty, all that stuff. And I feel like women have it a lot easier than men, being able to find sexual partners. And men don't like that, they will shame us for it... If I want to have sex, I'll have sex! And every once in a while, when I want to have sex, I do. And I'm still happily single.

Jane too, affirms how sex and sexuality flow through how we make sense of our processes of becoming. While Jane has experimented with pleasurable sexual encounters in her process of becoming single again, and over time, has come to an understanding for herself, that it is no longer important. And while she questioned whether that was biological, the answer did not matter to her wellbeing.

A girlfriend of mine said to me, "Are you then saying you are giving up ever having sex or any intimacy or anything?" And, actually, I have. It's just not that important anymore. If I was maybe 40 or 50, maybe I might have thought of that a whole lot differently, I don't know. Hormonally speaking is that why that's not a driver for me, you know? I don't know.

Hearing the women talking about sex and sexuality, I was moved by the flows of emotion in their stories, and as they reimagined their bodies and their sexualities, a process of healing the painful memories of the past emerged.

Renegotiating Relationships with The Ex. Single again women can, over time, renegotiate their relationships with their ex-partners. And this was the case for several of the participants. While some of us can not yet imagine the potentials for re-negotiating a meaningful relationship with an ex-partner, I was moved by these stories for their potentials for healing our painful memories in our process of becoming.

Linda has ongoing relationships with her ex-partner's whānau, and these relationships resist Eurocentric norms of love, where love exists within the intimate partnership and ceases when a partnership ends. Understanding Linda's embeddedness in her whakapapa and the care of whanaungatanga, Linda tells a moving story that flows in and through those relationships, including the decades of renegotiation with her abusive ex-husband when she attended his father's tangi (funeral). The affective flows in the telling portrayed to me a deep sense of healing, a place for new openings and peaceful understandings.

I was one of the last lot that got welcomed on to the Marae... After the burial we went into the Wharenui. <Ex-husband> got up and spoke and he acknowledged me and said, "You've always been a part of this family and you always will be." And, without realising it, that was actually quite healing. He didn't have to say that. The past is the past, we don't need to live in the past, we need to live in the present. We all went and had a kai, and his sisters were joking and said, "It fucking took him long enough but at least he's finally come to the party!" And that's what I wanted at the beginning. And I never thought it was going to be possible. I never thought it was going to happen. With it happening, it was like, yay! I say that to his sister, "Where we are now is where I always wanted us to be." Because we can be at a moko's birthday party and it's okay. I can go to a tangi and it's okay... And it has been a really nice place to get to. A long time coming, but now, if there's anything, it's okay. And, you know, he's changed.

I also remember the laughter we shared when Linda told this story, and I am reminded of what Hyden (2014) refers to as "special energy" – it was the joyfulness of the energy, the laughter, the lightness that moves this story, her memory of that moment with whānau, at a tangi, on a marae. As we sat together, I could feel the embodied memory become a process of healing. Sitting on my deck that afternoon while Linda told me stories, I sensed her mauri, or life force, in all its beauty and complexity – the joyful process of the healing space of her becoming. As a Pākehā woman, listening to Linda's story brought into stark view the affirmation of cultural difference in our stories. When my marriage ended, relationships were cut, and I never heard from my in-laws again – I was ghosted. So, I heard Linda's story as aspirational, opening space for relational meaning making.

And relationships were renegotiated over time in Jane's narrative too. Again, with a great deal of laughter, Jane stories their shared experience of immigration to Aotearoa, and their subsequent divorce. She stayed connected within her ex-husband's family here, in

Aotearoa, and in her home country. In her story of becoming, the family connections flow with love, particularly with regard for the children. What I heard was a very strong feeling of affection for her ex-husband in her stories.

I can tell him that I love him. He knows there's no sexual innuendo in any of that. Because I do love him. And he'll always be a great father for my children. Yeah, it's interesting... We always stayed connected through this whole process. And maybe in those 12 years we were married there was a lot of protecting each other from the realities of what we were doing. And, when this time came around there's much more honesty and not so careful of the other person's feelings. "Look, that's just not right, it's not working for me." Whereas in the previous thing I would have thought, "Oh, okay, I'll just have to put up with it." If I don't like it, I'll say it and I don't have to tolerate it.

What has been enabled through their relationship of connection, is negotiated outside the confines of the institution of marriage. In her story of becoming single, Jane is no longer entrapped within the confines of heteronormativity, and has negotiated new boundaries for relating that affirm her single status.

Flourishing in the World as Single Again Women. The collective narratives tell stories of “flourishing” (DePaulo, 2023) in the world as single again women. And as we became storytellers together, again I felt an intensity, the shifts, the excitement, new spaces, physically, psychologically, and spiritually, and flourishing becomes dynamic. It is joyous, and to borrow from Wolfe and Hook (2019), happens when single women move from drowning to waving. And it flows through new stories, new experiences, and through our bodies. Flourishing moves us joyfully in our processes of becoming. Mary flourishes in her recognition that her becoming single meant she experienced the freedom to follow her dreams.

It took a long time, which basically culminated in me flying to Australia on my own recently for my trip. The sky is the limit, I can do whatever the heck I want! And you have these invisible barriers in your mind, right? Like, even a couple of years ago, I still wouldn't have thought I could have done that. But now, I've just realised, the world is my oyster. And I don't feel like the world would be my oyster in a relationship... That was inconceivable to me that I could travel by myself. I thought

you'd need to go with a friend, because, who does that?... Because there's so many missed opportunities. There are things I've wanted to do in the past and then I've not done it because I've had no one to go with and no one else is keen to do it. And, I'm like "But you don't actually have to miss it, you can go on your own." It's not that big a deal. That's really freeing!

No longer held captive in heteronormativity, Mary confidently affirms her differences, and experiences her freedom from patriarchal power unapologetically, and with confidence.

Well, a confident woman, on her own, standing in her own strength is a threat to the patriarchy, isn't it?... So doing things on your own confidently... that's why there's like the messaging that you're like a loser; or you're weird, or whatever; if you enjoy your own company, there's something wrong with you... If all women just started standing in their own power like that, the patriarchy would be fucked!

Toni too, flourishes as she increasingly finds confidence in becoming single. No longer "trapped", she talks about the energy she now embodies as exciting. And as she moves with excitement, new spaces open up where she can imagine her future.

Like, if you talk about being the possum in the headlights, I'm no longer in that. But, how long were we possums in the headlights while we were actually in the marriage? Or, just the flattened possum on the road because we had given up? Whereas now we have the energy... You know, it takes energy to make a change. You just sit in that thing. So that change is exciting but exhausting at the same time... So, for me, it's learning to accept that I don't have to be busy all the time, that I don't have to be engaged all the time and planning and doing something. That I can look forward to whatever it is that I plan. I don't have to think about anybody else but myself and what I am planning... I guess it is excitement, because the road isn't just the squashed possum anymore. It can go in whatever way I want and I can take that fork and then backtrack and go down a different fork. So, confidence that I can do that, growing confidence that I can be alone. It is excitement what's coming, what is to come?!

Rachael too is joyous in her process of becoming. As she moves with confidence in her freedoms, she resists the institution of marriage. And she flourishes in her excitement for the potentials that becoming single have for her happiness.

I really love my life! And, I've definitely made the completely right choice. And I feel like, um, worthy of having the rest of my life. And I feel confident that if I am on my own or I'm with somebody else, whichever way around that is, that I've kind of got it. Yeah, it's lovely, it's great, I don't feel lonely, I don't feel upset all the time... The best thing that a woman can do if the marriage isn't right is to leave the marriage... Definitely no regrets. I would say to anyone, to the point of being a bit of a zealot... I'm so, so, so for divorce! And it just represents positive choice and trust in yourself and happiness. Yeah. Very happy.

What brings these stories of our flourishing together (and not the same) speaks to our confidence as single women, our courage to move from our stories of pain. Anne reflects on our conversation, and the movement between the painful effects of heteronormativity, and the joyfulness of our re-telling our potentials. Our conversation was a celebration, of who we are becoming.

I think we are brave women that took charge of our own lives again. Saying, enough is enough, we're going to do this!... Actually, it's the first time I've talked about the entire journey... Interesting that sharing this has two effects on me at the moment. So, one effect is, giving me the courage of, okay, to take the next step. The other effect is, okay, that was an emotional thing, so I might need to go and do something else before I go home, you know? Cause and effect. You first need to go there to actually understand what the effect is now... To go, we've made this, we've done this! This is the not-so-great part of the story, but we've managed to get through it and look where we are now!

The reflexive process of storytelling this research enabled, brought “knowing” to the movement in our stories, and the embodiment of our new stories, in an affirmative and emotional encounter. For Anne, this recognition of joy has opened spaces for her to imagine what might yet be possible.

These stories of becoming, where women mobilise to embody new spaces, offer counter narratives to the dominant deficit-based narratives available for women who become single again at midlife. Far from being lonely and miserable, the collective voice tells stories of beautiful friendships and strong relationships with whānau and community. Single again women courageously challenge the story of “The One” and reimagine personal lives beyond

“the Family” (DePaulo, 2018; Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004). Women’s stories also spoke of empowerment as mothers parenting alone, with the only wish often being that they had embraced this sooner. Collectively, women’s narratives were of consciously choosing to happily remain single rather than “settle.” Spaces also opened up for new experiences of sex and sexuality. There are also new (unexpected) spaces that can open up for single again women, such as renegotiations that lead to new relationships with their ex-partners, that moved stories of pain toward healing. Collectively, the women in this project told stories of living joyously and flourishing in their new positions as single again women.

As was inevitable with the reflexive methodology of narrative inquiry, my own process of becoming has shifted and moved during the course of this research. I no longer fear the experience of singleness. As I began to make sense of the coercion of heteronormativity, and in particular the institution of marriage as a gendered social power relation of domination and subordination, and recognised the exhaustion of my complicity to its disciplinary practices, I too began to resist their constraints. And I wasn’t lonely, rather I had the energy for making connections, for relationships with friends, and celebrating the joys of becoming single. I have zero regrets. Through the course of this project, I have sat beside women as they told aspirational stories of, over time, courage and joyfulness. And I wonder too, if there will be a time where my ex and I can renegotiate our relationships in the pleasures of celebrating our newly adult children, and this too is a story for imagining a different future. In this moment, for me, being single again is not awful at “my age”, but rather, it has been awesome. I am far from drowning, I am waving at the joyous possibilities with and among my tribe.

I enjoyed travelling on my own so much that I’ve gone again. I’m in London. I’ve forgotten what it’s like to be in such a big city. It’s sensory overload. I was last here in my 20s, living, working and growing up. Along with the smells, sights and sounds, the memories come flooding back. I know how to get around, I remember the streets. I was young and free and taking on the world. I was invincible! I met my knight in shining armour when I was in this city. He scooped me up and we impulsively got married, feeling really smug and happy. Us against the world! It was very romantic. Fast forward and the fairy tale didn’t work out. That’s okay. I understand how this happened now. I know a bit more about all of this stuff. I know I’m not the only one and that I won’t be the last. I can leave that where it is. I can move on and do things differently. There’s nothing to fear. I love my new life! I’m in a theatre watching a

musical with my sister. It's funny, really funny. We are laughing so much we are crying and slipping off our seats. We spill out of the theatre into the warm night, overflowing with joy, and jump on a double decker bus. The bus is full and we grab the sticky handrail to steady ourselves. We did this together in our 20s. We're doing it again. We catch one another's eye and smirk knowingly, raised eyebrows. We'll take it, the good and the bad. The handrail is still sticky, but we are older, wiser, stronger, and even more invincible this time around!

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Moving Forward with Joyful Narratives

As I pour over the stories told and the emerging collective voice, I remember the affective flows within the relational space of storytelling. It was a special experience to share that space with women and be gifted their precious stories to nurture and share. Our conversations touched me deeply and have changed how I move in the world. By storytelling together, we created something new and exciting. We bridged the gap from experiencing to knowing. A collective voice for women's processes of becoming single at midlife emerged with narratives of reckoning, embracing freedom, and embodying new spaces joyfully. We cried at times as we shared our stories of reckoning, retelling painful memories and making meaning from resisting our previous social entrapment, leaving the shackles behind, in our processes of becoming. However, the beauty of this research was also being able to make sense of the flows of meaning in the narrative becoming that are affirmative, relational and joyful. These are the stories that have not been as widely circulated. Stories about the potentialities of new spaces women becoming single at midlife in Aotearoa can embody.

Through the relational space of storytelling, we celebrated our movement towards freedom in our processes of becoming. Narratives of free and joyous transformation that offer the potential for enlivening and exciting new leases on life. Anne dancing and laughing in her new home. Mary's empowerment, standing strong in her strength, and taking on the world. Linda's embodied aroha for whānau, infectious humour, and felt sense of peace. Rachael radiating love and joy for life in her daring explorations. Jane's ongoing bravery conquering new frontiers and courage to keeping doing things her way. Toni's curiosity and gleeful excitement about the road ahead and what might be just around the next corner.

Collectively, this thesis is a narrative that embodies the spirit and processes of becoming single again women at midlife. Smiles on faces, freedom flowing through bodies. Reimagining relational intimacy and affirming meaningful connections with children, friends, and whānau. Embracing "the ones" with aroha. Feeling emotionally supported through communities. Continuous movement, affirming and making sense of new spaces emotionally in relational flows of meaning making. Relaxing and playing in the processes of becoming. Living and laughing, moving through everyday life with happiness. Embodying alternative positions and flourishing at midlife as single women.

Our collection of stories reimagine potentialities to tell new narratives, weaving these together to connect to other ways of knowing. As is the case with pūrākau, we are alongside one another, connected in our relational space, growing together and making sense of our movement. Through our collective embodied wisdom and narratives, we produced knowledge about our processes of becoming, an understanding that being single again women at midlife can be joyful. Knowing that we can take up space in the world, alone, or with others alongside us, however we want and flourish. Feeling togetherness as single again women but in all our differences is magic. Realising that we will keep moving, keep coming together, keep telling stories, and keep reimagining futures. Our collective voice offers affirming narratives of joy and potential. There is an idea percolating away too, amongst this collective, that these counter narratives may also plant seeds of hope for other women in their processes of becoming single again at midlife.

While coming alongside the women involved in this research, I was painfully aware of my responsibilities as a researcher and wanting to “get it right” for my community. Michelle Fine’s words express this best for me, where, with every fibre of my being, I felt this to be a “deeply peopled project” (Fine, 2017, p. 119). My greatest hope is that I have honoured the women in this research and upheld their mana. Ironically, in my attempt to do this and forge a bridge from experiencing to knowing, I had to temporarily withdraw from my own flourishing life as a single again woman to get the job done. I now take a deep breath as I prepare to leave this project and come out of my self-imposed thesis hibernation. I turn back to my community, my tribe. Smiling, I re-join them in our ongoing processes of becoming for more dancing and laughing.

I’m sitting around a table drinking tea and eating cake with women I love. We’re an odd bunch, all different. We’ve been told in the past that we have some “big” personalities. Sometimes we disagree and have robust discussions, but it works. One woman is writing in a journal, one woman is crocheting a beautiful blanket, one woman is deep in thought and drawing a mandala, and one woman is engrossed in a paint by numbers she got from Kmart. We come together because we want to. It doesn’t really matter what we do. I’m working on a project where I do art inside an old biology textbook that I got from a second-hand shop. I’m flicking through the book, waiting for creative inspiration to strike. I see a page with a technical drawing of a penis on it. I pause and look at it. Feeling immature, I try to suppress a

spontaneous giggle. The woman next to me notices and chaos quickly descends, everyone laughing hysterically, pointing at the penis. The table explodes with stories about dicks – the good, the bad and the ugly! The past and the present! We are all hooting loudly now, holding our sides, snorting. We are being silly, we know, we don't care. Dicks may come and go, but we've got this!

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Appendices

Appendix A: Information Sheet

[Print on Massey University departmental letterhead]
[Logo, name and address of Department/School/Institute/Section]

Women's experiences of becoming single again at midlife

Information sheet

Project invitation from Aileen

Hi, I'm Aileen, and I am doing research that I would like to invite you to be a part of. In my process as a woman becoming single again at midlife, I struggled initially to find resources that offered me potential rather than generating worry and fear. However, as my process continued, I connected with other single again women who began to share their stories with me and these gave me hope and were often inspiring.

I am really interested in hearing about your experiences of becoming single again and women's experiences of collective resilience. If you would like to share your story, I invite you to be a part of my project.

Through gathering these stories, I hope to be able to provide other women with resources that may be helpful to them. You can be a part of the research that produces those resources for other women.

This information sheet outlines some details about how I will carry out this project and what it will mean for you if you decide to participate. I am also happy to answer any other questions you may have (contact details are at the end of this information sheet).

What will happen if you participate

You have this information sheet because your name has been given to me through my own networks as someone who might want to participate in this project. You are welcome to pass this invite on to anyone else that you think may also want to participate.

As I will be having conversations with women in my social network it is possible that you may know one another. To protect your privacy, I will not say who has chosen to be a part of this project. Your identifiable information will be protected.

To be involved in the project, women need to be 35 years old or over and have previously been in a partnership and become single again. Women need to be living in the Northland or Auckland region (so that I can meet in person with them). I am hoping to have conversations with up to eight women for this project.

If you decide to participate, I will meet with you and provide an overview of the project and answer any questions that you may have. I will ask you to sign a consent form, which acknowledges that you know what the project involves.

We will talk about your experiences of becoming single again at midlife. These are the types of everyday conversations that women have, and we can go about this however feels right for you. You are welcome to talk about any aspect of your experience of becoming single again.

If it is helpful, I can ask some broad questions about your experiences and am also happy to share my experiences. Essentially, I would like to hear your stories about becoming single again. I expect that these conversations will take between 1-2 hours, but I can stay longer if needed. We can meet a couple of times if you think of other stories you would like to share after our first conversation.

We can meet wherever you prefer. This could be at your home or mine, or another location you choose. I have often had conversations while sharing food and cups of tea/coffee with other women, so I will provide some refreshments. This is also a small way I can thank you for sharing your stories with me.

I will record our conversations on an electronic device. This is so I can review the conversations later. Recordings will be uploaded to a password protected Cloud drive and only I will have access to these recordings. If you would not like our conversations recorded, then I will take notes during the conversation (and no one else will have access to these written notes).

It is possible that sharing stories about becoming single again could bring up a range of different emotions. I will support you in this process and will also make sure that there is time to reflect on any concerns or feelings you may have following our conversations. I can also help you to connect with other appropriate support people or services if that would be helpful.

Keeping stories safe

I will transcribe the conversation recordings (or type up the notes if the conversation is not audio recorded). I will not include your name or any identifying details in the transcripts and pseudonyms will be used. After the transcription process has been completed, I will destroy the recordings/notes of the conversations and only the transcript will remain.

I am required to keep your signed consent forms and transcripts of our conversations for at least five years. They will be stored separately from one another by my supervisor in a secure location in her office in the School of Psychology, Massey University. Any notes I take from the transcripts will be stored on a password protected Cloud drive until the thesis is graded.

I will provide a transcript copy to you of our conversations. You can request changes to the transcript if you wish. When you are satisfied with the transcript, and consent to it being used in my project, I will ask if you can sign an authority to release the transcript. You can withdraw from the project at any time up until you sign the authority. I will analyse the transcripts with the help of my supervisors. When the project is completed, I will contact you to discuss the findings and feedback on how the project went.

Your rights during this project

This information sheet provides an overview of the project. You do not have to accept the invite or participate in the project. If you do participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any question that may come up in our conversations
- ask for the recording device to be turned off at any times during our conversations
- withdraw at any time up until you sign the authority for release of your transcript
- ask any questions about the project at any time
- provide information understanding that your name will not be used unless you want it to be used
- have access to a summary of the project findings when it is finished.

Researchers involved in this project

If you would like to participate in the project or want more information, please contact me:

- Aileen Perrin, phone [REDACTED], email [REDACTED].

This research forms the thesis component of my Master of Science (Psychology) under the supervision of Dr Leigh Coombes, Massey University, Manawatū. Her contact details are:

- Dr Leigh Coombes, phone 06 951 8075, email L.Coombes@massey.ac.nz

This project was evaluated and peer reviewed and judged to be low risk. As it is low risk, the project has not been reviewed by one of Massey University's Human Ethics Committees. The researchers named in this document are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you would like to raise with someone other than the researchers, please contact:

- Professor Craig Johnson, Director - Ethics, phone 06 356 9099 ext. 85271, email humanethics@massey.ac.nz

Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

[Print on Massey University departmental letterhead]

[Logo, name and address of Department/School/Institute/Section]

Women's experiences of becoming single again at midlife

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM - INDIVIDUAL

I have read and I understand the Information Sheet attached. I have had the details of the study explained to me, any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time. I have been given sufficient time to consider whether to participate in this study and I understand participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time up until I have signed off my transcript.

1. I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.
2. I agree/do not agree to the interview being sound recorded.

Declaration by Participant:

I _____ [print full name]_____ hereby consent to take part in this study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix C: Authority for the Release of Transcripts

[Print on Massey University departmental letterhead]
[Logo, name and address of Department/School/Institute/Section]

Women's experiences of becoming single again at midlife

AUTHORITY FOR THE RELEASE OF TRANSCRIPTS

I confirm that I have had the opportunity to read and amend the transcript of the interview(s) conducted with me.

I agree that the edited transcript and extracts from this may be used in reports and publications arising from the research.

Signature: Date:

Full Name - printed