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# **(Re)mapping Women's Cosmology: Transformative Potentia of Women's Stories**

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# Abstract

Binary difference is deeply rooted within the heart of European philosophy and underpins contemporary understandings of sexual difference. Forces of power relations circulate to uphold binary categories of gender that conflates man with the universal, upholding a single model of male subjectivity and inscribing meaning onto the bodies of women. In this research, I have engaged with a narrative approach to map a cosmology of ten women's stories, connecting women's bodies and experiences to the flow of forces that shape their lives through a complex assemblage of cultural practices.

Thinking with Rosie Braidotti I have endeavoured to sketch a cartography of the multiple embedded, embodied and affective social positions constituted by forces operational in, and immanent to the production and circulation of knowledge about sexual difference. Relational ethics in feminist standpoint inquiry enabled me to attend to relational processes which contributed to the co-articulation of these stories, and to open out towards the multiple possibilities available outside established hierarchical categories of gendered subjectivities. Through this process, light is cast on the material conditions in which forces come to inscribe and inhabit women's bodies as flows of power capable of both "entrapment (potestas) and as empowerment (potentia)" (Braidotti, 2019).

By paying attention to the situated and affirmatively encompassing differences within and between women, bodies can be understood as a site of resistance and transformation. This research resists phallogocentric notions of the universal by re-orienting towards the affirmative potential of women's bodies made available through interconnectedness and ethical transformation in processes of becoming.

# Dedication

For mum. Thank you for everything.

# Acknowledgements

To my sister, Carmen. Thank you for holding onto that glimmer of hope that shone through at the precise moment it did. Thank you for remembering the possibilities of self-hood outside of where you were, and for resisting notions of what you had become.

To the ten women who generously shared your stories with me, your precious input has brought to light the beauty and transformative potential within the shift and flows of multiple desires. Co-creating this research has been a process of reimagining with wonder and joy the transformative potential in learning to reinvent the self, of connection and affirmative ways of being.

Many times over the course of this research journey I found myself tied in affective knots, embodied and embedded blockages shaped by global-political phenomena such as the surge in media reporting high profile sexual assault cases following the #MeToo movement going viral and the Covid-19 pandemic. At other times, bumps in the terrain of my personal life diverted my flow and direction, but throughout this entire process I have not stopped learning and growing. The support of my family has been instrumental to the development of this thesis, but moreover to the woman I am always in the process of becoming. To my children, Paddy and Mako, thank you for your love and support always, learning and growing with you is something I always cherish. Jack, you've been a rock with your steadfast love and warmhearted encouragement, not only along this research journey, but throughout the life we share.

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Jasmine, since we first met on campus and throughout our adventures I have come to really value your insights and perspectives as well as the ways in which you challenge my thinking in the spheres of both our personal as well as professional lives. Here's to future full moon bonfires, stargazing, and future adventures through wonderland.

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# Locating myself

She's got to come to bed eyes. He said this in Afrikaans, standing in my grandparents' lounge in 1980s South Africa and talking to another older man. It was a Bible study group. I was six years old. I had been with the women in the kitchen and was dutifully carrying a tray of freshly baked scones to the sitting room. I was the only girl in the room, and I suspect he thought I wouldn't understand the language – I did. What I didn't understand was the look in his eyes, which were directed towards me as he said this, nor the expression on his face. But I do recall the visceral sensation of my stomach twisting into an uncomfortable knot as my cheeks burned with a deep shade of crimson, and sticking with kitchen jobs amongst the safety and security of the other women after that. Trying to make myself small. Trying not to be noticed. I didn't tell anyone because somehow I felt like I had done something wrong. Children, after all, should be seen and not heard, and I had very much been seen in that moment. In the words of Audre Lorde, "children know only themselves as reasons for the happenings in their lives" (1984, p. 146). I could not articulate exactly what had happened, but somehow, I felt wrong.

Looking back, I piece together individual memories so that I might see the fuller picture and move towards trying to make sense, trying to understand how these connect to each other, and trying to understand what that means for who I am in the process of becoming. Memories flowed through my consciousness throughout this research project. That time a well-respected patron of the country club where I worked as a waitress drunkenly grabbed my wrist, and placed it in his lap where he had exposed his erect penis; when I lost a job at a clothing store because I refused to have sex with my manager; being stalked and harassed by men; being groped in a crowded lift... and in a mall... at work... at the cinema. I learnt to deal with instances like these by sucking it up. By being silent. By not causing trouble. By accepting the potential of imminent violence and managing myself as a means of managing the potential consequences. Ahmed (2017) describes experiences as accumulating over time, gathering weight, their heaviness weighing us down as our personal biographies of violence become enmeshed with various aspects of ourselves. It is no wonder, I reflect as I write, that women become weary over time.

Some instances of violence are more easily recognised and named than others. To apply physical force or rape are material examples of, and how I had come to understand, violence. Bodies could be assaulted. Growing up I had born witness to this as I observed my father's temper and my mother's bruises. Safety, to me, meant shielding my body as much as was possible, from that kind of assault. It also meant I did not have words to describe otherwise feeling unsafe, or to make sense of those situations that felt wrong – because those situations did not fit with my working definition of

violence, or the kind of thing that anybody would actually do anything about, because nothing had actually happened even when *something* had happened. To draw attention to myself in this way, by putting this discomfort and unease into words was inconceivable to me because I lacked the words and confidence to describe these wrongs. Because after all, boys will be boys.

When I commenced my postgraduate study journey I enrolled in the psychology of women course, mostly as a filler paper and certainly not expecting the impact it made on how I understand the world. I was introduced to a chorus of feminist voices theorising the very wrongs I had seen, felt and experienced but had previously been unable to articulate. I was particularly interested in understanding more about the social power relations that circulate in, around and through women's sexuality from a feminist perspective. Feminist standpoint epistemology showed me it is possible to speak about that which has been silenced through the enactment of normative and gendered social power relations, but also more importantly, it showed me that women's voices and narratives *are* legitimate sources of knowledge production and key to theorising how we experience and make sense of a gendered world.

It was my intention to attend to the gendered ways in which psychological knowledge is created through resisting and disrupting the flow of power relations embedded within institutions that intersect to uphold gendered knowledge production. I therefore intentionally opted to strip away the restrictive androcentric sections and titles usually found in traditional academic work as these originated from statistical reporting and imply an impartiality and objectivity that is inconsistent with the feminist values that underpin this research.

Instead, I invite you to join me on a journey whereby a collective of stories reflect the complexities involved with the reality of working with emotion, connection and interpersonal relationships. We begin our journey by turning to the **embodied** nature of subjectivity to develop an understanding of the various ways intersecting forces of power related to gender, race, class and age come to be inscribed upon the body. Next, we turn to the epistemological and ontological assumptions within which our embodied selves are **embedded**, and I share my developing curiosity and research process. **Affective and relational flows** shaped the co-articulation and shared meaning making through which ten women's stories emerged, after which I trace the thematics of thinking enabled through Rosie Braidotti's nomadic theory in the '**Thinking with...**' sections following each reconstructed story. **A cosmology for becoming heterogeneity** traces the transformative potential of affirming difference through processes of becoming. **A reflection** marks the conclusion of my research journey. It is not my intention to make a point through shock value, but to stay true to feminist standpoint perspective which creates space for the messy, sticky and often uncomfortable

articulations of women's lives. I hope that this thesis goes some way to challenge and destabilise, intrigue and empower.

You'll find points at which my own story intersects with the women's stories presented in this thesis. This is an intentional and necessary reflexive endeavor that is part of my meaning making process. Throughout this journey I encountered resistance to what I was writing where I least expected it – within myself. At times I sat with the discomfort of my own internalised misogyny, experiencing what some may call intrusive thoughts in response to issues raised in the literature or through the women's talk<sup>1</sup>. Other times, I found myself thinking that feminist theory was all well and good but we all know it has no place in the real world, and wondered about the legitimacy of this research; as though sharing stories about *real world* women's experiences – *in* the real world – is trivial. Being embodied research, this left me questioning the legitimacy of my existence as anything other than how I had come to understand my place in the world as a woman. Learning to differentiate between my father's voice and my own voice has been integral to my process of weaving together the words presented in this thesis<sup>2</sup>. For me, this entire journey has involved unpicking previously taken for granted gendered scripts, and reworking these threads to make visible alternative possibilities that are available to us once we can bring ourselves to look through and beyond the constraints offered by gendered ways of knowing and being. Reflexively I have made sense of this as the beginning of my "un-doing". This un-doing was, and continues to be an integral part of my "becoming", not of something or somewhere as an endpoint (as pursuits of knowledge that uphold universal truths would have us believe is the goal), but as an endless range of alternative possibilities that could be.

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<sup>1</sup> Thoughts about women being: selfish, emotional, sluts, frigid, ugly, fat, butch, good girls, bad girls, stupid, asking for it, weak, not enough... never enough.

<sup>2</sup> I refer here not my biological father, but to the voice of patriarchy – for such is the structure of this oppressive system that our "fathers'" voice can be heard echoing throughout all that we know, see and do.

# Embodied

*History produces not only the forces of domination but also the forces of resistance that press up against and are often objects of such domination.*

- Elizabeth Grosz (2021, p. 254).

Human was never a universal or neutral term to begin with; it is a category that normalises access to privileges and entitlements by those who meet a pre-determined set of naturalised criteria. Appeals to the human are always discriminatory because of the ways in which it creates structural distinctions and inequalities among different categories of humans, as well as between humans and non-humans (Braidotti, 2019). Western epistemologies have historically pursued androcentric lines of inquiry, emphasising knowers as rational, neutral observers and the process of knowledge production as arising through claims to universal truths about an objective world. A dualistic ontology further informed these epistemological assumptions, including: mind/body, object/subject, reason/emotion, culture/nature, knowledge/experience, public/private, thought/sensation and universal/particular (Grosz, 1994). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, feminist critique emerged arguing that these dualisms are overlaid by gender since only the first of each binary classification is associated with the male (Hartsok, 1983). Furthermore, Keller (1992) argues that norms associated with men and masculinity were taken to be the universal, producing a logic of male superiority over women within a gendered binary framework. Reasoning, mind and logic are thereby privileged as gold standard over automated disobedient and mechanical processes of the body (Price & Shildrick, 1999).

While the English language does not explicitly assign gender to nouns, masculinity is associated with characteristics of the mind: logic and reason, expertise and civilisation; whereas femininity is associated with emotional, excessive and/or disordered body. This mind/body split positions women as the polar opposite of reason and rational thinking (Morgan, 2005). Psychological knowledge production contributed binary classifications of normal/abnormal resulting in oppressive classifications of deficient “others”. Fundamental social categories such as class, race, gender and sexual orientation, age and able-bodiedness have historically functioned as markers of human

'normality'. A power-knowledge system that upholds normality as a standard has, as argued by Foucault (1977), not only produced and reproduced the pathologisation of women and children, but also justified disciplinary practices and technologies of control as being in the best interest for society as a whole.

### *Biopower and discipline*

According to Foucault (1977), the transition from the enactment of sovereign, monarchical power to modern, more subtle regulatory regimes of power arose from the state's requirement to control populations as a whole. Biopower, a term coined by Foucault, refers to the mechanisms and technologies through which the state enforces power and controls populations (Legg, 2005). In particular, at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, technologies of measurement and categorisation established norms within society and social control shifted from overt force to being enacted by the state through its management of norms related to birth and death rates, education, discipline, health and longevity of the population (Deveaux, 1994). Thus individual bodies became political objects, constituted and inscribed by power relations. Individuals who did not fit in with these norms were deemed problematic, or 'deviant' (Foucault, 1977). Biopower is upheld through dominant discourses and political institutions, and asserts control over segments of the population deemed problematic or considered a threat to the dominant group.

Whereas biopower seeks to assert power at a population level, disciplinary power operates at an individual level. Of interest to disciplinary power is a focus on producing individualising effects on the body and manipulating the body as "a source of forces that have to be rendered both useful and docile" (Foucault, 1976, p. 249). Bodies are therefore produced as self-regulating through individual investments in categories and norms upheld as 'truths' by dominant discourses. According to Foucault, power functions through docile bodies, resulting in self-regulating technologies which govern individual bodies within society. It is through self-surveillance and policing that individuals become both agents and objects of power (Bartky, 1998; Foucault, 1977). The Panopticon prison model proposed by Jeremy Bentham portrays a central watchtower surrounded by a circular prison, and positioned in a manner whereby prisoners are visible to those in the watchtower at all times, while those in the watchtower remain invisible at all times. Foucault draws on this model and likens us to those prisoners, constantly monitoring and policing our own behaviour and ever mindful of being watched by the faceless in the watchtower.

With respect to sexualities, biopower is evident by the ways in which power differences between genders are eroticised and normalised in contemporary society. The portrayal of gendered

subject positions (passive female/active male) are not only subject positions created through social processes that construct imbalanced gendered power relations, but these gender binaries also have the effect of producing and reproducing meaning, adding to what are perceived to be 'common-sense' understandings about heterosexual activity that are considered right, natural and unquestionable (Gavey, 2011). This process of creating meaning involves discourse that is defined, regulated and accepted without question. In other words, the way that we think about sexuality, our practices, definitions, beliefs and norms are constructed through unequal gendered power relations. Sexuality is therefore implicated in the process of how power is constructed and implemented within western contemporary societies. Feminist body politics is a resistance to the objectification of women's bodies, and encompasses more than heteronormative expectations about the physical appearance and behaviours of the feminine body (Bordo, 1993). For example, 'slut walks' are a form of protest against justifying rape through a woman's dress and appearance. The protest and activism associated with slut walks relates to an awareness of the ways in which the feminine body is implicated in power struggles about sexual justice, and in this way is linked to biopower politics.

The comportment of women is also governed at multiple levels: economics, population control and social welfare. Governmentality is simultaneously concerned with the constitution of individualised subjectivities and with how the operation of biopower transforms women into docile bodies, as well as the various ways within which women are implicated in large scale regulatory controls and normalising structures (Macleod, 2006). Modern power functions by legitimating social norms upheld as 'truths' through discourses of discipline and biopower in a "bottom up" approach, and via discursive technologies that consist of disciplinary regimes, systems of self-surveillance and normalisation of dominant discourses thus producing docile bodies (Hook, 2003).

#### *Forces of discourse*

Dominant discourses not only privilege the entitled, they uphold power differentials, and are maintained through institutional apparatus and technologies that produce knowledge as power (Hall, 2001). Dominant discourses become normalised by appealing to common-sense knowledge; they are accepted as natural truths, as being unquestionable, and achieve dominance through reinforcing and maintaining existing power relations (Gavey, 2011). This power constitutes and is reproduced in society, the implication being that we all function as oppressors (of ourselves as well as others), as well as being oppressed. These discourses construct individual and social experiences (Gavey, 1989), whereby it is possible for multiple discourses to intersect, each offering coherent (and often ambiguous) meanings of embodied and embedded worlds. This means different subject positions become available, although these subject positions are not necessarily equally accessible or enabling, often competing with each other even within one account. Discourses constitute

subject positions, through which subjectivities are constituted by and for individuals in a given time or place (Gavey, 1989). The contradictory, complex and ambiguous gendered sexual positioning available through discourse can result in fragmented and inconsistent sexual subjectivities for women.

As discourses constitute subjectivities, each specific subjectivity is constituted through both the language and discourse available to humans in a given time or place (Gavey, 1989). Whereas sexual objectification constrains women's sexual autonomy and independent interests, sexual subjectivity enables women to enjoy a sense of agency and entitlement to sexual safety, desire and pleasure. The 'sexually liberated woman' in the current post-feminist climate is informed and motivated by dominant discourses related to (hetero)sexual relations in society. These social structures are situated within a political regime where sexuality is governed by gendered subjectification. In this way we can see how historically specific processes subject women to regulatory frameworks and discursive regimes through which both gendered individuals, and the social context in which they are located are constructed by the same processes (Butler, 2014).

Power relations embedded within dominant discourses of heteronormative sexuality normalise and eroticise gendered power differentials within heterosexual relations. This occurs through shaping and determining what sort of sexual performances are appropriate, and for whom. For example, during the 2016 United States election campaign media such as *The Washington Post* reported on Donald Trump's comments made to other men about how his position of fame and power enabled him to "grab women by the pussy", and his description of "moving on her like a bitch" when sexually pursuing a disinterested woman (Fahrenthold, 2016). Both of these examples position women's sexuality as passive and serving of men's sexual urges. The article reports Trump dismissing his comments as "locker room banter" (Fahrenthold, 2016), a response which articulates the normalisation of men's rights to predatory sexual performances. The comments and their characterisation illustrate how patriarchal power relations are normalised in everyday talk and how this message is distributed through various mechanisms including the media.

Dominant discourses complicit with gendered inequalities inevitably gain a currency of truth about naturalised human nature and are reinforced through various apparatuses such as the state, religion, psychology, medicine, social services and educational institutions. Not only has neoliberalism established itself as a hegemonic mode of discourse, its values of choice, personal responsibility and autonomous agency have also become common-sense to many as a way of interpreting, understanding and living in the world (Harvey, 2005). Brown (2005) describes how neoliberal rationality has become the dominant mode of governance in the current western political climate and is responsible for producing subjects, forms of citizenship and behaviour, and a whole

new organisation of the social. The emphasis of neoliberal rationality is not simply on economic policies and a system that supports privatisation and profits for corporates, but on how it functions as a form of governmentality (through redefining good citizens as consumers, for example) which continues to control and dominate constructs of embodied femininity and feminine sexual discourses.

### *Performativity of gender*

Butler (2009) draws on Irigaray to discuss how a binary of feminine and masculine produces gendered social norms. She describes gender as performative in that it outlines the ways in which performances of gender are reiterated throughout our lives, and how this in turn discursively reinscribes gender performatives. Gendered subjectivity or associations we have with 'naturalised' feminine and masculine ideals are socially constructed and maintained through interpersonal processes. Like culture, gender is produced and reproduced through everyone constantly "doing gender" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 126). Judith Butler (2009) compares gender performativity with a theatrical performance, produced through the repetitious rehearsal of a regenerated script. Performances are reinforced through invisible, pervasive disciplinary forces that control the "practiced and subjected" (Bartky, 1998, p. 33) feminine body, one which has been inscribed with an inferior status through the constructions of femininity and masculinity. As a social institution, gender is not only embedded within a stratified system of power relations that ranks men higher than women, it also functions as a process that confers recognisability on a subject through creating distinguishable social statuses entitled to particular rights and responsibilities (Butler, 2009; Lorber, 1994).

Sandra Bartky (1998) describes the social construction of femininity and the disciplinary practices that produce the feminine subject as operating through the female body. She discusses three kinds of practices that contribute to the construction of femininity: exercise and diet regimes that target the ideal feminine body size/shape; feminine comportment which involves gestures, postures and movements; and engaging with various beautification practices that decorate and embellish the feminine form as an ornamental surface. Women's bodies are constantly subject to public scrutiny, and controlled through disciplinary regimes such as diet and/or exercise. The ways in which women occupy space is also markedly different from men. For example, the term 'man-spreading' refers to the manner in which men take up as much space as possible, as opposed to women who close or cross their legs and take up as little public space as possible. Women's beauty practices that embellish women's bodies are not only restricted to the use of make-up but include practices to maintain as youthful an appearance as possible by maintaining hairless skin, the use of botox injections or even cosmetic breast implants and labiaplasty.

'Technologies of sexiness' is a term coined by Radner (1999) who draws on Foucauldian theory to explain the relationship between the notion of self-surveillance, self-discipline and technologies of self. The term encapsulates the complex ways in which dominant discourses of sexual subjectivity and femininity are regulated and constructed within western society. Social media is laden with "selfies" superimposed with filters that mask women's imperfections. In a society where physical appearance is valued, many women feel compelled to achieve unrealistic standards of attractiveness on a daily basis (Tolman et al., 2006). The disciplines within which women attend to their appearance are linked to power and oppression. Evans and Riley (2014) describe an all new form of control and capture, where regulatory institutions (such as the media) and individualisation (through neoliberalism) intersect to normalise cultural conceptualisations of feminine beauty and sexuality that make it hard to function as a woman without conforming to a predetermined culturally defined notion of feminine appearances or sexuality. From this theoretical position, femininity is something that is enabled, constrained and policed through social interaction.

Where previously, expectations of young (western) women revolved around marriage, motherhood and limited economic participation, the contemporary woman is constructed through post-feminist forces of equality through social categories endowed with economic capacity and sexual freedoms previously reserved exclusively for men. Within the sex equality narrative equality is conceptualised by women (other) conforming to established masculine norms. Post-feminism assumes that many, or all of feminism's goals have been achieved and champions ambitious alpha-girls who embody neoliberal rationality in the way that they engage with competitive and market driven markers of success and happiness. A post-feminist sensibility may appear to grant personal agency and choice around sexual behaviour, however, as Gavey (2005) argues, an emphasis on women's sexual agency diverts our attention from the socio-political landscape in which these notions of femininity, and normative sexual identities and practices are produced and reproduced. The ways in which women understand and perform gender and sexuality are therefore governed by microcosms of power that are essentially asymmetrical and non-egalitarian as Foucault (1977) has theorised.

Rosalind Gill (2008) traces the shift from women as sexual objects for the male gaze to the independent go-getter woman who actively engages with discourses of compulsory sexual agency for women because this is portrayed as sexual equality. Sexual liberation for women is portrayed through a phallic femininity whereby women conduct themselves in a manner that is consistent with the ways in which it has historically been acceptable for men to behave. The 'phallic girl' creates an impression of sexual equality whereby women are encouraged to exercise their sexual agency by consuming mainstream pornography, sexualising men (and other women), and engaging in casual

sex. Women are celebrated for demonstrating a sexual appetite similar to that of her masculine counterparts while simultaneously maintaining a femininity that is desirable to men (McRobbie, 2007).

### *Sex, gendering and difference*

Whereas our sexed body is biologically determined according to sex organs, gender is constituted through the forces of domination which inscribe meaning onto the sexed body (Grosz, 1989). Sexual difference – which Julia Kristeva (1981) describes as biological, physiological, and relative to production – is reflected in the difference in the relationship of masculine/feminine subjects to the symbolic social (phallic) contract, and hence a hierarchical social contract, highlighting the gendered difference in relationships to power, language and meaning. A dualistic gender system that delineates the boundaries between what is acceptable as feminine or masculine creates a binary framework within society that perpetuates an unequal power balance.

The oppressive effects of the structure of the sex binary is essentially the most pervasive form of theoretical misogyny. Elizabeth Grosz (1989) describes phallogentrism as a binary system of representation that upholds a single model of male subjectivity around which others are positively or negatively defined. According to Grosz (1989), phallogentrism comprises three distinct forms which describe the historically varied positions that have been socially acknowledged for women in patriarchal cultures. Whenever the two sexes are conceived as opposite, the same as, or complementary, one of the two terms defines the other, as only one term (masculine) has positive value, whereas the second term (feminine) is the absence of the defining characteristics of the first. Woman, therefore, represents the absence or lack of what man is.

Dominant forces of heteronormative sexuality locate women and men as complementary to one another. These forces are propelled by deterministic and evolutionary assumptions grounded in naturalistic logic. When men and women are conceived as being complementary to one another, woman is characterised as an adjunct to man. From this perspective, one term is taken as given, in need of completion, whereas the other is regarded only insofar as it serves to satisfy this need. Women therefore possesses no value of its own and is positioned relative to a valorised man within each of these terms. Complementarity maintains compulsory heterosexuality as a given, and is upheld through the normalisation of social institutions such as marriage and the nuclear family. These institutions privilege men's interest and desires through internalised gender essentialism that position women as natural caregivers of their families and whose sexual subjectivities are entitlements readily accessible to men.

With sameness, one term (man) is taken to be the norm against which the other (woman) is measured. As the other conforms to the standardised norm, an identity is posited highlighting a masculine bias. On the other hand, difference is represented as though a reciprocal relationship between two *autonomous* terms. The only possibilities permitted within the binary structure however are 'one' or 'other', with the terms being mutually exclusive and mutually exhaustive. The complex, varied and intersecting power relations that produce and uphold western norms of masculinity also produce the subject of 'deficient' other. These confirm the core characteristics of the dominant subject as much as it excludes and others difference. As Braidotti (2003) reminds us, difference as pejorative was established through the hierarchical and exclusionary process of colonisation and is rooted at the heart of European philosophy. Characterised by inequalities throughout history, difference is constitutive of, and crucial to the flow of power that upholds sameness.

The social categories of gender are organised around a male/female binary which produces gendered power relationships of (masculine) domination and (feminine) subordination (Davies & Gannon, 2011). Men are understood as Darwinian driven, seed sowing ejaculation machines whose active sexuality creates a sense of obligation that women are expected to attend to. The male sex-drive discourse positions men's sexuality as biologically predetermined, perfectly natural and unquestionable. Combined with gendered expectations of women as natural caregivers, this emphasises women's perceived responsibility to be responsive to, and take care of their sexual partner's desires or "needs" over their own desire. Key aspects of hetero-sex coupling comprise erection, penetrative sex and ejaculation as the goals and endpoints of sexual encounters, constraining women's sexuality and desire in all its multiplicity and complexity to within male defined parameters.

Although culturally-defined notions of feminine sexuality have evolved over time to seemingly grant women the freedom to experience their sexuality in a more liberating way, the re-sexualisation of women continues to objectify the feminine form for the male gaze (Evans et al., 2010). Heteronormative sexual discourses encourage men to exhibit their masculine dominance and sexual prowess, while women are expected to remain compliant and virtuous. This results in a sexual double standard where different levels of sexual tolerances are sanctioned for women and men (Hird & Jackson, 2001). Tolman et al. (2015) observe that it is not uncommon for people to believe that a woman's sexual history and demeanor position her on one or other side of an invisible line of feminine sexual respectability. For example, women are expected to be sexually available to men, but only within socially sanctioned constraints whereas it is acceptable for men to assert their sexuality through an array of heterosexual encounters (Bay-Cheng & Zucker, 2007). Women are

faced with a Madonna/whore dichotomy; they are either expected to be (or at least give the illusion of being) pure and virginal or are considered loose, immoral and promiscuous (Crawford & Popp, 2003). Men are empowered with a desiring, active sexuality whereas women's sexuality is silenced or labelled negatively (Jackson & Cram, 2003). According to Gilfoyle et al. (1992), the sexual double standard extends beyond sexual activity to also govern all aspects of heterosexual relationships, normalising a gendered power imbalance that privileges men and oppresses women.

Previous research has identified intercourse and meeting men's sexual needs as fundamental to sex with an emphasis on erection as the starting point and penile ejaculation as the natural conclusion for what is considered (legitimate) sexual activity (Gavey, 1992; Hird & Jackson, 2001; McPhillips et al., 2001). This obligation shows how women come to embody disciplinary power, and reproduce and uphold gendered power relations by emphasising men's desires through women's passive sexuality. Wendy Hollway (1984) identified three dominant discourses embedded within heteronormative sexuality: the male sex drive discourse, rooted in biological essentialism and privileging an active and desiring masculine sexuality; the have/hold discourse which positions women as responsible for meeting men's sexual needs; and the permissive discourse, which emerged from the sexual liberation movement and maintains that both women and men may desire or engage with casual sex. These discourses work together through emphasising difference to uphold gendered power differentials whereby femininity is reproduced as subordinate to, and in service of dominant masculinity. Women's bodies are inscribed with meaning through the flow of disciplinary power and are historically, politically and socio-culturally located (Jackson & Scott, 1997).

Heteronormative ideologies uphold the notion of 'normal' relationships as occurring between a man and a woman, with relationships that fall outside of this categorisation classified as abnormal. Adrienne Rich (1980) offered an explanation of heterosexuality as a political institution alongside and intersecting with other institutions such as marriage, motherhood and the nuclear family. The presumed naturalness of these institutions render heterosexuality as compulsory through its ubiquity, thereby perpetuating male domination over women. The nuclear family is tied to matters of global politics in that it is an organising principle in societies. It is underscored by heterosexual coupling and procreation, colonising its members within a hierarchical structure. Sara Ahmed (2015) links the reproduction of life through the stabilisation of the nuclear family with the reproduction of culture. Familial ideology therefore shapes bodies and lives through reproducing and emphasising ways of living that are already recognisable as forms of civilisation. Ideological norms of traditional values associated with compulsory heterosexuality therefore shape what it is possible for bodies to do, even if it does not contain what it is possible to become.

Gill (2008) draws parallels between post-feminism, neoliberalism and subjectivity which are constituted through contradictory notions of autonomy, self-improvement and choice *alongside* surveillance, discipline and stigmatisation. The body is both commodified and constructed as a key site of improvement and control (Gill, 2008). Women willingly subject themselves to intense scrutiny and self-surveillance, making investments within themselves as called for within a neoliberal governmentality by tapping into what Sara Ahmed (2010) calls the 'happiness industry' while traditionally masculine traits such as competition and confidence are repackaged through post-feminist technologies constituting 'agentic' women for whom autonomy has been fetishised.

Power relations and systems of representations actively constitute the phenomenological experience of the body. Western notions of beauty are bound by cultural constructions of a white homogenous and heterosexual femininity. Embodiment of this idealised femininity is achieved via a range of disciplinary practices that shape women's presentation, appearance and behaviours in relation to the male gaze (Bartky, 1998). Butler's (1990) performativity of gender theory examines the ways in which compliance with gender norms confer recognisability as a subject, or the differential ways in which subjects become eligible for recognition. According to Butler, if what women want is only produced in relation to what is wanted from them, then the notion of women's desire turns out to be something of a misnomer; we are "in our desire" negotiating what has been wanted of us.

Ahmed (2015) outlines the ways in which heteronormativity is regulative through links between sexual conduct with other forms of conduct. There are certain proscriptive parameters through which acceptable heterosexual coupling is defined, by marriage between the right sorts of people (in which race and class divisions are emphasised), through donning the yokes of the idealised nuclear family (excluding certain kinds of families, e.g. single mums), and upholding monogamy which equates intimacy with property rights, or rights to the intimate other as property. The power relations embedded within these forces extends beyond sexual activity to function as technologies which govern all aspects of heterosexual relationships, normalising a gendered power imbalance that privileges men through our understanding of gender and how this enacted. The reproduction of gender within the western socio-cultural landscape is always a negotiation with forms of power whereby surveillance, discipline and power intersect to produce a 'docile' feminine subject that is positioned as inferior to, and aspiring towards the masculine (Bartky, 1998). Heterosexuality and feminine embodiment can therefore be understood as a disciplinary form of power that renders itself into a discursive performance as a way of being through notions of acceptable femininity.

### *Mothering ideology*

Motherhood is experienced as both a universal, as well as deeply intimate and personal phenomenon, yet it is also a yardstick by which all women and the choices they make are evaluated. Mothering ideology emphasises good mothers as executing their citizenship responsibilities, and achieving happiness and fulfillment in doing so. Characteristics of a good mother include behaving responsibly, and in socially acceptable ways that naturalise women as intuitively nurturing and responsible for caregiving in all spheres of women's lives. Sharon Hays described modern mothering as an idealized endeavor of "intensive mothering" that requires women to be selfless, always available and engaged in parenting (Hays, 1996). The maintenance and legitimacy of the mothering ideology is reinforced through romantic narratives portrayed in fairytales, books, movies and advertising as well as dominant forces driven by government policy and the organisation of institutions such as education and workplaces. The romantic myth of maternal bliss pathologises maternal unhappiness by locating the problem within individual women who fail to find maternal fulfillment.

Not only have women been historically reliant on heterosexual institutions for material survival, "women's work" carried out within these political institutions does not contain economic value highlighting the ways in which compulsory heterosexuality intersects with other institutions such as economics to uphold gendered power relations. Whereas previous generations of mothers were expected to focus solely on their children, contemporary mothers may access education, paid employment and participate in the community as long as this does not impact their children's needs and wellbeing (Russo, 1979). Catherine Rottenberg (2018) draws attention to the production of a feminist subject who orients herself towards the perfect work/(family)life balance. However, the pursuit of power and equality with men in a phallogentric and hierarchichal world perpetuates oppressive gendered practices through valorising and privileging men's interests and is constitutive of subjects who willingly collude with phallogentrism and consequently their own oppression. Women are also required to make investments in themselves, with Rottenberg likening the self to a business in which we are constantly calculating assets, losses and areas to invest in.

### *Thinking with Braidotti*

By 'thinking with', it is my intention to keep the flows of knowing and being open through processes of co-constructing knowledge arising from embodied and embedded relational encounters that enable flows towards continual becoming. Posthuman feminism challenges anthropocentric ideologies that categorise human as a hierarchically significant and distinct category and the binary logic of sex/gender that is characteristic of, and has sedimented western thought. It

reflects seriously on the carnal powers of the flesh and elemental force of desire, but also on its marginalisation in the biopolitical management of posthuman bodies as reproductive and desiring machines (Braidotti, 2022). Rosie Braidotti draws on Baruch Spinoza's monistic thinking via Deleuze and Guattari to move away from the either/or dichotomies inherent to Cartesian dualism, offering perspectives that enable new ways of thinking and theorising that are transversal and multi-directional instead of rational, linear and logic as reflected in humanist western knowledge production.

Braidotti (2017) urges us "to acknowledge the embodiment of the brain and the embrainment of the body" (2017, p. 33) as the body and mind are inseparable and interconnected and therefore not possible to untangle as independent of each other. From this perspective, notions of autonomy and individuality as *separate from* are not sufficient for thinking about the entangled complexities inherent to conceptualisations about the world. Shifting away from the linguistic turn, Braidotti offers concepts such as nomadic thinking, figurations, autopoiesis and zoe/affirmative ethics as a means of engaging with the death of the humanist subject offering ways to thinking through the body as never one but always already part of wider, open systems.

According to Braidotti (2018) "all human and non-human entities are nomadic subjects-in-process, in perpetual motion, immanent to the vitality of self-ordering matter" (p. 6). Thinking nomadically therefore enables us to rethink subjectivity outside of dominant hierarchies – beyond dichotomised entities rooted within western epistemologies and as fluid and perpetually in flux; always in a process of becoming yet also engaged in the flow of power relations that constrain but also enable alternate modes of embodiment and ways of being. For Braidotti, inherent to all matter is the intrinsic capacity for self-organisation, or autopoiesis (Braidotti, 2017). It is the potential represented by this vitality inherent to all matter (human and non-human) and the relations between things (as distinct from agency as something *bestowed upon* through universal and essentialist notions from the outside) that she encourages us to engage with as we seek to experiment with what bodies are capable of doing through processes of becoming. In this way we can not only tap into the flow of forces that constitute embodied lives – but also create space to de-individualise concepts of agency whereby more relational and nuanced accounts of complex social processes such as gendering and racialization can be produced as co-constituted within shifting encounters and power dynamics.

Braidotti (2005) refers to power as a multi-layered concept comprising *potestas* – negative/confining methods, as well as *potentia* – empowering/affirmative technologies. Since it is multi, and neither one or the other, the output or outcome of power is non-linear and unpredictable. This helps us to rethink the subject as a cluster of complex and intensive forces, or

assemblages which connect and interrelate in various ways activating a shift away from Cartesian dualism. Along with assumptions about gender identity, heterosexism, racism and ableism are *material* realities that situated feminism is required to attend to in order to disrupt processes and assemblages which facilitate the emergence of, and perpetuation of inequalities. Attending to these enables us to challenge and dismantle dominant power relations by resisting the structural orthodoxy of theory and research through highlighting multiplicity and fragments (Braidotti, 1993). Affects and effects make a body knowable through connections that occur with other bodies and with fragments of material flows. The body can be seen as the primary object of social production and inscription, and thus can be located within a network of socio-historical relations instead of being tied to a fixed essence (Grosz, 1987). Embodiment of the subject can therefore be understood as neither biological nor sociological, but as a point of overlap between these with the physical.

Affect is often articulated as the capacity of bodies to act or be acted upon by other bodies. Affect theories highlight how bodies *become* rather than what bodies are; we don't come to *know* through standing at a distance from the world but through direct engagement with it. Turning to the affective has the benefit of orienting us away from onto-epistemological processes that view knowing (epistemology) and being (ontology) as *separate* to conscious, noncognitive and transindividual bodily forces and capacities. Instead, affective capacities are co-produced through intensities, proximities and viscosities circulating between, through and transversal to individual bodies whereby affects can also *stick* to gendered, racialised, queer, poor or able-bodied bodies (Ahmed, 2015).

Sara Ahmed (2015) examines the political implications of affect as it shapes bodies and lives, arguing that emotions are cultural practices which assign value to bodies thus aligning individuals with particular ideologies. Affective flows can function as an oblique mode of ontological production whereby subjects are constituted through effecting passionate attachments as well powerful divisions. Effects of binary difference are realised not through explicit acts, but through a championing of traditional values which come to be asserted in an anti-minority way. This does not necessarily occur by a direct attack on minorities but a process of disqualification, where subjects come to be marginalised vis-à-vis a proliferation of discourse celebrating the norms and ideals of a privileged majority. These subjectivities are bolstered by certain modes of longing, nostalgia and aversion. The affective power of emotions consequently produces social alliances through collective politics that play a role in constituting national identities, of which man is the pinnacle.

Within Braidotti's nomadic framework (2018) affects are not related to emotional states residing within the individual but instead relate to the transversal, non-human forces that need to be assessed in relation to their impact on subjects and on the world. Since we have a tendency to

ascribe affect to pre-personal sensations in everyday language, theorising affect carries the potential to appear apolitical through erasing identities. It is therefore ethically imperative for researchers to attend to intersectional concerns through attention to the situated and grounding within politics of location as well as the affective intensities that manifest at the surface of the body and flow to pass between bodies, affecting bodies' capacities to act.

Traditional positivist approaches are aligned with an 'Oedipal structure' which promote phallogocentric knowledge claims that maintain binary classifications of difference, and uphold Eurocentric traditions of exclusion and oppression (Braidotti, 1993). Braidotti (1993) encourages feminist theorists to resist the pull towards replicating and supporting masculine structures of thought by disidentifying with the logic of phallogocentrism – which she argues merely reproduces theoretically hegemonic and exclusionary discourses of power. Poststructuralism calls into question how the ways in which people interact are affected by specific social and institutional contexts and therefore enables us to look at the world in a way that challenges positivist notions of universal truths and knowledge as *discoverable* through objective observation. This perspective posits that reality and meaning is subjectively *produced* through language, and that meaning is not fixed but can change dependent on specific historical and social contexts. Thinking with Braidotti, this is an empowering redefinition of the process of thinking itself in that it draws on a new vision of subjectivity about women's sexuality and embodied sexed identities in what she calls 'nomadic' terms (Braidotti, 1993).

Braidotti (2011) writes of figurations as more than "figurative ways of thinking" or metaphors. Instead, figurations can be thought of as materialistic mappings of situated, embedded and embodied social positions which enable adequate representations for the sort of subjects we are in the process of becoming. Within these mappings, or cartographies, figurations can be thought about as navigational tools; a speculative relational technique that enables alternative ways of engaging with critical thought within feminist research and practice. Figurations offer a means of understanding the differences as well as the common grounds that constitute assemblages. These transversal links encompass human and non-human agents but also remain a function of subjectivity: Posthumanist, post-anthropocentric, embedded, embodied, relational, affective and bonded through affirmative ethics (Braidotti, 2019). These processes activate a subjectivity that extends beyond individuals to new affective transversal assemblages and flows across to encompass those in-between spaces which enable displacement of the limitations inherent to binary logic.

Braidotti's emphasis on affirmative ethics as a collective practice is grounded in embedded and embodied materialist practices in response to "flagrant injustices, the perpetuation of old hierarchies and new forces of domination" (Braidotti, 2019, p.156). She highlights the ethical ideal as

mobilising the active powers of life intrinsic to the affirmative mode of *potentia* in order to manifest the means to cultivate empowerment and degrees of affirmation of interconnections with others in their multiplicity. Affective forces that drive processes of becoming are facilitated by an ethics of joy and affirmation which transform the negative into positive passions. It is therefore ethical forces, rather than moral injunctions that serve as a framework for on-going inquiry into engagements with intensities that need to be enacted collectively. Braidotti describes 'I can't take this anymore' as an ethical statement not of defeat, but as one echoed by a subject-in-process, one that is "shot through with waves of intensity that illuminate their self-awareness, tearing open fields of self-knowledge in the encounter of and configuration with others" (Braidotti, 2006, p.140). Inquiry into what kind of subjects we are capable of becoming can be accounted for by adequate cartographies of how much bodies can take depending on historical, biological, physical, sexual and emotional limits.

#### *A curiosity develops*

I had originally planned on adopting a feminist Foucaultian discourse analysis as I was interested in learning more about women's social practices, their language and the discourses within which these were embedded. I anticipated producing a clear and logical discussion about the sociocultural, political and economic conditions that influence women's daily lives, peppered with quotations to illustrate various points. I had in mind a clear and linear pathway to discuss the feminist politics of women's sexuality as highlighted within the feminist literature I had been reading, yet I found myself being repeatedly drawn back towards the women's stories. As I was immersed in the women's talk my interest was piqued by the similarities interwoven with differences I noticed between the women's stories as well as my own story, and I wondered about these points of convergence and divergence across women's lives. I was intrigued by the ways in which the narratives were entangled with contradictions and tensions, both fragmented and fluid, gloriously rhizomatic and knotted in all their complexity and multiplicities. I was also perplexed by questions about the pursuit of agency within a neoliberal and post-feminist context – in what ways do notions of equality, freedom and choice produce women's sexuality, and for whose benefit? How do we separate women's desire from the production of women's desire as a mechanism of social control?

According to Braidotti (2003), the quest for points of exit from phallogocentric definitions of women requires us to work through the images and representations the 'knowing' masculine subject has created of women as they have been coded in language, culture, science, knowledge and discourse and consequently internalised in the heart, body, mind and souls of women. The phallogocentric imaginary reduces women to unrepresentability and so if we are to repossess these fragments of phallogocentric imaginary, women must speak, write and represent the feminine on

their terms. This approach acknowledges multiple complex processes, affirming woman within her own right as opposed to a 'devalorised other' by making visible the unseen, unheard and unspoken (Braidotti, 2003). Redefining the female feminist subject involves rejecting the traditional knowing subject as universal, neutral and gender free in an effort to redefine our bodily roots of subjectivity while resisting privileging any one theory of embodiment. This involves embracing embodiment as multi-vocal, and as shifting and changing with space and time (Morgan, 2005). Speaking from a woman's perspective is to speak from multiple, complex, contradictory and overlapping gendered positions.

Braidotti (2022) reminds us how within a posthuman feminist perspective, bodies are diverse and relational desiring machines whereby sexuality – no longer confined to the dialectical opposition of two sexes as a process of differing – is redefined through interconnections between bodies and the wider environment as a collective assemblage. This uncoupling of sexuality from the gendered binary system recasts it as a hub, a kind of relay point for a network of complex connections and inter-relations through which multiple processes of transformation disrupt the primacy of ego-indexed notions of identity and notions of huMan as the apogee of enlightened consciousness. In this way, posthuman feminism illuminates the profound vitality and interconnectedness of all living matter by reflecting on the embodied and sensuous elemental forces of Eros as well as the marginalisation and biopolitical management of posthuman bodies as reproductive and desiring machines. Sexuality therefore is cross-species, encompassing elemental, geological and meteorological qualities that extend beyond the centrality of the human body and subject as the locus of sexuality and reflecting a relational embodied and embedded, affective and accountable subject.

Thinking with Braidotti (2022), sexuality is an ontological force positioned before, beneath and beyond the social codes that entrap binary oppositions, compulsory heterosexuality and reproductive sex. It is comprised of relational variations and provides the organizing principle for carnal human affectivity and desire. This multiplicity breaks up individualistic notions of totality by acknowledging the ties that binds us to multiple others in a complicated web of interrelations through which desire can blossom, producing affirmative relations that flow in a fluid cosmic feminine and dissolving boundaries created by categorical differences. Sexuality can then be understood as the joyful tendency to replicate experiences that give pleasure and avoid those that cause pain, flowing in an infinite process of becoming across categories like sex, gender, ethnicities, and species in a multi-scalar post-binary kind of way and encompasses complexity, multiplicity and affirmation (Braidotti, 2022).

# Embedded

*Science it would seem is not sexless: she is a man, a father, and infected too.*

(Virginia Woolf, 1977, p. 253).

The scientific institution of psychology was historically dominated by white, cis-gendered, heterosexual, middle-class men who conducted research on white, cis-gendered, heterosexual, middle-class men. Early psychological knowledge production therefore pursued lines of inquiry that privileged men's interests while matters pertaining to women's lives were deemed trivial and unimportant. The positivist ontological and epistemological assumptions that primarily underpinned these early research questions and methodologies produced findings that were generalised to society as a whole. The language employed to communicate theories and findings was androcentric and drew on gendered metaphors, symbols and implicit assumptions – all of which positioned masculine thought and reason as logical and the measure by which all things were standardised and considered to be normal (Eagly & Riger, 2014). Men, the masculine and male bodies constituted normal (determining the 'human'), whereas women, femininity and women's bodies typified deviations from this norm (determining the 'other'). A general consensus about women as 'less-than' subordinated women politically and economically, reducing women to commodities which enabled and legitimated the exploitation of women's bodies and lives.

The colonisation of women's bodies by psychology as an institution was constructed upon notions of difference. Women's bodies have long been positioned as a deficient and problematic deviation from masculine norms. For example, hysteria, a catch-all diagnosis for women who exhibited problematic behaviours, was used to explain symptoms which are today associated with anxiety, depression and complex trauma. Hysteria, rooted in biological essentialism, was believed to manifest in women due to their emotional, unpredictable and therefore unstable nature arising from their reproductive organs. The historical pathologisation of women's distress means that emotional excess holds negative connotations, is gendered and is something to be kept in check. This gendered colonial relationship, of which domination and subordination are key features, reinforces an ideology that continues to privilege men's interests by maintaining exclusionary and

oppressive power relations that values logic and rational thought (associated positively with men) over emotion (associated negatively with women).

Naomi Weisstein notoriously stated in her infamous article *Psychology Constructs the Female (PCF)* that, “Psychology has nothing to say about what women are really like, what they need and what they want, especially because psychology does not know” (Weisstein, 1993, p. 197) Her article criticised the field of psychology for producing theories without evidence (in particular, clinical psychology and psychiatry), failing to account for social context and for drawing heavily on biological essentialism. As feminism gained momentum, a crescendo of feminist scholars drew attention to how scientific research was complicit with the oppression of women both within the fields of science as well as more broadly within social context (Eagley & Riger, 2014). Drawing on themes that focus on gender as an analytical category, and which emphasize the intersections of gender with race and other social categories, feminist scholars turned to and developed qualitative research methods in order to represent their realities and lives in their own words. These methods enable us not only to make sense of how the symbolic world such as images, discourses and beliefs exert powerful influence over expectations held about women’s lives, but also disrupt cultural, situational, interpersonal, psychological and economic powers as institutions that interact to uphold existing oppressive power systems.

Challenging androcentric knowledge and truth claims through feminist standpoint methodologies helps destabilise dominant ideologies by offering a space for women to talk about and understand experiences relevant to their lives ordinarily dismissed by or overlooked within androcentric research approaches (Harding, 2004). This representation includes women’s voices as valid sources of knowledge and offers an alternative(s) to the dominant and restrictive narrative of women’s sexuality and lives. Standpoint methods are politically engaged in that they aim to empower oppressed and marginalised groups such as women by critically examining the social power relations that have material effects on their everyday lives. These methodologies empower women by offering them agency to direct qualitative studies through sharing their lived experiences by their own accounts, and by enabling them to offer their knowledge into how these experiences have influenced their lives. Women’s stories, offered from their unique standpoints make explicit the social power relations that circulate around and through women’s lives and creates space to talk about how these forces inhabit our bodies.

Instead of universalising women’s experiences, Donna Haraway and Sandra Harding espouse situated knowledge which takes account of the ways in which women’s experiences and how they make sense of these are contextual and embedded within a specific socio-cultural and political landscape (Harding, 2014). Situated knowledge troubles gendered power relations by offering

alternatives to the biases of historical hegemonic discourses through legitimating women's voices as knowers of their own realities and privileging the multiplicities and diversity of women's narratives throughout the knowledge production process (Harding, 1987; Haraway, 1988). Similarly, Rosi Braidotti's cartographic method (1994) emphasises situated knowledge as a means of offering a perspective about the unique way the world is experienced by marginalised groups. It offers a way of understanding the multiple ways in which power relations are inscribed on and through the gendered body and situates knowledge production as emerging through multiple embedded and embodied perspectives. This approach is interested in the many ways aspects of our identities and lived experiences intersect and overlap, always in a state of flux and constantly being shaped and molded by a complex interplay of historical, social and cultural forces that constitute the human experience.

#### *Oriending towards my research journey*

Reflexively I cast my mind back to the assumptions I had internalised about academic research before embarking on this journey. I think about all I had learnt about objectivity, generalisability, and validity, and about what kind of research matters. I marvel at how despite feeling a pull towards feminist research and methodologies, a positivist ontology continued to taunt me. I knew I was interested in women's sexuality and gendered power differentials, but positivist epistemological requirements would enter my thinking, uninvited and unannounced; objectivity over subjectivity with an emphasis on data, what counts as data, and imposing constraints on what this data can tell us. The research question I had articulated back then reflects this, looking for something quantifiable and generalisable:

In what ways do practices and gendered performances associated with contemporary women's sexuality maintain gendered social power relations that are aligned with patriarchal ideologies, and how do these influence women's sexual experiences?

As I reflect back I had anticipated more conversation flows around "doing sex and sexuality" and had been exploring the literature concerning gendered power relations and discourses within that context, however the conversations with the ten women who shared their time with me covered so much more ground and went in directions I hadn't necessarily anticipated. Through the co-articulation of our stories I noticed texture, movement and flows that I initially found myself turning away from in pursuit of "doing research" and seeking resolution. Our conversations were very much guided by the women and followed threads that came up for them during our talk but

through this process we also co-constructed shared meanings about our embodied experiences such as expectations about what women should be, where we might fall short of this “should”, and our experiences of navigating these and other forces. Noticing these similarities, variations and differences that became visible both between myself and the women as well as collectively also caught my attention.

After transcribing the interviews my process involved reading and re-reading each of the transcripts to familiarise myself not only with the content we were talking about, but also to reflect on my own positioning within those conversational interviews. I kept a journal for this process, noting points of convergence and divergence between stories, ambiguities and contradictions, hurt and joy. I also consciously made an effort to notice my affective responses as I encountered the flows and forces shaping embodied lives throughout the process. I then identified and condensed what stood out to me as main themes and wrote these subheadings on post-it notes. I recall the way in which my floor was covered with strips of paper where I’d cut out seemingly relevant quotations and I tasked myself with placing quotes I thought were relevant beneath each themes, with a view to link theory and present a research project that looked quite different from what has ultimately emerged. I had begun writing an analysis based on abstractions.

During this process I noticed a growing tension within me; this process didn’t feel right. It felt static and the women’s words on those strips of paper seemed flat. I became more conscious of my internalised misogyny not only through the enactment of gender, and how this was presenting for me as I engaged with the stories and even within my personal life, but also in the research process itself. I knew feminist and qualitative research approaches to be valid epistemological and ontological approaches, but I also acknowledge this pull to researcher as observer, collector, identifier, quantifier and the lure of the master signifier to meet institutional requirements for my research to be taken seriously. I felt paralysed by the social power relations implicated within Eurocentric epistemologies circulating around and through me, coercing and tugging me towards compromising my feminist research ethics and invoking a voice of authority regarding universal knowledge claims. These forces seemed to me to function something akin to a puppet master manipulating marionette strings – coercing our docile and compliant gendered bodies to bend and fold seemingly willingly, and in seemingly unnatural ways. I noticed as this process of consciousness raising within my own psyche overwhelmed me in painful waves. Frustratingly I felt unable to articulate the enactment and embodiment of gendered violence – violence I could feel but not name. How could I make explicit that violence which precedes violent actions? How do the women’s stories help portray this enactment of violence against us? It became clear to me I needed to find a different way forward.

In an effort to unpack the questions that were troubling me I spent more time with the transcripts through multiple readings and note taking. My strong sense was the women's stories offered so much more than what I was capturing at this stage of the analytic journey. I was drawn to how the glimpses into these ten women's lives exemplify the multiplicities and complexities inherent to the gendered subjectivity of woman and felt compelled to find a way to bring that movement and flow of affective forces through for my audience to experience. I noticed myself looking for and organising similarities and differences within and between the women's stories. I attempted attaching these to potentially relevant issues on the feminist agenda such as the #MeToo movement or the gendered pay gap to make sense of women's experiences of sexuality collectively. It felt like I was trying to shape the women's stories into restrictive discourses to produce a tidy discussion about gendered power relations – but something wasn't quite working. These attempts left little room for an in-depth engagement with the glimpses of that 'something else' the women's stories in all their multiplicities were showing me. I felt stuck and for a long time sat with this tension of being pulled in different directions, putting down and picking up different threads in an attempt to weave these into an overarching and cohesive story.

Returning to the women's stories I found that at times I was drawn into the minutiae of the narratives, and at other times I would reflect on the ways in which women spoke about their bodies and their lives. I also considered my personal experiences as a woman relative to the stories that were shared with me as well as my responses to the women's stories as a researcher. Sara Ahmed (2017) talks about feminism often consisting of memory work, about piecing together memories to make sense of how different experiences connect. Just as the women remembered aspects of their lives with me, I too remembered aspects of mine as we negotiated shared experiences and meanings, our bodies witnesses to each discrete event bearing these memories. It was through conversation with Rosie Braidotti that I found a way to make sense of the confluence of different stories and experiences. Instead of continuing to divide the women's talk up through abstraction – in pursuit of resolution through the familiar, I thought about the ways in which Braidotti's cartographic approach enlists imagination, memory and affectivity to the process of inventing new figurations and new ways of representing the complex subjects we have become and are in the process of becoming (Braidotti, 2019). I had found a way to speak the unspeakable... to acknowledge the affective flows and forces that circulate through us, weaving inwards and outwards in a complex interconnecting spiral.

Re-engaging with my felt experience, the feeling of being tied up in affective knots, I returned to the interview transcripts, but this time I resisted the pull of the master signifier urging me to summarise, categorise, and bring resolution to what was through my process becoming an

embodied hearing of these stories. As the boundaries between the women's stories dissolved, so too did the boundaries between my story and their stories. Stories about access, identity, pleasure and pain. Stories about physical and sexual violence – not only as memories but an inescapable and inevitable risk. Stories about women's bodies productive of, and produced by, institutions.

Story telling lends itself to highlighting “individual and collective action and meanings, as well as the social processes by which social life and human relationships are made and changed” (Laslett, 1999, p. 392). Through a process of co-construction and reflexive storytelling I share the stories of the ten women who spoke with me within this thesis. Sharing stories is always a process of strategic and delicate social movement as the detailed layering of talking, listening and writing involves circling in and through multiple sites of knowledge production (Fine, 2017). As Sreekumar (2017) points out, the stories we create as women come to explain us. As we listen to them and re-tell them we find ourselves within the multiple, intersecting and embodied subjectivities constituted through them. Within this thesis I have endeavoured to draw a cartography of power relations operational in, and immanent to the production and circulation of knowledge about sexual difference (Braidotti, 2019). I have engaged with a narrative approach to weave these women's stories and present an account of women's bodies in terms of what they can do, connecting women's bodies and experiences as they are engaged within a complex assemblage of cultural practices that produce social relationships implicated in gendered sexualities and subjectivities.

A narrative approach emerged through my research process as I came to appreciate my personal experiences were not only contributing to how I was making sense of the women's stories, but that conscious reflexivity was essential, and required me to attend to the ways in which my own life story shaped the way I have interpreted and made sense of the women's stories. From standpoint epistemology to the cartographic methodology of Rosie Braidotti, feminist legitimization of women's knowledge of their specific social conditions informs the journey of my own story. Attention to the situated helped me to make sense of my own location as a researcher as a South African born pākehā woman living in Aotearoa/New Zealand, as a mother and as a woman who has experiences of living through violence necessarily as part of the shared narrative, as this directly contributes to the shared meaning making process in which I attempt to make sense of the social power relations embedded within relational, cultural and social experiences from a feminist standpoint.

### *Relational ethics*

Relational ethics stresses the compassionate but also more political aspect of subjectivity. I was motivated to find a way to present the women's voices meaningfully and authentically – not as

fixed, unitary subjects but through a process of listening with their memories of experience and attending to the stories that shaped their subjectivities. Braidotti (2022) reminds us how the present is the record of what we are ceasing to be, at the same time the present is also the seed for what we are in the process of becoming-subject.

Oakley (2015) offers the concept of a gift relationship between researchers and research participants as an ethical obligation to give voice to the researched. I considered each of the women's memories and narratives shared with me a taonga, and the diversity and nuances between their experiences as precious and valuable artefacts. Central to relational ontology is the relationships formed between researcher and those who take part in research. Women's voices are at the heart of this research project and I sought to create a safe, shared space for the women to share their stories. I upheld relational ethics by privileging empathy, respect and a willingness to listen over research aims and in doing so, opening myself up to the transformative potential offered by the narratives that emerged through this relational process (Braidotti, 2013). Upholding a relational ontology creates a space for the flow of *potentia* through sharing, listening, and understanding stories. Thinking with Braidotti (2002) my goal was to bring to the forefront interconnecting processes through the women's stories as opposed to singular concepts representing women.

#### *Politics of location*

Politics of location accounts for one's locatedness both in terms of space, from geo-political/ecological dimensions, as well as time (historical memory/genealogical dimensions). It helps to ground political subjectivity through rejecting claims of the universal by attending instead to the multiple differences among women (Braidotti, 2019). As Kaplan (1994) explains, politics of location identifies the grounds for historically specific differences and similarities between women in diverse and asymmetrical relations, creating alternative histories, identities and possibilities for alliances. Race, class and sexuality interact with gender to produce a complex assemblage that intersects with varying and complicated relationships of oppression, effecting and affecting women's lives in multiple ways. The ten women who shared their stories with me ranged between 26 and 72 years in age and represented an assemblage of diversity and multiplicities. Instead of focusing on and reproducing hegemonic categories of binary difference through emphasising demographic data, I have sought to intentionally disrupt notions of sameness through re-orienting towards shared political locations embedded within European phallogocentric perspectives of philosophy.

The women contacted me directly after learning about my research through shared connections who were aware of my research interests and had distributed my research information

among their friends (See Appendix A). I met with each woman individually and at a mutually agreed location that was comfortable and safe. Before commencing I provided each woman with a consent form and we talked through their rights as a participant before they signed their consent to participate (See Appendix C). Each meeting followed a conversational style rather than a rigid interview to enable the women's talk to flow naturally around the what mattered to them. My opening question sought to understand what feminine sexuality meant to each woman, and the talk that flowed was guided by a collaborative process of meaning making as I pursued connections between flows of power and subjectivities constituted by binary difference. While I prepared an interview schedule this offered ideas for conversation and was not prescriptive (See Appendix B). Our talk ranged between 45-90 minutes. Each interview was digitally recorded and recordings were destroyed once transcribed. I personally transcribed each interview in full, sending these to the women for review and an opportunity to provide feedback. Women were offered a \$25 Visa prezzycard for participation; however most women declined the offer and proposed a charitable donation to Women's Refuge instead.

#### *Institutional ethics*

I also met institutional ethical approval through the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Human Ethics Southern B Committee in May, 2016 (SOB 16/14) (see Appendix D). I considered both the safety of the women I met with as well as my own. I was mindful that meeting places needed to feel safe should the women disclose sensitive information through our talk. I also ensured the women were fully informed of the purpose of the research and reiterated their right to withdraw at any time. I ensured they understood that should distressing stories be shared I would support them to identify appropriate community resources for support, if needed. While writing the women's stories I endeavoured to remove identifying information from the women's stories and used pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality and privacy. To address the concern my own safety, I advised my supervisors of dates, times and locations each time I met with a woman. I also sent text messages to advise when each interview began and ended, and was available to be contacted by phone at all times.

#### *Storying*

Early European settlers introduced patriarchal ideologies that have contributed to the oppression of indigenous knowledge around the world. In Aotearoa, the breakdown of social structures and impressing of gender hierarchy has resulted in Māori history being rewritten as Māori mythology, with men replacing women in powerful roles which renders Māori women invisible in their own stories (Smith, 1992). It was important to me that I not assume the role of 'coloniser'

through retelling the women's stories by inserting a narrative authority that turns their stories into my story. I kept a reflexive journal during this time to clarify my thoughts, develop ideas and reflect on the ways in which my own experiences and standpoint contribute to my thinking with the women's stories.

As I think about my own location and situatedness, I acknowledge the ways in which this, as well as my ethical commitment to collaboration, has been enacted by thinking *with* a chorus of feminist voices that have informed the movement and flow represented within this thesis. My interpretive stories were shaped within the embedded, embodied and affective flow of my conversations with the women about women's sexuality. The process from transcription to the stories presented in this research involved applying multiple lenses to the interview transcripts. I began with immersing myself in the conversations I'd had with the women by reading and re-reading each of the transcripts in turn. I also reflected on each of the women's socio-political context and noted similarities and differences between us. I noticed points of convergence and divergence between and within the women's talk. I paid attention to my affective response as I engaged with various points throughout our talk, noticing moments of joy, sadness, annoyance and anger, not only as privately occurring emotive states, but thinking with Sara Ahmed (2015) as a cultural practice that links emotions to bodies, and bodies to social relationships within communities. In particular I noticed how these affective states relate to popular ideology about women, for example discourses of sexually agentic women.

The overarching narrative that began taking shape – our collective story – is centuries old. Binary difference is deeply rooted within the heart of continental philosophy and underpins contemporary understandings of sexual difference. It conflates man with the universal upholding a single model of male subjectivity, and inscribes meaning onto the bodies of women. It also maintains institutions assembled within a structure where violence perpetrated by individual men is permissible and justifiable as natural and inevitable; where women are held responsible for failing to protect themselves; where sexed bodies are manufactured as gender machines that spit out bodies inscribed with violence. My aim was to move the reader and show how how gendered subjectivities can be understood as contextually embedded, embodied and malleable to the flows of forces and multiplicities while also allowing for redefinitions that reflect on, respond to and challenge notions of deficit.

Power is a strategic complex entanglement that we all share, and I was politically motivated to take on board Braidotti's encouragement to challenge to the meta discourse (2014). It is difficult to discuss the woman's body as a concept without essentializing it as a "pure", self-representing femininity or reducing it to an abstraction. In enacting affirmative ethics, we acknowledge our

relationality within larger assemblages, it means creating new ways of thinking and increases our ability to locate positive, alternative, non-hierarchical, respectful ways of interacting within assemblages. Situating the knowing subjects as immanent to the very conditions they are trying to understand, change or resist means that critical thinking is about being able to make a careful ethical distinction between different speeds and territorialisations of both knowledge and subject production. The specific challenge for critical theory is to map out and operationalise the margins of possible actualisation of the virtual.

Rosi Braidotti's cartographic approach offered a methodological framework as I co-constructed the stories presented in this thesis. Cartographies enable a grounded analyses of how discursive power operates today and how it provides new parameters of knowledge, while also perpetuating traditional patterns of exclusion. Specifically, cartographies are interested in understanding the kind of knowing subjects we are in the process of *becoming* as well as which discourses underscore the process (Braidotti, 2019). A cartographic approach aims to produce figurations intended to help develop an understanding of and address the complexity of social power relations complicit with the socio-cultural positioning of gendered subjectivities and women's sexualities. Mapping the multiplicity of the women's lives and the various ways in which they negotiate their own subjectivity destabilises and challenges power associated with traditional representations of selfhood (and the concomitant subordination and marginalisation of women that arises from these) because it helps identify possible sites and strategies of resistance and enables the reconfiguration of political practice.

The stories presented in this thesis have been part of a collective, politically invested process through which I have endeavoured to map the figurations of subjects in the process of becoming. Braidotti's cartographic method helped me to move beyond the borders that delineate the binary of violence/not violence, and which constrains the definition of violence to physical force enacted by one body to another. Engaging with the cartographic method enabled me to map the material conditions in which the embedded and embodied social positions ascribed to Woman come to inscribe and inhabit women's bodies as forces of power capable of both "entrapment (potestas) and as empowerment (potentia)" (Braidotti, 2018, p. 33). It was my goal to make visible the marginalised voices of women from their multiple and collective standpoints while acknowledging that these stories are necessarily partial, selective and never exhaustive.

As I searched for ways to weave our collective story, the metaphor of the cartographic figurations as a cosmology of women's lives began to guide me in the way that constellations of stars have guided our ancestors navigating and called to our scientists and philosophers to help us understand our universe. A metaphor of cosmology evokes both the scale of the universe and the

locatedness of particular stars in relation to each other. In guiding my retelling of the women's stories, the metaphor concerns the study of the constellations of social power relations forming the women's experiences and the highlights of their expert knowing of their lives that guide us in navigating our ways through struggles with sexualities and gendered violence.

## Affective and relational flows

*I write for the still fragmented parts of me, trying to bring them together.*

*Whoever can read and use any of this, I write for them as well.*

- (Adrienne Rich, 1983, p.540 ).

Through conversation with Braidotti I have endeavoured to map a cosmology whereby we look towards the stars to shine light on figurations of varying intensities of gendered power relations. As we journey through these constellations, we navigate the forces that flow with dominant configurations of heteronormativity and orient towards shimmering points that catch our attention. This light makes visible the flows of transformative and affirmative potential through opening out and creating space to think, speak, write and represent femininity that resists dualistic oppositions and embraces the positivity of difference. Mapping this cartography is an attempt to bring to light power relations that flow to shape our daily lives, not an exhaustive effort to observe, record and report universal truths. From our different locations you and I may notice a similar flickering of light within these constellations, or be drawn towards different points illuminating forces as they mould and shape women's embodied subjectivities. The point is to encourage an opening out and make visible the possibilities through encounters beyond. This cosmology operates as a site of resistance that is productive of counter-truths and enables us to call into question the underlying assumptions of the humanities and human sciences that privilege huMAN subjectivity.

For Braidotti (2022), the ontological desire that orients vital neo-materialist subjects towards the freedom to express all that they are capable of becoming is grounded by the fact that virtual possibilities need to be actualised, by a missing 'we'. She refers to the formation of the missing people as a transversal subjectivity, a virtual category emerging through the collective effort to bring into action a complex singularity. Heterogeneity, complexity and multiplicities mark this process of becoming, which opens a myriad of possibilities of both resistance and counter-actualisation of alternatives. Accordingly, 'we' are in this posthuman predicament together, but 'we are not One', let alone 'The One', or the chosen People, because we are positioned in embodied and embedded differential but material locations that generate different perspectives about knowledge, subjectivity and the posthuman convergence (Braidotti, 2022).

This new 'we' expresses the embedded, embodied, relational and affective forces while also illustrating that 'we-are-in-*this*-together-but-we-are-*not*-one-and-the-same' kind of people. I engaged with the women through the process of recognition of shared conditions that constitute us as a we; the we in this context is always those of us, for whom these discursive conditions are shared. The process of co-constructing the women's stories as presented in this thesis is an example of a strategic and delicate social movement circulating through multiple sites of knowledge production (Fine, 2017). It is a consciousness raising process which makes visible the images and representations that the masculine knowing subject has created of woman as other and also orienting towards alternative possibilities. My recrafting of these interview transcripts into stories is a representation not of the women's experience/s, but of the forces and flows that have engaged me with them, as an us together in these conditions.

It was my intention to uphold feminist research ethics and privilege women's voices as authority over their own experiences. Therefore the text in the stories that follow was all transcribed from the text the women spoke in our conversations without any additions. I have carefully recrafted and re-ordered the transcripts to produce a temporal narrative that enables sense-making of the storying of embodied experience. The stories themselves are not intended as a dataset I've opted to make visible, and from which I am abstracting and extrapolating in pursuit of resolution. The composition of the stories has been carefully rewoven as a remapping of a woman's body in the social and includes a process of simultaneously constructing and deconstructing preconceived gender categories, while challenging notions of woman as an object of representation, as well as the woman as viewer of herself represented. This co-creating of affective interlinkages followed a process not of turning inwards in search of identity bound truths, but of mapping different socio-economic and symbolic locations to cast light on forces that thrust us outwards, along "multiple directions of extra-textual collective connections and experiences" (Braidotti, 2003, p. 168). Following each women's story I trace the thematics of thinking enabled through Rosie Braidotti's nomadic theory. It is my intention to disrupt ideas of commonality and expectation through fragmentation, multiplicity and messiness as this represents the complexities of women's embodied and embedded lives. The intent behind my process of reformation using Braidottian nomadic ethics and cartography is to engage with the flow and the movement of these forces, not to engage with the names of forces. For example, talk about the motherhood mandate and essentialised nurturing and care practices (Russo, 1979), the inequitable notions of neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg, 2018), capitalism, consumerism and the colonising effects thereof along with a long list of forces we are all *already* familiar with. My intention here however is to *feel* the potentia ... to *feel* the postestas... to feel *with* the conditions of the women's lives. Within that, there is also an absolute conscious refusal

of a felt desire for a resolution, a pull from the master signifier. I was, in Braidottian spirit consciously resisting familiar taken for granted assumptions and practices in this approach. Within this process of reformation I am giving the stories a different form from traditional narratives as we have come to think of them with beginnings, middle and ends. They do not conform to the traditional oral narrative, and to me, that variation speaks to the different forms the forces take within the stories to bring an embodied hearing.

# Elaine

Probably the first person we learn about sexuality from is our mother, also friends, and then wider than that, we've got the media. We see what our parents do and how they interact together and how they show affection towards each other, whether or not they do, whether it's behind closed doors or whether they show affection in front of the kids. I think that sends a really strong message to kids around what is and what isn't okay, and it's often not talked about but it is, I think, where we learn in our course of learnings. When I look back, my parents were quite naive, or I thought in denial, which is sad. They never talked to me about sex until I said that I was going to stay the night at my boyfriend's house and there was nothing they could do about it. And then mum said, oh well, I'm going to book you an appointment to put you on the pill, and I said to her I did that years ago. She had no idea and she got all annoyed so I just hung up, I didn't want to have that conversation with her. We never had that conversation again. I don't want it to be like that with my kids, and I'm not going to be naive either. I do wish that they had, but I know that parents do the best that they can and that they don't know what they don't know.

With my partner, we've had some really interesting conversations about sex coz he's always been really conservative in his ways in which he's viewed sex, and that's been quite new for me. He was fairly late in losing his virginity and he wanted to make sure that it was with someone that he really loved and that she loved him back. I was like kind of shocked coz I remember we ended up sleeping together quite early on in our relationship, which was unusual for me and him. He made a comment well I slept with you because I wanted to show you how much I loved you. I laughed at that, and kinda thought like what a cop out thing to say, but now that I know him, I know that that's true, because he's only ever slept with girls that he's actually loved and really cared about. He's kinda unusual like that, emotions do play into it for him as well. It's quite different from what I was brought up with, and what my experiences of guys and sex has been, especially through my teenage years and into my early twenties. It's been really refreshing for me.

I definitely still see that if a guy sleeps with lots of girls then he's the man, and if a girl sleeps with lots of guys, then she's a slut. I still think that that's really prevalent and men are more able to be sexually free than females. Or females can, but then they do get stigmatised for it, and end up having quite a hard time, or get a bad reputation from other guys where they are easy, whereas the guy never gets that because guys are all seen to be easy but it's in a positive way, if that makes sense. There are definitely gender differences in sexuality, it's just so different for a man and a woman, sex is completely different.

I'm on the pill and I look back, and in that I had the power. With my partner, he wants to have kids and he's always like well it's up to you, you're in control, you're the one taking the pill. I like that, I like to know that it's up to me. But also, sometimes I think it's unfair 'coz I'm putting all these hormones into my body, like it would be nice to have a break and have a male contraceptive, 'coz nobody likes condoms. I mean it's not too bad, I'm quite lucky in that I don't have many side effects, but I still worry about that the contraceptive pill is relatively new. I mean I know it's been around for decades, but how much research have they been able to do? And if it puts your reproductive system on hold for so long, like surely that must have some repercussions.

Sex is not just physical, it's about emotions as well as the physical. Men tend to have high libidos they tend to always be ready for sex and would have it every day if they could. I definitely don't think it's true for all guys, but for a lot of them I think it is true that it can be quite physical and that it can be easier for them to switch off. Women aren't the same and I think that men expect that they are, and they don't completely understand that they actually have so much going on. Women tend to need more foreplay than men. Like men tend to be ready, well from my experience anyway, they can just go for it. Whereas females need a little bit more foreplay to be ready, so you can't just do it. Or you can do it, but it's not as pleasurable. It's also harder for females to split everything else up because we've got so much going on, we think about so many different things. I think men are a little bit better at just thinking about one thing at a time, like probably a bit less distracted. Women, I guess we multi-task, and are always thinking about lots of things, and get stressed out, and we seem to have a bigger role especially in looking after kids and things like that. So I think women are less keen for it all the time.

I actually saw a really funny cartoon where this man and woman were having sex, and this woman's thinking about women's work, like what sort of things to get from the grocery store, and I'm doing this tomorrow, and got to pick the kids up from school, and she's thinking about hundreds of different things and the guy's just like... ooh boobies. That like sums it up, coz especially in today's society we're so busy, and it's normal for women to have careers, and to work, and be an equal part in bringing home the finances, and all of that, so we do have a lot to worry about, and think about.

There's also that expectation that women should always be up for it, that men are entitled to sex when they are in a relationship, and that it is what they should be getting, and I don't agree with this. It's a message that I see all the time, and it comes from society and from pornography. Like I hear guys talk about other guys who are religious, and aren't having sex before marriage and how negative they are about what "a waste of time" that is, and how it's so pointless, and how they should be getting it because they are in a relationship. But I think it's slowly being recognised that

it's not a man's entitlement and that it's mutual and should be a consensual thing. I do wonder if it's men's belief about sex, their entitlement. Like it's not gonna harm her but I'll sleep better, or I'll feel better, or I do things for her that I don't always wanna do, those kind of beliefs, I don't know, just speculating.

I know that only in 1984 or 1985, something like that, it became illegal for a man to rape a woman within marriage which is really, really late. It was a few years before I was born, which is kind of shocking to think that it's taken that long, but to me, that's a recognition of actually women have rights too, and they have their own thoughts and feelings. They've always had them, but it's only just been recognised that actually they have the right to say no and that a man isn't entitled to it, it's a privilege rather than an entitlement. I think it sends out a message that, what I want is not as equally important as what he wants when it comes to sex. The whole justice system seems to be out there to protect the perpetrators. It's always the innocent until proven guilty, so the female has to go through such extents to prove that she was raped by this particular person. There is shame on the girl. For her she goes through a trauma, and then she has to go through a trauma again, like it's her fault. It's just horrific given that everything that's happened, and it's a traumatic thing to go through all of that all over again, and it's often far too painful to cause someone to go through that, so they often choose not to and perpetrators get away with doing it again.

There's also that guilt for women. Just think, the words don't always match with how you feel, and if you say ok, we can have sex that's fine, a guy should pick up on that she's actually not that keen, she's just doing it just to make me happy. But it's complicated, because I know that guys get confused by girls because we might say one thing and mean another, or, be like, oh that's fine, or they'll be like what's wrong, we'd say nothing, but with the way that we say, like, nothing's wrong, I'm fine. Women just cave in and do it, 'coz then you don't have to have that conversation around oh I'm tired. Like sorry I know I was tired yesterday too, but I'm tired again tonight. There'd be all the guilt and the and all those other emotions that come into it and that kind of plays into it as well I think, and I don't think that's consensual. Or like dread, like oh god, we have to do it again. Or we haven't had it in a while, and he's going to want it tonight and I'll have to give it to him, coz I haven't given it to him in a while, kind of, that he's entitled to it. I know with my partner, if I'm not keen he's going to be respectful about that, but I know that I'm really lucky with him. I haven't always had that experience before and I do feel like I'm with someone who is really unusual, in the way in which he views sex. If we're not that good emotionally together, like if we've had an argument or something like that, he's not willing to do it unless we've made up. Whereas in previous relationships it hasn't always had to be like that, or like, we've had sex, and then made up. So it's definitely it's taught me that not all guys are the same.

There's all these campaigns around, like, what I wear, shouldn't have anything to do with consent. Like, if someone gets raped, and they're wearing a short skirt it's not her fault. Whereas, I know that when I was in India a few years ago there were all these horrific rapes happening, and it was just a really scary place to be. Everybody's mindset, and what they were teaching kids at school was that if you're wearing a short skirt, you're asking for it and you're putting yourself in danger, never do that. Rather than saying, to the men, just because a woman is wearing a short skirt doesn't mean she wants to have sex, so it was definitely telling them it was their fault, rather than nothing to do with the man thinking that he's entitled to it. It's your fault if you wear a short skirt, that brings in cultural differences there. It doesn't matter what she is doing or what she is wearing, a man should never do that to anyone. But I know that even here people say that well, she's put herself in a vulnerable position and if she hadn't done that then it probably wouldn't have happened to her. I definitely think there's things you can do to protect yourself, but that's just a state of our society and it's quite sad that we have to do that because there are men out there who aren't able to control themselves. But it's about being and where we're going to be because of them, not because of what we wear, it's not the short skirt that rapes us, or the alcohol that rapes us.

We're always bombarded by images of women particularly, often sexualised. Pornography plays a massive, huge role in educating society around what a women's role in sex is which is obviously fakery, but that's still educating people around how they believe women should act, and what they should wear, and what they should do around consent, and that women seem to be more subservient than the man. There seems to be more directives, those kinds of things...all those messages, are ... even if it's not explicitly, they are all around us, and we are learning it from all different places, like, television, everywhere. It's all showing men's power and sends messages that it's the man that makes the move and the woman that follows. It's easy for children to see that, and then to internalise that, and generalise that into other areas as well, like that's across the life span where men are more dominant and women have less of a say. I think it might be changing a little bit now. There's more awareness around it, I think, and more, a little bit more discourse around it, or it could be that I'm older now, and exposed to it a bit more but it's certainly never been something that's been talked about a lot.

I love being able to put make-up on to go out, it's fun, I go from looking really tired, to looking awake. I like to spend time straightening my hair, and when I look better, I feel better. I think that's also a self-confidence thing, and I'm not thinking I'm trying to make other men attracted to me. I do it more because I like to feel good, and look nice. It does take a little bit extra time and effort, and I don't usually put a lot of effort into how I look coz I love sleeping so much I'd rather sleep in for ten minutes than wake up and straighten my hair for work. Like on a Saturday night if I'm

going out to dinner or to friends or whatever I enjoy putting make-up on. A couple of weeks ago I was quite sick for a few days, and I was just at home and didn't really leave the house and didn't wear make-up for a few days and just wore my black pants and a hoody. The next day I went to work I put make-up on and I wore nicer clothes, and I actually felt better, I felt ready for the day. So I think it's basically not all bad, a lot of it is for us too and to give us more confidence as well.

I've seen some mums who like after they've had children, how they let themselves go a bit. I think they might feel a bit drab, or maybe like they'll be so focused on their kids and other things... I don't know, it's hard to speculate. I guess hair dye is like \$10, so if they really wanted to, I think they could always find a way to prioritise it. Like if you really want to buy yourself something nice, like a lipstick or something which lasts forever. But I think it's also that your priorities change as well. I'm not going to be that worried about spending \$180 on getting my hair done if I've got three kids and that's where my focus will be. I don't think that will make me any less attractive and I think, to my partner I will be more attractive because I'll be the mother of his kids hopefully.

This almost sounds bad to say out loud, but a stereotype of a woman being sexy is having like large breasts, and long legs and long hair, and quite flirtatious, long eyelashes and big lips, those kind of things. And to show them off, and exacerbate them in some way, so like wearing push up bras, and lots of mascara, or short skirts, and showing off their assets which men consider to be sexual. But the reason why I mention it, is because that's usually what a person sees first. The physical person, and then they see their behaviour, and their personality and all that after.

I definitely think appearance isn't everything that contributes to sexiness or attractiveness. I think maybe other things actually come into play, like a women's confidence, how she holds herself, maybe what she says, how she acts. She can still be flirtatious and sexy in her behavior without, looking flirtatious and sexy. Like if you wanna appear attractive to someone and you know that they are really into something, then it could be like, learning a little bit more about that thing that that person is into, and then that person might be like ooh, they really like, football or whatever.

It's really sad that someone like Trump is in a position of power and he's in a position where people will look up to him and consider him a role model coz he is extremely sexist, and derogatory towards women. Even when you look at his wife, she is the picture of what someone would imagine to be a sexy woman, with like, an absolutely perfect symmetrical face, perfect hair, big lips, big boobs, high heels - completely impractical! Everything about him is just sending that message that he's like a sleazy, disgusting man with lots of money. And that's sending another message as well, that women will go for that. Like women who are in the Playboy mansion and those kind of, like, not much going on upstairs, but have big boobs and blonde hair and blue eyes and down for sexy

anytime will be with this seedy 80 year old man with lots and lots of money. And that's sending another horrible message out there.

You don't often see gay couples, or bi-sexual couples on TV. It is happening a little bit more now, but you don't see it often. I saw a program yesterday, I was flicking through, and there were two guys who had gotten together. It was on one of these American dating shows and then it flipped to the mother of one of these men, and she was crying and was really upset. She was saying it's not how I pictured his life to be, and I wanted grandchildren and things, and was going on about how hard it was for her which again, I think pushes towards stigmatism, 'coz she was saying how it wasn't right. So sending this message across TV, it's not helpful I think. I think if I were gay and I watched these programs I wouldn't be able to resonate with them at all I certainly don't think it helps to break down stereotypes or reduce stigmatism, I think it just reinforces stereotypes.

I think homophobia is definitely a thing in New Zealand. In small towns people are quite stuck in their ways, and this is a farming town. You need have good self-esteem and be quite strong and have like thick skin and be able to brush people off. Or brush comments off, which is really sad that they have to be like that, but it's kinda true. Good friends of mine are a gay couple, and they moved here from Auckland and they just didn't feel comfortable holding hands, when they did, they'd find that people would look at them funny. They felt really uncomfortable here, which is really sad, and they ended up moving to Sydney. When I lived in Wellington, where we've got gay bars everywhere, no-one will think twice or look twice if they saw a gay couple walking down the street holding hands, no one would care, so I think the bigger the city, the less conservative people are. Geographically there is a known fact, like depending on whether you are in a big city or a small one, like being somewhere like Holland versus NZ, it's probably more accepted in Holland or places where they are more sexually liberal... if that makes sense.

In the work that I do we get a lot of referrals for young people who are really distressed because they have realised that they are attracted to the same sex. They hate the fact that there is so much internal homophobia around it, like especially one boy that I'm working with at the moment, he is gay and hates, just hates the fact that he's gay. I think it's really sad because he doesn't know any gay couples and I know that if he was living somewhere like Wellington he'd feel a lot more accepted probably. I said to him there are probably people out there who you do know that are gay but haven't been brave enough to come out because of the environment that they live in, it's just not conducive to being different. It's because we are a bit of a farming town, and people are all really old school. I think that will probably eventually change as well, but it is really sad.

These days, all of a sudden people are really comfortable with their sexuality, which is awesome. I think if a woman is choosing to use a sex toy, then good on her, I think if she's buying it for a man to use on her, coz the man is getting all the pleasure out of it, then that's a bit sad that it comes back to what they see on porn and what they think a woman enjoys, 'coz what a woman enjoys isn't always the same. It's kind of sad for the guys too, because they're doing it thinking that she's getting enjoyment out of it but they're kinda just wasting their time and effort. Whereas if a woman is buying it for herself and is really enjoying it then I don't see anything wrong with that at all.

It's good that not everything out there is for men. Like women who are into that should have something too, although personally, I've never been that interested in it. It's quite funny like this woman at work, she's always had calendars with like sexy guys, but I've never actually found them attractive. I'm just like... ugh. I've never been like wow, that guy looks amazing, look at his abs. Like it hasn't really ever done anything for me, not since I was a teenager and had a picture of Nick Carter from the Back Street Boys on my wall. And that's just 'coz everyone else was, but I wasn't like how guys would have posters of girls and have a wank over them. That just doesn't seem to happen for girls I don't think. Well, me personally, I wouldn't get a dirty magazine of guys with oil all over their chests and like have fun with them.

Through talking about all this it makes me realise that it's definitely changing over the years. I think women used to be really conservative, like it was quite typical for a man and a woman to have one sexual partner for their whole life and no sex before marriage, and then they get married they're with that one person. Now it seems to be that both men and women have multiple partners before they settle down with someone, and it's got pros and cons, neither good nor bad. It just keeps changing I think, sexuality and sex. It's all talked about more, but it's still not talked about that much if that makes sense. I think children even, and adolescents are having sex younger and a younger, I think they're having sex before they even realise what sex is and understand it completely, or are emotionally ready to. Like physically they might be able to, like a guy can get a boner at a really young age and females get their periods at around like 11 or 12, or like a young age but they still seem like children, they don't seem emotionally ready to be having sex. That's something I learnt from my parents, that I'm going to talk about it with my kids from an early age and I think that will prolong, or that would help them wait longer before they have sex.

## Thinking with Elaine

Within this cosmological encounter I engaged with a process of shared meaning making including implicit understandings about male and female subjectivities categorised within the sex binary. Navigating this shared discursive space I was initially distracted by the appearance of normative discourses of heteronormative sexuality and the ways in which these constituted particular kinds of subjectivities that felt problematic. This was in part because of the inconsistencies between these normative discourses and the articulation of our embodied lives that became apparent during this process, but also because this lens appeared to reinforce heteronormative sexualities and therefore shift focus away from the types of political questions I felt drawn to, for example about the ways in which processes of sex and gendering hierarchies are related to other variabilities in our lives.

Elaine's articulation of negotiating normative constructions of gender and sexuality illuminates the interrelationships between the processes involved with the embrainment of the body, and the embodiment of the mind. Thinking with Braidotti enabled me to consider the ways in which subjectivity is already always in motion and how bodies and spaces are materialised through a *process* of becoming different. This helped shift my thinking from issues that are framed around individual and proprietary notions of sexuality that pertain solely to difference within the gender binary towards sexual difference as multi-directional and dispersed, not linear; multiple, not binary; relational and interconnected, not dialectical; and in a constant flux, not fixed – as a molecular mode of becoming (Braidotti, 2022).

As Elaine dances around the parameters of heteronormativity throughout her storying a complex assemblage emerges that is entwined with social processes, materialities and encounters with others in which human and non-human, relational and co-implicated forces are always at work through multiple organic and inorganic ecologies – hormonal, environmental, psychic and social that co-produce bodies (Braidotti, 2022). Sexual difference, therefore, becomes redefined as an active process of differing that breaks away from the hierarchical system in which difference is posited as the pejorative other (women as less than man) and realises sexuality as a collective desire to express and materialise virtual potentials which affect both subject formation and knowledge practices in society.

## Sam

Women's sexuality means to me looking girly and feeling nice and attractive. Like expressing yourself in a way that makes you feel good about yourself. It's about dressing up and getting your hair done regularly, and doing those kind of appearance type things that girls are supposed to do and that make them look nice 'coz sexuality for me is about looking nice. What makes girls look nice is that you've got make-up on, you're putting your best foot forward and it is about appearances, that's the girly aspect that I think about. If I have nice hair it does make me feel nice and that would matter to me if I wanted to like feel turned on, or to feel sexy. I feel really nice if my hair looks nice. It makes me feel really good, and your sexuality is I think, kind of linked in to certain aspects of that.

I have a friend that won't leave the house without make-up on, she's got no eyebrows so she draws them on every day, like it just would make her feel good. I guess her confidence would be worse if she didn't, she would be self-conscious so that would bring her a certain amount of confidence I'd say. Or my other friend will be like oh my god I've been spending hours doing my eyebrows and I'd look at them and I think they look like a clown, and I'm just like okay. But yea, I guess we all play up on it sometimes. It's about what you feel, this is my own perception of it. I also have a friend that cries heaps. She's really sensitive and expresses her emotion in crying and that's really attractive to guys 'coz it's like a vulnerability. She's never without a guy and she's *always* getting compliments and I'm just like what the fuck! If you're feminine you're a bit vulnerable, or you're sensitive. She's got all of these traits that I don't. I don't cry in public and all these other things which are probably feminine, like I would think girls cry.

I don't have a partner, but if I'm out and I'm dressed up and a guy is checking me out then I feel more confident being at that party, even if I didn't want that attention from him. And all the comments that you get – it's all positive reinforcement of these girly things. Like, oh my god, you've got your hair done or you've got this new thing, or your body... it's all confidence boosting stuff for that. So for me it feels nice if I get a compliment and it makes me feel sexy, or that I'm a girl you know. I do like compliments if I'm going out and it makes me feel good to know I've got a bum and waist that can be complemented on as well. I like it if my friends also think I look nice, it's not just about pleasing or about looking good for the opposite sex.

I think you're always kind of in competition with other women. I guess maybe not competition exactly, but there's a lot of discussion and talk about females looking sexy and taking care of their bodies - well that's what goes on in my circles anyway. Like you get the thing of she's butch, she must be a dyke or a lesbian. It's kind of difficult to think about how your sexuality is linked

to that kind of stuff but it makes you feel more that you're heterosexual, not a homosexual, or I don't know, lesbian. That I'm not going to be attracted to my friends. I think that there's probably a certain amount of overlapping because I think your confidence could be tied up with feeling feminine. If you look good then you're probably not going to look masculine, you're probably gonna look a bit more feminine. Or that you're depressed, that you don't feel good if you kind of don't act or dress up, that's what I feel. That maybe you don't feel good if you don't care what you look like. If I don't put effort into what I look like, people probably don't think that I look very happy. I think that there's a certain pressure, if there's a lack of effort that kind of means that there's a lack of, I don't know something, so you always want to maintain an element of giving a shit about your femininity and your sexuality. I mean you go up to Levin, you go out of the city and sexuality, or femininity that kind of - what I'm explaining half doesn't exist. It's just completely different, or I don't know, it's just expressed a different way. They're walking around in their pyjamas down the main street with their hair not done, and I don't know whether they maybe they feel sexual doing that, or maybe they just don't think about it, but it is a response 'coz of the attraction.

I'm not going to express my sexuality that much by wearing what I would wear if I was attracted to, or trying to court somebody. But I still would bring in an element of it because I think its intertwined to my style. Like I've gotta go for a job interview and I think there's gotta be a certain amount of, well if I went into it with no lipstick on and with no make-up on and my hair all over... there's an appearance factor you kind of wanna come across not like I'm using my sexuality, but I am using my feminine side and enhancing that to boost my confidence so that I feel good about getting the job. If there was a panel, I probably would act differently if its guys or girls. Say if there was just a panel full of men... it would just feel a bit more intimidating. That you should smile a bit more and maybe make a little joke or something. I probably would do the same for the ladies but they're on the same gender level as me so I feel like I would need to concentrate a lot more on what I have to offer. I think looks would come into it, definitely 'coz you do wanna still come across as taking care of your appearance and keeping your upkeep, and giving a shit about your body and health and being professional. But it probably would be a little bit different. The women might be all confident and really ego based, and really resilient and strong, and look for male attributes which a lot of women have as well. I mean I wouldn't want to do a strip show or anything in front of the guys but there would probably just be some subtle differences between them. I do feel that being a woman and being interviewed by women you've also got the kind of common grounds like we're kind of more relational and we're a bit more emotional. I might act or not act a certain way like it might be sort of more professional and understood, whereas, if it was a panel of just guys they'd probably be looking for the less emotional woman.

I think over the years the fashion sense has changed a lot. It's a lot more open for girls, a lot more accepting that you can dress a certain way without being judged that you're open to having sex with everybody because you show some cleavage, or that you can wear a short skirt because you think it looks pretty. If I'm out in a short skirt, or just having my legs out I definitely get comments on it. Positive mainly, but like I might get a lot of come ons. I still think that girls need to be careful though, there's that innuendo of you go out and you're asking for it, that does still exist. In fact I still say it sometimes, I'm like what are you doing wearing that skirt, is it actually a skirt? It's only just barely covering your ass! Maybe that's a bit unfair, but it's my initial reaction. It's 'coz we live in a society where the bikini is worn at the beach and if you go to a rugby game and wear a bikini you're a flasher. I mean I think it's changed in some degree, but not deep down, you know. The word whore is still used, slut is still used, or slapper if you're a girl that looks good, that is attractive. And say you're with a guy, or then you break up and then you're with another guy, you're a whore and it's not fair whereas for guys its different. It's like they're more attractive when they do that, and this is from a young age from at school. It goes round from a young age, it's completely ridiculous. And then it's like you're the wench down at the docks, 'coz they were the only girls that wore low cut tops and short skirts and whatever, the ones that sold their bodies for sex. It is changing but it's still not openly accepted.

I think there is a certain amount of power using your sexuality and dressing as such as well. I have a friend that's really sort of sexual in her body movements. She's long and lean and she sits up straight. She hasn't got a big chest but she has long blonde hair and I always used to look at her and think you're really feminine and sexual 'coz it was all these kind of fairy tale attributes that went along with her. I would always think I'm so not like that. She'll always get comments from guys about how she looks even though it's unwanted, or even comments from guys who will just openly flirt with her and they're actually really offensive. They're awful. It's really disrespectful, just because she's a girl that looks nice. She's got a partner and she's really happy, and once she was just dancing at a party and having fun and this guy said to her you really know how to dance, if I gave you 20 bucks would you give me a dance? And it's just like what the fuck, I'm just at a party dancing. It's like girls having fun is now sexual, what the fuck?! It's not fair, it's really disrespectful. So in some ways it's actually just if you're pretty and having fun then you're a target.

It's hard coz you want to look nice but kind of conservative, or conservatively, without wanting to be leered at all the time, you know. It can be really hard to get out of it if you feel obligated to fuck. I don't think that's talked about that much. I mean it's either one extreme or the other, you're either kind of off having sex or getting kind of fed the reassurances that you look pretty and that everything's really great and would you like a drink... which leads on to ok, you think I'm

pretty and you think I might have sex with you, but it's not really talked about... it's really hard. I'm always like "a drink is not a contract". If you've really got good self-esteem and are confident you can like maneuver your way out of it but some girls are just cut throat. They'll actually just be like no, I'm not sleeping with you.

Personally I have to be really assured of the situation, as in know what the expectation is and I need to feel comfortable. You've got to be confident in what you feel is right for you. I guess the power is half in our hands, like if we don't want to have sex. Just coz you're horny, doesn't mean I'm feeling the same way and I don't think that needs to be linked to whether I'm having fun or not. It could be at the moment because I don't feel that great, so I don't really feel like being more vulnerable, like I feel like that's actually a step that might not make me feel that good in myself and as a woman. But if I trusted the person, if I had an established relationship with him, it would probably feel maybe nice that you're being cared about and supported and that trust is there 'coz there is like some kind of vulnerability or sensitivity about it.

It is fun sometimes, like if you're with a girlfriend and you move in that way when you like squat, you kinda do a twerk, but really low to the ground, because you know you're playing it and you can play up on it. When you're nice and attractive there's probably a certain amount of sexuality and flirting that just continues in everyday circumstances. Maybe I think that's some of what I mean when you're in a professional aspect, you can actually play on your sexuality for... to get your own way sometimes. There's a certain way that you can get things from the opposite sex, and then from the same sex you don't wanna come across as being threatening in a kind of better way than someone else. It can be really hard to keep up with the girls, it's hard work.

## Thinking with Sam

Sam's storytelling links identity politics to embodied subjectivities constituted by dominant forces of heteronormativity. Her embodied and embedded recollection about the cost (financially, emotionally, relationally) of competing with other women is revealing of the micropolitics of everyday living that influence different women in different ways and led to me to reflect on how embodied accounts, grounded in a politics of location can disrupt notions of homogeneity and binary difference through directing attention to our situatedness and the ways in which our collective social and political experiences are shaped by our physical and cultural environments. This collectively shared and constructed process of consciousness raising is at the heart of politics of location, which recognises the multiple differences that exist between and within the category of women. If we think of a location as an embedded and embodied spatial but also temporal site: it is a memory, or rather, a set of counter-memories, which are activated against dominant social representations of subjectivity (Braidotti, 2015).

Grosz (1989) and Braidotti (2014) both assert that the ways in which affect, desire and imagination are organised, channeled and transformed are fundamental to theorizing subjectivity as these bring to light flows of power relations. As an embodied gendered subject, Sam engages with a process in which she identifies herself in relation (through comparison with and in opposition) to others creating alignment with, or against other subjectivities constituted through categories of gender. Affective technologies of hegemonic masculinity flow to normalise particular subject positions over others so that cultural practices associated with heteronormative feminine subjectivities construct boundaries between what is normalised through the binaries of good woman or problematic as is indicated through Sam's use of the terms 'butch', 'dyke' and 'lesbian' as undesirable. Formations of affect are key to understanding how modes of subject constitution come to be produced through insidious technological components of broader governmental logic that both produce and perpetuate oppressive affective patterns.

Thinking with Braidotti (2013), becoming other means desiring the self as a process of transformation – for the shift and flows of multiple desires, of learning to reinvent the self. Enabling subjects to reassert their identities in all their multiplicities is a way to redistribute the structural inequalities that impose sameness in a set of hierarchical power relations. Braidotti (2014) contends what is crucial to processes of becoming other is undoing the oppositional majority/minority dualism and awakening an affirmative passion and desire for the transformative flows that destabilise all identities. Affirmative ethics builds on radical relationality, aiming at empowerment by increasing one's ability to relate to multiple others in a productive and mutually enforcing manner while

creating a community that actualises this ethical propensity. The affirmative force therefore is also the motor of political change in which we collectively construct conditions that transform and empower our capacity to act ethically and produce social horizons of hope, or sustainable future (Braidotti, 2022).

## Gemma

Taking care of yourself was embedded in me by my mother and aunts, having lived out here I think. I suppose it's probably just a hang up of being a teenager out here, before cell phones and stuff like that, walking the streets and just knowing, taking care of yourself. But I think that they were very hyper alert, and since then it's eased, but not completely. There's obvious parts that are different too now, like then I wouldn't be wearing shorts during the day, I wouldn't be walking around unaccompanied, and things like that. Even now I walk every morning and I have to wait until it's light. It would be nice to actually be able to do that, and without a dog because its gutting to have to be aware all of the time, always looking over your shoulder. That would be amazing to change. I don't think it will, it might go backwards a bit and then we'll move forward again, it's just two steps back, three steps forward, two steps back. But if it does, it would be wonderful. I can't help it but I'll see some women, you know, and I'm like why did you go down that alleyway? Just why? But whatever's going on, there might be times you gotta be in that situation. That's obviously an attack situation, but being put in that position. I just think being put in that position, being stupid enough and making that silly decision of not protecting myself. The what ifs... god, it's fear. Fear of the stupidity, fear of that stupidity.

I think I remember I went on the pill when I was 14, purely because of my period and how it was at that time for me. I remember mum turning around to me, coz I didn't even actually understand the connection between "the" pill and being able to have sex. I was 14, so I didn't really get it, and then my mother piped up, and told me doesn't mean you can have sex. I was like oooh, it's that pill, inside of course. Yea my life actually changed, well my teenage years changed completely from having gone on the pill, it was sort of like this catalyst for many things to come. Not that I realised it at the time. Like one night stands, a great example there in the 90s. It kind of, blew up in that sense. You know, women were really coming into that 'girls can do anything' mind set. Like yay women can do it yay... as long as you protect yourself, yay we can do it just like men can, we can go out and we can ask for it, and there's nothing wrong with that. It started and ended with that person, and if it carried on, it carried on into a relationship, or if it didn't it didn't - it was acceptable. It was normal I think, well here in Wellington anyway, if both agreed to it, if you were straight up and honest.

I don't see anything wrong with one night stands actually, just ask, would you like to? Yes or no, and no's cool. Complete vocal consent. If I'm consenting, and situations do change, could be anything, it could be you've remembered something, the washing, or fuck, I've got a husband at

home, I don't think any reasonable man would have a problem with that. Do I think a woman has the right to change her mind? Abso-friggin-lutely. Do I think women are becoming more stronger vocally? Yea, yea I do. I think women all go through one, at least one dumbass decision. Like yea, not gonna do that ever again. It comes back to state of mind I think, I don't think I would do that. If something were to occur I would just... well, I don't think I would be attracted to that kind of person anyway. I think I am a pretty good judge of character in that sense 'coz god you can see them! You can see them a mile off, the slimey ones. It's like I would never go with you to begin with, let alone be in that situation, even back then. I think its inherent with women, we know. I think it dates back to cave woman days, mate suitability, that sort of thing. I think warning bells. But yea, state of mind. If women are drunk or god forbid, when they've been slipped something, or something like that. That's when that whole decision making process goes awry. There's just no protection there, and women especially are going to be painted with that horrible brush of sluttiness or whatever it is, and I don't know whether that's going to change, because once again we get to this and that's out there at the moment, but it's always going to be that undertone and the women are going to have it harder.

I was thinking the other day, if I want to go down to the mall, as opposed to going to Wellington and going shopping there, I will dress differently. I certainly won't wear heels to the mall, and that's purely because how I'll be looked at or responded to, but it's nothing in Wellington. Out here you'll get the side eye and stuff like that, like she's open, she's looking. It's more of a non-acceptance. It's a... who are you? Women will shun ya. Men will look at you a lot more differently too, in the sense of, well she's up for it, she's looking sort of thing, so that's always going to be the way I think. It's the way it is out here. I don't think it's ever going to change in that sense, a lot of women will dress down. It's only 25/30 minutes north of Wellington, but it's still pretty old school out this way, and I suppose like anywhere that's not central city. Even if I'm getting dressed up to go to a party or dinner in Wellington, and we've got to stop off at the shop out here on the way in and I'm wearing heels and a skirt or something like that, it's like yea na, I'm not getting out, you can get out and get your own cigarettes, you go and get them... or you pour the petrol, because I'll get the side eye. And that's purely, completely just a social silliness and I don't think it will change.

There are women out there who just don't give a shit, and I love that, I just think that's just confidence, and it's absolute beauty. But having grown up out here and stuff, and seeing that a little bit more I feel... apprehensive, shy of that sort of response, and I'm not going to do that. I know what idiots live out here, so I'm not going to do that. Out here, there's probably more of a chance of having to walk on a street in the dark than in Wellington, just purely public transport availability, taxis, that sort of thing, or waving down people. I mean the women that can do it, I don't begrudge

them at all. That confidence is amazing, I mean I don't have it and I think that the next generation, the millennials or whatever they call themselves, if they are able to do that, power to them. If they manage to change society, for the better, well done.

This generation, I actually don't think they have more freedom, to be honest, I actually feel sorry for them. Freedom... that's a loaded word. It's that whole perception, ten foot tall and bullet proof when you're that age. These days, even if there was an agreement or anything like that, what happens on social media... people gotta share everything these days. Sexual exploits, and especially one night stands, I think you take a huge chance and risk in what happens on the day, even two, three days after on social media. I think it always ends up there nowadays with these young ones, and whether it's a closed group, it's still a group. That can be anything that's online, it's just never going to go away, so yea, I feel sorry for them so no I don't think they have freedom at all. I think things are just so much more in their face, and the comeuppance, or the karma that as far as social media comes back and smacks them across the face something chronic, and I think that's just so dangerous for them. It's just so dangerous, especially with sex, and society out there. At least when we were in the 90s if you wanted to, and you could, it was between me and the person and maybe a few close friends, and groups and now, now its passed around in photos and videos and things like that. I just know I'd hate to lose that freedom, I'm glad I caught that freedom myself. I think that's spinning around in a box, in a fishbowl, I just feel bloody sorry for them actually, just comparatively, sexually anyway.

Even when you're watching MTV or a music channel, I used to love it when I was a teenager. All of the music videos and things like that and you see the differences in the back up dancing. I loved to dance when I was younger. Seeing what they did back then and what they're doing now, and what they display, and watching my daughter watch it, she's ten, and it's all hypersexualised. It's just that whole appropriate question mark. We're going through that whole mother-daughter thing at the moment with what's appropriate and what's not, with what she wears and things like that and still having a personality. I've explained it to her as best I can. I think she understands once she hears the reasons. I'm not the kind of person who's like get in your bedroom and change. It's get in your bedroom because when you're bending over I can actually see your va-jayjay, so get in there and then change! Because it's in your face, it might look good like this, in front of the mirror, but you bend over. It's a balance, and that's why I love active wear. That's just her I think just navigating around what she should be wearing to school and things like that. She loves anything sparkly, and she hates skirts and that sort of thing, so she wears shorty shorts you know. Got no problem at home, got no problem when we're out at the beach, or out at the park or whatever but school, it's like yea na. I don't know why I should even worry about that, I feel guilty having to worry about that,

because that's how she feels comfortable, but at the same time it's like appropriate, come on. This is school, there's supposed to be a little bit of work. Would you like mum to go to work in shorty shorts? Her father said I'll come down in shorty shorts to drop you off, and then we'll see how appropriate they are. So we're having a few to-dos about that sort of thing.

I can't help thinking like that about that sort of thing, rightly or wrongly, but I do. She just feels comfortable and she's a very confident girl. I never was that confident, but, she's just like, it's who I am mum. So that's a really interesting message because it's really good for confidence, but also you don't want them to not take care of themselves, and at the same time put themselves in a potentially dangerous situation. So there's that awkward balance there. I had a conversation actually, because she wants to travel, and I'm like yuss, but she has these farts of ideas as they do, it's like I wanna do this now, I wanna go and do marine cadets and then I wanna go and do scouts, drama... it's like no no no... because she does tae kwon do with her brother and her father. And so the question I ask her is when you're travelling, what's going to protect you, tae kwon do, or learning how to sail a boat. I says, you're going to get more out of this, for you, particularly, because I feel like you're going to put yourself in those situations. It's just me being mum, it's who I am, and learning how to protect yourself, so it's cool that you've got all these little things going on in your mind, if you want to do that you can do that later, but for now you're doing tae kwon do.

She's got a great little group of friends and they're just so nutty, really nutty but I think a lot of girls are nutty, and then they get all introverted, you know, with the hormones and stuff like that. I don't wanna lose that, because I think that stuff's beautiful as far as a girl is concerned. I never had it, so I don't want her to lose that, so I'm like don't stop, you crack me up, she's real funny. I don't wanna put her down, you know coz you know a lot of people would put that sort of thing down, like stop being so silly. No, I love it, I encourage it, coz I know there's going to be a time when she's locked in her bedroom. So I just hope she doesn't lose that, but yea, she probably gets it from me and I encourage that confidence but at the same time, I've gotta get that balance of being able to protect her at the same time.

I think knowing how bad it can be out there, predators, all of that sort of stuff, knowing the bad stuff up front, will hopefully protect her with being a little bit more... aware. Which is kind of sad, but at the same time, like recognise and listen to your instincts, and if it's too good to be true it usually is. Just because it feels good doesn't mean it's right. I kinda of feel bad for her to have to learn it that way, but at the same time I don't, because I don't want her to have any ideas that especially for women it is all beautiful out there. Especially the first time and so forth. She's had a lot of questions, and that's what I love about her too. Right from when I decided to have kids I was always just going to talk. I was always going to answer every question because it was never like that

in my household. I feel fear for her, but at the same time, I think I've balanced it out with a few hard things. It is hard for me, not having had those sorts of conversations growing up, but I did have a friend whose family did and I was over at their house quite a bit, and realised that my situation wasn't necessarily normal, that theirs could be normal, so I made a conscious decision to be more along those lines and to be open and honest. I feel like a bit weird when it comes up but then it's like shhhh to myself, settle down, just go with it... talk. So yea, the initial reaction is I don't like it but I have an internal voice that says chill the fuck out. I don't think she thinks about me like the old antiquated mumma thing, but that could change... that could definitely change. If she were to come to me later and say I need condoms mum, I need this or that I'd be stoked, I'd be like yea, let's go, not a problem. Is there anything more invasive that we can do? Do you want an IUD? Just anything and everything, yea absolutely.

I actually let them watch that programme, and I don't know if it's appropriate or not, but Teen Mums, on MTV. Just purely to watch their reaction to what they're watching. Not for long, just put it on, but normally the mother's having a meltdown or something at the father for being a drop kick whatever, it's just watching their brains tick over, it's quite a cool experiment. That was the only reason why I had kids later on, it was because my sister made me watch a video. Holy shit, no holding back because you don't believe your mum for a start. Even being there with our mum while she's having our little brothers is like it's nothing, you're dealing with it, it's not my problem. When you see the actual visual thing going on, it's like ah... yea na. Even my husband when we first met he wanted 92 kids, he wanted heaps of kids, he said 92, I remember 'coz I've never got that number out of my head. Like what do you think I am, I'm not a machine. And then he saw the first one, he was there for the first one and he was like just two a-ha? And it was like yea, just two, two we can manage, and it was like yea, I bet. Spread the genes... they love that, spread the genes.

Women's sexuality grows within a partnership. Men definitely do have an expectation because I think they get hornier, they definitely get hornier as they get older, and more demanding. I don't know whether that's an indicator of maybe what could happen, but, it's funny because a couple of years ago I think that I had this view of having to maintain and take care of his needs, and I've definitely changed. Post-babies it's like, not even on your freaking radar and if it is, god, jesus christ, good for you, and what's your secret. But I think um, particularly post-babies, it's hard for women to, come to grips with their sexuality again. Not all, but a lot, and even just talking about it is hard and I don't think men understand that... at all. If they just sat down and read a fucking book then maybe they might sort of cotton onto it, which is why a lot of them tend to look elsewhere. I've seen it with a lot of my friends' marriages being broken up. I have multiple friends having hysterectomies so they can't even fathom that kind of part of their life, and then the men, their eyes

are wandering, they go look elsewhere and younger. Whether that's her fault or his fault or anyone's fault, it's nobody's fault actually. I don't think it's anybody's fault that that happens.

A couple of years ago I had it stuck in my head that I had to look after and maintain his needs no matter what I felt at the time, I just put out lots. But then after a while I was like nooooo... you've got a hand take care of yourself coz I'm not in the mood, sorry darling. Men can just... compartmentalise, put everything aside for the needs of whatever is dangling down there. Whereas we're going this is happening, and I've got this going on, and work, and kids and stuff. I think that's really mean for whoever... like when do we actually meet in the fucking middle?! But also I believe you get to a certain point and you're like if you feel that this isn't enough, then that's another conversation that we need to have, because your needs are not paramount to my life anymore. I actually I fell out of love with my husband for a few months. A year actually, and it wasn't happening for me, and I was seriously thinking of moving on. What was it, I don't think anything was a real catalyst. Maybe it was my 40<sup>th</sup>, maybe seeing that, going through that, and watching him dance around, and knowing at the time that I wasn't... I didn't feel... I just sat back and watched it, and I could see how much he loved me. We were going away but it was family time and stuff like that, but I wasn't ready to meet him halfway, I don't think I was, and I just sat back and watched it, it was odd. And then all of a sudden one day he got a spark up his ass, but why did it have to get that point... I just kept asking myself, why does it have to get to that point? So sexually, we've turned a corner there, and it was more a case of... if you want me, then you make a play for me because, it 'aint gonna happen otherwise. Maybe that might be the start of the end, I'm not sure, but at the same time I feel more comfortable with myself. I mean he's a great guy and everything like that, but no, the ball is in his court from here on in.

So it's interesting, and after talking to different girlfriends and things, well I guess I didn't realize how common it was 'coz you get a lot of relationships, especially in your 40s where it comes to a crux. I think the 40s are quite dangerous for marriages. You've had a couple of decades of doing that, just doing that... like out out out. And now there's no need to do that anymore, it's like, yea then you have to reassess. I suppose that's why I call it my mid-life crisis. Like yea, I'm going through a mid-life crisis. Trying to make an informed decision, really, without going really crazy cray. I think especially as women we're almost expected now, because well most had their babies in their early 20s and even teens and by now they're grandmas. There's no break, and that's almost the sequence, the expected sequence of women now, I must become a grandma... oh hell no, god jesus christ no! I wasn't prepared to have babies for a while, let alone grand babies. But I think a lot of women are venturing away from that sort of expectation that's for sure, and smashing it out there on their own,

more power, and let it grow, but there's just going to be some fundamentals and bullshit that will never change.

## Thinking with Gemma

Sketching a cosmic terrain with Gemma's story casts light on affective forces that flow through women's bodies highlighting how gender and sexuality are inscribed across multiple layers of the bio-political. Reorienting towards a posthuman feminist perspective, bodies are heterogeneous and relational desiring machines (Braidotti, 2022). Braidotti (2014) links desire with power and knowledge where power is both negative (*potestas*) in that it constrains and prohibits, as well as positive (*potentia*) in the way that it enables and empowers. The negotiation between these poles of power mean that subjectivity can therefore be politically formulated as power and desire. The subject is consequently positioned as being in process with power as well as in resistance to it which highlights a complex convergence of forces that is structured by an interplay of obligation and desire, a desire that both is and is not one's own. It is linked to the ways in which bodies encounter other bodies and the assemblages and linkages these produce.

The genealogy of women's stories of pain and violence has as its organising principle the negative affects of women as weak and vulnerable, and has to do with forces that circulate creating arrest and blockage, pinning embodied subjects in place. As embodied and embedded subjects, pain and vulnerability expresses the deeply affective and relational nature of all living entities. Affirmative ethics and the positivity of desire neither deny nor cancel pain, violence and suffering but rather propose another way of dealing with them, with the assumption being that negative affects can be transformed through movement and flow through processes of becoming. This is achieved through the ability and the commitment to co-produce conditions and practices that transform the negative instance, including hurt and pain. Braidotti (2022) describes vulnerability as an ethical and political means to come to terms *with* rather than reject the untenable and painful.

In thought with Braidotti (2022), the ethical ideal is to increase one's ability to enter into modes of relation with multiple others and to create a community that actualises this ethical propensity. She describes disrupting negative passions as the transformative process of achieving the freedom to affirm one's essence through joyful encounters and interrelationships with other bodies and forces. This process aims at pursuing the subject's capacity for interaction and freedom and is joyful, coinciding with the terms and modes of its expression whereby the moment of actualisation of its virtual potential is also the moment of the neutralisation of the poisonous effects of pain (Braidotti, 2022). This is achieved through actively desiring otherwise and breaking with normative frameworks in a radical gesture of defamiliarization that is transformative of negative passions through reorienting towards a philosophy that is no longer entrenched upon a phallogocentric set of ideals.

# Joelle

My mum's a very feminine person, and she's very much into make-up and high heels and making herself look beautiful for men. I didn't want to be that. I'm the opposite. Probably, especially in my 20s, I really downplayed all of that. I wore some make up in my first job, but what a pain in the bum that is, like you had to go and check your face all the time and I thought this is ridiculous! So then I didn't wear make-up, 'coz it's like you can just have proper conversations and it's not all about ooh I just rubbed my eyes. Yea, I think I was probably quite anti a lot of that sort of thing, I probably just like doing things different from society anyway. But I also wanted to be taken seriously and I wanted to have serious conversations, a lot of people wouldn't take you seriously. You just wanted to be treated like one of the guys really.

My dad was a good person. He just had three girls, and he treated us, well, from my perspective, he treated us as human beings you know, not as... not boys. And I like it when people can treat me as a person, that's really important to me. I'm a woman in IT, and I guess there were fewer of us in the 80s. I really like being in IT because I think there's a large group of people who care more about how you think and talk, than about how you look. Part of that kind of slightly nerdy people that it attracts, they're a little bit more in their heads, so I like that.

It was always so important to me that women should be allowed to do anything. When I grew up women couldn't be bus drivers and there were all these jobs that weren't accessible to women, and I just always thought that was a bit stupid, it's just not fair, just stupid, so I've... it's always been really important to me, and I guess that's part of why I feel strongly about being treated as a human being because that's what we all are. And not a woman because that means I'm not allowed to drive a buses, or I'm not allowed to do this, or I have to behave a certain way.

My sisters are probably more like my mum in terms of clothes, although my mum can be quite hypersexualised as well. My mum is in her 70s. For her, that was her method of having protection and security, it was about having a man. I guess that worked for her that her relationships with men are about that sexual side of things. But then she'll bring all that into her everyday talk and behavior as well, she just likes to shock you, I think. It is just a bit about how her attention getting is about sex and it's about sex conversations, it's about when she went on Tinder, it was about having probably sexual meetups or sexual conversations with men on Tinder, and with her boyfriend, and lots of things. She's like very trying to gain your attention and doing it through sexuality. I guess that's her way of attracting and keeping the people she wanted, because when her husband died she still needed to find another person. She doesn't have a sense of her own

independence and power, she needs to have a man and have a sexual relationship with a man that gives her her sense of self-worth.

My relationships with men and my sexual relationships are based more on our conversations about other things. I have my own sense of power, so it's irrelevant. I don't feel I have to attract them because I can just attract one if I like. It's particularly easy to have sex with men. Ah look, there's a man, would you like to have sex? Yes please! I mean, they're not exactly out there playing hard to get. Let me think... ah, you want to have sex... you're really ugly... I'll have another beer then we'll have sex. It's not very often they would say I just don't feel like it. So I guess I just see myself differently.

I'm probably a bit biased about women who are very feminine. I probably keep away from them more because they're almost a bit alien to me. I have this group of women at work, where everything is brought back to penises and really rude sexual jokes. Men would never be allowed to be so sexual and have sexualized things all around them. I think it's wrong that these women do this when actually women have worked really hard to try and remove the sexualisation of women out of the office and yet these women have basically taken that and moved the sexualisation of men into the office. It's fine, and it's funny, people being a bit rude, but I'm like can we just have a fucking conversation that's not just about genitals... because it's just all the time! Women worked really hard to stop that. You can't just turn it around and make it ok the other way, it's not okay.

There is a bit of hypersexualisation at our work anyway. They're very happy to talk about female anything as much as men's. People in the office will use sexual language, and it's like no, treat me as a person. I'm a person like all these other people are, our gender is irrelevant in the workspace, we all bring individual and different things to it, and it's not fair if you make these comments to me and treat me differently because I'm a woman. I just think it's as wrong as it was back in the 70s, it's as wrong now really.

I was thinking when you have babies, you're exhausted for ages. I guess your relationship really changes. I thought, probably after my second child, I don't know if I'll have sex until my husband has had a vasectomy. So you have to sort of redefine your relationship, and you redefine love I think, when you have children, because I don't know if you would put yourself out for anybody else as much as you would your children. You see the world differently and because you do put yourself out, you know, your focus is more outward, especially if you've had children a bit older, and you've got more used to your own world. That's a big change, maybe women don't see themselves as sexual beings quite in the same way. And then they worry, what if you've put on weight. Your relationship changes after children or even menopause. Men have, well their libido changes as well,

and they are fed the same thing about do you stay in a relationship if the sex side is different when maybe there is so much else going on. So I guess you either hang on in there and if things change you'd leave... Actually, I'm not sure if people do or don't. People tend to leave each other a bit more now. Maybe in the past people would adapt and make different choices.

Society sort of feels like you should be having sex. And people are brought up that you're are only supposed to have sex with one person, it's a really strong message, and it's derived, I believe, from men wanting to know who their babies are. Is it ok for people to have good, loving family relationships without having sex? I mean mum was saying she and her husband stopped having sex. It would be really hard for everybody I think, because it is part of that love relationship isn't it, especially if we're still kind of monogamous, so you'd think well if we're not having sex but part of the definition of our relationship is that you're the only person that you're having sex with... what if I feel like sex?! Now what? Where do we go from here? I don't know, I guess people just work it out.

My husband is really relaxed about letting me go out coz I love to go out and he's an introvert. He just lets me have this space and freedom which is just lovely. There was a group of people I used to go out with, and one of them was this young man and he was probably, I don't know, 15/20 years younger than me. Lovely, like we worked together and used to go out and we got on really really well like really well, he was a really nice man. And he would make these comments about how he used to have a relationship with this older woman, it was really good, I really like older women... and I'm like yea yea yea. And then eventually I was like he's probably trying to say something, but I was like if I really fancied you, I probably wouldn't be going out with you because I quite like being married to my family and I like my family. But I really like you, and he could actually treat me as a person so that meant we could go out and have a really nice time but yea it was actually, maybe even a year or two later, I'm like I wonder if he was... but yea, in fact this guy was my run away from people coz you go out to the pub and everyone, the drunk people assuming she must really want to have sex with me, and I went over to this guy and would be like no, I'm with him. So yea he would be my run away guy, and vice versa. He'd be like, yea, that guy is really into you, he was telling me about all his divorce. So yea, really good chatter ay. Sometimes it's hard because my husband knew I was going out with these people all the time, and so I'd have to make sure that he feels comfortable, you know, secure at home.

We went out, this same guy I told you about before, and he hooked up with this woman at this pub. He was really drunk, she was really drunk, and so he's going off home with her, I said just make sure she hasn't got handcuffs in the basement! I just do not know how you can be drunk and go off home with an utter stranger... how could you... I've just read too many bad things happening to people. And then, what's even worse, is every time we went to the pub after that, they were so

mean about her, and I'm like you assholes! And I'm like... na, that's just shit. What happened to just treating people as human beings? But he got derided every time they saw her and they had a nickname for her, a rude derogatory nickname. It was a couple of women that I was with. Maybe they didn't like that she went off and had casual sex with him, but that's her business you know, as long as she's safe yea, but he got derided for going off with her. He didn't really get names, but it was all mean about her, it was all about her. She wasn't ugly, she was just a nice ordinary person. It's just about how you have to cut women down, so much and then all the jokey jokey stuff at him, but derisive about her, so mean!

Maybe that's how they used to do it, maybe that's how they used to stop women from making their own natural sexual selection because I truly believe that women should be allowed to just as men should be able to, but maybe that's how society used to be able to do it, by being so mean. By them being mean about her they're passing on the message to me, aren't they? Well, not just to me, but the message to all the other people who were there that this is how we're going to talk about you if you do that and that's how they make it so that you're not allowed to go and choose who you want to go and have sex with. They're not even really aware that they're being mean, they're just saying shit that they think is right. They were people I worked with that I went and hung out with, but these women I wouldn't have told them anything personal because they're the women who talk about you behind your back anyway, aren't they. So you do tend to keep it careful. So yea, I've seen lots of instances of how men and women treat those women who've had a hook-up and it's like, it seems mean and it's so unfair.

I used to sometimes hang out with this guy from work, he was from Africa. There was one particular time coz he was always... I think he'd sexualise a lamp post, truly! He was really overt, he'd sit there and he'd be moving his hands, like really... I've never come across it with Kiwi men, because they're a little bit... slightly more hesitant. And I'm like, are you just thinking that we're going to have sex, and he's like yea. So I was like well where would we even go and have sex, and he said... oh, just anywhere. So yea, it's like wow, you're really doing it for me. It was like really? I didn't even, I was like wow, you're different from other people.

When I went to Italy, you get looked at really differently. It's like, whoa this is weird. When my husband went to Italy in the 80s with his girlfriend at that time, he said you know they pinch your bum, they were really physically in her space. That doesn't happen to me, very rarely. So, the only experience I had, I was at a party once and there was a Polish man he'd just come here recently, and he was friends with this Polish guy that I worked with, and they were much, much more pushy. I was like yea, I know you'd just have sex with anyone, I'm not interested you're not making me feel special. I don't even have to feel that special you know. Human being... hello but it was so, I don't

know, culturally they must just be more sexually aggressive than whatever I was just used to. Or maybe the signals in your own culture you're just used to them aren't you?

This one time I was walking down the road with my husband in England and you'd walk past the working gang and they'd all start whistling, so I just gave them all the fingers behind my back and then I told my husband he was like no, they'll come after us, so I said just walk faster! When you get to middle age and you're getting a bit less of it, it's quite relaxing, it's like this is nice, isn't it. A lot of women don't like that, they feel like they've become invisible. I don't have that at all. I don't feel like it's gone away, in some respects it's a little bit more relaxing because you're not looking out all the time. And that is the thing isn't it? You get totally put down if you don't look right, but you're like totally worthy if do look right, it's like... ah, just piss off.

When my daughter and her friends were 14 or 15 at the time, and her friend it was her 15th birthday party. Her friend's mother had this boyfriend and the party was at the boyfriend's house. I had met him a couple of times, and there was just something odd. He was creepy to me, you know, something was making the hair on my neck stand up. So I said to my daughter look, if your friend is going to stay there I don't want you to go there. She said no no no that's fine. Anyway, unbeknownst to me she did. I didn't get told that the party was at his house, and that he was going to buy them alcohol. So he buys them alcohol and they go back the party. About a week later it was another girl's party, and she tells them that he had sex with her. So he got them all drunk, and had sex with the 14-year-old, and he had been grooming her. He was in his mid-30s, and the friend whose mother's boyfriend it was went home and told her mother, and this is a story of how great a mother can be, the mother Facebooked him, he shut down his Facebook and she rang the police.

It was such fantastic story because when I was a kid my friend, the neighbor was having sex with her, and her mother said what were you doing with the neighbor, and she said, ah we were just playing bottoms. Don't do it again the mother said and then that was like the end of it, yea. So she's got this whole sexual abuse history and it just went nowhere. In the 70s nobody ever talked about it, or in the 80s. So I was just amazingly proud of this woman. There was still a whole lot of fall out for all these girls, really, it was a terrible thing, but to go to police, and the police take you seriously now. Women are heard. And they didn't say to her it wasn't her being bad, and she is 14 so it probably helped, and she would have been lapping up his attention too because you're 14, it's like wow. I said to my daughter, how come he got away with it? And she said we're actually used to trusting adults, you've brought us up to trust people. So it was really good because well I think back to the 70s and ah well, you know, you were just like a nymphomaniac... slut... bla bla bla. And young girls, you know, 14/15, they flirt outrageously with older men, and they should be safe to do that as

well, and safe to go to, you know, friend's houses where there are fathers because that's how they learn about how to be treated.

I said that to my husband once, the way our daughter will be with her boyfriends and partners has so much to do with how you teach her as she's growing up and you know, vice versa for boys. It has a huge impact, and he really took that on board you know. So yea, the outcome of how you treat her and behave around her just reverberates all the way through. So while my daughter is sexually active, and has been for a few years, my daughter doesn't... I think that she's more sort of, tends more towards serial monogamy rather than, well it's people that she likes. I don't know if she's ever just hooked up with people. I don't think she's made that way. I'm not made that way, and I think it's your make up as well, like casual sex. I just kept going with family planning, where you just look after yourself. Honestly, I don't even know how guys have casual sex, I've read far too many psychotic serial killers!

One of my favorite interests is women's romantic fiction. If you were going to read women's romantic fiction in the 70s which is all bodice rippers, you know, like semi-rape kind of things and then the 80s and 90s and how it's evolved and changed. Even Mills and Boon, but now there's a lot of sex in women's romantic fiction compared to then. Then there is Fifty Shades, I haven't read it myself, but my daughter wanted to read it. She was 15, asked me would you buy that for me? No. Well why not? Everyone's reading it. Because I think as an adult you have filters for female sexuality and you can see it for what it is. It might be titillating, or whatever, but for teenagers still finding their place in the world, they haven't got the same filters yet, and it takes a while to develop that. And who's talking about feelings? And how to treat people. It's hard though because the kids don't really want to talk about that stuff with grown-ups.

## Thinking with Joelle

Charting this starscape I am struck by the glow cast by Joelle's affirmative and invigorating desire, and active resistance to dominant forces of heteronormative femininity. Her intention to connect with others on her own terms, as someone who is "not not boy" welcomes diversity and is affirmative of difference. Sexual difference here emerges as a process of actively engaging with encounters between multiple forces moves and flows, opening out through a process that transcends the binds of the binaried structure of gendered categories through an affirmative passion and desire for the transformative flows that destabilise all identities. Desire here, is not expressed as lack – 'I want to be more boy because I want what they have' – but as site of potential with the creation of new possibilities of empowerment through encounters with other bodies and forces. It is an embodied becoming, actively pursuing a line of flight away from the limitations of gendered identity and subjectivity.

Thinking with Braidotti (2022) we are encouraged to account for the living, embedded matter of bodies as pre-discursive phenomena, including the role of culture, transversal cross-species and the trans corporeal interrelations between them. Braidotti (2014) argues that embodiment of the subject is a key term in the feminist struggle for the redefinition of subjectivity as it addresses the bodily structure of subjectivity and therefore emphasises the importance of the body as a site of knowledge production. Joelle's storying of how she and other women negotiate gendered expectations shines light on the multiple and various ways in which sexualities as subjects in the process of becoming are constantly experimenting with various intensities that are enacted collectively as the affirmative aspect of sexuality in a more transgressive and politically transformative direction. Sexual difference, no longer the interlude of negative opposition, instead flows as a vital force and encompasses rhizomatic or nomadic interconnections where desire thrives in multiplicity, as the production of affirmative relations.

Braidotti (2022) encourages us to consider embedded and embodied entities in all their morphogenetic and topological virtualities and unprogrammed virtual sexualities as a means of rethinking and repurposing sexuality within the posthuman convergence. Within advanced capitalism a focus on hyper-individualistic freedom of choice and hypersexualisation comes into view, women who have "moved the sexualisation of men into the office" – an observation made in Elaine's story also. Posthuman feminism assumes both a post-binary world and a constant interaction between re-materialised sexual practices affecting embodied subjects and de-materialised flows that decenter them. It offers a means to rethink sexual difference differently and supports experimental sexual relations and kinship arrangements through a relational process that is

heterogenous, transgressive and moves beneath and beyond fixed unitary identities and gender binaries (Braidotti, 2022). Affirmative ethics is therefore not an application of moral protocols, norms and values, but rather the force that contributes to the conditions of affirmative becoming.

## Ella

I wasn't brought up necessarily pro my sexuality. It's kind of sad, Dad used to tease us girls about everything and it was awful. I remember being just mortified when mum brought stuff up with me too, so it wasn't probably dealt with very well in our household. It's probably my husband who's actually supported it a lot, which is great, and I do feel powerful in my sexuality, I sort of don't hide it or anything like that. I guess it is a strong part of me, who I am.

I see women and their sexuality as being really powerful. I was just listening to the radio before, and they were talking about companies in NZ. Someone had texted in to say their house used to be the first Bendon factory, and then it became a winery or something. The guy who presents said oh, boobs and wine, like what more do you need. It was just such a funny comment that I was sort of just like what did he mean by that? Because I see boobs and breasts as being so feminine but whenever I hear men talk about them in a real sexual way, in an almost alluring way I feel quite undermined. I feel like almost how dare they, because I feel like women's bodies are so powerful and they almost don't have a right to speak of our bodies like that. But I guess I'm probably more, I don't know, maybe more liberal thinking about things like in sexuality.

I think views are really different pre-mum versus post-mum. I've always really enjoyed having sex, like always really enjoyed it. My husband and I have been together 11 years and its interesting because he actually wanted us to wait 6 months before we slept together. I didn't really see that as being an important thing, but he really placed a great importance on that, which now I really value. But we used to obviously have a lot more sex before we had Beth. While I was pregnant I was really interested in sex. I felt like my body was amazing because I was growing this little person, and I actually didn't care what I looked like. But I felt really sexy at the same time because instead of being worried about my body and what it looked like, I felt real powerful that I had this huge belly, she was in there, and she was kicking away. Post-mum I'm sort of the opposite. It's not even that I'm too tired, I just have lost the interest to really be intimate in lots of ways.

I'm definitely not as confident in my body as I was before, some of that's to do with weight gain and how my body's changed. I feel sexy when I'm exercising and running lots, when I'm eating really well, and when I feel thin and good in my clothes. I really hate that I feel that way, but that's how it is at the moment. I used to really enjoy getting dressed up and going out and being with friends and just embracing being a woman and things like that. But I think post-baby, well I obviously haven't got back to that yet. I've been out a couple of times, but I don't really feel the same way

about myself. Even things like I don't have any non-breastfeeding bras that fit me. I mean I'm only feeding morning and night but I haven't gone to the effort of going to get sized for ones that I could just wear during the day that you don't have to clip and unfold.

After having Beth I lost all of my hair so now I wear a wig and at night when we're in bed I don't have a wig on, I've got a bald head. I don't really feel all that comfortable, and I don't like being intimate because I don't want James touching my head because it's bald. It just makes me feel like not... I don't feel... well I haven't felt like myself for a while now since I lost my hair. But I think that's probably part of my sexuality too, my hair. It's kind of this roadblock or this obstacle, the lack of it, that kind of gets in the way. It's always there, it's not something you can sort of get away from. And even if I was to wear my wig, it would fall off, it's just not one of those things that you can kinda work around. So that's been a huge, huge thing. I've struggled to feel sexy since having a baby, the last time was probably when I was quite heavily pregnant.

James has always loved, well he's kinda a boob man. But I mean I'm breastfeeding, I don't really feel that comfortable him touching me because I'm very aware of Beth being in the next room. I sort of am aware we don't have all the time in the world anymore for things. So that's a big thing that weighs on my mind, that I feel like I maybe sometimes hear her making noises or something, and it's then like no it's not her. I don't know, I guess it's just my sort of subconscious that I can't turn off. I had an emergency C-section with Beth in the end, and like the scar, it's probably only in the last 4 or 5 months that I feel comfortable with it now. I didn't want James to touch it, or look at it, or anything for months and months and months and months. Part of me felt like it was a permanent reminder that I'd failed at a natural birth, it all kinda went out the window.

I think there's a part of me that almost looks at some of my clothes and thinks I'm a mum now, maybe I shouldn't be wearing that. I think even just the things that I'm more aware of, it's probably not even that my opinion's changed, it's probably just that I'm more aware of how I feel about myself and then maybe what I notice in other people as well. I suppose I even look at some mums differently, as women, than I did before. I think I... I don't judge them, but I'm just kind of aware like, ooh I don't know whether I'd wear that, like that's a really short dress, or like the way you're pushing the buggy. I can tell that already I'm starting to think that maybe I shouldn't be discussing things as openly as I do, or have done in the past, which is actually quite a weird feeling for me, I haven't really been like that before. Maybe I should be a bit more... I don't know, possibly it's how people would view me and whether they would judge me or whether I may not meet up, or measure up to this idea of a mum. Coz that's really important to me, like I really, really wanna be a good mum, obviously.

I think I would maybe describe being a good mum as almost not putting yourself first. Like that's been a big thing that I've struggled with, especially in those early days when you just don't get any time to yourself. I find that really hard, and I need time to myself. So, it's been a big thing for my husband and I to make sure I get some time to myself, whether it's just watching Netflix, whether it's going to the gym, or whatever it is. But I suppose it probably is yea, putting your children first. I've been really working on not caring about what people think about me as a person and I'm doing really well on that. But how they think, how they sort of feel about me as a mum is still really important to me. I'm always checking in, to make sure that I'm maybe portraying what is expected of me, so toning down the sexuality, or toning down the dress. It hasn't been summer yet, but I probably wouldn't go out with Beth wearing short shorts and a t-shirt like I used to. I'm probably more aware of what people might think. I mean that's in my head, but yea, I probably am just aware of other mums around me and maybe how they're portraying themselves too.

Usually when James gets home I always apologise first thing when he walks in the door, coz sometimes I've just got out of the bath or the shower with Beth. I sort of say, I *was* dressed today, I have had make-up on, you know! But I'm in my pyjamas that I was in when he left this morning, and I've got a hat on instead of my wig, or I've got no make-up on. And he's like I don't care, but to me, I care, because... it wasn't even like I used to put in a lot of effort into that, I was just such a different person before becoming a mum. Losing all my hair that's just been a massive thing on top of everything else. I mean he always tells me how beautiful I am, always tells me how much he loves me and things like that, no matter what. Even if I'm bald in the bath with Beth he's still telling me that, so I don't know he probably has a... it's not my soul, but it's kinda like a way of being that he probably finds sexy rather than a quantitative thing.

James has known me through lots of body changes and being really, really fit and going to the gym all the time and then not. I think he definitely sees me as being sexy when I'm confident and comfortable in myself, so it's not really a tangible thing. It's sort of more of a way of me being. Every day is different, and now throw in another pregnancy on top of it, well it's been a real a challenge to even feel like myself. I really believe that sieve mentality, that all the things that are important will stay, and all the things that aren't just get lost along the way, and that's totally fine. I think it's just kind of shelved for now, and comes out sometimes.

When we got married which was 2.5 years ago, I bought all the gorgeous lingerie for our honeymoon and I never used it. They don't fit now, post-baby, but I felt like there was this expectation to be this really feminine person, and put effort into things like lingerie that I never do the rest of the time. I don't know whether that was kind of sold to me the whole wedding idea and

bridal thing, this is what you should do, or whether it was just like an expectation I had of myself to buy things. I spent hundreds of dollars and just never used them it's just so ridiculous. His idea, I think, was quite different of me back then. I always say to him I will get back to where I was before, and it's not a bad place that I'm in now, I just don't have the energy or the capacity to be this raunchy, sexy boobs pushed up, like person around the house. That's not my focus at the moment.

The idea of me buying lingerie or something is just kind of a bit of a joke, I mean I just wouldn't feel comfortable in it. James sort of sometimes jokes about how I used to buy things and I'm like what... once? He has bought me stuff probably twice, and it's just been ridiculous! I've just been like what are you doing, like oh my gosh, this is not me. I bought new underwear 6 months ago or something, and he particularly liked these black lacy ones that I got and he commented on it. But I said to him I got them because they're really comfy, they're not actually meant to be sexy, and he just thought that was really funny, but good at the same time. He was like good, you should be comfortable, like what's the point in not being comfortable.

It's been really tough, but I'm definitely getting there now. My attitude now is I am sort of operating with my mask off. Leading up to having Beth I wanted to keep up appearances and I wanted to look like I was doing fine, like I really cared what people thought about me and wanted to fit in. So I worked so hard to probably come across as everything was fine, but actually it feels so much better if someone asks how I am that I can actually like open and honestly say, yea I'm great, or actually, you know, it's been a really tough week you know. That's been a big part of learning too. That it's okay, that people aren't gonna judge me. But in saying that it's funny, thinking about Beth going to kindy, or something like that, I don't wanna be the mum that turns up completely disheveled with three kids in tow to pick her up. I don't even know why that would matter because if I saw a mum who was like that, I would just think like, you're amazing, I would have dropped your child home for you so you didn't have to come out.

I definitely do think I feel like I have this bond more with other mums. Like when I see people out walking with their buggy and got their little baby in there, I feel a lot more like it's this club that I've joined, and that's really nice. Like mums with young babies - you can all relate to each other and it just feels like that's really nice. I think I definitely don't, not that I ever really judged other women, but I definitely don't judge them as I used to. Especially mums, what goes on behind the scenes, and what they might be dealing with. I've had an amazing, perfect little baby. But others, my poor friend Emily, her baby had colic and stuff, I just can't even imagine that. And to still be functioning, like it's incredible. So yea, I think there's more this bond. Maybe then if a woman who is a mum was really portraying her sexuality, I'd almost be jealous maybe because how can you have

everything going on that I know has been going on and you still have time to, or you still have energy, or you want to... you know?

It's quite a new world being a mum. All of my friends that I was really close with before, I'm not that close with anymore because they can't relate to having a child. And I don't know whether they don't want to relate, or they can't. It's just too hard, but I think I'm in this kind of world now where I'm solidifying these friendships with like-minded mums with children similar ages, and I suppose I'm kind of aware of what that means. I wouldn't want to turn up at a group play date dressed inappropriately. I mean I wouldn't want to do that beforehand either, but I feel like it would burn my bridges way bigger, like way more now because I'm a mum. So, I guess maybe I do feel like there's a lid on my sexuality maybe, as a mum, and maybe it's because Beth is so little. I think I picture myself having lots of littlies around me and that's why I've probably got a lid on it, 'coz how on earth would I have time to kind of focus on it? It is so important though, like when James and I are intimate, I just feel like back to me. It kinda just recharges my batteries and kinda reminds me that there's other things to focus on and not just being a mum, or this role.

Even how I dress, I almost feel like I have a mum wardrobe too. It's awesome 'coz I've got tons of comfy pants now that I never used to wear, I'm kinda pleased that they're more fashionable now. Before I think I was probably more outgoing with my clothing, and things that I would do. I definitely don't feel that way now, but I think it's probably to do with not having the energy or the, I sort of don't care as much anymore. I probably put more care into what Beth's wearing, or what she looks like, making sure she's got a clean wee face, and things like that most of the time. If I was going out to work I would really care that I've worn the same thing like two or three days in a row, but like now, yuss, it's still clean, that's awesome. I know that I won't always be like that. I know that there'll be more important things, and that I will care how I dress again, and I won't always have to think about breastfeeding clothes, and a mummy tummy... I know that they will all go, but it's definitely a consideration. So I think the whole everything that I probably think about myself is probably under this umbrella of a mum. I think the way I feel about myself and as a woman, is definitely in the category of mum and all the things that go along with that, rather than maybe even a woman or a girl.

I want Beth to grow up being really confident in her body. That everything is ok and there's nothing taboo or that we can't talk about. She hopefully will know early about how her body is going to change and develop. I think that my idea is to be really open and honest from really early, so that for her there's sort of no unexpected things that come up. That's kind of how we wanna bring her up, and James is quite staunch on that as well. We just wanna teach her to feel really comfortable in

her own skin and to really look after her body and keep her body safe. We practice free movement with her, so if she's crawling around and stuff we'll often say to her please keep your body safe, like if she's near the edge of something we might say that. So that's really been something that she's always heard and we'll probably continue that, and it could be physical safety, or emotional... or any kind of safety.

Hopefully, we'll kind of be guided how Beth feels about herself, and what she wants to do. I can imagine that she'll wanna either fit in, with everyone else, and if they're all wearing really short shorts, you know, she'll want them. We really just wanna instill this confidence in her to be her own person. If she wants something I guess we would support her to a point. I would find it quite hard to probably approach her if she was wearing something that I thought was inappropriate maybe. If her boobs are developing and like she maybe wears a t-shirt and like you can see her nipples or something I think that would be a difficult thing to broach.

I remember being somewhere, I don't know where it was, but I remember being at a beach somewhere, and there was a wee boy running around, and he was probably around 6 or so, with... with no clothes on. And I felt a bit like... ooh, like that was a bit... like a bit risqué, or a bit you know. But then, when I think about it I don't even know why I thought that, it was, I think, yea I don't know. Coz I've taught children, I've helped them toilet. It's probably just this thing about you know, about being private. Probably not drawing too much attention to yourself as well in that way. I don't think I would let our children run around naked on the beach, and that's probably from a really protective point of view. I mean even, not even many people have changed Beth's nappy except us, like my parents have, and her aunties and stuff, but I mean we just treasure her body, like it's just this beautiful wee thing and I suppose it's just like sharing it with other people, or exposing it is kind of scary for me. I'd probably let her run around with no top on, but she'd have to have pants on, or knickers or something.

I wouldn't have wanted to live like 50-100 years ago. That whole idea of how women were oppressed and everything to do with them being sort of male dominated. I think with my personality I would have found that really hard because I'm quite stubborn and I'm willful, and I do what I think is right. I think I would have found it really really hard to be so covered all the time and measuring up to what other people thought and sort of not speaking about things that you really wanted to talk about. I'm pleased that things are the way they are now. I feel like that's sort of how it should be, and maybe how it should have always been, just this power and empowerment that has come to women. I just feel like women can do anything and I even love when women are compared to men as being just this totally superior being, like I just love when I hear that... it's very rarely but I mean it just makes me feel just so good to be part of this gender.

I love the idea of a woman being back in charge of the country. I'm not particularly a feminist or anything, but I just really trust Jacinda. I mean everyone is talking about her lack of experience and stuff, and it's like she's been around in the party for 9 years, and she was Helen Clark's advisory. I just think that I don't know that a guy would be getting such a hard run. When they were talking about her age and whether she's going to have children, I was like how bloody fantastic would it be for a Prime Minister to take maternity leave to look after her baby, I just think that is amazing, and why shouldn't she? I just think why not? And why couldn't a dad, like a prime minister, take paternity leave? If Andrew Little had stepped down and the next in line was a male I feel like he'd just get a slap on the back, and congratulated, but I'm really proud about how Jacinda is tackling like all of these questions. Andrew Little is an old, white, middle-upper class guy that I just can't really relate to.

## Thinking with Ella

The shining luminary that attracted my attention was an innate sense of wonder at the embodied experiences of women connected to the powerful and regenerative forces of life itself. Through storying her embodiment of the maternal and sexual aspects of herself, Ella's negotiation of dominant forces highlights how the colonisation of mothering by phallogocentric logic is constitutive of maternal subjectivities. The good mother that Ella aspires towards is a dominant configuration whose regulatory forces are constitutive of women's experiences through establishing normative constructs of what and how a good mother should be. Braidotti's (2003) emphasis on the embodied nature of subjectivity however offers a means to disrupt established modes of theoretical representation by creating space for multiple and varied maternal experiences. While motherhood is a highly politicised area of women's lives, an embodied understanding destabilises notions of a central identity while enabling these to exist in a state of fluctuation outside established hierarchical categorisations.

Thinking with Braidotti (2022), sexuality is an elemental, complex force at play before, beneath and beyond the gender binary because matter is sexuante. This refers to the inbuilt capacity of living things to be sexed and sexual and to reproduce sexually. Being sexuante means to be differentiated and endowed with multiple sexual morphologies and virtual bodies of desire through a molecular becoming, and is sexual in an open-ended manner that undoes the binary gender system of the patriarchal symbolic order (Braidotti, 2022). Sexuante matter is relational as it gets mutually specified and defined in the encounter with others and a sexuante process of becoming is therefore both an ethical and a political project that requires collective subjects and collaborative assemblages to carry it out. The mediated nature of sexuante matter therefore de-essentialises the discussion and inserts more complexity in the contemporary experiments with alternative sexualities.

Essentialised notions of subjectivity invoke negative passions that reduce a subject's political agency whereas affectivity is the power that activates our bodies making them want to act, fulfilling our capacities for interaction and freedom (Braidotti, 2006). Thinking nomadically is transformative in that it points towards cultural interconnectedness, a shared thread woven through the women's stories. It illuminates the body as a complex interplay of social and affective forces, a bundle of contradictions indicating a shift away from the body as a map of semiotic inscriptions and culturally enforced codes (Braidotti, 2003). Offering a means to circumvent passive thinking, the transformative potential of nomadic thinking activates alternative ways of thinking about what kind of humans we are in the process of becoming without assuming mastery or a position of dominance

since 'we' who are not one and the same are nonetheless in this posthuman convergence together (Braidotti, 2022).

# Ava

I never really learnt about sexuality at all from my mum. She was a solo mum and typical, you could say British prude. She didn't want to even discuss anything remotely sexual, unless it was periods, or stuff like that, the more physiological. We never talked about boys in our house. Even if there was a sex scene coming up on the telly mum would change the channel and it was just never ever discussed in an open way. So I got the basic sex education at school, the birds and the bees, and this is how it's done. I met Bruce, my husband, when I was really young. I mean I started going out and stuff when I was probably 15, so grew up quite quick in that respect. There was a place in the town where I lived in the UK called Off The Record funnily enough, and its where you used to go to get your condoms and your pill, and speak to a nurse. It was not linked to a doctor's surgery and it was specifically for young people, under the age of 19 and nothing went on your medical records and your parents weren't informed just because you were under 18. So I could get the pill that way, but again that just became a one stop shop of in and out, you got your pill, you got your condoms and go, it wasn't really the kind of place you'd go for advice, as such.

I grew up in an environment where if I wanted decent advice, I knew I couldn't go to my mum about it, I had to find that elsewhere. Things really opened up for me at college, and I learned everything I knew about sexuality just from peers. You get a dialogue running through about what is acceptable, what isn't acceptable, what's funny versus what's serious, and it's all taking the cues from your peers as to what that is. So you kinda grow up knowing what rape is. You certainly would know if that was happening to you, like that is a massive violation. You kind of grow up aware of that, and say no, and about consent. But I think what's less discussed even today is that sort of blurry space between being consent and not being consent. The more psychological pressure around consent, which I think that was more prevalent when I was growing up. I would never sit here and say "I was raped" because I wasn't, but was I pressured? Definitely. Did I say yes to things when inside I was saying no? Definitely. I think there was a lot of pressure, and I don't know if it's still the same today, but certainly when I was growing up, there was pressure on women to just to do like, whatever.

I think a lot of it was psychological in that you're probably thinking well, if I do do this I'll be in a relationship, or there was kind of an emotional attachment there. If you like a guy and he wants you to do this, that and the other, you kinda just do, because you like the guy, and there's that emotional attachment. Whereas for a guy that's not really... well, they're kind of two separate things. There's the physical act, and I think the emotional act is more separated. It's talked about more with women, whereas that emotional aspect is downplayed for men. But I think guys, well

certain guys, know that if they behave in a certain way they'll get what they want by sort of using emotional manipulation, if they're that way inclined. I think growing up I was exposed to some of that, and didn't necessarily have the understanding that I could say no and that was ok. I think it was just more around an expectation is set that you must do all of those things for you to continue to have contact with that guy. It wasn't even love or anything like that, but it was just what you did, it was the expectation I think.

When I was younger, you kind of put your make up on, you do your hair, you wear clothes in a certain way that might resemble somebody that you admire that's famous or someone that you're exposed to in the media, like day in day out. And so it's imprinted on your brain to be sexy you must try and resemble this, and so all girls kind of, myself included at that age would all look like carbon copies of each other. Back then it would be the scraped back hair, it would be the two little strands of hair on the face, it will be lipstick, the chokers, it might be, little spaghetti strapped singlets, short skirts whatever because that's the image of what being sexy was. I was never one of those people that necessarily dressed provocatively or anything like that, even when we went out to pubs or clubs and things, it was never really something that I consciously did. Again, you turn to peers I think, and you kind of dress similar to your friends and that's the way you fit in, but I didn't necessarily dress a certain way to attract guys. I wanted to be attractive, but not necessarily to attract guys if that makes sense. Even when I met Bruce and I'd still go out, I'd still dress in a way that I was feeling comfortable with and, attractive in that sense, but not with a view to attracting guys or anything like that.

At that age, I never really noticed society being open, it was more dare I say it, behind the bike sheds kind of conversations that you would have with your mates about this boy, that boy, and what happened, or didn't happen - that kind of thing. And taking advice from peers as well, it all came from there. Now, as I've grown up, it's all accessible. I think the internet has changed the dialogue on sexuality for women. I think the accessibility to getting problems solved, or just looking for support, or curiosity. I think access to free porn, I think all of that, I think the internet has played a large role, personally for me I think, in terms of just being a google or a click away from anything you ever want to find out. So I think the relationship you have with peers becomes more downplayed as you get older and more experienced, but you can still access the same amount of information, if not more, online.

As I've gotten older and I'm in a long term relationship, for me, being sexy comes from within. It's not this external image that's projected onto me where I think I must look like that to be sexy. There's a confidence that you need around it. I would definitely try to play to my strengths in

terms of make-up and things, like I might accentuate my eyes with eye liner, that kind of thing. I'd probably wear lipstick whereas I don't normally wear lipstick day to day unless I'm consciously remembering to apply it, and not only that, it's re-applying it more often than not. In terms of my clothes I can feel sexy wearing just jeans and a top if I accessorize it and wear boots instead of chucks or whatever, but if I was making a real effort for an occasion I'd be happy to wear a dress. I don't wear anything particularly revealing anymore, and I don't even think that's since I became a mum. I don't tend to wear revealing stuff nowadays anyway, and I think that's probably because I'm not as confident with my body shape compared to when I was in my early 20s. But I don't think that makes me feel any less sexy. I think you can still be sexy without having to show all of your flesh and in some respects it can be better. God, I sound like my mum now!

If you've got body hang ups or if you've doubts about how you look and certainly becoming a mum has accentuated that for me, you're not going to feel sexy until you learn to either accept those things or overcome them. It is a more mental thing that you have to, I guess, decide to feel sexy. I mean most of the time when I'm a mum and I'm just messing around in track pants and I've got a bun on my head and no make-up on, I don't feel sexy. But if I turned my mind to it, and if I accept... and I'm learning to accept my body for the way it is, I can feel sexy if I choose to, but that's more of an emotional thing now, than a purely what I look like in the mirror type thing. I think that emotion and the way that women feel about sexuality is part of the discussion as much as the physical act itself. Bruce has made more of an effort to compliment me on my appearance, which is nice. Like if I were to put some lipstick on or do my hair nice, or wear some nice clothes or whatever, and he'd be like ah, you're looking really pretty today, or you're looking sexy in that, or, you've lost weight since you've had the baby, you're looking really good. That is a real booster for me and that makes me feel sexy, but since having Abbie I haven't been able to tie feeling sexy to actually having sex because of the way having sex has become since having the baby.

After having Abbie sexual acts have happened, but I haven't particularly felt sexy around that. It's been more a quick she's asleep, she's probably going to be asleep for the next half an hour, boom, in the room lets go, without any thought to sexiness or anything like that, it's just been... get it done, we're both in the mood for it. Having sex has just become, it's almost like something at the very bottom of the to do list, if we get a chance, if Abbie is asleep and we're going to be undisturbed for a little while. We haven't been on a night out or an occasion like that where I've consciously thought let's get dressed up, let's feel sexy or anything like that. At this stage its more of just the function at the moment when we can get the time to do it as opposed to something you build up towards, by feeling sexy and all of that stuff. It's very hard to get in the mood for it when it is just a last minute thing to do on the to-do list, it just becomes another thing to do.

I think society has like maidenhood over here, and this sexualised concept of a women over there. That's what you see growing up, that's what you're exposed to. Boobs are everywhere, boobs in the sexual sense. Like that brainwashed me to the point where I didn't even want to consider breastfeeding my baby because I was never exposed to what boobs are actually designed for, which is breastfeeding children, for babies. That took me quite a journey to learn to go from this is the concept of woman over here, this maidenhood, pre-children, this sexualised being - that's what a women's body is - to mum. I don't think society today does a good job of saying mum can still be sexual too, and that that's okay. We see women having more than one child, but people don't like to delve into the psychological aspect of a mother feeling sexual again, and having a bit of sexual liberation about her that she would have had pre-children. I don't think society places the two anywhere near each other, the fact that you have to have one to get the other, and back again to have more kids. That's kind of something society doesn't really want to talk about. It's almost like the person you are kinda gets forgotten about, at least initially, when you have a baby and it's very hard to get that back.

Society tends to talk about post-baby in the sense of personally, how your body looks, or the things you like doing vs not like doing, but in the sexual sense I don't think it's really ever discussed, and I wonder if it's one of the last taboos we have. I think there's a lot out there that suggests that because you're a mum you can't be a sexually aware and active being, other than the purpose for pro-recreation. It's like you're in that mum category now, and I think a mum has to work very hard to get that sense of self back, and even then it's different anyway. What I think gets lost in that is that sexual side of a woman. And there isn't a lot out there that talks about desire, sexuality and intimacy in a post-baby world other than a lot of anecdotes online on the mummy blogs about how in the two minutes between putting the kids to bed and them waking up again you might squeeze in a quickie. Get it while you can, when you can. Let's not worry about ticking off fulfilling fantasies or anything, no time for any of that 'coz I don't wanna risk spending too much time on that and then the baby wakes up and then you're like ah... we've only just started. It just becomes functional rather than something that you really take the time to build yourself back up to enjoy I guess, that wanting. Your body has just become this vessel that carries life from inside of you, to the outside world.

Since becoming a mum, I have never been able to switch off that mum side of me. I always have one ear open. I'll check the monitor a thousand times when she's asleep, at least in the early days, less so now. I do think it's very hard to go from being a breastfeeding mum to suddenly having a body that you want to turn your mind to for sex. At the moment it's nigh on impossible to separate that, and I think it's necessary to keep those two separate, to enjoy it. For me that plays a massive role, and so for that reason, they are an absolute no go area in the bedroom. Like they are covered

up, I have a top on, I even keep nursing pads on, I don't even take any of that off. Bottom down, fine, do what you want, but bottom up, no. I think that's a physical barrier to being intimate in that way again, but for me it's necessary while I'm breastfeeding because then I'm in control. I don't wanna have a situation where it's like *shhhh* everywhere, that's not gonna be too fun. Before having a baby it was not a massive thing and I certainly wouldn't think of keeping them covered up consciously. If the top came off, great, if it didn't, fine. It's not that they were a huge feature, but it was something I never gave thought to, if that makes sense. Whereas now it's like, I may as well put a vice or a padlock around them before having sex because I don't want anything going near them. Just for the physical reason more than anything else, but I also think it's just another attachment I have to being a mum that's making it probably harder for me to enjoy the sexual side fully. I don't necessarily think about my body in a sexualised way anymore. It is this object that has birthed a baby, fed a baby and transported a baby, and then breastfeeding which it is all amazing in itself, it *is* to be celebrated.

The hardest thing is to separate being a mum from having sex. Every time I'm having sex, I just think, ah, a baby came out of here, a baby came out of here, what's going up here, like... a baby came out of here! It's not that it is less enjoyable in terms of the physical sense, no that's all fine, it's just more that the psychological aspect of a baby came out of there, a baby came out of there! For me I think that's an issue. I think over time as she gets older and I become less, sort of antsy about stuff, I will relax more around it, or I hope so. I don't think I'll do anything different consciously. I'm just hoping that it's a time issue and the more often we do it the more it will get better, to how it was. It does feel different physically for me as well, not massively, but there is a difference. And I think I'm also conscious that it's not the same as before I had a baby. I've asked Bruce does it feel any different for him, is it any different. He's like no, it's exactly the same for him as it was probably. For him it's not the issue, and I don't think it really is for men. Women perhaps overthink it, and think maybe it is different for men. Maybe he can tell it's just not the same, but in reality it's probably more up here for women than anything else, but I never see it talked about. I've only really thought of that in this discussion, that it isn't something talked about. I've got an antenatal group of women where we've become quite close and we talk about all manner of things, not just baby stuff, but that's never talked about either.

Basically I don't think that its ever really talked about, sexuality, when you've had a baby. I follow a lot of online mummy blogs, but I haven't really seen anything about it... it's very silent. I think the internet has been great, in terms where those mummy blogs are starting to celebrate mothers' bodies post-baby. The body shapes, the differences, the stretch marks, all of those things, warts and all, but it's almost silent on the issue of sexuality. There's lots of questions asked about when is the appropriate time, specifically to have sex. There might be hints that husbands are not as,

patient as perhaps they were pre-baby in that sense, and they're quite keen to have sex again, but it all seems so functional. Like when to do it, husbands impatient should I just get it over with. Just suck it up kind of thing, without really too much discussion as to how you're feeling about all of that again. I mean it's ok to feel different things, but I don't see anything about that emotional component that is always so prevalent probably, about how you're feeling and whether you're enjoying it or not enjoying it, it's just completely silent from what I've seen.

I think that post-baby it's a very silent world out there on all that. The emotional aspect, actually feeling sexy and all those things, it's just not openly talked about. I mean for me it's quite hard to feel all that when you're knackered and when you've got an endless amount of things going on with baby, and also just being able to switch off enough to even get into the headspace of feeling desire and all of that again. It's harder to talk about with your partner when you've got an endless list of baby related functions to get through during the day. It is the very last bottom of the barrel if you've got energy conversation that you want to have, especially if you suspect it could be a difficult one either for you personally, or for your partner.

Society has done massively well over the last 10-15 years at letting us talk about desire, generally, in the pre-baby sense or in that maidenhood as I call it. I think about '50 Shades of Grey' and how mainstream that was. I mean I haven't seen the film myself, but as I understand it, a lot of that is about desire, and fantasy, and all of those things that a lot of women experience, but it never used to be talked about in that sense. For that to be in a mainstream cinema is fantastic because it gets the conversation started. When you look at daytime news shows, they're talking about that stuff, whereas before that movie I don't I think it was really that prevalent. But it's all in that pre-mum world, maidenhood.

One of the things that I'll live by when I return to work is one of guilt, because you're just never gonna get the balance right. I initially wanted to go back for 20 hours a week but now I'm going back for 30 hours a week, that's almost fulltime again. So I've got to be mindful of that and very clear on the boundaries I've set myself so that I'm not all of one or all of another, trying to get that balance right. I don't think anyone really strikes a perfect balance, the guilt is just something that travels around with us. Like it's just another hat to have to wear, I think. There also aren't that many stay at home dads although there we are starting to see a change in that sense. Bruce already knows that if he goes to the daddy day care clubs and sees other mums that he'll probably be the centre of attention for a while. I know that he is going love having that time with Abbie, but I know definitely that he is also apprehensive about taking on that role because in his mind the man is the provider so he's had to overcome that, which is a male stereotype that he's had to live with.

I was reading about a study out there at the moment. They interviewed some university students who were looking at this corporation and this meeting that was taking place. There was a senior female and a senior male. One with children, and one without, on both sides. A phone call came and these people had to be called because the ones with children had an emergency, and they needed to attend to their children. They had a female leader who did leave the office and who did go and attend to the children's emergency, and had a female leader that didn't leave the office, they stayed and carried on with the meeting. They did the same with the men. They found that the staff warmed to the guy who went and dealt with his children, they still thought he was competent at his job, just as equally as the man who stayed. But the woman who went to attend to the children, they lowered their rating of competence for that woman. And for the woman who stayed, they said she's a bitch and she should have gone and attended to their children, she's clearly a cold hearted bitch by not going home and attending to the children. It's a no win situation. So I've been reading up quite a lot on this because obviously with me going back to work I want to excel in my career, but I'm also mindful of those pitfalls and perceptions that still exist whether we like it or not in the corporate world, and I don't think that's a far leap from the themes around sexuality for women, I think it's another hat that women have to go out and wear in society and something else to conform to in order to succeed.

Given that I'm quite senior in my job and there are a lot of younger women I'm mindful of those at work that don't have children, I know they will be looking at me as to how I juggle everything when I go back. I'm mindful of the example I set for other women in the organisation as well. I used to think part-timers were slackers, those part-time mums. Every time there was a massive urgent project, or something to be done, they would be the ones to say oh no, it's 2:30 I'm out the door now, see you later, and we'd be the ones staying until midnight to get the job done, and I'd be thinking, ah, part-timers ay, how can you run a place on part-timers. Now I see the other side of it. When I look back to my time as a full time employee before having children, I used to think, god how many hours did I waste standing around the freaking coffee machine gossiping because I knew I had all day and it didn't matter if I stayed late to get something done, because I had that time. How many hours did I spend in the friggin' pub after work, ranting about work and not necessarily being in the healthiest mind-set about it. Now when I look at it, and the stats prove it, is that if you really want to get a job done, you give it to a part-time mum to do, because they are time-pressured, and they focus when they are at work. They get more done per hour as a result, and the studies have proven that ten times over. I'd be very interested to see how I transition into that, from being the person who was idle at the coffee machine for the first half an hour of the day,

chatting to people versus getting into the office and getting my shit done and then I'm going because I've got another job to do.

I've been studying up quite a bit about women in leadership before I go back to work, and one of the striking things out of that is how still to this day, how much significance is placed on a woman's image compared to a man's. There is a whole code about how to conduct and present oneself, the clothes you should wear, not wear, and it all ties in to how you are perceived as a leader. It's not as overt, it's not as prevalent as it used to be, but I do think the old stereotypes still kind of remain, when you think about going into a corporate environment at work, you've got to make sure your skirt is not too short, that you've got tights on, that you've not got peep toe shoes or too low a top because you want to be taken seriously. So the connotation to that is you must dress very modestly, or you will just be known as the one with the low cut top, instead of being taken seriously. I think it's still goes back to women are sexual objects still, first and foremost, and everything else is second, like how overt it is, whereas men don't get that. Like the things that have come on TV about the Australian news presenter that wore the same suit three weeks running, and nobody made a comment, but when his female co-host wore a dress that people didn't like the look of, the barrage of questions on social media, it was just interesting that difference.

I never used to think this way, but I kind of feel sorry for the big media outlets these days because they kinda grappling with social media as well in that world. I think at the moment they're walking a bit of a tightrope, the old stereotypes still exist and the media can't help themselves but play that out. An example is a female sports presenter was interviewing a male American footballer I think he was, and he tried to put his arms around her and give her a kiss, and that was rightly projected back out to the world as, that's not acceptable. But in society you could still see that that female sports presenter was still getting flak for being...well she was attractive, she was wearing nice clothes, but that didn't give that American footballer license to put his arms around her and kiss her on the cheek. So I think the media is still giving that airtime as well as throwing up the debate about whether that's acceptable or not. So what I mean by the tightrope is that it's still playing out to the old stereotypes, it's still giving airtime to those big divisive debates because they know what sells. To see Miley Cyrus twerking on the TV it sells, people are still hungry for that kind of cannon fodder, even though it plays into those stereotypes, because if Justin Bieber jumped around on stage in the same way, no one would bat an eyelid probably.

That said, the other side of it I think, and I think it's just emerging but it's just bloody annoying, is that everything is now PC, everything is now to be criticised and spun around to be labelled as something. Like the biggest thing I've seen since becoming a mum is this whole gender appropriation around clothing and things, and how girls should no longer be confined to pink and

boys should no longer be confined to blue, and if Abbie wanted to wear something blue, and a boy wanted to wear something pink, so be it. But the amplification that it's got on social media and with various news outlets, I think, the message is being lost in favor of having the big argument about it and bringing out the worst of people. The trolls on the internet, and people who probably don't give a shit about the issue beforehand, but now suddenly have this really fundamentalist view about it, because it's been amplified so much. I think that's where the internet in particular plays the role, so I think the media could have contained a lot of these issues and dealt with them and society would have progressed along its intended path. But I think with social media and the explosion of that, how one little comment on an article can be turned into a news story and amplified around the world. That's generally one person's opinion, but it sparks another debate about something that's actually quite minor, and it might just be about boys and girls clothing and it's so out there and so prevalent that I think that it could have the opposite intended effect of starting to silence people back down again.

I think another big example of this, aside from the gender stereotypes of children, is transgender. Suddenly every man and his dog on the internet seems to be transgender. Everyone knows someone who is transgender, it never used to be a thing, now it's the thing it seems. I am very pleased that the issue has been rightly escalated in society, and raised, but at an awareness level, probably like homosexuality was a decade or two ago, probably a bit further back. But now it's almost escalated or elevated to a level where people are fearful about even having a conversation about the transgender issue because of those extremist fundamentalist views that come out to play, particularly on the internet, and again, I think that could cause the issue to rebury itself because people just get too fearful about speaking about, and having an opinion and having a healthy debate about it without it being so extremist in its viewpoints. It would be interesting to see how the media evolves over the next few years around sexuality, transgender issues, gender, all of those things, and whether it can in a mature way handle the debates anymore.

I do think we're living in an interesting time, I think that social media and the internet are amplifying what's going on in society, but I do think quite often, um, the media give too much airtime to things that are likely to divide people and it's not necessarily with good intentions. An example, and I don't think it was a full blown rape, I think it was a sexual attack of a woman in a college campus in America but he was quite a highly regarded student in that university, and he basically got let off because he was a very gifted student. Very popular, and the judge kind of said the girl was drunk, she was asking for it if you think about it. He was drunk as well though, and that really divided the world around who's side they were on, what was right, what was wrong. I do think the media needs to retain some sense of, responsibility for the way these debates seem to explode

and divide people, particularly on new areas of discussion like female sexuality, transgender, that kind of thing.

And I think with the lack of control over social media, there's a lack of regulation, there's a lack of fact checking that goes on, there's a lot of fake news stories that are out there just to sell. The internet and mainstream media, which has championed rightly for the rights of LGBT and women, has silenced the white male. When it comes to elections you're getting more fundamentalist leaders with extremist views getting into power, and I think that's largely because people feel silent into being bold with their views, and so they quietly elect these leaders that might relate to them and hold up their views as valid because people are afraid of having honest debates, for fear of reprisal. There is a large cross section of society that no longer has a voice, like they were used to having, and so the closest political entity that expresses even some of their views is likely to get their vote now. Trump is meant to be a genius, apparently his IQ is next level, he's a genius by that definition. He is very calculating at what he does and, I think is very clever at, well he plays into the old stereotypes that are still alive and well in a lot of society, particularly in America. It's the middle aged white male boys that have been dampened down and quietened over the recent years with upsurge in LGBT rights, female rights that kind of thing in society, and I think he calculated that if he can speak to the old, to the middle aged white guy... dare I say it rednecks some of them, he will get voted into power, and look what happened. The silent majority voted him in, he did win the election, and people do like him. I don't think people like us like to think that people like him, but he is popular with a certain cross section of society, extremely popular. He says what everyone is thinking, in inverted commas, when actually what the discussion should be about is what can I do to make the world more of an equal place, because everyone, particularly those people who have a role to play in it.

The book 'Lean In' largely contemplates that yep, we want to change the world, but to do that we need to get into the leadership positions, to do that we need to kind of adopt a way of working in a man's environment, and a lot of that requires behaving in a way that a man does, in order to get ahead. It's a chicken and egg thing, because when leaders are at the top of organisations, and in government, things do start to change, women's rights do get championed more and more, like civility starts to come in. But I think you're walking a tightrope between having to conform to the man's way of doing things before you can actually, change.

I would say that whilst society has become a lot more equal than it was, that it's more underground and less overt in terms of the discrimination that women face in society, particularly in western society I think. When it comes to sexuality. I'm a great believer in that phrase, with freedom

comes great responsibility, and I think women also have a role to be responsible with their new found freedom when it comes to sexuality, and with that responsibility I mean just because we live in a society where we can pretty much have sex with who we want, does that mean that we should? Does that mean that we should be practicing unsafe sex versus safe sex? Just because the media might say it's okay, is it okay for you? Is it okay for your daughters to be doing those things? I think we still need to retain that responsibility and live by our moral standards and code and not have our moral compass kind of swayed through peer pressure and other things. In the name of greater freedom in that sense, I think that people should also be paying closer attention to their own values and just living by, or having the confidence to live by your own moral compass as opposed to the compass society kind of holds out in front. I just feel that some of that might be lost, if I think about Abbie's generation growing up where that's all they're exposed to all of the time. At least we got to our teenage years before that became so prevalent, where a lot of our views are formed already. I think for Abbie's generation it's going to be interesting to see how she forms a sense of right and wrong, and her own moral compass, and what is right for her, rather than that being informed too much by other people. I think what I would appreciate in Abbie's generation is respecting herself, and remembering to do that above all else.

## Thinking with Ava

Tracing this celestial trajectory I notice familiar figurations whose presence was seen or felt through light cast on dominant forces or figurations in previous stories. Not only have women been historically reliant on heterosexual institutions for material survival, “women’s work” carried out within these political institutions does not contain economical value highlighting the ways in which compulsory heterosexuality intersects with other institutions such as economics to uphold gendered power relations. Ava’s reflection of becoming a mother in a corporate environment as a woman in leadership illuminates a process of differing that is shaped through a complex interplay of internal and external forces in which the subject is engaged in processes in relation to multiple others (Braidotti, 2014). Leadership roles within corporate organisations emphasise gendered virtues that constrain ways of being and doing with reference to difference from an implied universal, and therefore masculine standard and act as forces of *potestas* that create blockages, binding thought and action to rational, moral action encouraging women to ‘lean in’ to get ahead.

Nomadism as a feminist figuration recognises that bodies are ascribed with particular historical and socio-cultural meanings (sexed, raced, classed) depending on their situatedness and that these differences all play a part in the nomadic journey. The nomadic subject creates a space that enables new forms of agency through deterritorialisation of the discursive boundaries imposed by constructions of traditional femininity. Rethinking sexual difference with Braidotti (2022) as a process in which embodied subjects engage in interactions with multiple others activates the ethical potential within these social/professional relations and releases the affective knots that create binds and blockages for subjects. Sexual difference as a vital force defies dualistic, oppositional reasoning through constant negotiation in which multiplicities meet and intersect in a rhizomatic manner that disrupt the sameness of enfolded and embrained subjects.

Reflecting on the discord between the care and nurturing practices associated with patriarchal definitions of mothering and the hegemonic power associated with phallogocentric notions of leadership as articulated through Ava’s storying, I turn to Braidotti to liberate these from heteronormative categories to activate the affirmative *potentia*. Posthuman relational ethics at the in-depth structures of subjectivities affirms a collective desire to persevere in our existence through collaborative relational activities and our inherent capacities to experience joy from such interactions. Grounding mothering and leadership in immanent relations releases the ties of heteronormative assumptions as individual practices involving self-sacrifice. Instead, a politically empowered subject in process of becoming emerges through an ethical form of relationality that escape the negativity and *potestas* of being trapped by these categories. Desire, expressed here

through resistance is a vital force always in flux and being propelled forward into an infinite number of possibilities no longer confined to the limits of the gendered body.

# Molly

I started being involved with feminism when I was still married and it was also around the time when I started doing social work papers extra-murally. I hadn't gone to university straight from school, I got married young and had three kids under five so there just wasn't time for much else in those early days. Many of the feminist women at the time were involved with play centre, it was a radicalising of women at that stage. I was involved with parent's centre but not play centre funnily enough. I think the reason I was involved at kindy rather than play centre was that I needed some time out from the kids, whereas play centre you had to sort of be there with them. So until I started studying that was my one thing of my own.

There were so many of these women's consciousness raising groups and all sorts of things back then, it was fantastic and it would have to be one of the most exciting times of my life. It just felt like my whole world and outlook had changed. I would go down to uni and get absolutely radicalised for the week. It was just huge support, women supporting women, hugely politically charged and just fun times and learning. All of learning who we were and what we could do and what that was all about, it was just excellent, it really was a lovely time. It changed my perception of what was possible for me. It's like I found a place, and I think that's what women were feeling then, hey, this is a place where we belong in this group of feminist women, it was sort of like finding a safe place. There were artistic endeavors and bringing out all sorts of different aspects of it, exploring everything about you that you hadn't sort of been able to in a traditional marriage.

In those days dinner parties were the thing, and there was a couple of men in particular in that group that used to like to bait me, and give me a couple of wines and I'm quite bait-able! So there was a lot of arguing and I think I did try to do a lot of converting of people, but I realised after a while it's silly to try to convert people who were actually not interested, they were just wanting to bait you.

Me and my husband didn't fight a lot about it or anything. Once I decided to be brave and talk to him about sex. I sort of knew that if I said no, the next night he'd be waiting to pounce, it's like you couldn't get away with it two nights in a row. I tried to tell him it's very off putting, like it's a bit animalistic really, both not being able to say no and knowing that he's ready to pounce. Well, he was very upset and offended. He hadn't felt like but you're my wife you do what I say really, but it really shocked him that I could actually say that actually this is a bit much, could we sort of back off a bit. I think I had known all along that I would need to get out of that marriage and that stuff just gave me what I needed. The funny thing is when I left my marriage my husband told everyone that I

would go back when I got over feminism, like a cold. It was such a funny thing to say, particularly because I was getting sort of radicalised by social work and getting radicalised by the feminist movement so I had a lot for him to take on really, but I never got over it.

I did have a second time around relationship, and I don't remember feeling that pressure in that relationship. I think I was more aware of myself, probably more into him for a while. We both went in with sort of different expectations, he claimed to be a feminist but like most men that claim to be a feminist, you sort of scratch that surface and find something else, but he had done *some* stuff around that and he was trying to be a feminist man, it just wasn't quite there.

Years ago a woman was attacked in her house, so all of us women went off to this self-defense course, and that was very interesting. She showed us a way of getting thrown down onto the ground, and we did lots of practices like how to grab them and how to get them down and then we went home. I think I was the only one that didn't have a man in the house or whatever at that stage. The next day they came back and they'd all tried the moves on their partner and got them down, and in every case the men had had to come back at them when they weren't expecting it and re-establish their power by getting the woman down. It was fascinating, it was just that they could not live with that. It's so ingrained for men that they have to be the power.

I also remember there was a couple of women students that were attacked at Massey or somewhere up there. They put out a thing to the woman saying you need to look after yourself, make sure you go in pairs, and there was some outrage about that. And I thought well hang on, you do have to. Like yes it's men's problem, but meanwhile, women should take care and look after yourself, so I don't think I agree with the outrage. I think absolutely it's men's problem and for them to sort, but meanwhile I'm not putting myself out there for anything. You have to kind of deal with reality and with now. So I just thought that was a bit odd really. It's a really difficult one, and I guess it applies much more to girls, that no you shouldn't have to be careful, but yes you do 'coz it's still there.

It's like that whole thing that rape is about power, not about sex and all that, and that's all absolutely true. Talking about sexuality it's still very largely men who initiate sex in most relationships, more so than the women. It's almost like, you know, men always want sex as opposed to well they should have a choice as well. But for men, sex is sex whereas with women it's a little more complicated. It's about love and intimacy and feeling valued, and also wanting to feel the mood. All those things are what sex is about for women generally, which makes it interesting that there's these girls these days who are getting broken and going home with somebody and just having sex for the night, it's a whole different thing.

Having said all of that, I have had a period of my life of having casual sex. I had quite a lot to do with an intentional community in the early years, before it turned into a very bad, horrible place. I am sure that it wasn't in the early years, I think it was a very different place. A good place for a lot of people.

There were certain ways that it sort of worked, you could go in as a visitor and you'd pay, and then you had to live as a visitor for quite some time and just pay rent, and then at some stage if the guru thought you were ready you had to write a letter saying you wanted to become a full member in which case you handed over any money you had, or any debt you had, and the community there took that over and you were then a full member of the community and you didn't have to pay rent anymore. Then you just worked in the community, because they had a whole lot of industry there.

I went there through a friend of mine when I had just separated from my husband, and another friend of mine had just separated at the same time, and her sister had moved up there so we decided to go up there just for a weekend to have a look at it. There were a lot of solo mums who just weren't coping that went there and were living there and were able to manage their kids and all of that, and sexuality was completely open there.

There was all sorts of work to be done there, like there's some really good designers that have come out of there, and there was a big pottery factory, or sewing and there was a hat factory so they each took turns with where they worked. They had a huge plant nursery, or some of them had to work in the kitchen. Some of them worked outside [of the community] 'coz they could go out to work if they wanted to, but once they were a full member if they worked outside their salary was just handed over because everything was provided. So yea, I think it operated really well at that time.

There was help with the kids, which I think was both good and bad, there was sort of a communal responsibility for the kids... not sure how that affected bonding. It takes a village to raise a child and so it was just kinda like that, the only thing was when a woman had a baby she had no jobs to do for the first three months and that baby was held all the time, so there was some really good stuff. So I think the starting off was great, where you had nothing you had to do but nurture this baby and if she wasn't holding the baby, somebody else was, which I thought that part was brilliant. It was more the little toddlers, you'd often see the little toddlers walking around crying, looking for mum and it was in the big complex and they couldn't find their mummy.

In terms of the casual sex there was a lot of pressure there put on the women to be part of that. I personally was strong enough to decide when I wanted to and when I didn't and certainly I had casual sex sometimes probably just to conform. But sometimes even though it was quite casual it would be somebody that I quite liked and spent a bit of time with. They had these huge lie-on bean bags, and you just lie there together and talk and cuddle, and then perhaps go and have sex. So there was a connection, and it might be very brief, but it was something. So that was a very interesting experience and I think that more than anything it sort of helped me to be open sexually and to feel okay about myself sexually.

It was interesting because Bert Potter was the guru. Feminism is the opposite to that, and so a lot of people were sort of saying to you, how can you be part of both. The fact is, I didn't bow down to him, I just thought he was an old man who had quite a lot of wisdom at that stage. But the women there, particularly the women who had started this community were some of the strongest women that I've experienced, they were fantastic. The guru thing is such a male tradition, but it still kind of fitted alright, it was fine.

With that power stuff it wasn't ever sort of openly challenged. Like it seemed to me that sort of half the people there would bow down and do whatever the guru said, and the other half sort of loved him as the old man who set the place up, but I wouldn't say they were subjects, or wouldn't necessarily do what he said. Or there were women just looking for someone to guide them. I wonder how much of that bowing down to him part of it is ingrained anyway, before they even arrived there, because you're doing it to your father then to your husband and you're doing it to church. People sort of accepted his power or just lived with it because of the community, because it was a lovely way to live in a whole lot of ways.

What is the tragedy now though is that all anybody ever knows about this community is that they were abusing kids and that's just terrible. Actually for the first probably, I don't know, ten or fifteen years, certainly the kids were getting into sex at an earlier age, like 12 or 13, but so were they out here, I mean it wasn't that different. It was just that they were a lot more open about it there and they were doing it in a safe environment until, well I don't know how or why it changed because at the time that I knew it there was absolutely no drugs or alcohol at all on the premises, never. And then suddenly they seemed to be experimenting with drugs and it all just changed. And again there's that power thing, a guru that has power. But this older man, kids, it's a whole different ball game really.

There is that saying that power corrupts and absolute power is quite small, or something I don't know. But yea, I think the guru did end up becoming quite corrupt. Yet to start with he was so

anti-drugs and his purpose in setting this whole place up was to give the kids a better start in life because he was saying that women are oppressed sexually, and so this is what it's about for women to feel free to express their sexuality and for the kids to grow up in that environment which he believed to be a healthy way for them to grow up, walking around people having sex. I think there were some good things about it.

I can remember talking to quite a lot of the women about the pressure, because there was definitely pressure there to be sexually open and sleep with somebody every night. I used to get a bit of flack because I often chose to sleep by myself and some of the women weren't strong enough to say no to that. I remember talking about it and mentioning it to one of the men, and they'd say oh no you'd better go home, don't do that but yea. I mean, I do think the women felt that pressure a lot, to be sexually open when really they wanted the community and the ability to be sexually open if they wanted to. If and when, but yes to have to sleep with somebody every night, you know that kind of stuff was a pressure for women, and maybe for the men I don't know, but I somehow don't think so. And that was just the accepted way of life there, so you just fit in, if that's the lifestyle you've chosen, you take whatever goes with it really.

I think women were much freer to talk about what they liked sexually, and what they didn't like sexually, and that was fine. That was sort of the advantage, nothing was taboo and you could talk about anything really. You could experiment which I did, some experimentation with other women and I mean that was fine, it was nothing. There was the freedom just to find out is that what you want, what do you like or don't like, or I tried this and that was okay but it's not really where I'm at. So yea it was certainly a place of experimentation and openness to talk about it, and to make choices and all that kind of stuff. Women are probably more like that now, well certainly more so than they were back in those days, I mean Centrepoint was quite... like really "ooh" you know, people were fascinated by it.

With sexuality it's more open these days. I think women are much more... and probably talking about educated women, are much more free in that sense now. I don't know whether the other sort of groups of women are. And there are also some very uptight educated women as well. But yea, women were having sex way long before it was this open. I believe the backstreet abortion rate was very high and all of that, so I suspect that in some ways it hasn't changed that much, it's just that people are a bit more willing to be open about what they're doing now and more aware. There's more freedom in terms of contraception and terminations and that kind of stuff.

I mean sexuality is bigger than sex, it's kind of undefinable and definable, isn't it? How do you separate out what is women's sexuality? The first words that come to my mind is freedom to

choose, to not choose, to be equal in a sexual relationship. The lack of coercion, all of that. It's essentially freedom to say yes or no, or to enjoy sex in a way that woman like to enjoy sex. It's about choices and acceptance, and the ability to talk about it, to read about it, to learn about it, that kind of stuff. With feminine sexuality it's about who we are and what we want, and determining our own path throughout life, not having it soooo predetermined and structured, and women feeling good about themselves.

I think something that we do whenever we meet someone is we form an opinion quite soon even unconsciously and you actually evaluate how you're going to be with them by looking at someone. It's something about the way that they present themselves that says yes, this woman's got it together, or wow, this one needs a lot of help. I think it is something that shows, I think you can tell, it's instinctive. But I also think you could be a woman without make up and still look really good and feel really good about yourself. It's not about pretty, it's about attractive... attractive is much more important, it's the way you carry yourself, it's the way you feel, it's actually the way you feel being comfortable with yourself, comfortable with who you are. I think that shows, just in how you look, how you walk, your hair, how you hold yourself. I look at some of the gay woman, jeans and t-shirt and some of them look really attractive and confident, somebody you'd want to get to know.

That you've got to look good is just everywhere. It's TV, it's the music videos, it's everywhere. I think that the younger girls these days are much more concerned with how they look than my generation were. I mean it's always been important for girls to look good of course but it just seems so big now, and that doesn't come from nowhere. Personally I don't really dress up a lot but I do dress better when I head into Wellington. I hadn't thought about why I do that, I mean I would go up to the supermarket dressed like this, but yea, I wouldn't go into Wellington shopping like this, so yea that's interesting isn't it? I think that there's a type of dress, and you don't really see it out here, but in Wellington sometimes, and perhaps for lack of a better description, is sort of arrogant clothing, like obviously highly expensive, but it's sort of off-putting, like it's probably very beautiful, but it's sort of like I'm out of everybody else's league.

You get pictures of models, or any pictures of women, they're made to look fabulous, it must be very hard for women who are overweight to feel good about themselves. I remember a friend of mine saying people are always very careful about what they say to fat people, but they're always saying to me gosh you're skinny, which is interesting. And I think politics is really bad about that stuff too, think about how they tore into Helen Clarke for instance, I mean they went on about her because she wasn't the most beautiful woman in the world. Or like there was somebody who was pregnant who was presenting on tv, and people complained about that, I mean that is mind boggling

stuff. And of course all the women on TV are made up beautifully and all of that, but that's part of their job. And while I think it's got a lot better I still think men probably still hold the primary positions on TV, but at the same time there's some pretty strong women out there.

With having a granddaughter I'm very conscious, as are her mums, in protecting her from that kind of influence. I mean it's huge, even I do it. She goes to day care, and mostly she's in her old grotty old clothes but sometimes if they're going somewhere she'll be in a dress and in my immediate instinct is to say don't you look lovely. It's all that kind of stuff. It's that conditioning of those little people, it's amazing, it's huge and it's unconscious so much of it, I mean that stuff is instinctive and is all around us, it's still there. They call her bossy, if she was a little boy they would say she's assertive or showing leadership skills it's so there, in their environment.

The interesting thing is that she insists that she's a boy, so that's interesting, she's a boy. I think it's because she plays more with the boys at day care, coz they're outside and that's what she likes, it's much more fun. Give her a doll and she just looks at it, but she does like having her nice clothes on too, and I think that's good, I don't mind that. It doesn't have to be either/or, it's just... well to start with she was always in non-female clothing, and they relented a wee bit and let her have a few sort of, girly things. But it is a political statement of course, trying not to have her being influenced by those kinds of messages really so I think she'll grow up really strong which is a positive thing.

Actually, she was quite naughty recently, she's just, unfortunately the boys, you know they get to that stage where they're smart asses and she's starting to get some of that, like you silly buggler nanna I was told the other day, and I thought, oh god! So I thought we should have a talk and I sat here said now I just want you to listen to me, and she went my ears are turned off. This terrible thought went through my mind, like maybe smacking wasn't such a bad thing! That smarty pants, she'd been so sweet and this was just so strong headed. And yes I want that, we all want that, but it's like I said to my kids, yes I've brought you up to be assertive, but not with me!

My daughter's gay relationship has just ended. They do sort of parent equally to a degree, but it's my daughter who is the superwoman. It's like that dynamic that if one is sort of responsible the other kind of lets it go. She certainly takes the role of responsibility for the child, but the other one does heaps with her as well. Like my daughter is really organised and likes to get the place reasonably tidy and clean, and the partner had no interest in any of that, so it's almost the same kind of dynamic that you get with men and women. They're both very educated, so it's a generalisation more than anything. Her partner had been married to a man and she said they didn't do all those things, like housework and stuff like that, so sometimes I think it's just personality.

I think that overall women take on an outside job and a home job and still take on all that responsibility. I think women still have more pride in the house and that sort of thing. Like yes I know a lot of men do help these days, but it's still primarily the women who have to do everything. I also think there is a class thing in all of this in that I think the more educated women and men are more into sharing roles, but women still do the most. Traditionally, for instance there are a lot of people I see out here where the women do the lot, like everything. It's the kids, house, everything and the men just continue to be boys really. I think women grow up through having children and so they become more responsible and the men seem to take a lot longer. I think those are the societal pressures that women still pick up.

I often say to couples if the women are complaining about the blokes doing nothing, well, if he hangs out the washing do you go out and repeg it? And if they say yes, well you get what you deserve then. They want it done a certain way, and I think that's a really big issue. That's how women end up carrying the load a lot of the time, it's that they want it done their way and at some point the guys say fuck you, you can do it yourself, and I can understand that, I would do the same. Like look at the way you're dressing them, you're doing it wrong. So if you're looking at heterosexual relationships I don't know how much the men play on that by being a bit helpless or I'd be asked to do it again so like maybe not consciously, but it's still seen as women's domain.

I do hear men say, well I help her with the housework, I help her with the washing, but who the fuck's washing is it? It's not about being helpful, it's about sharing responsibilities. There are certain things that has to be done to run a household, and I don't think feminism is about saying the women have to do this and the men have to do that, it's about choices and doing what you're best at it. If the women are better outside, you know, like if I was with somebody I'd be the one doing the garden and the lawns, that to me is equality.

I sort of reached a point of having this whole thing about women are treated unfairly, ra ra ra, to thinking, actually men are disadvantaged in a whole lot of different ways as well, it's just different. I tried bringing up a boy, his father wasn't actually that masculine, he was quite an effeminate arty man and my boy was quite gentle. School was hard for him 'coz he didn't quite fit the mold. Like he really struggled with friendships and that sort of stuff because he wasn't a great rugby player or any of that stuff. I mean he was certainly into sport, he was a bit more into climbing and that sort of stuff, but it wasn't until he sort of left school and found people that were like him. I think that stuff is still in existence for kids, and boys are damaged equally by that.

I read a book a while ago, the self-made man. It was very interesting, it was a woman, god I can't remember her name, the same woman in America who wrote a book about getting herself

admitted to a mental institution to see how long it would take them to realize that she was perfectly sane. But this one is self-made man, so she spends a year getting prepared. She's a lesbian woman, but she lives as a man for a year. She found some way to do a very authentic beard, she did a lot of gym exercises to build up her pecs, whatever, did all of that, and then she lived in various types of places and communities for this year, completely as a man. She was never sprung, but afterwards some of the men said to her, I just thought you were a bit of an effeminate bloke. She did voice training and everything, and she did it in order to see how differently she was treated as a woman, or as a man.

What she said at the end of the book that really stuck with me was that what she realised, and I think that as woman we generally don't, was how almost inbred into men it is to be the protector of the wife and children, and the earner. So even in today's world when you think about men and women are earning and all that. But who is it that says I think I'll go to university part time and you keep working, it's the women, not the men. Or I think I'll take a year out, it's the women. The men still carry that absolute responsibility for the support and protection of the woman, and that was her big learning out of that. She worked into different groups, like there was a group of men, they were playing pool or bowls or something like that so they were quite sort of blue collar blokes and she got amongst them. And then there was another group that she was in, it was sort of a men's therapy type group, and she found that really scary because she was scared that they would spring her and that they would be very angry, so yea that was interesting.

The other thing that she learnt particularly was that women tend to be dismissive of men's friendships and all they talk about is women and rugby. What she was finding was that the men didn't indulge in superficial friendships like woman often do. That if they were friends they were friends, if they gave you a hug that was a real hug, not a silly air kiss. With women, some of them are much more superficial in their friendships whereas the men didn't seem to bother a lot with those ones. There were those kinds of differences. I thought it was fascinating really. But it was that men's responsibility that interested me the most, the fact that they feel this so strongly. In couples I have certainly seen men are still not comfortable with women earning more than them, and I guess that's the reality, all that stuff takes time to change.

I suppose I still think sex for women is different than sex for men in terms of for men it's a thing on its own and I think really that in spite of the fact that women are getting into sex that way, I still don't think that's quite it for us. I think there's still an emotional content for a woman, and maybe that's because all our sexual bits are internal. Like it's obviously physically different. I struggle sometimes with men who think about it... like why is it so important? You know, they think they're

dying when they don't have sex. For men, I do think that's how they get their feeling of being loved and I don't know why. It's always like god's trick, that women need to feel loved in order to feel sexual and men seem to need to feel sexual to feel loved, which is a simplification... but I think there's something in it. It's a really funny way of creating people really.

I've seen it with couples. When a woman has had an affair it's almost like the men claim them back with sex. It's like an ownership thing. You're mine, by having sex with you I've claimed you back. More often it's the men who have had the affair, but where the woman has had the affair they've been a bit surprised at how quickly he's wanted to get back into sex, and it does feel like claiming them, like somebody else had my woman and I'm going to have her back. It's very ownershipy. That's a difference in males. I think men would prefer their women to have a sexual affair that's purely sexual than they would to have a romantic intimate relationship, whereas for women again, it's almost like the opposite, I think. I mean there's no doubt that sex is different for the two different sexes.

I think in the past women have been pressurised into sex, and I think that they still are, whether it's dating, or whether it's the pub thing. I mean sometimes I wonder about those young women, whether they really want to do that or whether they think that's the way to go. That's a kind of social coercion in a way, if that's the norm to be one of the gang you have to do it that way. So there's the obvious coercion and then there's a whole lot of more subtle forms of it that go on. I think that women still fall to that pressure. I think it's not so obvious, so overt, but the pressures are still there. You still hear these sort of radical right wing type comments, like well, she was in a short skirt, what did she expect? Or something like that. Those are the kind of subtle or not so subtle pressures that are still on women.

## Thinking with Molly

The resplendence of star beams whose light beckoned from this galaxy illuminated a celestial ballet dancing through time and space. Molly's story traces a complex interplay of inconsistencies, identification with and resistance to cultural and social conceptions of femininity illuminating the complexities involved with cultural classifications of homogeneity and processes involved with sexual difference. Within this topography emerges a feminine figuration constantly in motion, propelled by a tenacious desire to dissolve the boundaries imposed by dominant structures through continual processes of becoming and in doing so, highlighting the instability of these very structures. This story expresses a transformative becoming as Molly articulates coming into contact with multiple human and non-human elements in her world beyond heteronormative boundaries in pursuit of affirmative alternatives.

Evolving dominant forces that circulated at the time of Molly's engagement with an intentional community were located by temporal proximity to a radicalised socio-cultural terrain that emphasised resistance to patriarchy and heterosexual normativity. The ideologies espoused by this intentional community resonated with Molly's talk about a liberal feminist rhetoric at that time seeking freedom from the constraints of a normative society and space to explore alternative sexualities. Dominant flows of heteronormative forces that uphold oppressive gendered differentials, particularly with respect to sexuality however, are saturated with invisible forces that are deeply embedded within asymmetrical and naturalised gendered power relations which circulate to mold women's embodied experiences as is echoed in Molly's sentiments that 'there was definitely pressure there to be sexually open and sleep with somebody every night'.

Turning to Morgan and Gibson's (2011) research with children who grew up at this intentional community sheds light on how forces of power are produced and concealed through the binds of normative and naturalised assumptions about heterosexual desire. It is not with detached observation and neutral affect I bear witness to these circulating forces as I reflect on this part of Molly's story. Finding myself tied in affective knots I reflexively acknowledge a sense of entrapment, and the pull of the master signifier capitalising on stories of pain and blame. Braidotti (2022) reminds us that coming into possession of freedom requires the understanding of affects or passions by a mind that is always already embodied. Actualising these vital forces that circulates through women's embodied lives means to interrupt the application of established norms and values, to deterritorialise them by introducing alternative ethical flows (Braidotti, 2022). At the ethical level, this means that the conditions for political and ethical agency are not dependent on the current state of the terrain, neither are they oppositional (and thus not tied to the present by negation),

they are instead projected as an affirmative praxis, flowing towards creating empowering relations aimed at possible futures through a collective process of differing.

Central to the ethics of affirmation is the view that negative affects can be transformed. Braidotti (2006) encourages a dynamic view of all affects, even those that freeze us in pain, horror or mourning through introducing movement, process and becoming and mobilises a shift away from patterns of repetition of negative affects. Affirmative ethics is co-produced in the acknowledgement of the immanent interconnection of the multiple ecologies that constitute all living systems where negativity in the sense of harm to others is reflected in harm to self through loss of relational power, self-awareness and inner freedom. Freedom here refers to understanding affects by a mind which is always already embodied.

# Lilly

My mother and father started off in the city. My father's dream was to have a farm but he didn't have that much money, so he worked and saved and then he bought the farm. Because he didn't have much money he couldn't get a very good farm, so it meant this farm was almost completely entirely covered in gorse, and because he didn't have enough money to be able to hire a bull dozer, he cut it by hand and then burnt it, or sometimes he'd burn it and then crawl over it with a caterpillar tractor. He like just worked and worked and worked. We didn't see him, I look back and I think, what an amazing thing, but also it meant I missed my dad, I didn't have a dad - but Dad's weren't around much in those days, that was not unusual, that was what Dads were like.

I grew up in a family that had very clear gender rules, and probably stronger gender roles than would have been in most other families at the time. In part this was because my father was a farmer and from his perspective boys worked outside and girls worked inside, so that's to do with the role. I'm the oldest of seven, we were four girls, including me, and three boys. So the boys were the ones were to help out with him, and my role was to be with my mother, and help inside. Some of my other sisters also did stuff outside, but mine was tightly tied inside. I do remember mum telling me I could have time off now and again, it wasn't a fixed time, but it was always so there was no way out from it. So in terms of gender roles it was really clear, the girls made the boys beds did the cooking and the cleaning and what have you. I always said, why should I make my brother's bed? Actually they should be making them coz they use them, but they were doing real work, so it didn't count. There were lots of arguments, so part of the trade off, though it wasn't said to me at the time, was I got to go to a Catholic girl's boarding school. It was absolutely the best thing in the world because one of the things about it was I didn't have to do housework, well I had to do some, but I didn't really have to and I actually had time to study. It was the most amazing thing, because I was allowed and there was time, and I did really well.

The other part of gender roles was you couldn't go on past school, like you couldn't specialise in maths, there was no science apart from general science, and their expectation was that when you leave school you either become a nun, or you got married. And before you got married you might train as a nurse or a teacher. And I thought, I can't stand blood, so it will have to be teacher, so I went to teachers college. It was kind of like how the curriculum was gendered, the expectation was gendered, the variety of options you had was gendered. But what it did give me was that there was a life outside of the hills, I could go beyond what I could see, there were things I couldn't see, and I wanted to find out. So in many ways I felt very lucky, I really did, because, that

opened up the world for me otherwise I probably would have married and made some person extremely unhappy... and myself.

We learnt about puberty at school. There was this Catholic book that kind of talked about reproductive organs of women and that you were going to have a period. I don't know that it was very much pointed out about how you could get pregnant. The nuns were really clear it involved boys. I can't remember if they told us, but somebody told us it was about sitting on toilet seats after boys had been there. I thought that sounded nuts, but how was I to know?

Once I went out of the school grounds without permission and got an ice cream and was expelled. Pathetic, yes, but this was quite a while ago. The other girls that went out also went through this, but they all went back. Now my father had left school when he was 13, he didn't have any qualifications. He was very good at maths, quite a good brain actually. We were really poor, and I just thought for all those years that he didn't understand how you got to go back. For years and years and years, and then when I was probably in my 50s we must have been talking about it again and I didn't say that bit to him, but he said no, I wasn't going to have them treating my daughter like that, it wasn't fair, that's why you didn't go back, and I thought... Aah.

What that really meant though, was that I was left feeling like I was thick because I failed University Entrance. I had to take Latin by correspondence, and I'll tell you, Latin by correspondence was hard. I also had to take a new subject which I hadn't taken before, I can't remember what it was, maybe history, maybe geography, but I was very bad at it so I failed, unsurprisingly. The other part of it was, I don't know if it's about femininity and gender, but it is about access. I get very travel sick, it means getting to school every day on a bus, and when I mean travel sick, I was sick every day of my life going to school. I didn't vomit at that point, but I was not well, so it was not a great set up.

So back at home I knew how to get on with girls, coz I had had lots of girls around, but I wasn't that, I hadn't really had... well, I've got brothers and they're just a damn nuisance really. I used to get bits of material and cut them to shape and use that with dolls, I'd do it all by hand and they were quite creative. I don't know if there were shops that you could get dolls clothes in in those days. I was going to say I'd never seen any doll or anything like this, but there would have been shops with dolls in them, we were just really working class. Since we were poor we had a little tiny Ford, so it had mum and dad in the front, and the baby, the latest baby on mum's knee before the days of seatbelts, and there'd be three kids sitting on the backseat, and there were arm rests, so there would be a kid on each armrest too, that's like 5, 6, so it was a bit like that. There wasn't a lot of nudity around our house either, we would have all been clothed. I'm just trying to remember how mum managed 'coz if there's 7 kids and you're living in a place that doesn't have running water, and

you've got to pump it, it means that the one bath does for everybody and it happens once a week. Thank god I was the oldest, coz I got it first! But there wasn't a lot of nudity, we didn't get changed in front of each other.

So over the years we had a lot of arguments, my father and I. A little later, and this is going to sound odd, my dad talked about leaving the farm to the boys. I said to him that's not fair, what about the girls and he said well, you'll have your husbands to look after you. So I said but we're your children, we should all be the same. And he said well, I'll leave it to the boys and they can look after your mother and I said, well that's not right, because what say they don't? Coz it often happens that the sons don't, if you do that I'll contest the will I tell ya. You've also got to take it into account that this is also a Catholic family so you don't question your parents usually. I would have been doing that as a young adult, rather than as a girl, that particular bit, this is before I'd come into contact with feminism, and it just seemed to me that it wasn't equal, it didn't make sense.

I left school at 16, I was in sixth form and because I hadn't got UE I could only do teacher's college. I went to the furthest place away that I could think of, like a long way away. They gave us the Raven's progressive matrices<sup>3</sup> in one of the classes, bugged if I know why. I looked at the copy, and it must have been alternative copies, the forms that they were using. I looked at the one I had, and I thought I can't do that. And I swapped it with the person next to me and I did extremely well, the results were very high. And from that day forth, I thought there's something wrong with tests, like they can't measure, that can't be right, can't be true because I got a really high score and I thought I was like dumb. When I finished teachers college, I didn't really want to start straight away so I applied to teach the deaf to train, so that took another year, and by that time I was nearly 20. Then I met this bloke, my flatmate said would you like to go to the ball? I've got two tickets, you can either have a gay man, or a hairy man. And for god knows what reason, I took the hairy one and I have no idea why, but I ended up married.

My sexual experience in terms of sex itself was that I didn't have intercourse until just before we were married. And I only had intercourse because he said to me I've got blue balls, and I thought I have no idea what he's talking about. He said I've been to the doctor and it means I should be having intercourse otherwise it's going to be too painful. I didn't know I could say to him go and get yourself sorted. So because neither of us were very experienced it wasn't that great an experience. When I was a student I had had experiences with guys, but I had never had sex. So I

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<sup>3</sup> Raven's Progressive Matrices are used to assess general cognitive ability in children from a non-verbal perspective.

knew I could get aroused, but I didn't actually... well Catholic girls don't have sex before they were married, so I didn't. But when I got married I decided that I would be more two faced to be Catholic and take the pill, than just to take the pill. So I decided that I wasn't going to church any further, and that was it. I made that choice then because I just thought, no. I had seen what had happened with my mother, there's not a hope in hell that I was going to be doing that, that was just nutty, and this was all before feminism kind of really gets itself rarked up.

I finished my training, did a year teaching the deaf, then we moved to the country. My husband had said to me oh well, we should use your superannuation and buy a car. So I said yes, coz that's what you did, and he went off and bought a car that I couldn't see over the steering wheel of. So it meant I had to sit on the seat on a cushion to see over the steering wheel, and then my feet couldn't reach the pedals so there had to be a special thing built so that I could drive. A while later Mum came to visit me, and she said you're being very selfish not having any children. I didn't think it made any difference, but I realised when I looked at the time that I had my first baby at 23, and she must have visited me when I was 22. I only know looking back that it was pressure, at the time I didn't realise. I think there would have been a bit of me that thought I don't really want to be teaching and I'm supposed to be doing this. So I had my first child, and then I thought I would have them quickly. So my second baby was born maybe 14 months later? It was quite hard, 'coz that means I wasn't bringing in any money. Then I went through a period of trying to be a perfect mother and quite glamorous. I don't know if I was trying to be glamorous, but I felt like I had missed out. I was still sewing, and it might not look like I was ever, but I was quite a thin, gorgeous young thing at this point. So every so often there would be things to go out to, and this was in the bloody middle of nowhere where we lived. I decided that I was going to make an evening frock, which I did, several of them. They did look pretty good really.

I also used to get really angry, coz like I said, I was quite a cute thing, which is not that believable now, but I used to jog. I used to get extremely annoyed when people whistled at me, I'd stop and abuse them because I should be allowed to just go for a run without anybody taking any bloody notice. Would I have worn tight clothes? Yea, I would have looked pretty cool, but that wasn't why I was wearing them, I was wearing them coz I liked them. It annoyed me, the feeling that I might have to cover up so that I wouldn't get whistled at. It's just fucking rude. I don't go and yell at All Blacks or whatever they are. I just don't get it. I'd get quite cross, but it also restrained me from doing it, I would find it so uncomfortable. I think for a number of years, and probably until quite recently actually, I've probably been very self-conscious about how I've dressed and how I look. What I know now is that back then I would have been judgmental about my size, my shape, my

whatever I was wearing, it always wasn't right. These days I'm much more comfortable in being who I am.

Anyways, out of the blue one day my husband said I want to move back to the city. He had applied for a job and I don't know that I knew about it. He taught secondary, so he was clever you see, 'coz you needed a degree to go to secondary. I said I don't want to go, and he said well, I'm leaving, and come with me or not, so I didn't really have a choice. I was pretty annoyed. And I said, if I went, 'coz he was going for a job in the airforce, under no circumstances am I going to be living under airforce accommodation, and we didn't. So we trundled along being married and then somewhere along the way, nearly 10 years later I think, I could go to university, because I was over 21 even though I didn't have UE. I don't know where this came to me from, 'coz in my world I was looking after children, cooking, cleaning, teaching art, teaching pottery. I discovered that I could apply for university so I did, and I got in. You had to do a pre kinda course to make sure you can cut the grade. I started off with like an A-, and then I got an A, and then I got a D. I went to the guy and I said I don't understand, what did I do wrong, can you tell me. He got really angry because he thought that I was challenging his marking. What I was really trying to find out was what was it that I had done, could he go through and tell me where I'd gone wrong. It took quite a bit of talking for him to get what I was talking about, and he did. And so my next one was A+ and I thought yea, but also actually it's probably a fluke. It didn't help that my husband said to me they must be marking easier than they did in my time.

The other thing that happened when I was doing that pre-course, not yet enrolled in the degree, I went to the careers advisor who tested me and he said hmmm, you could work behind the counter and sell cosmetics in the chemist. He said it's 'coz you haven't got maths, and I'm thinking what the fuck has that got to do with it? It was because I'm a woman. Like would you say this to a man? No you wouldn't, and I got really angry, if I had ever met him again I would be so much better qualified than him. But yea that just got me angry, I just thought... bastard. So I got to university, and I was a bit like my dad, I was driven. During that first year, I'd say to my husband, look, I really need you to look after the children on Saturday. I don't want to hear them and I don't want them to be coming into the room, I need to be writing an essay. So he fixed the motor mower outside the window and the children went nuts. There was a whole bunch of things like that that happened. He was, I suppose, a man of his time or even worse I don't know.

Sex wasn't great. How could I put this. His view was that you never had oral sex. Like he did, but the purpose of it was to get me ready so that he could have sex, not for me, for him. So it wasn't anything to do with what was happening, or pleasure, or otherwise for me, it was all to do with him. I don't know where I got these books from, but I had read *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and thought,

really? No, that doesn't compare with anything I know really. I would have read a whole lot of stuff about sex to find out what the hell it was that I was missing out on, or was vaguely aware that was possible. While I was pregnant with my daughter, I was reading a book called Colette. I don't even know how that came about, this is living in the backside of bloody beyond, where I got Colette from I don't even know. Nobody would have said to me you should read this book. My husband wouldn't have said to me to read this book, and remember this is before the internet so you couldn't order it online, you couldn't get reviews on it. How the hell I found it I have no idea, but I did. And then there was The Joy of Sex, great book! And so I'd be talking about it to him but he never got that that's what he needed to be doing in order for me to have pleasure. In fact, I didn't orgasm so I didn't know there was such a thing as an orgasm at all. I'd read about it, yea, but I thought it must be like Father Christmas, or the Tooth Fairy, they don't really exist. I think I was very good at pretending I'd had an orgasm though, the reason was then it would stop.

I also discovered, this is really bad actually, but I also discovered that there was a way that I could let him know that it would be ok to approach me. I didn't even know I was doing it, but I realised when I started studying that this was what I was doing. If I used a particular perfume, then that happened. If I didn't, he didn't. So it was also to keep him away, this perfume. I didn't even specifically know, it was only afterwards that I was thinking back.

He did also rape me. One time I didn't verbally consent we were at my brother's wedding, and me and two of my sisters and their partners were sharing accommodation. I thought if I objected and made noises that they wouldn't intervene, and it would be embarrassing and I would feel really hurt so I let it happen. He also tried to kill me and he did hit me, so there was a bit of that too. The killing was in the vehicle, so whenever the children weren't in the car he would drive like a maniac quite seriously. I gotta tell you that that was so far buried it took probably more than 6 years of therapy for that to pop up. It's not seen, like it's non-verbal and it's much harder to deal with a non-verbal than it is with a verbal. It was abuse, but what was I going to do?

So I'm at university and I go and I withdraw from all my courses. I think I can't, I can either be myself, which would mean continuing, but I just thought I can't do it. Not that I can't do it, but that I shouldn't do it. And then I thought, if I don't continue to do what I'm doing, I'll die. I need to do this. This is so important for me as a human being, and I went back and re-enrolled and pretty soon after that said to him I'd like you to leave. And I just thought I can't spend the rest of my life not knowing, 'coz I still didn't know that I wasn't as thick as a brick, I really thought it might have been a bit of a fluke, a once off. He wasn't very happy, but he did eventually go, thank god.

I know why I also decided that he was gonna go. He'd taken on a particular role in the airforce that took him away to Auckland for three weeks out of four of a year and I thought what's the point? But more than that, I became independent. I learnt how to manage the money, I learnt how to do everything. And I thought he chose this, you know. It wasn't that he had to do it, he wasn't directed to do it, he chose to do it. And then like he'd come back and he'd say to me about the other guy he was with, that I was really lucky that he, my husband, was not fucking everybody in sight, like his mate was, and I'm thinking many things and none of them are polite! So I said to him, well the same applies to me, you're quite lucky that I'm not doing anything either, aren't you? And he looked at me like, well you wouldn't, would you, because you've got all the kids and things. And remember there was no particular reason, like he hadn't, that I knew about, he hadn't been having sex with anyone else. That was the hardest thing to say, that you were ending a marriage because you didn't love somebody anymore, that was hard. Nobody got it, coz you stayed married no matter what, but if you were going to, there would be a reason, something, but not because you didn't love him anymore, na, that didn't happen. So that year after we got divorced, he used to bring his car around and watch to see what I was doing, coz he thought I had a boyfriend. But anyways, he was gone, which was good. After getting rid of my husband I realized that I needed a safe place, and I needed a home. We owned a home and I said that I wanted to divide the matrimonial home, and that I would pay it off. I'd take out a mortgage and I'd pay out that bit, and he agreed. Probably because he was really relieved.

The year after we separated and got divorced, as a good scientist you know, you do your research. A lot of men that year, a lot of men, at least 13. Made up for lost time, and just to see whether that was gonna be the thing for me or not. It didn't really work.

For a long time after I separated and divorced I felt really embarrassed and ashamed that I didn't have a ring. In those days if you were a solo parent it was seen as very bad. There would be women that I would meet from the school, we'd be at social things, and they'd say I think that women on the DPB should have their children taken off them and given to parents who actually want to have children and can't have them. It was quite hard to say, but I remember quietly standing up for myself, saying well I'm a solo parent, and they said no, we don't mean you. We mean young girls who get pregnant because they just want to go on the DPB. I'd just think if you try being on the DPB it's fucking hard, it's not easy, it's really really hard, it's just appalling. Those things were hard, and I'd taken them on board, that it would be a shameful thing to do. I remember my mother being very angry at me for not being married anymore too. I said he used to hit me, and she'd say, well what did you do to cause it?

I'm getting on with my study and I'm just being, you know, good with study. There was a whole group of women that were studying that were mature students and most of them were married. But in my second year there was this woman and they told us in class that she got 97%, and they named her, they wouldn't be able to do it these days. Anyway, I went and tracked her down and said I know how to write, I'll teach you how to write if you'll show me how you get 97%, and by the way, did you go and ask them how you, where the other 3% was? She said, no, because they might have found some mistakes and they might take them away. Well, I said, I would have asked.

So this is around the time that feminism is raising its gorgeous head. I'm at the university and it's a pretty exciting place. If you're an older student you can get away with bloody everything, 'coz you know, you just ask, if you don't ask you're not gonna know. They'd all talk about samples, and they're this age and what have you, and they say what the results are. I'd say, well it doesn't feel right to me, but then I realised that was the wrong question, the question is, what was the proportion of females that was in the sample, and they'd say we don't know. And so that just kept happening and happening.

1972/1973 was the first women's convention, that was the year my son was born, but it didn't kind of get me at that point. But then there was a post-convention, like a big meeting in Christchurch. I can't remember the date, but I was at university at the time and there's a wee bit of bubbling going on. The sessions were completely and totally outrageous! For example there was one section, and we were all broken into little groups, and they said we think that most women have never seen their own vagina. So what we're going to do, and they sort of briefed us about it and they showed us theirs. It was just kinda like, well I was thinking do you just go and look at somebody's vagina? And I thought, actually I will because I've never done this before, so why wouldn't I? And they made it comfortable what we all did. We all went up and had a look and people were going "ooh, yuck" and she was saying "I think I'm probably just a couple of days before my period", and we're all thinking "you can do this?". But we could, and you could get your own speculum and she said that if you're going to go and get your own, don't get the metal ones, get the plastic ones, because the metal one is too cold. Anyways, I bought one. I'm thinking about it now, you'd never do it, it would never happen now.

They were talking about starting a women's centre, in the same area that happened to be where my mother-in-law was, and so, don't know what came over me, but I walked up to them and said "I think I could help. I'm quite good at teaching pottery, I could come and teach women pottery" and they said "ok" and somehow or other I got involved in doing this... and, you might think this is very simple, but pottery is actually just the vehicle, you can talk about an awful lot of things while

you are doing pottery, none of which have got much to do with pottery, but quite a lot to do with gender relations, and I did it all over the shop. There were lots of groups that I ran for pottery that we also talked about women's lives and equality and, yea, it was quite fun really.

At this point I've got a good friend, Eloise, and she was lesbian. One day I said to her you might think you're lesbian, but I'm not. And she looked at me, like, what the fuck are you talking about, and it was then I realized that I had fallen in love with her. Part of the engagement was I'd never met anybody that had a good brain before. I didn't have to pretend that I didn't know stuff. She didn't think it was unusual, she just saw me as normal. I didn't have to pretend to be anything other than what I was, and we made an amazing team together because I'm innovative. I go to boom, to boom, to boom, and I join things and make a whole, I'm creative. Eloise learns everything. Every bloody thing. Like every, every everything, and it's like ah god, I couldn't cope. So it meant my experience of my time with her, which wasn't very long, well I could start with her bits that she had, but I could go from the bits to the unknown - not the next step, but bringing together things that hadn't been brought together before, like way beyond that. Then I got scared and thought, oh no, I can't do this, and broke up with her. We went on/off for a wee bit and then she got another girlfriend. I thought oh jeez, so I had to make the choice, and I made the choice really deliberately. I thought I can either go to summer camp and come out as a lesbian, and I knew that Eloise and her new partner were going to be there, or I could go back to the way life was, and I knew I couldn't. So it was a mostly rational decision. Just thinking now, did I have orgasms with Eloise? Probably, but just little ones. I think that's been my experience, that they have been little ones with other people but much better orgasms with a vibrator. You can go as long as you need and many times!

We started feminist studies at my uni. I think women's studies had started at Victoria, but we were the only university to have feminist studies at the time, and we chose the word deliberately. It was started by a collective of students and staff, only women of course. The only university in the country that did it that way, and, it just meant that you could have that kind of focus when there's that rubbishy stuff happening all around. Like I was also doing a course on animal psychology, and there's a theoretical framework that says down the phylogenetic scale male animals of whatever species will populate with as many females as possible bla bla bla but I just think it's a description of what they would like to happen because some of the research that supported it all was... hmmm. I remember the guy that taught that course put a joke up on his door that was really bloody offensive, and so I just put another joke up, I can't remember what it was, I changed the wording. I just thought I'm not going to just let this happen, so lots of little things like that.

When there were issues around sexual harassment, we dealt with those too. I remember one woman was taking a complaint, and I was talking with her in the corridor and she'd asked me to

support her while she was doing this, and somebody else walked past us and said to her do you know she's a lesbian, about me, thinking that this young woman would then think that I was hitting on her so she wouldn't progress it, like it was just bad behavior, totally shocking! One of the staff responsible for sexual harassment had been doing this for a long time, and the woman I shared an office with in my Masters years, after we were both finished and she was somewhere, I was somewhere else, and she emails me. She says we just got an application from xyz for funding to do dadada, I can't remember exactly. But what it meant was we could join the dots. I could then go back to my supervisor and say do you realize there has been funding requested for this? He already knew this guy was doing bad things with these students but he got done because he was misappropriating funds, because they couldn't get him for the other reasons. So there's those kinds of things and they continue to happen. Women didn't want to rock the boat, and this man did appalling things. Like when one of these students who had made a complaint had applied for a job they'd contacted him as one of the referees or something. He had said no, she'd withdrawn, like seriously bloody evil stuff, like really bad.

We managed to get feminist studies in part, coz it is a fairly sexist organisation. I went to the head of the department who was... that way... and said I'd like to run a survey through all years in this department, and go into all the lecture rooms and do it for everybody, and would they please fund the photocopying for it, and they did. Guess what we found? The further along that you went, the more you felt distanced and the more you felt the sexism come in, and it was the basis of the argument in order to have feminist studies. And they paid for it! And so then there was a big group of us, a collective, about 13 of us in feminist studies, and we'd just go systematically around all our classes and say okay, what's the research on this, and what's the sample... and how come it's only on men? Well does that apply to the rest of us? but how come? just aggregate your data? I mean you wouldn't do it, at the end, where you just say I had 20 men and 20 women, you'd start with men and women and be able to disaggregate everything. It's not useful to be able to say I had this many and this many... it's the application of it.

I went on and I got a job up at a government agency in their evaluation unit, and I had this advisory role. No power, but influence around education and training, so all scholarships, all training that was being delivered. At that point maybe 25% of scholarships were going to women, it's not very much. It's 50% now, and it was 50% by the time I left. If you actually line up your systems and argue that way, coz empathy wouldn't work, we could argue from an economic basis and that did work actually, because if you train and educate women you reduce family size, you reduce the cost on health, everything changes. The whole society improves so, it's not just a matter of knowing about it, it's about putting it in practice, making it happen you know.

These days, what I'm noticing is that casual sex is more popular. I think I did it when I was experimenting with men, where you'd separate out sex from love, but I'm not good at it. I think there might be a whole bunch of women that are much better at it than I am. Then there's this idea of buying sex but it is more a male thing, I hope. When it comes to women who sell sex, well I think that's a completely different thing from buying sex. One thing is that there will be some reason or point for her doing it but the fact that somebody buys, it I just don't get it at all. It's kind of interesting, because intellectually I get it, but intellectually I also don't get it, I just think really? really? 'coz they go together for me.... well sex and love go together, but buying sex is kind of just... 'coz I kept thinking to myself how is it different to having a massage? And I think it's way more intimate, you're far more vulnerable.

I know that in my forties, the women I hung out with, we'd talk about sex a lot, even now. I've known the same group of friends for over 20 years. I came in once and some of them were already there and they were talking about wanking, and I thought... really? And they're all about my age... like really? It's kind of funny. But in the early days, when I was not quite where I am now, it was kind of trying to make sense of how things are supposed to work and I don't know that I ever discussed not having orgasms with any women, but I probably would have discussed about what men do, but we didn't quite get down to the specifics.

I think the most interesting bit is how you define sexuality. Is it like Clinton, who said no I never had sex, because it wasn't genital? I actually think that feminine sexuality is tied up with, gender identity as well. I think in some ways they are connected and in some ways they are a bit separate. It's about identity. It's about a sense of self and completeness and also it's about intimacy, and if you're lucky, it's about safety and security. I think I'm saying it's partly about myself, and partly about what I've shared. Sometimes that it's quite broad, like about what I've shared, but when it gets the very intimate part of it, that part I might not share very much, does that make sense? And it doesn't stay static... like over my lifetime it's changed. And it depends on whose lens is looking, if it's a male gaze not a shit show. I wouldn't go and watch violent porn, why would I? No... I just wouldn't, I don't want to. Like often there's a lot of film festival films that are done by men, especially about lesbian women, and you think... this doesn't feel right, this is the wrong gaze, this is not MY gaze, you know, you're looking at how people are gorgeously laid out, and you think no, not really, that's not how it works.

When I go to my doctors and they've got Women's Day and they've got stories about people I've never heard of I think it's creative writing, it doesn't make any sense at all. It's just nuts, but when I was younger I would've thought I wish I could look like that 'coz what we wear and the colors

we wear are often dictated by things on television. Kinda like finding a date, or getting married at first sight, or my big body, or serious stuff ups with plastic surgery ah god, I don't know. There's any number of stupid things. I just think I cannot get my head around why anybody would go on television and do this, it's just gross. In terms of plastic surgery I just think I don't like having operations, why would you do it? Why would you do it? Coz I mean it would hurt, and it's not as if you just go in and out and bingo, you're beautiful, it's going to hurt.

From my perspective a sense of self is a sense of all the things going together in a way that feels like it's solid, it's got a firm foundation and it's not going to get rocked or shaken or destroyed. Like instead of being that outside viewer, either looking at yourself from the outside, or experiencing others looking at you from the outside, that's not a sense of self, that's a sense of looking to the outside. It doesn't rely on other people, saying "ooh, you look good today". This is what happened when my husband and I broke up actually, I lost an enormous amount of weight. I'd also got an amoebic dysentery. People kept saying to me oh my god, you're looking good and I'd think I was feeling like shit. So I wore baggy clothes to cover it up so that people wouldn't notice my shape because I didn't want to be seen as desirable because I wasn't feeling desirable, I was just feeling like crap really. In fact people would say every time I wore a skirt my goodness, you're looking really great, and their reaction was I was looking like a stereotypical female, and I'd just get really grumpy, and decided that's it, I'm not doing it, and now I don't really wear skirts anymore. So yea, when I'm me, I'm on the inside and it just is. That's the bit that's taken a long time, not just in sexuality, but in everything. It's about that sense of self. How come you've gotta get old to know this? Isn't it silly?

Oh, one more thing, remember "but you haven't got maths?" Guess who was the senior teaching fellow that was responsible for teaching statistics? I think I showed him!

## Thinking with Lilly

As I gaze around this constellation, I find myself orienting towards familiar points within these shimmering stars. Reflexively, I acknowledge a tension within myself as I make sense of aspects of my own story through the co-construction of Lilly's story. This tension is multi-faceted. My ethical responsibility as researcher to resist inserting a narrative authority that colonises Lilly's story as my own led me to grapple with blockages created by the flow of forces that have molded and shaped my personal constellation. Here I recognise a conflict between internalised epistemological biases about the process involved with working on empirical research whereby I actively resist (and sometimes yield to) compartmentalising myself from meaning making out of these moments of connection with women; I feel the pull to separate myself and observe, record, report. Thinking with Braidotti (2014), I acknowledge this gravitational pull of the master signifier and resist the entrapment and associated black hole of negative affect that commodifies women's stories of pain. Instead, within this moment of connection I orient towards the affective forces that swirl around, through and between us, contouring our lives in similar, yet different ways. This process of delinking pain from epistemological quests for universal meaning is a strategic point of resistance as it creates affective flows wherein alternative possibilities and transformation are possible.

Women who take up subject positions made available by heteronormative institutions such as marriage, motherhood and the nuclear family are constructed as responsible and good citizens and are granted particular social benefits and status in society. Lilly's articulation of negotiating the binds of these dominant forces highlights how a neoliberal imperative of economic participation stigmatises maternal bodies fixing women's employment status as a site of social control (Wolfinger, 2020). While the forces of dominant configurations of gendered bodies constrain, these complex flows of power relations are also constitutive of the conditions to be overturned. Whereas representations of woman as other are upheld through stories about what it is possible for women to "be", the nomadic process destabilises the imaginary sites of authentic identities by actively displacing dominant formations of identity, memory and identification to open up spaces of movement and possibility (Braidotti, 2014). It is a means of critiquing and subverting European phallogocentric perspectives of philosophy and subjectivity that bind women's lives through offering new perspectives, frameworks and modes of thought which extend beyond assumptions and restrictions imposed by categories of binary difference.

The enactment of affirmative ethics casts light on living entities' propensity to persevere in their existence through collaborative relational activities, their inbuilt capacity to experience

pleasure and empowerment from such interactions (Braidotti, 2022). Through Lilly's storying I am invigorated by shimmering lights whose incandescence highlight how hegemony breaks down through processes that connect us all in a web of relations and through which difference is affirmed. Transformation of the negative in this way works as a catalyst by activating the *potentia* fundamental to ontological desire and unlocking an infinite number of possibilities. The ontological desire that orients vital neo-materialist subjects towards the freedom to express all that they are capable of becoming and virtual possibilities need to be actualised by a missing 'we' (Braidotti, 2022). Heterogeneity, complexity and multiplicities mark this process of becoming, and opens a myriad of possibilities of both resistance and counter-actualisation of alternatives. The point of this actualisation is to provide an adequate expression of what embodied and embrained bodies can do and think and enact in terms of sustaining intensity, processing negativity and producing affirmation (Braidotti, 2019).

The task of producing adequate understandings and expressions of alternative knowledge is also connected to the ethical task of turning the painful experience of inexistence into generative relational encounters and knowledge production. Becoming woman is subversive because it works towards transformation of the signs, social practices and embodied histories of a Eurocentric, institutionalised femininity (Braidotti, 2013). Keeping the process of becoming open goes beyond the logic of reversibility embedded within binary oppositions and creates space for women in all their multiplicities to identify lines of flight from the internalised phallogocentric logic that structures their embodied subjectivities. This is achieved through welcoming internal contradictions and attempts to negotiate between unconscious structures of desire and conscious political choices. From this perspective, liberation is achieved through understanding our bondage, extracting knowledge, and activism from pain via the transformation of the negative (Braidotti, 2022),

## Rose

I am gay obviously... or not so obviously. From as early as intermediate I knew that I preferred females to males. I was born in Napier and lived there until I was about 9 or 10 and then we moved to Auckland. I used to get bullied at primary school... intermediate not so much, but high school definitely. I did have friends, but it was all the outcasts basically. It was not as bad as I believe it is now, but it was... the outcasts I'd call them. The ones that don't really fit in anywhere. I used to get beaten up quite a lot and it was always by other girls. It wasn't the boys. I don't know what the connection was, but it's always girls. I don't know whether that's because I was different or whether it was because I had these issues and I was quite... I don't know, but I used to always get bullied.

I had crushes on other girls, is what you would call it, and I would want them to be my best friend. I didn't want anything else because I didn't know about things like that. I thought that was just what a friendship was. When I was about 13 or 14 I suddenly realised this is not normal and I should have crushes on boys. There must be something wrong with me. That was 40 years ago. There was no internet, there was no nothing, it was very limiting because of the information we had and the only thing I found was an article, some newspaper article saying that there were psychiatrists that were trying to fix people, that were broken, that weren't into heterosexual relationships... and I went, ok, so I must have a problem. I'm not normal, I'm broken. I'm doing something wrong. I can't talk to anybody about it. I've got this huge problem what do I do? I thought I must be wrong, you know. You'd never choose to be gay... you'd never choose it because it's a hard road.

Anyway, for a while I struggled with my identification about whether I was a male or a female, this was a big question in my head. I grew up thinking that boys and girls were meant to be together and that's how it worked. For a very long time, probably a good 15 years, I thought that that's what is meant to happen. Because of what I'd grown up with, I started thinking well maybe I should be a boy. I didn't do anything about it, but, I just thought that should be what happens I guess. It was very hard to find anything on anything other than what I thought was normal. The idea of being a boy didn't really interest me though, I just couldn't get past that I want to be a girl. Don't get me wrong I was a tom boy... I hated dresses, had short hair, liked rough and tumble, wasn't into being a princess. I didn't associate with being a girly girl and I didn't associate with being with a male because it just didn't make sense to what I had been programmed to at a younger age, so I didn't really think of myself as one or the other. It was just what it was, and it was just what I felt. I didn't think it was odd, I was quite happy that way not thinking one way or the other.

I had a boyfriend once, for a very long time. It was in the days you know, where you just go to the pub to meet people. We were best friends, and we're still friends, but all the time I was with him, like every day, I used to think that I should really be with a female. I was in my first gay relationship when I was 30. What happens is when you have your first gay relationship it's like being a teenager again. We were only together for a couple of years and we broke up in my mid-thirties, so that was 20 years ago. I was horrible when I was with her, really awful. So we broke up and I went with somebody else and then I broke up with that person and then I realised what a terrible mistake I had done and we tried to get back together, and she just couldn't get past the fact that I had been with somebody else. I'd never go there again because I know that I just don't really fancy her anymore... I mean she's alright as a friend, I just don't fancy her. But you can have emotional connections that sometimes never go.

In a female relationship, monogamy is really important and letting go is really hard. Because what happens with females is they have very strong friendship bonds. If you have two female partners, they generally will be best friends. There's no gender, you don't have one that takes on the male role and one that takes on the female role. Girls will get together, and you don't dare go anywhere else with anyone else sexually. It's a very deep relationship in the sense that it's so much wound up together. With a heterosexual couple, you've got the man with his physical needs, and the woman has physical needs as well, but obviously a woman will want to cuddle and want to feel that she's loved and nurtured whereas for a man it may be that he just needs something physical. What you'd have with the gay boys is they'll get together and they'll have an agreement; they're driven by sowing their seeds and that's from very early days. That's what the point of a man was, to populate as much as he could so that's their purpose. For women, sex is more emotional, the sex would stop when the emotion stops, whereas with a guy you don't need any emotional attachment at all. When you have a spectrum of being gay, the lesbians and the gay boys get lumped together, but we're not the same.

If you're thinking about breaking up, the problem you've got if you're two girls is all your friends are all so tightly connected, you're splitting up the whole group. It also gets complicated, the community is so little. It's like I was with a partner, we broke up, there was another couple that broke up, and then I ended up going out with one of them and she ended up going out with the other one so it was almost like a swap, but it wasn't. When things go bad the evil nastiness that women can brew and can put upon each other is like a ticking time bomb. Women just analyse everything. So what happens when you've got two girls, if you imagine being really really close to somebody, so close that you do everything together and your whole life is involved and all your friends are joint friends and everything's entwined totally. Well you put two emotional people

together, and I'm sure it happens with heterosexual couples but it happens more with two females because they can be really nasty in the sense of... really nasty. Females can be really, really nasty. You imagine both having their period at the same time. Guys can have a fight, a physical fight with each other, like punch each other and then be friends the next day and be ok because they've dealt with it, got it out, and on they move you know. Women just hold onto it forever and out of the vault it comes.

I was also in a relationship where my partner used to beat me up, I must have 'bully' written all over me. It was alcohol, she used to drink and get very violent. It's to the extent where I stopped drinking because she was so bad. For ten years I used to call her the wife beater for her nickname and then at one stage I just went I don't want to call her that any more. I said to her I've been calling you the wife beater and I don't want to call you that anymore. She said I just want to say sorry for my behaviour. You probably wouldn't do that with a guy, we had so much more of an emotional connection. To the extent that we both just went okay that's great, both happy now and had a hug and were fine. You get to the point where you accept what happened but you accept you had something with them so you must have thought they were ok for some reason. So we try and keep friends, it's a very different dynamic. I know I don't have any sexual feelings for her anymore. It's very distinctly cut off. It just goes, you have that chemistry to start with obviously. It's like the driver, for the relationship, usually. The emotional attachment and the caring about them is still there, which is probably bigger. Very nurturing you know, there isn't anything... totally nothing sexually, it is an emotional attachment and caring about someone yea, very different.

My partner now, she's had shingles for 18 months and she's been quite sick. She said to me I haven't been putting out as much as I should have. I said don't worry about it, every night we go to bed and we cuddle each other, and we have that that close bond. You're not well. So you have more of an acceptance of a situation. You can have a much more civil conversation. You don't go oh my god another night. There's a lot of things that are very enjoyable as well, if somebody is not in the mood or someone is sick you know like getting a nice massage. The really good thing is you can have a conversation about things, you can go, actually I'm not really comfortable with that, how about we try this. Whereas I don't know if its that's easy to have that sort of conversation in a heterosexual relationship. That makes it about him again. There would be times where a female understands more like, if you go, oh I'm getting my period or I've got a headache, or I'm really tired tonight. Generally we know it's not really an excuse, it's how we're really feeling. The experiences I've had is you talk a lot more about what you need, what you like, if you're not comfortable with something, trying something new, yea. There's a lot more things you can try, would be the polite way of putting it.

I see sexuality as a spectrum, like a scale. So you have at one end lesbians and at the other end you have straight, and in between you have different variants of what level you're at, and some people are smack bang in the middle, obviously bi. I've got friends who have had really bad relationships with girls, and they've gone ok, I'm just going to get a boyfriend coz it's much easier, it's simple, it's cut and dried. Of course you've got to consider whether you sexually can go there, not everyone wants intercourse. Here's something interesting, a lot of lesbians enjoy gay male porn. To be fair, the female porn is made by males for males, and it's always generally a man and two girls. Or a man doing whatever he wants to a girl. With sex, girls go for a lot longer because obviously we can have multiple orgasms. I've had conversations with straight girls that go "what do you mean multiple?" And I go ok, do you really want me to explain?! A female could enjoy another female for hours, whereas for guys it's a harder unless he's young and virile. So it's a lot more about the foreplay and there's a lot more to it. It's very much more of an emotional connection and caring, it's not just wham bam thank you ma'am.

There are limited places that we feel comfortable and safe going to. We know the gay bar is very very safe for us. We know the bouncers are always going to look out for us, we're not going to get drunk men coming in and trying to change the world, so we feel quite safe. We have a core group of friends and they're all gay. We've got one friend, she's straight. If another female was to hit on her like at a club, all she needs to say is I'm straight, I'm just here with friends. 99% of the time they'll say ah ok, and everyone's flattered and off you go. You don't have that whole harassment or, buying drinks. You have a lot more respect for each other. Whereas when we go to a normal bar, we don't feel so safe. We wouldn't typically go there if you wanted to go and have a bit of a dance or something, unless you were with going with a load of workmates. The great thing about gay bars is it doesn't matter how old you are either. You go to a bar and when it gets late and everyone's drinking they're all of a certain age, whereas in gay bars you don't have that, you have people that are young and you have people that are in their 50s 60s... because we don't care. There are also relationships where you have quite big age gaps. At the moment my partner is 13 years younger than me, the previous one was 10 years and the previous one was 18 years. It's more on an emotional level too.

Recently I called some big organisation like insurance or something like and they rang me back. I said look my partner's been in hospital, I've just got to deal with that and she said oh that's no good, I hope **he** gets better soon. And the thing is there are terms you can use; you'd just say I hope they are better soon. So I get that a lot over the phone. If it's work, I'll tell them actually you guys need to realise that you can't really assume, especially when you don't know someone and you've only got a name, you can't assume these things. In meetings when people talk about consulting the

manager its always associated with the word he, so I always make a point of saying "or she" and that's really hard. There's a big education there as well that doesn't do the whole am I normal... normal's not a good word... but am I normal am I not. It just makes you feel like more of an outcast.

## Thinking with Rose

Rose's story depicts an embodied subjectivity, which while embedded within a complex and contradictory interplay of dominant forces, moves in process to cast light on the body not as machines designed by nature to *be* a certainty, but as a site of resistance and transformation. Embodied subjects are sexed in a multiplicity of ways whereby the sexed body is a site of multiple and intersecting codes that is inscribed through embodied and embedded affective flows situated within specific geo-political and spatio-temporal locations (Braidotti, 2022). Thinking about categories traditionally associated with the body like gender, sexuality, race and (dis)ability help us to analyse how these are produced and reproduced through power relations that are no longer confined within the vulnerable limits of the body. As Braidotti (2022) argues, conceptually, subjects cannot be reduced to their vulnerable mortality, on the contrary they are essentially subjects of desire. Freedom is written into our system as the desire to expand and enhance our existence where thinking beings keep on flowing out of the frames that attempt to capture them; this is desire as *potentia*.

Through Rose's storying of negotiating dominant structures of heteronormativity in navigating her own sexuality she articulates transformative processes of dis-identification with essentialised norms in pursuit of alternative ways of embodiment. Opening out towards possibilities beyond the binary enables the flow of transversal sexualities to find movement and flow, taking us beyond these blockages created by the epistemic and ontological violence that is embedded within heteronormative referents of sexuality. In this sense hurt and pain are not reflections of inevitable experiences that constitute reality, but instead signal a reorienting towards positivity and possibilities through processes in which difference is affirmed. It encompasses the affective flow towards other sites of pleasure in spite of the pain and is therefore affirmative. What is subversive here isn't about the dialectics of being straight or gay, but involves being moved by the shimmering quality inherent to the vital life force seeking out pleasure and joy.

Rethinking sexual difference as a transversal life force points to poly-sexualities that stretch beyond the normative constructions of gender in an infinite process of becoming across categories and offers alternative ways of thinking about agency by shedding light on the embodied manner through which social relations are conducted in everyday life (Braidotti, 2022). Thinking with Braidotti (2022), posthuman sexuality is a line of flight in which the vital, generative power of matter enables sexuality to constantly re-emerge as a point of resistance and reinvention. Irrepressible, generative on a cosmic scale, she describes the force of desire as always *sexuate* before, beneath and beyond gender, breaking all molds. Here posthuman subjectivity is defined as the composition

of posthuman subjects who want to know otherwise and produce knowledge differently and is an ontological source of empowerment for women and LGBTQ+ people (Braidotti, 2022).

# Aria

I was born in Iraq, and came here when I was like ten-ish. I grew up in West Auckland and went to a primary school with girls and boys and after that I went to an all-girls school. I looked really different when I came to school here and so I got bullied for the way I looked, it was pretty horrible and I had a lot of body issues as a result. Girls specifically talked about appearance things and I guess the boys were less critical of my appearance in some ways, though they were still quite mean in other ways, like racist. A lot of times for me nowadays, it's not so much vocal hostility anymore, because people have grown up and they're mature now, but I can definitely tell when people are intimidated because I look different, like I have links with terrorism or something. It's really hard to explain because they're not vocal about it now like when I was a child, it's kind of a vibe, like my presence is a threat in some way or something.

The most interesting thing about my sexuality is that when I was a teenager and I wasn't putting on any make-up or anything, and I hadn't really developed yet, I got bullied for how I looked 'coz like racism was a thing. But when I became a sexual object, that is like when I grew up and I became more attractive and I started putting make-up on and playing the part and grew boobs and stuff, all of a sudden my sexuality trumped my race, so all of a sudden it was like being an attractive woman comes before race. So like for example, if you're an unattractive brown man you probably have it a lot harder in dealing with racism than an attractive brown woman, and likewise an unattractive brown woman is going to face a lot more racism than an attractive brown woman. It's like because I'm playing the part, you know, of *their* idea of a woman, of a beautiful woman, I am allowed entry to some elite club, but if I'm not playing that part, then I'm just a brown person. And I see it all the time with the way I dress when I go out into public.

Probably my earliest memory of sexuality was from my parents and that it was something to be ashamed of. So I guess it begins with shame. I remember my mum catching me masturbating in the shower one day, and she was like no, you shouldn't touch yourself down there... and I'm like why and she just sort of, she didn't give me a coherent reason why, it just was a thing not to do. And so of course I kept masturbating. I've always reasoned my way around all this shit that people were telling me. I didn't really think about my sexuality for very long, I mean I was masturbating and stuff, but I didn't think about my relationship to other people and what that all meant. I guess my parents were like no sex before marriage and stuff, and I was like whatever and I eventually did have sex, but it wasn't until I was 18.

But for me, I really struggled with my body image, and still do in part, especially because of all that feedback I got when I was a child, and because I was an unattractive teenager. Before I came to New Zealand I hadn't really thought about my appearance much, like I was just a child. But when I came to here and people started making fun of how I looked and stuff I was like ah shit... this is a thing. And I remember, like here in New Zealand it was a relationship of shame too, it's not like New Zealand is this enlightened culture when it comes to sexuality. I guess most societies are shamey about sex, but it was interesting 'coz in New Zealand it was more visually accessible and there were images of women being sexualised constantly and everywhere. That was less of a thing in Iraq. We had TV shows and they had women and men, but women were just dressed normally. Advertisements weren't constantly using sex to sell either so overall sex was less of a thing. I think that has its own negatives, but in New Zealand it was definitely something I really remember, like women are sex objects was the main ideology being pushed, and I guess my peers were responding to what they had been taught to do, judging other women's appearances... even now, constantly criticising other women's appearances and also to bring themselves up in that way because they have their own insecurities.

My first ever experience with the sex industry was working at a strip club. Not stripping, because I have a lot of body image issues like I said, but I did other things in the club, like bar tending and handing out fliers. And then I worked at a sex shop, and then after that I started working as an escort. Working at a strip club was really illuminating because like I had all these ideas about strip clubs and strippers and they were all shattered and I met some really awesome girls there. It was a problematic relationship that I had with the sex industry 'coz this is clearly a situation where women were being objectified and I disagree with society's objectification of women to the extent that it does but at the same time, this was empowering for these women in real time because they got money, and they were able to use that money to empower themselves in this economy which they're stuck in which happens to value their sexuality. It's like the only set of cards that we have dealt to us, you know. It's not a choice because we kinda need it to survive in this economy. So I thought to myself, how do I resolve that dilemma and basically I decided the individual needs of all women in the sex industry trumps whatever bigger societal need we have to make reforms, because the onus is not actually on these individual women who are the victims of society to change it all, the onus is actually on everyone else who's not those women. It's on the people who are constantly using women to advertise for things and anyone who sexualises women for profit. So that's how I resolved that, and then I started working as an escort and I'd say I think I have the same view now on that work.

When I moved to Wellington I got a job at a sex shop selling sex toys and other items, so that was my first real experience in that kind of industry, and it was really cool. It was a sex positive sex shop run by women, and I got to be able to have open honest conversations with people about their sex lives and learnt a lot. It was awesome to be able to help people get through their inabilities and to talk about it and help make them feel comfortable with it all. Working in a sex shop kinda helped me just generally learn about sex too, I read about all kinds of sex and stuff that I didn't know about like stimulation and pleasure and I kinda felt like a sex expert, so that was cool. I was definitely surprised at times though, like I even had a customer once who didn't know what a clitoris was! Although to be honest the people who did make it to the sex store were probably having better sexual experiences than the average public because they were more aware and were looking to explore, to try toys and different things so they're probably a better representation than most. Sometimes you did get people who couldn't have penetrative sex and other problems, but it was mostly men that came in to buy toys for them and their partner.

It was an interesting time for me, like I'd had had some sex with some people, but I wasn't super-duper experienced at that stage plus I thought I was straight as well. I don't know what stage I started being like am I actually bi-sexual, but at some stage I consciously went out there to test the theory and started hooking up with women, and I was like yup, I'm definitely bi. And now I think everyone is bi, actually bi is a problematic word, let's use pan or something like that... pansexual is good. So I think everyone is on the spectrum anyway. Ultimately I don't really care how people identify, they might be non-binary in some way, but it's like the myth of empowering yourself via sexualising yourself. By this I mean to define oneself as a sexual being, which is a hard one to unpack because there's actually a lot of stuff going on there.

I find it so problematic because I don't actually believe its empowering to be a sex object and take that all on board to define ourselves when that is the only way that we are portrayed. It's like a false choice. Like think about this, you can pick between these two brands, look at how much option you have, you have two whole brands, but in reality there is actually a monopoly on the whole thing and you can only really choose one of those two brands if we're talking about electricity or something. So it's kinda the same thing here. It's like the illusion of choice, like women choosing to be sex objects, but really that's just one of the only currencies that we have. Like the only set of cards that we have dealt to us. It's not a choice because we kinda need to play up to this to survive in this economy. In the not so distant past women relied on being attractive to secure a husband to provide them with economic security, but at what cost? Or to be a mistress. And then I guess more recently women are trying to reclaim some of their autonomy, but in doing so they're not offered many different stories of how to exist other than a sexual object because for so long that's all that

we've had told to us. So yea, I personally think deconstructing the illusion of choice is a good place to start because we're not actually choosing how we're acting or being in this society, in this world, it's already been decided for us.

Looking at playboy magazines that we have at the agency where I work as an escort now from not that long ago, 70s and 80s... they're horrible, like really horrid, really sexist and really racist. I feel like we went from being okay with that view of woman to now where that's considered taboo, you can't be blatantly sexist about women in those exact same ways anymore, but what does still happen is that you can objectify women and that goes hand in hand with how we objectify ourselves, so at a society level it's like we've kinda narrowed our scope of sexism, or what's considered sexism. I'm not really sure just how much things have actually changed though, certainly not as much as people pretend. I think that we *were* sex objects, and we *are still* sex objects. It was more obvious and more explicit then, whereas now you still have sexualised images of women but they won't be coupled with the kind of really derogatory sexist remarks that were more common then. It's more paired with things, so like to sell things and it goes hand in hand with this undercurrent message of equality and freedom and empowerment that somehow makes the objectification ok. It used to be acceptable to be sex objects but also, like slave objects, like house objects, like house cleaners and stuff. But yea, in terms of women's sexuality, and looking at and thinking about those magazines from the 70s women are very much still sex objects.

Maybe we're in a transitional stage now, but the problem is it's just so profitable to sexualise women. It was just more intense and obvious before where women were sex objects but they were also punished for being sex objects, as though it's all their fault for being attractive to men and it's their fault for how men act as a consequence and there are all these knock on effects like temptress and all that stuff. Actually it's still very much there but I guess we're trying to transition, or at least there is more awareness now. In saying that, I'd never put being an escort on my cv even though it's a legal job. So yea, I do think deconstructing the illusion of choice is a good place to start 'coz actually we're not all choosing how we're acting, we are making choices within pre-defined parameters, and not all choices are equally available to all people.

Feminine sexuality is kind of a confusing term. I think about sexuality pertaining to people who identify as femme. If you're referring to gender then, I think gender is on a spectrum and some people might identify as femme even though they might not be identified as such by society... that's why it's such a difficult term, because feminine could be describing people's idea about biological sex or it could be describing the societal idea of the gender of woman... of feminine. I guess it would be viewed very much as the object as opposed to the subject, it's the thing which is worked upon and looked at and done to. It's usually portrayed as soft and passive and very made-up and pretty

and like biologically, traditionally looking womanly. And it's women who are more likely to tell you something about your appearance than a man is, which is good I guess 'coz I'm not saying men should start doing it, like it would be inappropriate... though I think it's inappropriate for anyone to do it.

I was just thinking about how it's a small number of people who dictate what happens in the media and what narratives are told unfortunately. I mean all the media companies in the world, or rather the main media producers from the United States, so like the western world, have been consolidated to three, or maybe two as of recently, like Sony and like Fox. There were like 50 not that long ago, this monopolisation thing happened very quickly, just buying each other out and integrating vertically and horizontally with all these businesses, and now you have these media companies that produce everything. TV shows, music, food, advertisements, radio, you know, just like everything, and so that means that you can actually narrow it down to a small board of each of these companies who make a lot of decisions about how the western world views female sexuality. And those men's views (because of course they're men) are heavily influenced by their riches, and their gender, and their own gender rules, and how they've been taught to view women. It's not necessarily their fault either, like, yes they have a privilege in this economy but they have been manipulated into seeing people in a certain way as well and they can't help but view women like that and so it perpetuates.

My biggest problem with some feminist theorists is that they seem to view behaving like men as empowerment, but what if men were never empowered to begin with? And instead of framing it like that and being like we're all oppressed and the system is not working, that we actually all of us need to do less of what we're doing, I would say that is the starting point we need to come from to actually make meaningful change. Look at all the time humans spend working - humans are not meant to work as much as we do. Capitalism has a lot to answer for 'coz I think that they've capitalised on the idea of feminism and made it profitable. What's more profitable than getting the other half of the population into the workforce? So all of a sudden feminism was women doing men's jobs... but really that's just another form of oppression that women have to deal with, they still have to look after the home in a lot of ways. I mean sure, that's getting a bit better now in a lot of places and that's good obviously, but so many women are needing to work to support themselves and their families economically at the same time as having these home responsibilities so that is just yet another form of oppression that women have to deal with. Working professionally and then all this unpaid work in the home means so many women are having to work at what calculates out to under a livable wage, not that anyone places a dollar figure on the labour women do in the home.

It's kind of like what has proved to be profitable has been so cartoonishly emphasised and used over the years that now it's just like ridiculous. Like they've realised that sexualisation of women is a thing so now that just dominates our expression of women. When you think about Donald Trump and the way that he talks about people, he very much speaks in only small little slogans about huge topics and that's because of how the media frames things now, which is because they don't have that much time in little ads or the news or whatever to express big topics. So that's what I mean by things are cartoonish, they're reduced and then blown up. That's how stereotypes are also born I guess. When it's profitable it just becomes such a thing, like when blacks are portrayed as urban they know that that's a thing that pays off, so now that's the only way that they are portrayed in TV shows. Everything comes down to profit, so I guess that's where the power is, and money. A small number of people are actually benefitting with the money and making a lot of other people suffer as a result of it.

I was thinking the other day that there's so much that happens to women that affects men too. Being taught to view women as sex objects is in itself really horrible for men because it means that they're not having really awesome connections with women that they otherwise could be because to them - and this is a thing that I experience a lot, but to men if women are not a sexual object then they have no use at all. And while that sucks for women for sure, it also sucks for men because they're missing out on a friendship with some pretty awesome women. I feel like a lot of times you'll meet men who are extremely lonely because they're not close to other men because they don't know how to connect with them. Especially men without partners, because pretty much men only open up to their partners I think, so maybe they just don't know how to relate to women on any other level and so they often end up having no one to connect with, and that's a really sad existence... and has effects like making them suicidal, judging by suicide stats. I think toxic masculinity hurts men first and foremost, both in that they are socialised not to talk about emotional stuff as well as male on male violence which is the most prevalent kind of violence and which is kinda socially accepted.

What I think is real interesting is the fact that men are generally unhappier than women. We talk about women being oppressed but even Afghanistan stats show that men are less happy than women and women are so oppressed there. In Afghanistan males, for example, are less happy than their female counterparts. They have to go and work with heaps of other really shitty men and they have to spend their entire days with emotionally unintelligent... frustrated and like, you know in all the ways that men are negatively socialised and, they take out their frustration on their wives when they get home, whom they have been taught to oppress as well. Although that's because they're

oppressed in ways that are studied in the western world and that we are talking about now because our media structures allow that conversation to happen.

It's like I said before, it's profitable to say don't oppress women... get them to work, get them to be sex objects, that's fine - but for some reason you don't really hear about the oppression of your average working man, and you're just not really getting any huge movement from men. I mean what do you think if I say the word "meninist"? You think shitty dudes on reddit being sexist or something along those lines, whereas they could have a really legitimate movement and talk about some real issues like about how toxic masculinity is affecting them as well as women. But that conversation is just not being facilitated for them. There's no examples of how to talk about that so that's a structural problem, right. I mean we've had working man movements before, but I'm talking as wide as the huge feminism movement. Like actually calling it out and saying that's oppression. I'm talking about the daily grind, like working a whole week only to make barely enough to survive. It's totally fucked up, and that's actually ruining people's lives.

Whether we like it or not, we currently live under this system right, and the fact of the matter is we're not given equality within this system. I mean like legal equality. That's why the whole feminist movement started right, it was because of the awesome women who were like this is fucked up and unfair and stood up for themselves. It was about let us vote and participate in this economy if we have to live in and abide by its rules. But even now in countries like New Zealand we still have the pay gap and stuff which is totally unfair. I mean if I have to subscribe to an economy then you have to pay me the same rate.

And if you think about it, feminism it doesn't really go that far either because it only goes so far as is profitable, so the feminine discourse will stop at "women should be treated the same as men under this system" but actually I think the conversation needs to move beyond that, and being like, okay but actually this whole economic system is oppressive and we want to move out of that entirely. It's an inherently flawed system which tips over the power to a small number of people, these elite who have found a way to make feminism profitable. They're not making themselves happier with all the extra millions they have on top of the already millions that they have. It's not benefitting them or anyone, it's a really shit time. And besides, is it actually empowering for women to be able to join the frontline of an army when armies are inherently oppressive? I mean I don't think it's empowering for women to be able to join already oppressive structures in the name of equality but at the same time I recognise how important it was for us to like get the vote and have access to basic human rights.

I feel like deconstructing gender is the wave we need to be on right now and actually being interested in, and asking questions about who benefits from these gender structures. If I get really super-duper philosophical I think it's also linked to the myth of free will, which kinda underpins the neoliberal philosophy, which, in a lot of ways fucks things up for us. I think it really comes down to this myth that we are freely choosing to participate in *this* current system and to behave in *this* exact way... which just *happens* to be the same way as everyone else. I think that's where a lot of people are in a situation where you end up feeling like you just have to look after yourself really, first and foremost. It's very individualistic. And besides, it's like men don't really have a choice but to be this hypermasculine working class kind of thing. We both don't really have a choice and are born into playing these gender roles. It really is no coincidence that most people with a vagina act feminine, and the vast majority of people with penises act masculine.

## Thinking with Aria

Aria's articulation of negotiating racism and sexism illuminates binary difference as an affective technology that is cultivated through categories of hegemonic sameness and binds the formation of subjectivities to naturalised Eurocentric heteronormative categories. Decolonising approaches in research acknowledge gendered violence towards Black and Indigenous people as imperial and colonial violence (Braidotti, 2022). In thought with Braidotti (2022) it is impossible to abstract discussions of Indigenous sexual symbolic systems and gendered identities from issues of violent dispossession and exploitation and this guides our collaborative process of shared meaning making. Gender dualism and the colonial projection of Western definitions and practices of sexuality upon Indigenous people has forced heteronormative categories onto a retrospective vision of authentic indigeneity. These processes of sexualisation and naturalisation inherent to the Western gender system are intrinsically linked to processes of racialisation that perpetuate colonial and imperial violence against Indigenous and non-Western people and reinforces the hegemony of the West (Braidotti, 2022).

Thinking with Braidotti (2022), the transformative potential offered through affirmative ethics enables us to both acknowledge and disengage from the complex ecology we are all part of and opens up possibilities for new ways of thought, being and life. Sexuality, recast as the vital force of life, becomes a line of flight as we engage with affective flows and processes of shared meaning making from our respective locations. What is affirmative about feeling with Aria through her storying of sexual difference is the ways in which her embodied and embedded experiences enable us to trace transformative paths that point to virtual possibilities that escape, challenge and de-territorialise the dualistic categories associated with the pejorative other. Within this process of fostering affirmative connections through intra- and inter-relationships we challenge dominant Eurocentric structures of homogeneity because these affirmative relations are non-hierarchical and emphasise our collective individualities and differences within a greater whole.

If we think about power as a complex interplay of forces that both enables and constrains, always circulating throughout our lives, we are released from binary assumptions of the dialectical opposite connected to affirmative/positive and reactive/negative affects. This flow of affective forces along with spatio-temporal variations shines light on the complex overlap of physical, symbolic and material social conditions that shapes women's embodied lives in multiple and complex ways. Theorising with Braidotti (2022), the transgressive force of sexual difference operates as negotiable, transversal and affective spaces of multiple becomings that intersects the multiple

differences within and among women in terms of other social variables such as race, ethnicity, class, age, and body abilities igniting the infinite capacities that lay dormant within each woman and each LGBTQ+ subject.

Posthuman feminism builds on an affirmative tradition and reaches out towards a different philosophy of love that is heterogenous, process oriented and transgressive, moving beneath and beyond fixed unitary identities and gender binaries recasting difference as affirmative through this process (Braidotti, 2022). Through Aria's storying we feel with her the generative power of embodied sexual difference as she traces a cosmology about the kind of subjects of desire it is possible for us to become. In doing so, she introduces a sensorial element of lightness and freedom through bringing you into the experience of being part of a vibrant and vibrating world of possibilities. Engaging with Braidotti (2022), desire traces the possible patterns of becoming between the no longer and the not yet, through a heightening of sensorial perception overflowing within specific geometries of relational forces and the ontological force that activates all living matter – humans included – to go on.

In asserting the principle of sexual difference as not-One, we engage with the process of collectively constructing affirmative ethics that acknowledges the ties that bind us to the multiple 'others' in a vital web of complex interrelations therefore opening up alternative ways of thinking about what kind of humans we are in the process of becoming. As collective subjects that acknowledge multiplicity and celebrate difference, the Eurocentric binds of heteronormativity become undone as notions of normative subjectivities become destabilised through a relational ethics of care and solidarity that resides at the in-depth structures of our subjectivities (Braidotti, 2022). This ethical relational principle disrupts unity and autonomy of liberal individualism and therefore also rejects loss, lack and irreparable separation of psychoanalytic theory formalised in a dualistic scheme of self-other antagonism (Braidotti, 2022).

The process of collectively constructing affirmative ethics involves the composition of planes of becoming for a missing people. For Braidotti (2019), the missing people form a 'we-are-in-this-together-but-we-are-not-one-and-the-same' kind of transversal subjectivity. Through activating materialist affirmative ethics that are grounded in immanent interconnections we co-create alternative ethical forces and political codes into new affective assemblages of 'people' who are no longer missing (Braidotti, 2019). Ethical relations activate the virtual in a web or rhizome of interconnection with others and create possible worlds by mobilising resources such as our desires and imagination. This relational bond transforms sexuality into a transversal connector that is accountable to and for these others by reconnecting us to our ontological grounding, the

fundamental joy of persevering in our existence and increasing our relational abilities to encounter a multiplicity of others.

## A cosmology for becoming heterogeneity

Through mapping this cosmology it was my hope to resist the reduction of subjects to the wounded, vulnerable aspects alone and instead have traced variations on heteronormative discourse through the women's storying of themselves. The incandescence of lights that shine through the women's stories make visible the discursive power relations through which they are figured while the virtual figures emerging through the process of reading and thinking with the women's stories is affirmative of the heterogeneity of sexual difference. The decolonising approach I have adopted privileged embodied collective histories and communal bonds over liberal, individual imperatives as a means of escaping the ontological bedrock of certainty, objectivity and logic that serve as the foundation of positivist methods. This has brought to light lines of flight away from Eurocentric interpretations of sexuality which inform philosophical assumptions about subjectivity and the nature of reality. Through a process of reading and thinking with these collective stories reality is instead reframed as emergent, nonlinear and in a state of flux highlighting the relational and embodied nature of social processes.

Gender is a western tool of governance, population growth, reproduction and demographic management. It upholds dominant ideas of what constitutes the desirable form for the reproductive and child rearing human within the social unit of the family and elements of this is reflected within the women's storying. A historically specific apparatus of production of entire societies, communities and terroirs, it is based on exploitation of women's productive and reproductive labour, the male ownership of children and the exclusion of LGBTQ+ people from both private and public institutions as we see woven through the aspects of the women's stories. Rather than being pinned into place by this notion, Braidotti (2022) contends that gender is not necessary or sufficient as a category to explain or contain the complexity of living matter, especially sexuality as a transformative force, because it is a tool of governance that reinstates the dualism inherent to the sex/gender divide and is inconsistent with assumptions premised on sexuate differential matter as a vital continuum. It is not gender, or social codes that constructs sex, or the body, but it is rather the case that sexuality is a human and non-human force always at work through the multiple organic and inorganic ecologies that co-produce bodies.

Thinking with Braidotti (2022), posthuman feminism radically criticises the gender system, but it starts from the assumption that sexuality is a force that is neither reducible to, nor is it constructed by the gender system because gender does not capture the ways in which

contemporary sexualities as materialist and disruptive forces experiment with the new intensive philosophies and practices of love. A posthuman perspective de-links sex and gender, replacing the sex-gender distinction with more subtle modes of analysis. While the sex/gender dyad is a binary social code of reduction, sexual difference is about a multiplicity of differences whereby sexuality activates the forces capable of mobilising modes of becoming-other otherwise than the dominant logic of heteronormative patriarchy.

Playful and non-reproductive, Braidotti (2022) describes sexuality as an ontological force positioned before, beneath and beyond the social codes that entrap it in binary oppositions, compulsory heterosexuality and reproductive sex. Instead, sexuality is comprised of relational variations before, beneath and beyond fixed identities and is therefore about differing across and within categories and producing alternative and in-between virtual sexes (Braidotti, 2022). As a transversal force flowing across real and virtual dimensions of becoming, sexual difference is relocated away from the dialectical opposition of two sexes through a *process* of differing whereby difference is recast as trans-individual complexity, or the principle of Not-One (Braidotti, 2022). In asserting the principle of sexual difference as not-One, or multiplicity, posthuman feminism calls for relational ethics at the in-depth structures of our subjectivity by acknowledging the ties that bind us to multiple 'others' in a vital web of complex interrelations (Braidotti, 2022).

The transgressive force of sexual difference operates as negotiable, transversal and affective spaces of multiple becomings that intersects the multiple differences among women in terms of social variables such as race ethnicity, class, age, and body abilities igniting the infinite capacities that lay dormant within each woman and each LGBTQ+ subject (Braidotti, 2022). By reading the women's stories we have engaged in a relational process that acknowledges our ties to multiple others in a complex web of interrelations. This ethical relational principle disrupts the unity and autonomy of liberal individualism and therefore also rejects loss, lack and irreparable separation of psychoanalytic theory formalised in a dualistic scheme of self-other antagonism (Braidotti, 2022). Processes of opening out to encounters and connections with other bodies creates space to feel *with*, to sense and process the lived experiences of women's bodies while also casting light on the complex ways in which gendered power relations are inscribed on and through the bodies. Reorienting from the oppositional, resisting self (I would prefer not to) into a collective assemblage we are released from the affective blockages and bonds that have held us in place the activation of this vital life force is activated towards horizons of infinite possibilities.

Eurocentric models delete historical and cultural differences between western and indigenous nations. It is challenging to remedy this epistemic violence without falling into the trap of neo-colonial appropriation, or arrogantly assuming the intrinsic superiority of western knowledge

and methodology. Reading and thinking with the women's stories facilitates a process in which subjects are enabled to reassert their identities in all their multiplicities and is a way to redistribute the structural inequalities that impose sameness in a set of hierarchical power relations and brings to light a collective desire to escape understood limits of identity. Sexuality flows and circulates within assemblages of not only bodies, but also social institutions, practices and within the wider environment on a deeply material level propelled by a desire that draws on its own affective landscapes (Braidotti, 2022). Thinking with Braidotti (2022) we are invited to consider how Indigenous cosmologies understand the connection between humans and their environments as profoundly intimate, acknowledging how love and a deep respect connects multiple species woven together within a web textured by multiple layers of interdependence and care.

Braidotti infuses our theorising of sexuality with the essence of shimmering, translated from the concept of *bir'yun* of the Australian Indigenous Yolngu people, and as presented by Deborah Bird Rose (2017). Rose's (2017) description of *bir'yun* as "characteristic of a lively, pulsating world, not a mechanistic one" (P. 55) depicts the vitality and brilliance captivated by shimmering, not only as an experience of sensorial richness, but also of a sense of beauty and reverence that accounts for the wonder of seduction and attraction occurring in the non-human world. Braidotti (2022) draws connections to the ways in which shimmering manifests a deep enchantment with the world and its constant flows, expressing shared desires not only to co-exist with other species in a shared territory, but also to take care of them, deriving joy and pleasure from such love in the process. These processes are propelled forward by a collective goal of affirmation and by a relational ethics of care and solidarity.

According to Braidotti (2013), nomadism as a feminist figuration recognises that bodies are ascribed with particular historical and socio-cultural meanings (sexed, raced, classed) depending on their situatedness and that these differences all play a part in the nomadic journey. She explains how the nomadic subject is not literally homeless or displaced, but creates a space that enables new forms of agency through deterritorialisation of the discursive boundaries imposed by constructions of traditional femininity (Braidotti, 2013). Whereas representations of woman as other are upheld through stories about what it is possible for women to "be", the nomadic process destabilises the imaginary sites of authentic identities by actively displacing dominant formations of identity, memory and identification to open up spaces of movement and possibility (Braidotti, 2013).

Becoming nomadic means desiring the self as a process of transformation – for the shift and flows of multiple desires, of learning to reinvent the self. It is a means of critiquing and subverting European phallogocentric perspectives of philosophy and subjectivity that bind women's lives through offering new perspectives, frameworks and modes of thought which extend beyond

assumptions and restrictions imposed by categories of binary difference. Through resistance to positivist research methods and the pull of the master signifier in the process of storying of this cosmology, I have nomadically traced a web of connections on zig-zagging paths of shared subjectivity beyond sexed gendered identities whereby difference has become uncoupled from the binary dialectics of opposition between two sexes and reformulated as multiple, complex and heterogenous. This creates space for the transformative force of desire to thrive through the production of affirmative relations in which the vital, generative power of this shimmering force enables sexuality to constantly re-emerge as a point of resistance and reinvention.

Reading and thinking with the women's stories facilitates a process in which subjects express their multiplicities through process of becoming that brings to light a collective desire to escape the binds of normative subjectivities. This process of becoming woman is subversive because it works towards transformation of the signs, social practices and embodied histories of a Eurocentric, institutionalised femininity. As Braidotti (2013) reminds us, keeping the process of becoming open goes beyond the logic of reversibility embedded within binary oppositions and creates space for women in all their multiplicities to identify lines of flight from the internalised phallogocentric logic that structures their embodied subjectivities through welcoming internal contradictions and attempts to negotiate between unconscious structures of desire and conscious political choices.

From a posthuman perspective, nomadic thinking and becoming is at the heart of a process of redefining one's sense of attachment and connection to a common and shared world, a territorial space: urban, social, psychic, ecological and planetary (Braidotti, 2022). It requires a transformation of one's sensorial and perceptual self-understanding in order to make room for the collective nature and outward bound direction of what we still call 'the self'. Thinking with Braidotti (2022) this self is in fact a moveable assemblage within a common life-space which the subject can never master but merely inhabits, always within a community, a pack or assemblage. In this way posthuman subjectivity is defined as the composition of subjects who want to know otherwise and produce knowledge differently. The ethical ideal is to mobilise the active powers of life in the affirmative mode of *potentia*. This actualises the cognitive, affective and sensorial means to cultivate degrees of empowerment and affirmation of one's interconnections to others in their multiplicity.

In conversation with Braidotti (2022), the selection of affective forces that propel the process of becoming posthuman is regulated by an ethics of joy and affirmation that functions through the transformation of negative into positive passions. This does not incorporate conceptions of moral laws but is instead a flow of ethical forces that operate like analytic frames for on-going experiments with intensities that need to be enacted collectively. Affirmative ethics is a collective practice that acknowledges the passing and dying of multiple universes, grounded in embedded and

embodied materialist practices (Braidotti, 2022). It builds on radical relationality, aiming at empowerment and increasing one's ability to relate to multiple others in a productive and mutually enforcing manner while creating a community that actualises this ethical propensity.

To assert the force of affirmative ethics, however, does not mean to dismiss the reality of conflict and pain as negative elements of embodied accounts need to be taken seriously. A focus on posthuman subjectivity also addresses issues of inequality, discrimination and exclusion through casting light on the inhuman(e) and the dehumanised aspects of this predicament as well as the perpetuation of structural injustices on dispossessed people and classes (Braidotti, 2022). In reading the women's stories collectively we also feel with them the effects of arrest and blockage that transpire through various permutations of violence, betrayal and traumas. This negativity is damaging and creates harm through loss of relational power, self-awareness and inner freedom. Negative passions negate the *potentia* of our relational ethical essence, of life as the desire to endure and continue, and impedes a becoming that is other-than-itself (Braidotti, 2022). Negativity hurts victims, but also harms perpetrators' capacity to pursue the ethical opening outwards.

Instead, within the ethics of affirmation is the belief that negative affects can be transformed through reworking these outside of dialectical oppositions implying a dynamic view of all affects, including painful ones Braidotti, (2022). Pain and vulnerability express the deeply affective and relational nature of all living entities and so increasing one's ability to enter into modes of relation with multiple others and thereby creating a community that actualises this ethical propensity becomes the ethical ideal. Braidotti (2022) contends that transcending the resignation and passivity that ensue from being hurt, lost and dispossessed activates negative passions beyond the dialectics of recognition and the politics of resentment. It aspires to an adequate understanding of the conditions of our relational dependency on the negative. She describes ethical relation here as the active transformation of the negative into something else whereby the moment of actualisation of its virtual potential is also the moment of the neutralisation of the toxic effects of pain.

For Braidotti (2022), vulnerability as the power of exposure is defined as an ethical and political means to come to terms with – rather than disavow the untenable, painful and unacceptable aspects and disasters of the posthuman times. She encourages us to rethink vulnerability not as a foundational condition as we have come to know it, but as embodied and embedded subjects with capacity to turn it into a generative force. This is achieved through the ability and the commitment to co-produce conditions and practices that transform the negative instance, including hurt and pain and requires the constitution of missing people through collective assemblages. Braidotti (2022) describes the missing people as real life subjects whose knowledge

never made it into any of the official cartographies or genealogies. The missing people form a ‘we-are-in-this-together-but-we-are-not-one-and-the-same’ kind of people. Statements like ‘we humans’ need to be grounded carefully on materially embedded differential perspectives (allowing for diversity and heterogeneity of approaches), for ‘we-are-in-this-together-but-we-are-not-one-and-the-same’ (Braidotti, 2022). ‘We’ are immanent to, which means intrinsically connected to the very conditions we are also critical of.

The transformative potential offered through affirmative ethics enables us to both acknowledge and disengage from the complex ecology to which we are all part of and opens up possibilities for new ways of thought, being and life (Braidotti, 2022). Coming into possession of freedom requires the understanding of affects or passions by a mind that is always already embodied. Affirmative ethics challenges gendered binaries because it is non-hierarchical, emphasising our collective individualities and differences within a greater whole. It acknowledges multiplicity, but also takes into account situatedness – the subject is therefore not “man” but a collective subject that acknowledges and celebrates difference.

Tracing how variations on heteronormativity are affirmed within this cosmology of women’s stories illuminates the shared discursive milieu within which they all live. Casting light on multiple sexualities beyond social mechanisms of capture, discipline and punishment, is one of the ways to channel the vital force of sexuality towards the invention of new ways of living and loving together. Through ethical relations we can create possible worlds by mobilising resources that have been left untapped in the present, including our desires and imagination (Braidotti, 2022). These ethical relations activate the virtual in a web or rhizome of interconnection with others that enable us to collectively construct conditions that transform and empower our capacity to act ethically and produce social horizons of hope and a sustainable future. It is through this process of affirming difference that we encounter the joyful *potentia* of heterogeneity and where hegemony starts to break down. As a force of virtual becoming, sexual differing can generate a myriad other possibilities and destabilise the bound identities that women and LGBTQ+ people are expected to coincide with.

## Reflections

This research has been a process of mapping a cartography of power relations operational in, and immanent to the production and circulation of knowledge about sexual difference (Braidotti, 2019). A narrative approach, guided by nomadic thinking and relational ethics shaped the co-articulation of the women's stories, connecting women's embodied lives within a complex assemblage of cultural practices that produce social relationships implicated in gendered sexualities and subjectivities. I have endeavoured to contribute to feminist knowledge production that destabilises and challenges power associated with traditional representations of selfhood (and the concomitant subordination and marginalisation of women that arises from these) through casting light on the flows and forces that shape dominant configurations of huMan subjectivity. Since forces of power flow to both enable and constrain, sites and strategies of possible resistance are also made visible through this process. Resistance enables the reconfiguration of political practice by redefining subjectivity through opening outwards, away from preconceived binaried categories of identity towards the transformative potential, flow and movement within processes of becoming.

I recall at this moment the blockage of affective forces rendering me voiceless earlier in my research process. This memory is powerful to me because it exemplifies the complexity of subjectivity within our narratives. Through the relational process of supervision, I came to appreciate that through speaking, writing and sharing our stories in their constant state of flux and flow, we are able to make connections with each other. Our shared stories help us understand how our bodies are inhabited by, and how we experience the affective flow of these social power relations. By taking into account situatedness while also acknowledging the multiplicity inherent in women's lives, we are able us to speak to the embodied, embedded and affective forces and flows that are constitutive of subjectivities and find movement beyond static categories phallogocentrism. Once we can work out where and how we are connected, we can begin to move together and support each other with the forces we have to endure as we begin to dismantle the social power relations that have separated Woman as an embodied subject from her *potentia*.

The stories we tell ourselves define the world we live in. They define how we relate to our past, our present and our future. Our mythology is not rooted in phallogocentric definitions of Woman, nor are we defined by the epistemological violence that is done to us. Feminist knowledge production works in active resistance to these binds that constrain women's

subjectivities to lack (of phallus) in the Oedipal family. Engaging with feminist epistemologies enables us to re-authorise this mythological inheritance and over code reductive phallogocentric perspectives with embodied accounts that transform our knowledge of ourselves and of the world. Through this process we are enabled to rethink desire as productive of, and produced by the social rather than fulfilment of lack, and individual.

The cosmologies that been written through our intermingling stories map the way women sharing the research journey with me support bringing the oppressive sexual discourses of heteronormativity to light. This enables us to see and make sense of the constraints of male sex drive or have hold discourses of sexuality and how these are interwoven with the shaping of women's positions as embodying objects of sexual desire, circulating also around the nurturing care and practices associated with the motherhood mandate. Through highlighting the interplay of power relations which shape our collective lives, this cosmology and the multiplicity of women's lives also challenges patriarchal gendered knowledge about women as a homogenous and essentialised category.

What insights can this post-structuralist feminist researcher take with her into clinical practice? Clinical Psychology is embedded within a phallogocentric tradition in which embodied lives are categorised through a binary of normal/abnormal. The biopolitical management of disordered beings has throughout the annals of history perpetuated injustices towards those who are vulnerable whereby distress, through processes of pathology is disordered and resides within problematic individual beings. Incorporating an affirmative ethics of care within my clinical practice engages with a process that creates space to co-produce conditions and practices that transform negative passions and affects through affirming and generative relational encounters.

Looking back, the research emerged through a non-linear process, following a zig-zagging path interspersed with contradictions and uncertainty and consisted of feeling with embodied experiences of pain. Similarly, relationships in clinical practice can be unpredictable and are often founded from the binds of being tied up in affective knots. Thinking with Braidotti (2022), this pain and vulnerability serves not as a foundational condition, but is representative of our capacity as embodied and embedded subjects to turn it into a generative force. Affirming the embodied and embedded aspect of our lives acknowledges the ties that bind us to the multiple 'others' in a vital web of complex interrelations and dissolves dominant structures associated with

heteronormative patriarchy. This process in turn activates the forces capable of mobilising modes of becoming-other otherwise than the dominant logic of disordered, problematic beings.

Feminist knowledge is about imagining how things could be different, and this imagination is developed affectively. It is a means of fostering an affirmative connection between all living organisms and disrupting the male subject as distinct (and hierarchically significant) from both his human and non-human counterparts. The women's stories presented within this research are affirmative in that they express women's ontological desire in the constitution of the subject. Becoming woman is about becoming audible. It is a way to think, speak, write and represent femininity that resists dualistic oppositions and embraces the positivity of difference. Mapping the multiplicity of these women's lives and the various ways in which they negotiate their subjectivities has been a collective, politically invested process of consciousness raising. I add my voice to the chorus of voices who seek a point of exit from phallogocentric definitions of Woman.

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## Appendix A: Information Sheet

### Regulating women's sexuality: A discourse analysis

#### INFORMATION SHEET

#### Researcher:

My name is Thea Wass, and I will be conducting this research which will be supervised by Dr Leigh Coombes and Professor Mandy Morgan, both from the School of Psychology at Massey University. I am undertaking this research as part of my Doctorate of Clinical Psychology training at Massey University. If you have any questions or concerns about any aspects of this research, please do not hesitate to contact us:

Thea Wass:



[thea.wass.1@uni.massey.ac.nz](mailto:thea.wass.1@uni.massey.ac.nz)

Dr Leigh Coombes: School of Psychology, Massey University, Palmerston North

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Prof Mandy Morgan: School of Psychology, Massey University, Palmerston North

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[c.a.morgan@massey.ac.nz](mailto:c.a.morgan@massey.ac.nz)

### **Research Project:**

I am interested in looking at how women talk about women's sexuality, particularly, how social expectations and images of women's sexuality impact on their experiences. Feminist movements have ostensibly come a long way in empowering women to make choices about practices related to their sexuality. For example, in contemporary society women's sexuality is often taken for granted as empowering because of access to various birth control methods; an increase of women accessing both erotic fiction and visual pornography; access to sex toys; and a sense of freedom to select a sexual partner/s. I would like to talk to women about their understanding and experiences of sexuality and use qualitative research methods to identify themes in these understandings and how sexual equality in contemporary society impacts on feminine sexuality.

### **Participants:**

Participants for this study are being recruited through snowball sampling methods. This means that personal contacts are approaching their own contacts with information about this study, and you can then choose to participate by contacting me.

Participation is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw at any time. To be included in this study you must be over 18 years old, and must have had a sexual relationship. If you would like to participate please contact Thea directly through email or phone.

### **Research Procedure:**

Your participation will entail a single one-on-one conversational style interview which may last anywhere between 45-90 minutes, and that is scheduled for a time and place that is convenient to you, and that is safe for both of us. I will be the only other person present at the interview. It is not expected that participation in this research will expose you to any risk or physical discomfort. If you choose to share personal stories or bring up topics that leave

you feeling distressed, I will ensure you do not leave the interview in this state. I will also provide you with information on who to contact for ongoing support regarding this issue, or with other relevant resources if necessary.

### **Data Management:**

The interview will be digitally recorded, and I will personally transcribe these to maintain and protect your confidentiality. The original digital recordings will be destroyed once they have been transcribed, and a copy of the interview transcript will be provided to you for review. Your privacy will be protected at all times. Your details will not be disclosed to anyone and any identifying information (such as person or place names) disclosed during the interview will be replaced with pseudonyms or omitted to maintain confidentiality. You will also have the opportunity to amend the transcript before granting your approval for analysis.

Interview data and any information that you provide will be stored securely, and password protected. Extracts from edited transcripts may be used in reports and publications arising from the research. If you are interested in hearing about the results from this study please let me know, and a summary of the research findings will be provided to you once analysis is complete.

### **Participants' Rights:**

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- Decline to answer any particular question;
- Withdraw from the study at any point;
- Ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- Ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview;
- Provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;
- Be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded;
- Be given a \$25 Visa Prezzy card to thank you for your participation.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application 16/14. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Rochelle Stewart-Withers, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 06 356 9099 x 83657, email [humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz)

## Appendix B: Interview Schedule

The interview will be conversational, using the following questions and accompanying prompts as a guide, but with an emphasis on facilitating participant's sharing of their experiences, stories and understandings. Emphasis will be on listening to the participant's experiences and understanding of these. The conversational interview aims to be responsive to the participant's contributions as the interview unfolds and are therefore unlikely to be asked in the order listed below, and depending on what information the participant shares - some new questions may also arise. The questions listed below are intended as a guideline, and to ensure that information relevant to the research focus has been covered.

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this project. As you know from the information sheet, I'm interested in women's experiences of feminine sexuality, and I'm wondering if we could start by you telling me a little bit about what that phrase 'feminine sexuality' means to you?

- How do we learn about feminine sexuality?
- How do you think feminine sexuality has changed over the last hundred years?
- When you think about 'feminine sexuality' what kind of images come to mind for you?
- How does the this (previous question) relate to your personal experience of sexuality and sexual experiences?

- How do you think media coverage of issues related to women's sexuality affects women's experience of sexuality? (prompts: twerking/women kissing at awards e.g. Oscars/women's dress e.g. sexualisation of teenagers with skirts too short).

**Examples of prompts to elaborate on points include:**

- Could you tell me a little bit more about that?
- Could you give me an example of that?
- You mentioned X, how did that make you feel/react and why?
- How did that make you feel?
- What happened next?

Is there anything you would like to add that you think is important for me to know about?

**Thank you for sharing your experiences, thoughts and time. It's of great value to talk to you and your contribution to this research is very much appreciated.**

# Appendix C: Participant Consent Form

## Regulating Women's Sexuality: A discourse Analysis

### PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM - INDIVIDUAL

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the information sheet, including sound recording of the interview.

**Signature:**

**Date:**

.....

**Full Name - printed**

.....

# Appendix D: MUHEC Approval Letter



Date: 31 May 2016

Dear Thea Wass

Re: Ethics Notification - **SOB 16/14 - Regulating Sexuality: A Discourse Analysis**

Thank you for the above application that was considered by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: **Human Ethics Southern B Committee** at their meeting held on **Tuesday, 31 May, 2016**.

On behalf of the Committee I am pleased to advise you that the ethics of your application are approved.

Approval is for three years. If this project has not been completed within three years from the date of this letter, reapproval must be requested.

If the nature, content, location, procedures or personnel of your approved application change, please advise the Secretary of the Committee.

Yours sincerely

Dr Brian Finch  
Chair, Human Ethics Chairs' Committee and Director (Research Ethics)



ID:

## Case Study 6

How my doctoral research contributed to my clinical practice

Thea Wass

Massey University DClinPsych Candidate

Clinical Psychology Intern at Te Whare Tipu/CAMHS Hania Street

This case study represents the work of Thea Wass during her internship in 2018. Clinical Supervision was received during the assessment and therapy for the individual described within the case study. All names and identifiable information within the case study have been changed to protect the anonymity of the client.

Candidate: Thea Wass .....Date: .....

Supervisor: pp



..... Date: ...28 November 2023.....

## **(Re)mapping Women's Cosmology: Transformative Potentia of Women's Stories**

Binary difference is deeply rooted within the heart of European philosophy and underpins contemporary understandings of sexual difference. Forces of power relations circulate to uphold binary categories of gender that conflates man with the universal, upholding a single model of male subjectivity and inscribing meaning onto the bodies of women. In my doctoral research I engaged with a narrative approach that incorporated feminist standpoint theory and Braidottian theory to map a cosmology of ten women's stories, connecting women's bodies and experiences to the flow of forces that shape their lives through a complex assemblage of cultural practices. Thinking with Rosie Braidotti I sketched a cartography of the multiple embedded, embodied and affective social positions constituted by forces operational in, and immanent to the production and circulation of knowledge about sexual difference. Relational ethics in feminist standpoint inquiry enabled me to attend to relational processes which contributed to the co-articulation of these stories, and to open out towards the multiple possibilities available outside established hierarchical categories of gendered subjectivities. By paying attention to the situated and affirmatively encompassing differences within and between women, bodies can be understood as a site of resistance and transformation. This research resists phallogocentric notions of the universal by re-orienting towards the affirmative potential of women's bodies made available through interconnectedness and ethical transformation in multiple processes of becoming.

As I emerge from the research space I reflect to consider how this journey has, and will continue to shape my clinical practice. Thinking with feminist theorists has enabled me to shift my perceptions away from notions of human as universal, beyond psychological binaries of "normal" and "abnormal" as static categories, and to push through traditional psychological approaches that have historically individualised and pathologised gendered symptoms of distress (such as hysteria) as problematic that require fixing, and/or institutionalisation. I have learnt a great deal about how inequities within society have material impact on everyday lives so that any therapeutic work we are involved with whether at an individual level, with families or groups in the community are nested within a broader systemic flow of power relations whereby socio-political positioning is intrinsically linked with psychological health and wellbeing. To me this means acknowledging the responsibility that comes our position of privilege, and the power conferred within our role as clinical psychologists and actively advocating for those vulnerable communities.

My psychology internship was divided between two separate placements within the Capital and Coast District Health Board (CCDHB). I was placed at Intellectual Disability Services for six months, working with the community liaison team as well as the forensic inpatient unit, and at Child Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) for the remaining six months of the year. The following section provides a discussion and self-reflection about the ways in which my research has contributed to my clinical practice.

My placements at Intellectual Disability Services and at CAMHS meant that I often came into contact with vulnerable individuals who were unable to clearly articulate their difficulties, emotions and/or internal distress. Individuals with an intellectual disability (ID), particularly in the forensic unit have little autonomy over their day to day lives, and are situated within a hierarchical system with expectations to conform. With respect to young people, the cognitive demands required to process and understand their world can be overwhelming, and their ability to express and communicate difficult thoughts and feelings may, depending on their developmental level, be challenging or dismissed as hyperbole. Furthermore, young people and the challenges they experience are also located within wider family systems and relationships which need to be considered as part of formulation and the therapeutic approach.

Upholding feminist relational ethics has, and will continue to guide how I engage with clinical practice as I privilege empathy, respect and a willingness to listen and be open to the transformative potential offered through shared narratives. To me, this means resisting commodification of stories of pain that reinforce shame – as often occurs with women who live through experiences of sexual abuse. It also means resisting power differentials that position clinicians as voices of authority that always know what is best, and empowers individuals as knowers of their own realities to identify lines of flight away from ideologies that frame distress as pathological towards possibilities that are opened up through processes of becoming.

My research has deepened my understanding of the ways in which forces of gendered power relations are embodied and flow through us. Understanding the role of power and oppression created by gender binaries also helps to understand the prevalence of sexual assault and how this is handled. I felt confident contributing to MDT discussions and offering a perspective that considers the ways in which gendered power relations facilitates inequitable and oppressive conditions with implications across genders. For example, the ways in which individuals are sexualized at an increasingly young age through social media, have access to graphic digital pornographic content and how these impact the development of young people as well as their interrelationships. One

client discussed at CAMHS MDT included a young woman had been talking to a young man, an acquaintance of a friend. He later followed her into cubicle in a public space and raped her. On a separate occasion, another young woman had her clothes removed, was beaten and raped by a different young person who was under the age of 13 years. Both young women thought it was their fault even though they had done nothing wrong. Some may blame the perpetrator, but at a higher level individuals take up a gendered subject position from an early age and this can influence their behavior, including boys and men. If we understand how gendered sexuality is constructed and the political power that perpetuates it, we are better placed to bring about change at a society level as well as support and restore agency to those affected at an individual level.

Qualitative data collection and a narrative approach prepared me for talking about topics of a sensitive nature respectfully, to consciously step out of the authoritative role of neutral and objective observer and to be honest about my standpoint and what this brings to the relationship. Talking to women about their understanding of, and practices related to sexuality is complex, messy, ambiguous, painful and sometimes fun. It was important for me to navigate these flows in a respectful manner without overlaying my story onto the stories that were shared with me – the same applies in clinical practice. I also wonder about the external pressures we have when working in services that require diagnostic labels attached to client presentations, and falling into patterns that pursue lines of questioning that may re-inforce diagnostic labels and pathology associated with medical models, as well as how we can better engage with both communities and the individuals we have committed to working with to help bring about change.

I reflect on how work at this individual level is always relational and is always in connection to multiplicities of others (human and non-human). Reflexive practice and attention to situatedness requires ongoing consideration of what I bring to the therapeutic relationship. My research journey has helped me to develop an awareness of how my personal experiences and perspectives contribute to relational flows and the processes of co-constructing meaning. For me this meant taking time to think about my own thoughts, feelings and behaviors within the context of what I am doing, of consciously accounting for my situatedness and how this flows through the work I am doing. This process has been invaluable and will continue to guide my practice as I balance the demands of my personal and family life alongside my ethical commitment to the individuals and communities I work with. Taking time to weave this awareness into my reflexive practice helps me to remain open to realities other than my own, to notice (and resist) internalised assumptions associated with dominant forces, and to challenge and disrupt binaried categorise that limit possibilities.