“Huggables”, “furry lovers” and “weapons of mass destruction” - Entanglements of older, British singletons with (non-sexual) touch

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Abstract
In a cultural web of myth, sexualisation and prejudice, how do older, British singletons gain access to health-giving, non-sexual touch? This study takes interview material from five single women and three single men (all cisgender, white, heterosexual, British, between 37-76 years) and interlaces it with autoethnographic commentary, poems and artworks to explore negotiations around touch. Drawing on Haraway and Barad’s theoretical concept of “entanglements” (2008; 2007), cross-disciplinary connections are woven across feminist new materialism and social sciences, the body and discourse, the conscious and subconscious. Findings, which are partial, provisional, messy and complex (Haraway 1988), include powerful narratives of shame, denial and cauterisation of touch-needs. These co-exist with corporeal tales of the richness and variety of touch-opportunities, the tactile importance of cats and a “turn” by the oldest, female participants away from a romantic, heterosexual partner towards bonding with the landscape.

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Introduction

“Oh my love
My darling
I’ve hungered for your touch
A long, lonely time…”

Unchained Melody (The Righteous Brothers 1965) on the Cerys Matthews show, Radio 6
Music, 12:09 on Sunday morning as I was making notes for the Analysis.

(Field notes, 15th April)

Ahhggh! The yearning in the line “a long, lonely time”! A skin hunger that has gnawed for years on end. For, how to get touch when you’re locked in a prison cell for decades? How to get touch outside of socially sanctioned coupledom? How to get touch, as an older, single person in Britain?

With this thesis, I have fumbled and sniffed, blind as a worm. Where there is shame, I’ve tucked in, a maggot on a wound; where there was a tickle of softness and the smell of incense, my fingers got interested. Certain items fell in my path, casual comments, song lyrics. I have felt my way forward. A negotiation, a dance. A game of blind-man’s-bluff.

In the Spring of 2016 the question was How to survive as an older, single woman? I was late forties, single and heartbroken, following a split in 2013. Not knowing the answer, I asked my older, single, female friends if they could provide any insights. When I interviewed them, I didn’t believe anything would help, but did it anyway. As it happened, the making of the resultant artwork, a sound-piece titled ‘A New Currency: Older Single Women’ (Dob Dob Dob 2016), was a healing mechanism in itself (for me! As to how the participants felt about it, this is touched upon in Entanglement K).

As time went on, the question became less about survival and more about flourishing. I developed an interest is in singleness and touch. This was triggered by - of all transient, populist, non-academic-grade catalysts - a Facebook post, whose echoes had stayed with me since 2016. It was
called ‘Neuroscience reveals 4 rituals that will make you happy’ (Barker 2016). Why did I read it at all? I have no idea; I spend almost zero time on social media. It was a moment of serendipity. Nevertheless, it lodged in my body and mind and in my moleskine notebook. The four rituals were simple, memorable and do-able; the findings for boosted happiness were supported by positivist measurements of more dopamine! more serotonin! more oxytocin! I could work on rituals 1-3. They helped. But ritual number 4? That was “Touch people” (Barker 2016). And here I was lost.

For by the time I began the Master’s in Gender Studies, Intersectionality and Change based in Linköping, Sweden, (of which this thesis is a part) in August 2016, I seemed to have become untouchable. As the programme went on, however, my touch options and experiences softened and expanded, often in less-than-conventional ways. My explorations felt feral, hidden, unusual. But were they? How were other singletons managing? I formulated a new question: How do older, single people in Britain negotiate touch? I turned again to my friends: How were my singleton peers managing? What solutions were they finding? How would they explain these processes to themselves and to me? Accordingly, in 2018, I re-interviewed five women from ‘A New Currency’ and three older, single male friends. All are cisgender, heterosexual, white and British; interviewees include short term and long-term singletons, divorcees, widows, parents, the childless/child-free, those with lovers and those without; ages range from 37 to 76 years. The one, specific question I asked each singleton was “Talk to me about touch” (Appendices B-C). It was a deliberately open query, encouraging narrative, storytelling responses. I also invited interviewees to partake in a touch experiment, the Miscellaneous Items Game (Entanglement H).

Regarding materials, as well as working with ‘A New Currency’ and these 2018 interview transcriptions, I include autoethnographic content. This is intended to highlight the co-construction of this paper and make visible my own positioning and motivation. Touch is neither pure not innocent and neither is my research (Barad 2012 p.215). I refer explicitly to my master’s, as well as to the thesis-process, as these entanglements have profoundly affected my relations with both singleness and touch.

As to current literature, singleness is a relatively new field. Singletons in Anglo countries are commonly pathologised; their lifestyles derided as queer, secondary, unsatisfactory (DePaulo & Morris 2006 p.251). There is a body of work on middle class, older, educated, heterosexual Western
women; largely overlapping, as it happens, with myself and my female participants (Reynolds 2008). However, there is significantly less research on older, single, British men (Literature review (ii) - Singleness). Regarding literature on (non-sexual) touch, a useful review is Tiffany Field’s USA article ‘Touch for socioemotional and physical well-being’ (2010; Literature review (i) - Touch). As to the cross-pollination of single people and touch, the majority of this concerns sexualised touch and dating (although it is conceded that sexual and non-sexual touch are deeply entangled, on theoretical, cultural and corporeal levels). Nevertheless, I tease out strands where singleness and (ostensibly) non-sexual touch have intermeshed. One springboard is Hafford-Letchfield, Lambert, Long & Brady’s recent British paper, ‘Going solo: Findings from a survey of women aging without a partner and who do not have children’, which briefly introduces the concept of “skin hunger” and the benefit of contact with pets for singletons (2010 p.379-380). My research is designed to generate more knowledge in this scanty interface between single British men and women and non-sexual touch.

On a theoretical level, this research, and the way I am increasingly living, are imbedded in feminist new materialism. Foremost amongst these influences is Donna Haraway; her waltzing literary ebullience and erotic entanglements with companion species are a hand held out, inviting me to join her, to clasp her wrist and spin (2008). Karen Barad is also central to this thesis, with her commitment to touching (2012) and her portrayal, backed by quantum mechanics, of the organising structure of the universe as “entanglements” whereby everything is not only related to everything else, but is already within everything else; the particles and the void are co-constructed (2007). By this logic, at the quantum level, I am much the same as the person sitting at the next table, who is much the same as a pot plant, which is much the same as a bicycle. Which is to say, rather than finding myself isolated, a feminist new materialism critical analysis found me deeply entangled already, with infinite touch-companions. This changes everything! However, lived human and inhuman lives do not necessarily feel so simple; I therefore tie in the complimentary framework of relationality (Shohat 2002 p.68; Cerwonka 2011 p.67). Relationality is a tool which enables me to look at the (peculiarly human) dynamics of power: The myths, national characteristics, childhood experiences and category paradigms of age and gender that saturate singleness. This paper swishes, theoretically, between entanglements and relationalities, a flux of ambivalence. Happily, the ontology is open to this: particles can be in matter or wave form; it just depends on how you look and what you’re looking for (Barad 2003 p.815).
Much of this paper straddles such unstable, vibrating territory. It is a cross-disciplinary creation and entangles feminist new materialist understandings with research from social sciences; it juxtaposes knowledge on singleness with behavioural data regarding touch; it knots up academic and artistic writing. The intermingling of matter and discourse is a further entanglement (Barad 2003; 2007 p.3). Through analytical techniques of close reading, I have endeavoured to capture hesitant threads of both conscious, and unconscious, negotiations by myself and my interviewees.

Regarding structure, I endeavour to mirror form and content, by threading Entanglements (comprising autoethnographic and interview data) throughout the whole paper, from start to finish. Each Entanglement deals with a different theme or point of interest, so Entanglement B, for example, deals with singleness; Entanglement J deals with language. Entanglements A-K are spliced (in no fixed order) in amongst the more traditional academic sections: Introduction, Theory, Literature reviews, Methodology, Materials and so forth. My intention in choosing this format is to disrupt any linear concept of “progression” and to illustrate the principle of entanglements, whereby everything is already muddled with everything else, simultaneously. Ideally, I would invite you to read this whilst ‘A New Currency’ plays on loop and you are having a massage! But via a flat, electronic platform, an interwoven layout is the best I can manage.

As to tidy findings, this proves a challenge. True to the ontology of entanglements, myriad threads and cross-ties and inter-connections make macrame of my Analysis. Nevertheless, I provisionally summarise half a dozen findings in the Conclusion and stress their localised, situated and partial nature (Rich 1986; Haraway 1988). The first, and most ubiquitous, outcome is that the older, single people in my study are already constantly, richly and deeply entangled with a multiplicity of human and non-human actors including friends (“huggables”), other people’s babies, trees, rocks and fabrics. Secondly, that cats (“furry lovers”) are an extremely popular touch-companion (seven out of nine singletons in the study - including me - live with a cat). Third, that a powerful narrative pattern of denial and cauterisation (burning out the feeling, the desire and the memory of desire) is exhibited by seven out of eight singleton interviewees when speaking about human touch (particularly touch with someone of the opposite gender, for my heterosexual cohort). Forth, that much of the bodily and verbal negotiation of touch by participants appears to happen on a sub-conscious level. Fifth, there is a pattern, shown in some of the women in the study of armouring up, becoming “weapons of mass destruction” when satisfying their touch needs, whilst the behaviours
and discourse of the singleton men is much milder. Finally, there is a “turn” observed in the three oldest women in the study (and which I share) of moving away from a focus on one, romantic, human partner and bonding with the landscape. A great number of other results, knots, oddities and tangles could have been chosen and elaborated upon. The tiny sample of a few, highly normative (white, cisgender, heterosexual etc.) acquaintances makes generalisations inadvisable. Further caveats are set out in the Limitations section.

In a wider context, is this topic of importance beyond me and my friends? Whilst researching this paper, an article came out in the Guardian entitled ‘No hugging: Are we living through a crisis of touch’ (Cocozza 2018). British touchlessness has become endemic. Is it time to open up to multiple, non-exclusive, non-normative modes of touch? Further, is it time for discourse to adapt to such developments, for language to speak these new entanglements?
Entanglement A - Sample knots:

**Mini Pop**

Sleeping with other humans has never been easy for me the men in particular snore, snort, fidget and wield their limbs like hatchets overheat, pull the duvet up chuck it off. They breathe

It’s not just them. Non-sentient matters don’t help: Too bright too breezy not enough air a noise especially one where you wait, like a drip, or one with a beat, like music, a mattress too soft too hard a bad pillow

And so it was a surprise to find staying at my friends’ farmhouse that their half-bald Cornish Rex cat is my best bed-fellow yet. Warm utterly still, curled in the crook with his softest crinkly downy fur

and barely a purr. So still in fact that when I got up in the morning he stayed there under the sheets like Lord Muck I never thought it would come to this My fancy man a pedigree companion pet

(Author poem, 7 April 2018)
Playing the Miscellaneous Items Game with my sixth interviewee

Liz: There’s no slugs in there, are there?

SJ (author): No, there’s nothing nasty.

Liz: Oh/

SJ: Well, I don’t think so /
But this is another thing where I’m, like/
I just did it, and I’m not,
like,
sure why/
Why I’m doing it/

Liz: Okay…

(Transcripts, 7 March 2018)
Structure and lay-out

The layout of this thesis is a spiral presentation of autoethnographic-interview-academic material as a wordy demonstration of entanglement-in-action.

Therefore instead of the traditional structure of introduction, theory, methodology etc. following on in sequence, with results and analysis at the end, I intersperse “results” throughout the paper, as Entanglements A to K. Entanglement C, for example, presents research data on the cultural context of touch; Entanglement D presents research data on posthuman touch, and so on. The Entanglements are not exclusively tied to whichever academic sections they abut, although there are likely to be sympathetic twangs; so whilst ‘Entanglement E - Human touch’ might follow on from ‘Literature review (ii): Singleness’, it is not expressly tied to this location. The Entanglements comprise autoethnographic personal reflections, poetry, field notes etc. followed by interview material on the same topic or theme. The relationality between the writer and written-about is therefore exposed, time after time, tangle by tangle. Entwining these sections from the beginning tries to convey how these feelings/conditions/motivations/actions pre-exist the thesis, are embedded within it and will extend beyond its papery walls.

There are numerous literary precedents for non-traditional structures. Over Christmas I read Claudia Rankine’s ‘Citizen’ which layers powerful scenarios and personal experiences with artworks and poetry in a modest paperback; its meaning is visceral rather than/as well as intellectual (2015). The structure does not start at A and end at Z; it whirls. I wish to credit her with some of this whirling.

Word-free areas on the page are important. Open space is crucial in poetry, for instance; it allows the feelings to creep in. I include poetry as the least-worst way to convey the corporeal, the body, touch. Poets have long been aware of this (Lorde 2007/1984 p.36). There is also rich precedent amongst feminist scholars and academics: Cixous and Wittig write in lyrics (1976: 1986); Donna Haraway excels in poetry-prose (1991); Barad is moving towards poetics (2012 p.216).

Open spaces and the disruption of “proper” formats provide opportunities for the reader to co-fill the gaps, to co-create. Any communication is relational; a joint enterprise (Hunt & Sampson 2006
p.73). Usually this happens without acknowledgement. I wanted the physical structure of the paper to emphasise such co-construction; in a feeling/tactile way as well as on a conceptual level. The reader thus embodies Barad’s “intra-actions” (being “the mutual constitution of entangled agencies”) and the thesis warps and moulds, depending on who is reading (2007 p.33).

I include photographs as some of the artworks and items are corporeal entities or visual images; this gives an opportunity for haptic relationality; for feeling/touching with “fingery eyes” (Hayward 2008 p.70; Marks 2000 p.162). The sound pieces, sadly, have to make do with print.
Entanglement B - Singleness:

**Autoethnography - “Of course you’re single!”**

I would say I’ve been single for four years. I could say I’ve been perennially single, over thirty-five years of dating, dotted about with different men for two years, three years, my longest at four and a half years, a tale of serial monogamy. I could say I’m a divorcee. But I say that I’m single. When I started at Linköping I was celibate and single. When I started this thesis I was single with lovers. Half way through this thesis one of my lovers asked me to be his girlfriend and I said yes.

According to two of the three definitions/criteria for singleness in the literature, I would be deemed partnered.

I told my daughter I might not be single any more, she snorted “Of course you’re single!” She’s right. Single is an identity for me. My innards are tangled up in it, my relations with others are filtered through singleness. I cleave to its free, unfettered, unprotected, feral margins.

If I have learnt anything from this master's programme, or the behaviour of quantum particle/waves, it is that either/or binaries are a nonsense. I reserve the right to be partnered, and single, simultaneously.

**Interviewees - A contested status**

Waking up 6:55am: Thinking about single people and how some cauterise the heart, the lust, the touch (sad, rejected) and others keep looking for the other, for something, for someone, keep roaming and exploring, experimenting, questing (sex, cats, freedom, travelling the world). It occurred to me there is a parallel here, like “ageing well” and “ageing badly” - we have “singling well” and “singling badly”. And of course, this, like the rest, is a binary lie - for most of us ricochet between the poles on some days, some moments, negotiate our daily lives with courage, fear, defensiveness, pleasure, in varying
degrees at various times. Even Richard, the consummate singleton, spoke of two glorious
days to one melancholy, as a ratio.*

* I like that ratio is both a mathematical proportion and a reason.

(Field notes 22 March 2018)

Singleness is a contested category. A status in flux, a private, nebulous, obscure and intermittent
notion. One can be single for years and, theoretically, partnered a moment later. Or the reverse. It
cannot be definitively pin-pointed by sexual or social or financial or habitation arrangements. A
place of secrets, of mystery, of dangers, vulnerability - singletons are the odd ones, the outliers. A
place of strength - ‘single-handed’, ‘single-minded’, ‘unique’ - the free-wheelers, the explorers. Or
someone deeply embedded in their community, connected to everyone, involved in everything?

Many of the women in ‘A New Currency’ were disconcerted when I asked them how long they had
been single; this led to lots of umms and ahhs and ad hoc definitions (Dob Dob Dob 2016). When I
re-contacted all the women for the thesis, eight of the nine declared themselves still single, without
missing a beat. There was a lot of heft behind this sustained singleness. Out of my five follow-up
female interviewees, the time-lengths of their singleness were 5, 6, 10, 11 and 36 years. This an
average single time of over thirteen years; even taking away the high figure, the average was eight
years. Singleness was an identity for some women, as it is for me. As Jill (69 years) says in ‘A New
Currency’ (ibid):

Fundamentally, I think I’m single in my soul.

The one woman who disputed “single” as a label in 2016 is in fact the only person who was no
longer single by 2018. Words and relationships to words thus translate into action.

Accordingly to the literature (Literature review (ii): Singleness), men re-partner quicker than
women and spend less time alone (McWilliams & Barrett 2014 p.419; Pudrovksa, Schieman & Carr
2006 p.316 and Russell 2007 p.185). My study also found this pattern (although it is crucial to note
the circumscribed nature of my sample - see Limitations). The three men I interviewed all gave
their time as single in fractions, years and parts of years; something they were counting; something
that would, perhaps, finish. The average time was 3.22 years of singleness. Sam uses the phrase a
“single crunch” to describe periods alone. The “single crunch” conveys a moment in time, a passing event, rather than an identity.

A number of interviewees dispute the intrusiveness of “single” as a category:

Kate: …cos I always think it’s funny when they have it on a form /
some forms you have to fill in / like job forms where you have to say what your marital status is /
which I think’s really bizarre /
so it’s one of /
it’s funny to have a classification for not having a man in your life.

Singles get prodded and poked and pried into; they are exposed and unprotected by traditional roles. One response available to the marginalised is not to reveal too much, to deliberately maintain a degree of opacity (Carter G 2017). Who knows how much my interviewees kept to themselves (Denscombe 2007 p.200)? And rightly so.

Stereotyping is a lot fiercer for single women than for single men. This is reflected in the answers I received to the question “How do you think you are viewed, as a single person, from the outside” (Appendices A & C). Whilst the women in ‘A New Currency’ responded loquaciously with a wide range of tropes and counter-tropes - they were seen as a threat, a source of pity, treated like children, dismissed as over-the-hill (Dob Dob Dob 2016) - each of the men seemed baffled by the question. For example:

Alex: I still don’t understand the question /
but I can’t / or I can’t / think of how to answer it /
but -
don’t - don’t know how to answer that…
Would you /
um/
Do you envisage that / people view me as a prospect?
Or…/
how would people / rate me as a single person?
Ummm/
What do you mean by how / you mean do people/
Do I think people judge me? As a single person or / people rate me / what - what do you mean?…
Yeah!
No idea!
I’ve never thought about it /
I’ve no/ no/ any relationship with that question!

This passage echoes Beth Eck’s 2013 paper, ‘Identity Twists and Turns; How never-married men make sense of an Unanticipated Identity’, featuring interviews with 14 middle-aged, white, single men in the US. One man in her study expressed an utter lack of anxiety about performing as a comprehensible singleton: “…it appears baffling to him that one would need to construct a single self at all—“who’s expecting?”” (2013 p.56). Similarly, as a man in Britain, it seems possible to do singleness in a more private, unselfconscious manner than is available to the UK’s women.

Amongst the oldest people in my research group, a few showed signs of sacrificing gender and/or sexuality, in order to preserve their singleness. Singleness has become an identity. Something worth defending. Consider these lines:

Sue: I feel more - I think the word is androgynous/
I feel less like a woman, a single woman, and feel more just like a person - now/ and I/ and I feel that people see me more as a person/ and I hope that is true and not so much as a single woman - that may be out to get somebody!

Alex: Sexuality?
Asexual.
Ah, I don’t know. Don’t know. It’s/ yeah/ sex/ heterosexual. Non-practising heterosexual! [laughs].
Asexuality. Androgyny. The literature review notes a “desexualisation” of older, single people, where it is presented as a rudeness, inflicted upon those individuals (Fleming 1999 p.5). Doubtless that does happen. But amongst my interviewees, is the sexlessness an active choice in order to ward off suitors and preserve lone status?

For the purposes of this paper, I intend to give “single” as wide a parameter as possible; make it an eclectic, non-homogenous, non-group; anyone who declares themselves on the outside of a marriage or couple. There will be fuzzy edges. Some people would define themselves as single, or not; others would define them as otherwise. I’m okay with that.
Theory

This paper works from an ontology of entanglement and relationality. In my use of these terms I propose, primarily, to twist together strands of Barad and Haraway: Barad’s rigorous science spiced up with Haraway’s humour and wordy embodiment. Politics of locations / situated knowledge are also fundamental underpinnings.

“Entanglement” is a guiding notion in this paper: a word to summon up infinite complexities of intermingling, knotting together and tearing apart, a wildly flexible arrangement which conveys best the world as I see it, smell it, feel it and touch it. Such entanglements relentlessly mesh and un-mesh across bodies, intellects, geographical borders, languages, species, dreams, time and memory. Karen Barad presented entanglement as part of her world-making in ‘Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning’ (2007). In the preface she touches on the entanglements which led to the piece being written, beginning with the “author/book pair” but extending this swiftly into and across academic departments, particular times of day and the surrounding landscape (2007 p.x). There is the clear implication that we are all entangled with everything else, on every micro and macro level. She emphasises that entanglements are not universal, fixed, predictable, exclusive or inevitable: “the specificity of entanglements is everything” (2007 p.74). Quantum physics also dispenses with linear time (Rovelli 2018). The entanglements overlay in a dynamic palimpsest: The touch of a cat’s fur, baby experiences, a suitor’s snub and witch burnings of older, single women can all be present simultaneously in the bodies and habits of my single people, in myself.

Entanglement did not start with Barad of course. It is an everyday word with a dictionary meaning. The Oxford English Dictionary online defines it so:

1.a) The action of entangling; the fact or condition of being entangled, confused medley; spec. a compromising relationship, an unsuitable liaison. (OED 2018).

I suspect Haraway would be entertained by this disreputable nature and lack of suitability! Our entanglements are thus expected to be ill-advised and impure (Haraway 1991).
Regarding the heritage of entanglements in research literature, Barad credits strands left by Andrew Pickering in ‘The Mangle of Practice: Time, Agency and Science’ from 1995 (2003 p.808). These strands involve the inter-mingling of human and non-human actors. I also came across Gayle Letherby using the sub-heading “knotty entanglements” to describe the complex inter-relationship between the researcher and research topics, interview subjects and so forth; Letherby adapts this phrase from a chapter by Fine from 1994 (2003 p.131).

The dictionary continues with military entries of entanglements forming barriers and obstacles before concluding with a “draft addition” from 2001 which introduces a technical term from quantum physics (OED 2018). Barad, a physicist, discusses quantum entanglements at length in Meeting the Universe Halfway (2007 p.270-271 and following). Entanglements therefore presented themselves to Barad from multiple directions - as everyday vocabulary, as a technical physics term and as a way feminists were describing particular complex forms of co-connection. She knitted them into an ontology (2007).

In the year following ‘Meeting the Universe Halfway’, Donna Haraway brought out ‘When Species Meet’ (2008). She dots her book with “entanglements” but neither defines the term nor expands it. To the contrary (with a few exceptions, e.g. 2008 p.41) she restricts its meaning throughout to relationships between animal species, including humans. Companion species are an example of such an entanglement. Haraway, of course, has been fashioning entanglements for many decades; ‘The Cyborg Manifesto’, for example, relished the inter-bonding between technology, words and flesh (1991). What I love most about Haraway is the shameless, impish quality of her writing. She throws in storytelling, cartoons, the erotic and fantastical, makes references to science fiction novels in erudite publications, kisses her dog in academic texts. It is those kinds of tangles that inspire loyalty in me.

Entanglement is also an apposite theory when dealing with touch. Barad recognises touch as a revelatory force in ‘On touching - the inhuman that therefore I am’ (2012). Haraway, equally, is deeply interested in touch. Her opening question in ‘When Species Meet’ is: “Whom and what do I touch when I touch my dog?” (2008, p.3). In this way, she vividly conveys her own corporeal situatedness; entanglements aren’t a theory “out there” - they are how she lives day by day.
In choosing entanglements I have forsaken other contenders. Assemblage was the primary alternative candidate; a gorgeous, non-hierarchical muddling put forward by Deleuze and Guattari which involves “the provisional linkages of elements, fragments, flows, of disparate status and substance” (Grosz 1994 p.167; see also Deleuze & Guattari 1987 p.503). Nevertheless, assemblage is but one part of an ontology which has its problematic elements, particularly in its relation to women (Grosz 1994 pp.182-183). The fatal blow in the context of this paper - which focuses, at times, on older women and their pet-connections - was Deleuze and Guattari’s distain for an old woman with her lapdog (1987 p.244). Haraway, an older woman with a companion hound, describes her furious horror on reading this passage (2008 p.30). Some decisions hinge on fleeting moments, on a single line, and so I turned away from assemblage.

Barad suggests the use of diffraction as an investigative tool to look at entanglements (2007 p.30; Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2012 p.49). Diffraction is a way of “reading insights through one another”, a space of intimate discovery and provocative thinking (2007 p.50). However, given the interdisciplinary knotting and as a way of handling human-orientated power, I have chosen, instead, to work with relationality. The issue is that, whilst human power might be temporary and illusionary on a quantum physics scale, it can be painful and raw on the level of daily life. In the context of social sciences literature on singleness, for example, cultural prejudices and practices impact strongly, and often negatively, on individuals. Relationality lends itself to those matters. It is a tool to unpick the tangle of history, memory, childhood, culture, clothing, micro-aggressions and passionate wonder that go into a moment in time and place. Relationality is a way of looking at these specific entanglements without binding them into fixed patterns; it allows me to study the impacts of age, singleness and gender without essentialising any of those categories (Shohat 2002 p.68). The analysis which results is, inevitably, contradictory and open-ended; a momentary snapshot of particular temporal and spacial circumstances (Shohat 2002 p.78).

Happily, both Barad and Haraway work with the language and mechanism of relationality. In ‘Posthumanist Performativity’ Barad puts entanglements and relationality side by side: “The primary ontological units are not “things” but phenomena—dynamic topological reconfigurings/entanglements/relationalities/(re)articulation” (2003 p.818). Similarly, in an interview in 2006 Haraway stated: “We need new category work. We need to live the consequences of non-stop curiosity inside mortal, situated, relentlessly relational worlding” (Gane 2006 p.143). Ella Shohat
links the term “relationality” back to structural linguistics, although she then extends its reach to transnational, transhistorical application (Shohat 2002 p.73).

My third framework is that of situated knowledge and the politics of location. As Barad notes via quantum physics, so Adrienne Rich notes as a poet: Who is looking changes what is looked at and what is seen - plus they change each other (2007; 1986). Haraway also champions situated knowledges and partial perspective (1988). Haraway recommends “local knowledges” rather than global systems, “webbed accounts” rather than grand narratives (1988 p.588). The researcher thereby declares her prejudices, her limitations, her desires and in return gets to see a narrow, partisan slice of a topic, upon which she may report. This thesis is wedded to such situated knowledge. By embedding myself within the work, including autoethnographic content, declaring my biases and benchmarks, I hope to produce a provisional, non-comprehensive, artistic and speculative review on touch as an older single person in Bristol, UK.
Entanglement C - Touch as a blind spot:

Autoethnography - One of Harlow’s monkeys

My personal touch-frameworks are strung, in particular, between my Britishness, my generation, baby experiences and bodily agency. Here are excepts from my voice memos and field notes:

The English don’t touch
12:20 am, walking home from work - shift with Irish woman who moved to England a couple of years ago. I asked what she noticed about the English. She responded immediately: “The English don’t touch”.

(Voice memo, 14 March 2018)

British specificity
- British weird, puerile, sexualised, puritanical view of physical touch;
- Keep the distance with a handshake, culturally allotted personal space in British queues;
- The Englishwoman has to be white, sit prettily, wear gloves so she doesn’t touch anything, regarding sex she has to ‘lie back and think of England’ to cope with the indignity; she cannot enjoy or desire (écriture féminine could never have come out of Britain);
- Private school segregation; young children from parents; male from female;
- Full contact male sports like rugby - hugging each other, hands between each other’s legs, crushed shoulder to shoulder; ears squished together - a sanctioned outlet;
- Note this is classed: Upper and middle class stereotypes;
- Working class stereotypes? Men: Binge drinking, fighting, tattoos, buzz cuts at barbers (all touch); Women: Doing nails, hair (also touch). More/different access?
- Cultural contrasts: Going to the hammam in Morocco with my daughter; around us, women massaging, scrubbing, deep, familiar touch, not seemingly just with one particular companion; wider comfort skin to skin, women to women;
- British imperialism - is there a connection with that history of taking, stealing, dominating - and the English inability to touch (connect, care, be tender and responsive?);
- Also think how ridiculous the English are with their pets (how ridiculous I am). So British. Because it’s culturally acceptable to cuddle your pets;
- Even the classical English Rose Garden. All that earth between your fingers: Sensual, damp, yielding, delving, soft petals, boundary markers of thorns (the kick back).

(Field notes, 5 February 2018)

Early years
- The family narrative of me putting myself to sleep as a baby by kneeling on all fours and bashing my head into the end of the cot. I needed a feedback mechanism; where does the world end and I begin? Where am I? Do I exist? One of Harlow’s Rhesus macaques;
- Lifetime of fleeting encounters, grabbing at wire cages, straws, serial monogamy. A lot of time alone, untouched. My mechanisms - running (the impact!), climbing (the rock!), vibrations of music. And then a deep and hollow yearning;
- Even today, I twiddle my hair, nibble my nails. Surely I’m here?
- If touch is necessary for happiness, what changes shall I make?

(Field notes, 20 February 2018)

Generational touch - what is shifting?
I don’t touch my girlfriends at all. Any of them. Different for my daughter - she and her friends snuggle together on sofas watching tv, spoon in bed, do each other’s hair - close and tactile, lots of touch - will some of the next white, middle class generation be kinder and more generous and skilled and casual with touch?
Still leaves the older ones - of the study - to fathom their / our way through.

(Field notes, 5 February 2018)

Interviewees - “Terribly British”

There is only one line in the whole of ‘A New Currency: Older, Single Women’ about touch, where Jill (69 years) says “they don’t have the touch in their life that they miss so much” (Dob Dob Dob 2016). Did I just not pick up on it, or did the women themselves also not pick up on it? I asked
questions about love, sex, singleness. I did not ask about touch. This blind spot is also reflected in the academic literature (Literature review (ii) - Singleness).

When, in 2018, I expressly asked about touch, various interviewees picked up on the same national, familial and generational webs as I registered. Though of course, my editing could simply have selected the same points. An overlap of weft and warp.

As to Britishness, a number of interviewees gave me guidelines on ‘correct’ touch-phobic behaviours:

*Helen:*  Yeah I’ve got a friend -
        you go to her house and she opens the door -
          and there’s only that much to pass by and she shrinks back against the wall and you just think that’s -
            um -
            just some English def/
            stiltedness.

Even when ostensibly defying the societal strictures, the base framework is clear:

*Polly:*  And / ah /eerrrm, yes, so /
      I mean as I say /
      I do/ you know, when I see friends they do i/ d/ you know/they do all hug me / it isn’t all kind of -
         terribly British -
         and stiff upper lip and *rrrah-what-ho!* (cartoon vox) and /sort of/ you know/
         handshakes and things -
         there’s a bit more to it.
      But -
        umm -
        yeah.
The slip into cartoon-speak and the stops and starts in this excerpt convey the discomfort at talking about touch. It’s just isn’t British.

One male interviewee describes his uncertainty and lack of confidence concerning touch:

*Sam:* It's not necessarily something that I find comes naturally to me

[...]

Perhaps / like, you know / there’s that whole idea of personal space / kind of, boundaries and stuff like that / and perhaps I’m a bit more introverted/ taken me a bit more time to get used to people/ so, kind of, ooop, I need some trust/ kind of bo/sma/li/ Yeah.

So I’m not like immediately tactile.

I’m kind of/ um/ and/ um yeah

I’m probably a little bit unsure around touch and stuff

[...] I’m kind of/

I guess I’m a bit unsure sometimes with maybe what a person kind of wants from me, or why they want to touch me, sort of thing, or why they would like to/so/yeah, hug or to/ yeah or to contact -

A number of other singleton interviewees expressed touch aversion (see also Entanglement F - Touch as a numb spot). Have we ended up single because we’re touch-averse, or has the state of sustained singleness created untouchability? Is it chicken or the egg? Where the desire, where the price? More silly dichotomies; these strands tangle round and round.

Sam suggests that the English take drugs and drink in order to touch more easily. As a way of overcoming their ‘Britishness’:

And people are a bit drunk - or/

and people take drugs in England /

that’s probably why things like MDMA and ecstasy are really popular

cos it’s basically love-up time

and with your friends / the people that you normally might not / kind of /
express it fully kind of like - physically with /
You can be sort of more physical with them without kind of worrying about it -

This is echoed in Katie Walsh’s article: “‘It got very debauched, very Dubai!’ Heterosexual intimacy amongst single British expatriates’ where alcohol (and being out of the UK) led to a slipping of the usual touch-prohibitions (2007 p.515).

As to family background, a couple of women volunteer that they were not touched as children or avoided touch:

Polly: Yes - so my family - you know - we just never have / never did have / and never do have any physical contact/ and never/ not in my entire life do I remember that.
My mother never hugged us as kids

Sue: As a child I used to never like my mum hugging me. It was always like / oorhh! GetOff!
never liked it

This reminds me of the ethnographic comparisons of French and American parents; how English parents, also, don’t do touch (Literature review (i) - Touch; Field 2010).

In this study I avoid prying into people’s family backgrounds and early touch experiences. Sexual abuse and incest are far from uncommon; no doubt they would affect people’s relation to touch. I feel my own entanglements in that regard. However, these are latent tales. As with respecting the opacity of singleness, these stories are not for me to dig up here. I offer no support, beyond friendship. There are no back-up counselling services to this research. Ethics and accountability leave this thread hanging.

Regarding narratives of ageing and generational change, differences emerge regarding experience of touch. The age of my interviewees ranges from 37 to 76 years (at times in this paper I refer to “older” and “younger” interviewees within the study). Stories diverge. At the upper end is a tale of
precious little human touch, which has got more entrenched with age. My oldest interviewee has become almost untouchable:

**(Helen)**: And people - yeah!

People are quite deferential as well.
You just think Oh! No need for that!
But - um - yeah. I really/
I really miss it.

By contrast, my youngest interviewee is the most open about touch and also seems the most satisfied:

**(Tom)**: …it’s quite important to me - I like hugs - and I like non-sexual hugs - just as much as sexual hugs [laughing]!!

Kate reinforces my observations (and hopes) that some British youth might enjoy more comfortable physical contact with each other, plus have more sophistication in dealing with the multiple, contradictory entanglements knotted in with touch:

**(Kate)**: And so they keep having to kind of jump over that hurdle of -
knowing that the world sees most touching as sexualised and that they just see it as friendly and fun!
Um! Yeah!
So - kind of reprogramming themselves - all the time -
against what they see in the media / or what they can sense - as fear - in the adults around them sometimes.

Regarding generational cross-connectivity, Tom describes how he (along with his sister) is actively introducing touch back up the generations to his older, particularly male relatives. His father is welcoming, his uncle resistant, but Tom is persisting!

**(Tom)**: …like, my family, I’ve ended up / me and / through me and my sister I think -
we’ve sort of forced a situation whereby there’s a lot more hugging goes on, than did
previously.

One quite touch-averse female interviewee speaks about her increasing openness to touch as she
gets older. Regarding massage, which she previously would have avoided, she offers:

*Sue:* …it / it / felt more sort of/

it’s more spiritual -

more spiritual and more, sort of, helping each other to / to / to heal /yeah / it is / you
don’t/ think of it as a sexual thing at all.

She explains that maturation, no longer being “on the market”, being more comfortable now in her
“own skin” has facilitated this shift to a more spiritual, rather than sexual, footing.

It appears to be a changing picture. Is healthy non-sexual touching becoming a possibility, for some,
both within individuals, families and British society at large? Field remarks, in a US context:

Clinical research trials are needed on how to reintroduce touch, for example, into school
systems and massage therapy into hospitals and generally eliminate the taboos in our
society against touch, making good touch replace the bad touch that led to the mandates
against touch (2010 p.380).

Are the touch-averse Anglo cultures really edging towards tactile reconnection? Or is the
stranglehold of cultural touchlessness still thrown over Britain: A gladiator’s net?
**Literature review (i) - Touch**

This thesis intersects (older people’s) singleness with (generally non-sexual) touch. My review of the academic literature found rather minimal overlap between these two areas. In order to convey the current knowledge in both fields, I present the literature as I found it, following rather separate trajectories, different lines of flight. In Literature review (ii) - Singleness I review the research on solo men and women and emphasise any scraps relating to touch. In this section I handle touch, firstly the socio-cultural approach and secondly touch from the perspective of feminist new materialism, noting implications, where they arise, for single folk.

Touch has myriad aspects, faces, entanglements and relations. Regarding language, the Oxford English Dictionary online has 33 primary meanings, many of which feature sub-definitions. As a mass, they are delightful, conjuring a web of skin, royalty, nautical memory and madness. In this paper I am mainly concerned with the bog-standard understanding set out in definition 1:

> To make contact with, and related senses in which physical contact is the dominant idea.

(2018).

Interestingly, the very next sub-item, 1.b(a) - out of 33 entries! - relates to sexual - and largely unwanted - touch:

> Originally: †to have sexual relations with (a person) (*obs.*). In later use: to touch or fondle intimately, esp. without consent and for one's own sexual gratification; to grope; to molest or assault sexually (ibid).

Very much further down the list, we find the more sensitive, esoteric meanings:

> Definition 28: To affect (a person or his or her mind, heart, etc.) with a feeling, emotion, etc. (ibid).
Definition 32: Of a smell, taste, sound, etc.: to produce an impression on (the senses, sense organs, etc.) (ibid).

In addition, there are a huge number of phrases in the English language which incorporate words relating to touch, for example: A soft touch, the common touch, the finishing touch, the Midas touch, a stroke of luck, a stroke of genius, a touching tribute… many of these phrases have positive connotations. There is a feeling, couched in language, that touch is good.

Nevertheless, it is a stereotype of the British that they do not touch (Montagu 1986 p.355). We are not a “touchy-feely” nation. During the writing of this paper, the Guardian published an article titled ‘No hugging: are we living through a crisis of touch?’ (Cocozza 2018). The tagline queried “Is this hyper-vigilance of boundaries beginning to harm our mental health?” (ibid). The article points to professionals in Britain (teachers, doctors and carers) being warned against touching for fear of litigation and observes; “touching each other in an age of pervasive and historical sexual abuse and harassment no longer feels safe” (ibid). The article also goes on to list the consequences of lack of touch: Detrimental mental and physical health, higher stress levels, worse sleep, a compromised sense of self. Hugging helps. It seems the “Touch people” post was on the right tracks (Barker 2016).

Academic literature confirms these assertions. Field’s 2010 paper, ‘Touch for socioemotional and physical well-being: A review’ gives an excellent overview of current research. Regarding the health-giving aspects of touch, she details a 2007 experiment whereby participants received either supportive words or massage before enduring a stressful stimulus. Those massaged showed greater reliance to the stress (slower heart beat rates and lower cortisol) whilst kind words, by contrast, had no effect (2010 p.374). Massage is shown to offer a great many benefits including reducing pain, increasing attentiveness, lowering depression and enhancing immune function (2010 pp.374-379). These findings for massage show how healthful touch is available outside of a romantic context.

That non-sexual touch is essential to development is underpinned by the famous experiments by Harlow on baby monkeys. In one experiment, babies removed from their mothers were shown to prefer a wire cage covered with cloth rather than the wire cage with the milk (Harlow, 1958 in Montagu 1986 pp.38-40). So the cuddling was prioritised over food; hugging was more important.
There is ethnographic evidence highlighting the paucity of touch in the UK and USA. In one experiment, young French and American children were observed with their parents (Field 2010 p.370). The French parents touched their children more; it was further noted that these offspring were less aggressive. This pattern was consistent as the children grew up: In a further study involving teenagers in a fast food outlet, the French teenagers touched each other, whereas American teenagers did not. The American teenagers compensated by self-soothing - touching their own hair and arms, for instance - and, again, were more aggressive (Field 2010 p.370). As adults, the pattern continues. A study of behaviour in cafes reported touch-rates of 100 times an hour by couples in Puerto Rico contrasting starkly with zero times per hour in London (Field 2010 p.370). Zero is a tragic figure - but the paper is from 1966 - has anything in the UK changed?

Given the many benefits of touch, are there any groups which may fall through the gaps? There is a class issue - who can afford daily/weekly massage? Also, touch sensation - along with acuteness of other senses - declines with age (Cocozza 2018). Field suggests older, widowed people may be vulnerable to lack of touch (2010 p.379); she also flags up adult single people who don’t have pets (2010 p.380). The overlap of older and single - and British - is therefore a susceptible demographic.

My second research enmeshment is to look at touch from the perspective of feminist new materialism, which elbowed its way into post-structuralism and reinstated the importance of matter (Barad 2003). Alongside materiality came not only discourse about stuff, but engaging with stuff, that is to say, touching. Barad is, again, of key importance here, with her text ‘On Touching - the Inhuman That Therefore I Am’ (2012). More of Barad below.

First, I wish to refer again to Haraway, another scholar profoundly interested in touch (“Whom and what do I touch when I touch my dog?” (2008 p.3)). Haraway focusses particularly on relationships with animals (2008). She observes that different species are intimately entangled; a biologist, she gleefully states that 90% of human cells are intermingled with DNA material from other, non-human, sources (2008 p.3). She entwines her tongue with that of her dog (2008 p.16). There is no purity here. New, transgressive, models of touching are opening up.

Quantum physics takes touch a step further. Barad moves away from old-school notions of atomic behaviour - whereupon the charges of electrons constantly repel one another (2012 p.209) - and into
the far more engaged world of quantum mechanics whereby everything is in fact intra-twined and overlaid within everything else; particles are entangled with the void; oneself and the Other co-inhabit the same space (2012 pp.211-213).

Barad also emphasises the naughtiness of the atomic particles - they constantly experiment (no organised rules, diligently followed); they touch themselves (a breach of the masturbation taboo) (2012 p.212). These quantum goings-on provide license to follow whatever entanglement one chooses. Touch can go beyond society’s tramlines and into quite other territory. As Barad says:

So much happens in a touch: an infinity of others—other beings, other spaces, other times—are aroused (2012 p.206).

The use of the word “aroused” reinforces the eroticism of these atomic movements; in this context, dividing touch into “sexual” and “non-sexual” becomes nonsensical. Celebrating and appreciating the erotic as a component of everyday entanglement is a viewpoint made by bell hooks (1994 p.191; also Hardy & Easton 2017 pp.24-25). Such profanities are still rather shocking to an Anglo culture.

Our touch is saturated by context: The stereotypes of our society, the vocabulary we have to name and to speak about the doings of the flesh, the happenings in the past, the soil we stand on, the key in our hand. Touch does not happen in a vacuum.

How do older, single people in Britain negotiate touch? Suddenly everything is up for grabs; you are only limited by your imagination.
Entanglement D - Posthuman touch:

Autoethnography - Notched into rock

Rock has been my partner for nearly twenty years. Climbing has sustained me whilst boyfriends came and went. It is a highly physical, touching relationship. Here is an excerpt from a poem I wrote in 2016, describing the partner-dance of sea-cliff climbing. The title is a quote from Haraway’s Cyborg Manifesto. It is a play on hybridity:

An in-between place, part nowhere part safe
pressed against cliff, limbs splayed, feet notched
into notches in rock, part human part lichen

The winter sun setting, part atoms part song
take my hand, we can dance on this salty dance floor
glitter ball, big band, red shoes, red carpet…

In 2017, I co-created a short film, The Salty Dance Floor, putting images to the poem, attempting perhaps to normalise intra-entity love-touch relationality (Dobner & Gromen-Hayes 2018). My favourite sequence is when the climber disappears, merges, into the rock’s embrace:
The film had a mixed reception. Some people “got it” whilst others thought it was a bit weird and “out there”. Vocalising joy and passion in non-human and (apparently) non-sentient touch is not mainstream.

Interviewees - Furry lovers and trickster trees

The interviews reveal a disparate range of touch options, from human-to-human inadvertent contact to intimacies with the ostensibly insentient. In Entanglement E, I cover various human entanglements. In this Entanglement, I furkle about in the non-human ranges.

As to non-human animal encounters, six out of my eight interviewees live in a household with a cat. I live with a cat. That makes seven out of nine of us. After humans, cats are the most commonly cited sources of touch in my study. These are partnerships in the woman-dog model of Donna Haraway and Cayenne Pepper (2008).

Cats clearly bring substantial touch-happiness:

Polly: I’ve got cats! [laughs]. Cats are great! Cos they’re fluffy! And you can cuddle them. And they don’t mind being cuddled and they’ll come and bash their heads on you and all that sort of thing/ and actually I think the cats are quite important on that score.

Tom: Yeah, it’s nice. Furry. Maybe a furry lover is what I need next??

Tom frames it as a deferral, but the clear majority of my sample are already engaged with “furry lovers”.

Even one of the interviewees without a pet is immediately aware of the benefits:
Helen: I know people have cats and people have dogs…and even rats and things like that but I don’t happen to have any of them - um, but - they would certainly be a substitute for human touch - but, um, yeah.

What is interesting here is the phrase “substitute for human touch”. This notion is a steady undercurrent in talk about posthuman touch: The idea or feeling that human touch is better, other touch is lesser. More of this later.

As to non-animal touch encounters, here is one of my favourite exchanges:

Alex: I bought some cords [stroking legs]
SJ: That counts!
Alex: I bought cords specifically because it was cold and that they feel really nice and warm and snuggly.

I suspect he is being rather tongue in cheek. But I’m not sure. Nevertheless, soft, snuggly, silky fabrics are certainly an enjoyable source of touch, as we see later in the Miscellaneous Items Game (Entanglement H). An intimate connection with particular inanimate items recalls Perrier and Withers’s terminology of “companion objects” (2016), taking Haraway’s language of companion species (2008) and extending it to the inanimate. My life, for one, is full of companion objects: My iPhone, my moleskine notebook, my rock-climbing metalware….

Regarding rock, one of my climber friends uses the same metaphor as I had, of partner-dancing:

Liz: …it’s like dancing or something like that, but you’re - dancing - well -
You do have a partner when you dance - but rock is like /
is like that in a way, isn’t it?

Helen describes her entanglement with trees. She is animated in the interview, throwing her arms out to mimic the branches:

_Helen:_ …and they’re _very_ beautiful…

[…] most of them kind of grow sinuously out from cliffs - reaching out _[stretching her arms out, BEING a tree]_ - they’re very - um yeah - they have very human gestures

[…] one species I recognise holds its arms out - like somebody saying “Pick a card!”

Here the tree is heavily humanised, a showman with independent agency and a twinkle in its eye. The interviewees most invested in such non-animal posthuman touches are the oldest in the study and all female. I also ally myself with this group. For these women, there seems a movement towards expanding the range of encounters, with age and/or with protracted singleness. Regarding companionship, rather than specifically touch, Sue expresses this increasing opening up of partnership options:

_Sue:_ …I think, maybe, as I’ve got older…

[…] Now I know what I’m looking for, I am / I / I wouldn’t say I’m actively looking but I do think about it more.

And I think if that right person did come along, or animal, or whatever it was, I would be open to that.

And/ whether it was a woman, a man, an animal, whatever, I would be more open and more - accepting [tut]/ I suppose.

These are thrilling possibilities, a fabulous expansion of options. However, the “I suppose” at the end, gives an indication of the persistent ambivalence involved regarding non-human entanglements. Heterosexual-human touch is still, subliminally, privileged in the discourse. Other touch is a substitute, or lesser. This is expressed directly by Sam:

_Sam:_ But I suppose you’re still kind of /
you probably hanker for /
there’s something about human touch which is different altogether and it kind of -
weighs up - lots of / something meaningful in it
You feel there’s a meaning behind the touch.

There is a flavour of embarrassment or shame, on occasion, when talking about the diverse non-
heterosexual, non-human sources of touch. I understand this. I can feel embarrassed telling people
about my film. Why? The specific source of shame is indirectly articulated by a couple of the
oldest, single women as an either/or, win/lose, failure narrative: They have not found a suitable
heterosexual male partner to touch. So Liz’s enjoyable contact with babies is in some way a
substitute (that word again) for being touched by a man:

*Liz:* Maybe no-one wants to stroke you particularly but - ha ha! - but you’ve got a little
child.

The defiance is there, but so is the hurt, the rejection. She has failed to get a man.

Similarly, when Helen introduces her tactile love of rock, she frames this as a second-best to
romance with men, whilst illustrating herself as a shameful figure:

*Helen:* … when I was a teenager and - as it were - nobody loved me and I didn’t know I had
horrible greasy hair and I’d be like a person in a comic/
and I’d be sitting on the outside -
of the barbecue -
blokes are chatting up the girls and I’d be sitting there - and then I’d go climbing round
the rocks - because it was - touch.

She frames her passionate and lifelong entanglement as lesser.

This is internalised prejudice. A universe of touch is out there - in the sea, the wind, rocks, trees,
animals, earth, sunshine, the taste of blueberries - if only, perhaps, we can get over the barriers of
human, and partner, exceptionalism.
In this section I look at singleness, especially older, single women and men. This review will focus on the relational context of stereotypes, social framing and resistance, before highlighting any entanglements between single people and touch.

I apologise for my unproblematised talk of gender groupings like “women” and “men”. This is how the social sciences literature, cited in this review, is written; in addition all my interviewees identify as cis-gendered. The single tales of trans, non-binary, intersex and genderqueer people are not the specific focus of this paper. I hope future research I carry out will be more inclusive.

There is no clear, universal understanding, by either researchers or subjects, of what is meant by being ‘single’ (Reynolds 2008 p.13). Marriage gives you a piece of paper; it is legally clear whether you are married or not; usually clear socially. Rings are worn. Titles are applied: Mrs. My husband. My wife. Not so with singleness. Within the literature different definitions/conditions are utilised: Without a partner and without children (Hafford-Letchfield, Lambert, Long & Brady 2017); “not currently in either a casual, short- or long-term relationship with the same partner” (Fileborn, Thorpe, Hawkes, Minichiello & Pitts 2015 p.69), to the more fluid notion of not appearing to be coupled, taking into account “the length of time the twosome has been together, the regularity and exclusivity with which they see each other, whether they seem to intend to stay together, and whether they live together” (DePaulo & Morris 2006 p.251). Researchers find that participants question the status of singleness (Hafford-Letchfield, Lambert, Long & Brady 2017 p.326). In this paper I use the terms “single”, “singleness” and “solo” interchangeably.

Older, single people in the West are largely depicted as a problematic group. One master socio-cultural narrative is of older and single comprising a vulnerable, pitiful condition: Multiple medical and physiotherapy articles depict detrimental health outcomes; plentiful papers report on financial detriment, from a tax system weighted in favour of marriage to single supplements on holiday bookings (2017 p.328; DePaulo & Morris 2006 p.252). In January 2018 the British Prime Minister announced she was setting up a Commissioner for Loneliness (Prime Minister’s Office 2018); older, single people are often coded as vulnerable in this regard. Studies of single people tend to
focus on policy, housing and health care adjustments and social support structures, delineating singles as a cause for concern (Hafford-Letchfield, Lambert, Long & Brady 2017 p.331). However, this vulnerability does not arouse compassion. On the contrary, there is still a marked stigma against singletons. Undergraduates in the US showed an enduring bias against single people, who were devastatingly stereotyped as “immature, maladjusted, self-centred, unhappy, lonely and ugly” (DePaulo & Morris 2006 p.251). DePaulo and Morris use the term “singlism” to code this prejudice (2006). Solo folk do not benefit from targeted legal protection; the UK has no enshrined anti-singlism laws.

As with the various definitions of “single”, demarkations of age in research are similarly flexible. Hallam selects the “middle years” as being 45-64 (2016 p.556). Davidson, Daly and Arber speak of “old” as 60-74 years, and “old old” as 75 plus (2003). Gott suggests “older” applies to people over 50 (2005 p.75). There are no set numbers dividing age categories; everyday vocabulary includes older, mid-life, senior and mature. For convenience, I use “older” to encompass the very wide age-range of my interviewees (37-76 years). Ageing, in itself, is widely understood as a negative state: The loss of youth, beauty, fitness and health (Moore & Radtke 2015 p.315). There is a discourse of ageing “well” or ageing “badly”, rather than a holistic, integrated embrace of the ageing process, as Linn Sandberg notes in her 2013 paper on “Affirmative Old Age” (Sandberg 2013a). Women are seen as hardest hit by ageing (McWilliams & Barrett 2014 p.415; Hatch 2005 p.19), with negative stereotypes getting more toxic for women as they get older (Sharp & Ganong 2011 p.958).

Singleness is also gendered, in that there are radically different cultural relationalities for male and female solo people. I consider single women first, and then look at the literature for single men. Single women in the Anglo-West are caught in a sticky web of stereotypes which are imposed upon them, imbibed by them and which move with them. On the one hand, female singleness is coded as a “deficit identity” (Reynolds & Taylor 2005; Sharp & Ganong 2011). Older, Western women inhabiting this disempowered status are prey to the labels of spinster and old maid (Hafford-Letchfield, Lambert, Long & Brady 2017 p.326). They are sexually invisible (Fileborn, Thorpe, Hawkes, Minichiello & Pitts 2015 p.70). From her review of contemporary British films, Julia Hallam notes that older single women, in particular, will be punished for showing desire (Hallam 2016 p.553). Simultaneously, a radically conflicting stereotype projected upon single women is the

Single women in Britain exist within this polarised public discourse. Not surprisingly, research notes that older single women’s sexual experience is commonly neither spinster not slut but rather “fluid and diverse” (Fileborn, Thorpe, Hawkes, Minichiello & Pitts 2015 p.67). There is a tension, in the literature, between solo women conforming to the prevalent society models, and living in defiance of them (2015 p.70; Moore & Radtke 2015 p.306). There are, of course, myriad identities which single women inhabit and move between on a momentary, daily and lifetime basis. It is a location of ambivalence, a “troubled identity” (Reynolds 2008 p.3). Despite the difficulties, there is a strong narrative of single women defending and preserving their singleness (Reynolds 2008 pp.56-58; Simpson 2015 p.395; Evertsson & Nyman 2013 p.68). Despite this difficult terrain, the number of non-traditional family structures in the UK, including unmarried, single people, is increasing (Reynolds 2008 p.8; Hafford-Letchfield, Lambert, Long & Brady 2017 p.321).

It is conspicuous that single women are largely defined by their sexual entanglements, as many of the stereotypes relate to their sexual habits or appropriateness. This thesis is primarily concerned with single people and non-sexual touch. However, touch is hyper-sexualised in the West (Montagu 1986 p.213). There are limited sanctioned mechanisms for touch: Save for medical or therapeutic contact, the major acceptable circumstance for someone to hold your hand or press against your knee is if you are partnered or married i.e. within a coded, understood, monogamous, sexual relationship. Academic papers on singles and any touch at all are therefore overwhelmingly focussed on dating and sexual behaviours (DePaulo & Morris 2006 p.253).

In teasing through such literature, there are tantalising strands regarding not-necessarily-sexual touch (as an aside, one tricky word is “intimacy” which can cover physical touch and/or emotional closeness, and it is rarely clear which meaning is intended. I have tended to look at surrounding vocabulary as a guide). A number of women talk of cuddling, snuggling and lying next to someone as being the most enjoyable aspect of sexual encounters or relationships (Fileborn, Thorpe, Hawkes, Minichiello & Pitts 2015 p.70-72; see also Watson, Stelle & Bell 2017 p.39). Another woman speaks of “skin hunger” (Hafford-Letchfield, Lambert, Long & Brady 2017 p.328). It seems plausible that these women are not so much talking about a sex drive but a “touch drive”.
The touch of friends is expressly noted, by one woman, as unsatisfactory, thus privileging the heterosexual framework (Fileborn, Thorpe, Hawkes, Minichiello & Pitts 2015 p.71). Only a man will do. And not any man or a number of men! As an additional, complicating factor, the West glorifies the be-all-and-end-all dream of a soulmate, “the one”. Disney, pop songs, ‘trash’ novels, magazines - many centre around this holy grail. Reynolds is alert to the goal of “finding ‘the one’ for a proper relationship” (2008 p.3). This “fairy tale prince” myth is particularly strong for women (Kaufmann 2008). But this is culturally specific, not a given. As Pillsworth and Haselton note: “In most cultures around the globe, your spouse is not your best friend, or even your primary social partner” (2005 p.102). There are many possible alternatives to the dichotomy of partnered (with one other romantic human) or single. Consider sisterhood, communal living, sluthood…however, such models are currently “kooky” and beyond general conception/reference (Moore & Radtke 2015 p.315, DePaulo & Morris 2006 p.253; Hardy & Easton 2017).

One such alternative, is touch-relations with animals. Regarding non-human companion species, a well-known British stereotype of older women is the “mad old cat lady” (Hafford-Letchfield, Lambert, Long & Brady 2017 p.326). Such women, with their domestic tabbies, are belittled and scorned. There is a flavour of witchiness, the cat a familiar, older women as something dangerous, smelly, to be avoided. The reviled figure of the “mad old cat lady” clearly has much in common with Deleuze and Guattari’s denigrated old lady with her little lap dog (1987 p.244). Nevertheless, later on in the same paper, Hafford-Letchfield et al. highlight the importance of pets as a place of intimacy (2017 p.328).

Turning to straight, older, Western, single men, the knowledge is conspicuously threadbare. There is nothing like the depth of material I had found for older, single women. Academics repeatedly remark on this paucity of research (Fleming 1999 p.4; Fileborn, Hincliff, Lyons, Heywood, Minichiello, Brown, et al. 2017 p.2097; Timonen & Doyle 2014 p.1750; Eck 2013 p.33). Reynolds makes reference to comparative studies for male and female singleness (not even pure studies on single men) but continues “most of this work is now out of print, and does not form a good basis for new work” (2008 p.22). All the papers I came across were a compromise, never quite intersecting the people, place and time I wished to explore. The papers I draw upon therefore occupy wider relationalities, regarding subjects, location and temporality, than the sources for single women. Following the same trajectory as for the women, I look at prevailing myths and expectations for
single, Western/British men, review literature on subjective, lived reality and then move on to the interface of single manhood and touch.

As for women, there is stigma to male singleness (DePaulo & Morris 2006; Timonen & Doyle 2014 p.1749). Older and single and male can be pathologised as a detrimental condition. One representation is of older, single men being lonely, with poor friend networks, and unable to cook and care for themselves properly (Timonen & Doyle 2014 p.1750; Patulny & Wong 2013; Kullberg, Åberg, Bjorklund & More 2008; Thompson, Tod, Bissell & Bond 2017).

There are also unfavourable stereotypes for men, particularly when age gets tied up with singleness. One image is the slightly pathetic mid-life-crisis-man; someone out of step with normative development and maturation:

“I’m not homeless, I’m just an older, single man that’s never settled down!”

Arnold (white, heterosexual singleton), on being snubbed by a woman in the street.

(Field notes, 31 January 2018, on watching Master of None, S1E1)

This echoes Walsh’s study where the single, British men are not expected to have emotional competence (2007 p.525). However, such figures are mainly depicted as harmless; compared to the expectations on women, society’s censure is mild.

A case in point, the classic Anglo prototype of a single, English man is the “player”, a “James Bond” type bachelor, the rich, sexy, cad who has whatever women he likes and no responsibilities. An enviable single status! There is clearly one rule for the goose, another for the gander (Moore & Radtke 2015 p.306). Walsh’s paper on UK expats notes the loosening of classical British inhibitions abroad but there is still less negative judgment against British men sleeping around than there is against women; the men are “players” (2007 p.524) whilst the women are “slappers” (2007 p.523).

Nevertheless, perhaps responding to this stereotype, Beth Eck’s paper on single, heterosexual, middle-aged, white men in the US highlights a pattern whereby older, single men stop being “players” and show (sexual) restraint in order to demonstrate their maturity and boost their status (2014 p.148).
As to personal testimonies, there is a narrative strand of single men going about their lives somewhat unnoticed, doing what they want. They do not attract the invective directed towards single women and, accordingly, do not embody the same internalised day-to-day ambivalence (Eck 2013 p.35). A 2006 Canadian paper confirms that never-married, white men suffer significantly less “single strain” than their white, female counterparts; the authors attribute this to the heightened stigma and cultural pressure applied to women (Pudrovska, Schieman & Carr 2006 p.320; also Eck 2013 p.34). Eck records how her sample of older, white, unmarried men in the USA all express a strong narrative of personal choice regarding marriage or a “turn” to single status (2013 p.41). By contrast, a 2014 Irish paper puts older men (and women) into two camps, pivoting on who felt they had choice and who didn’t (Timonen & Doyle 2014). Those who felt they had chosen singleness continue to be happy being solo into later life, whilst those who had been constrained from partnership tend to resent their single status (akin to “singling well” and “singling badly”) (2014 p.1767).

There are a number of articles on men and age (though not singleness per se). Two from the 1990s focus on bodies and embodiment, thus sending out tendrils towards issues of touch (Öberg 1996; Fleming 1999). Öberg carries out long interviews with much older (70+) Finnish men and reports on the perceived binary “choice” of ageing badly or ageing well - the “Sweet Life” or the “Bitter Life” (1996 p.711). He gave his interviewees a mirror and asked them to talk about what they saw; through this process he observes a split with the body and mind; talk of a young inner with a dilapidated crust; the lack of a holistic, all-embracing continuity to maturity (1996 p.710; p.715). Further, he speaks about how the body has been both “silent” and “invisible” in research (1996 p.710). Fleming, working in Australia, also notes the invisibility, and emasculation, of older men (Fleming 1999 pp.4-5; see also Russell 2007 p.173). All these points, in fact, echo the literature on older, single women.

As with the women, touch is also viewed through the prism of sexuality. Pressures of hegemonic masculinity persist, with expectations on men to be forever virile, hard and rampant (Walsh 2014 p.152). Fleming proposes that in terms of touch, this machismo leaves Australian men unable to process intimacy (Fleming 1999 p.4). However, in a recent paper, ‘The Importance of Sex and the Meaning of Sex and Sexual Pleasure for Men Aged 60 and Older Who Engage in Heterosexual
Relationships’, Fileborn et al., provide a comprehensive update on the sexuality of older, heterosexual Australian men which paints a much more diverse and softening picture (Fileborn, Hinchliff, Lyons, Heywood, Minichiello, Brown, et al. 2017). They report an increased appreciation of intimacy and non-orgasm-related touching (2017 p.2106). Similarly, Gott’s UK study of older participants describes, in the context of erectile dysfunction, the importance of cuddling and touching (2005 pp.70-71). Sandberg makes similar findings in Sweden. Her first 2013 paper notes of one interviewee: “intimacy and touch were not experienced as mere substitutes for intercourse… Instead, they were experienced as pleasurable activities in their own right” (2013a p.27); her second 2013 paper, “Just feeling a naked body close to you: Men, sexuality and intimacy in later life”, observes the same shift from penetrative focus to other touching, in Swedish men (2013b p.262). However, some men still experience ambivalence, dogged by the shadow of failing “masculine” sexual prowess (Fileborn, Hinchliff, Lyons, Heywood, Minichiello, Brown, et al. 2017 p.2106). As with the women, a “touch drive”, independent of eroticism, seems hinted upon but rarely put centre stage in the research. These papers all deal largely with partnered men.

Regarding dating, there are plenty of papers on the mis-match of who and what heterosexual men and women are looking for in a partner, which is sadly beyond the scope of this thesis. It was however reported in a US paper that men found new partners twice as quickly as women found new men (McWilliams & Barrett 2014 p.419; see also Pudrovksa, Schieman & Carr 2006 p.316 and Russell 2007 p.185). Men spend less time as single creatures.

Single studies is a fairly new discipline. Many papers remark on the need for further research (Hafford-Letchfield, Lambert, Long & Brady 2017 p.321; DePaulo & Morris 2006 p.254; Moore & Radtke 2015 p.306). Investigation of the differences within the category of single women are often overlooked, so collecting more nuanced, diverse data would surely be welcome (Moore & Radtke 2015 p.305). In particular, Hafford-Letchfield et al. note that the intersection of ageing and singleness merits further research, which could have implications for policy and service provision (2017 p.322; p.331). DePaulo and Morris also consider further studies are “likely to have implications for public policy and even for the way people conduct their everyday lives” (2006 p.254).
In summary, there is a respectable body of literature on older, single women, including contemporary research from the UK (Reynolds 2008; Hafford-Letchfield, Lambert, Long & Brady 2017). However, I found very little which was relevant, recent or qualitative regarding older, single, British men based in the UK. There is certainly scope for further research on this demographic.

Very few studies have been made on single, older people and (non-sexual) touch. The body, in general, is remarkable by its absence (Öberg 1996). For example, Hafford-Letchfield et al. refer to “critical, self-reflective methodologies that integrate cognitive, emotional, ethical, and spiritual aspects of knowledge-making” (2017 p.322). Tellingly, this list seems to embrace every aspect of research except the body. Non-sexual touch, in particular, slips through the discourse. In a chapter headed “Aspirations for Intimacy: Companionship, Marriage, and Love” by McWilliams and Barrett, there is no mention of touch in the discussion (2014 p.423); neither is “touch” coded in the analysis (2014 p.418). In a section headed “Looking for love, sex, companionship?” in Fileborn et al.’s paper, physical touch is not foregrounded (2015 p.73). It appears that touch is still subsumed by sexual activity and is rarely privileged as a viable need in its own right. This pattern of “not noticing” touch-needs occurs even when, as shown above, research participants emphasise their enjoyment of pure physical closeness (their “touch drive”). I sympathise here, as I have had, and still have from time to time, the same blind spot (see Entanglement C). Davidson, Daly and Arber observe that men may have different measures of intimacy to women; more research could be done as to gendered requirements, notions and taste regarding non-sexual touch (2003 pp.171; 183).

In summary, a short paragraph in Hafford-Letchfield et al.’s very recent British publication recognises the value of inter-species connection for solo, older women as well as participants’ desire for physical (non-sexual) contact (2017 p.328). This links with Field’s concern (Literature review (i) - Touch) for single, older people without pets. My study aims to expand knowledge from these springboards in the literature.
Entanglement E - Human touch:

**Autoethnography - The hardest to negotiate**

Currently, I enjoy a wide range of human touch. This has not always been the case. At some points in my life I have felt touch-starved, ravenous with skin hunger:

In the treatment room at the local medical centre, the nurse is putting a tourniquet around my upper arm; she touches my arm with her hands; spikes a needle into my vein. There is pain, a fear of breaching the skin, of harm. But overwhelmingly I feel comfort; someone is looking after my body for me, doing a service for me, making the decisions for these few minutes, taking the burden from my shoulders, taking care of me. This is touch. For a person who is not touched enough. Scrabbling for crumbs. 

(Field notes, 5 February 2018)

With human touch, I have learnt to be sensitive, stealthy, opportunistic, sexy, hard-skinned, soft-skinned, strategic, patient, compromised, unsafe, safe. Human touch seems the hardest to negotiate.

**Interviewees - A constant search**

In response to the question “Talk to me about touch”, Liz states:

*Liz:* You don’t get any touch when you’re single.

A number of interviewees speak of a deficit, as singletons, regarding human touch. In this context, human touch is often conflated with, and limited to, heterosexual, romantic, sexual contact. Nevertheless, multiple other aspects of human touch are revealed in the interviews. Hugging friends is the most cited source of non-sexual human touch (seven out of eight interviewees). Alex, for
example, speaks of his “huggables”. Hugging generally takes place at greeting and parting, but also in other circumstances (eg. sitting together with a new baby). Participants report varying degrees of satisfaction with this form of human touch (Tom is happy with friend-hugs whilst for Helen it doesn’t really hit the spot). Two interviewees mention touch in a work context (care work and nursing).

Here I focus on self-touch, inadvertent/stolen touch and lovers; these piqued my curiosity as marginalised and somewhat surreptitious ways in which my interviewees negotiate access to human contact.

Regarding self-touch, masturbation does get a couple of passing mentions but is too sexual to be central in this paper on ostensibly non-sexual touch. A topic for further research! Non-sexual self-touch is registered as self-care:

_Sue_: You know and sometimes I’ll, like, massage - my hands - you know / when I’m sat down - or I’ll massage my feet / you know / I / I just think it / it’s nice.

Sam tangles himself into hieroglyphics during the interview. He is alert to the element of self-soothing:

_Sam_: I suppose I’m sitting fidgeting - self-reassurance - touching myself -

This behaviour is consistent with the research on American teenagers, who self-touched in the absence of contact with their human peers (Field 2010 p.370). Sports can be another useful form of proprioception, a form of self-touch:

_Liz_: ...so I do a lot of stuff with my body so I run and I climb…

Similarly the academic, Tiffany Field, does yoga and power-walks as part of her touch regime (Cocozza 2018). All these are methods whereby a lone person can satisfy some touch needs.
In the same way as I had been hyper-aware of the touch of the nurse, Helen volunteers an incident of “stolen” touch from earlier that day:

*Helen:* And so, today I was working with a team of three blokes, and we had our tea break in the front of the van -
so we were very squashed up -
and that’s just rare - to - be - touching other people - as a normal thing.

She mentioned packed London Underground tube trains as another touch opportunity. This inadvertent mode of touching was also relayed by the writer of the Guardian “No hugging” article, whose opening paragraph mentions brushing the hand of a delivery person (Cocozza 2018).

These are examples where the person “giving” the touch is barely aware; the touch-lacking person is drinking it in, “feeding” to use Liz’s word; sating their skin hunger surreptitiously.

Three interviewees talk about lovers, sex or kissing: Polly, Kate and Tom. I also play in these territories. This paper is angled towards non-sexual touch, but a couple of aspects of these romantic encounters interest me.

One is how all three of these interviewees seem to foreground intimacy over the language of penetrative sex. This vocabulary: “cuddles - a big snog - ruffle my hair - hug - my feet on his knee…” is consistent with Hafford-Letchfield et al.’s findings that some singletons crave touch, of itself, and suggests that skin hunger is distinct from a sex drive (2017 p.328; also Sandberg 2013b).

The second point which strikes me is age-related. These three friends are the three youngest interviewees. The younger cohort are therefore still engaging in sexualised touch, whereas the older interviewees seemed to have stopped. On the other hand, they might be keeping details to themselves. Opacity is a useful tool for singletons, perhaps especially so for the oldest of the interviewees (see Limitations).
The two youngest interviewees (37 & 40) both specifically remark on how they haven’t met the right person. This is consistent with the Western model of the “one”, the soulmate, that perfect match:

Tom: … so sex as a single person is a constant search for someone you can have good sex and good times with.
Err.
But yeah.
I haven’t found that person [quiet].

Kate: I haven’t met the / I haven’t met the / yeah / I’m waiting for the right / kind of bloke.
And he has not come along.

Interestingly, the verbs in use are “traditionally” gendered - the man searching and the woman waiting. These discourses are ingrained. The contrasting narrative, from some of the oldest women in ‘A New Currency’ (Dob Dob Dob 2016) and the oldest man in my sample, is that they are no longer searching or waiting:

Alex: So I’m happy to stay in the single world. I don’t feel the need to go and - gamble - in that other world.

Why are these older singletons no longer looking? This is, sadly, beyond the scope of this paper (there is a wealth of tangential material out there, for example McWilliams & Barrett 2014). Some of my oldest interviewees are therefore fairly wedded to their single status. Yet underlying this, for some, is a sense of heartbreak and hurt. Skin-damaged, touch-damaged words like “badly burned” and “bruised” come up in ‘A New Currency’ (Dob Dob Dob 2016).

The use of “gamble” by Alex brings back Helen’s image of the tree saying “Pick a card!”’. Touch is a wormhole, a rabbit hole, a lottery ticket, a booby trap. Where will it lead? When you start getting involved in touch-encounters you cannot always control the outcome. My “YESYESYES” field
notes accord with research on the “Midas Touch”, whereby, once touched, people give more money to charity, report greater satisfaction, give bigger tips (Field 2010 p.371; Morhenn, Park, Piper & Zak 2008; Levav & Argo 2010). Their previously-decided boundaries collapse. A fleeting touch can do this. It is powerful magic. This might explain the active avoidance, by some, of touching or being touched by those of the opposite sex.
Methodology

How to study entanglements? One needs a comb. Perhaps some coconut oil, conditioner, a sense of priority. In which way precisely to plot relationality? One needs curiosity, and patience, the correct corporeal mentality. I have utilised mixed methodologies, including experimental aspects.

Serendipity is an over-arching framework, further to Lie Sissel’s method in ‘The Infinite Resources for Writing’:

This is also serendipity: you are available and attentive, and by strange coincidences you happen to meet people or find inspirations just when you need them… (2014 p.111).

At the start of the project I walked in the fields alongside the intercity motorway, sat at my window staring at clouds, drinking tea, stroking the cat. Became accustomed to waking in the early hours and jotting down ideas. I read who I liked, and followed my nose. Kept my ears open in conversations, paid attention to songs on the radio, started noticing the energy of trees, the touch of the pavement under my feet. In this way, I allowed the entanglements to come to me, to embrace me, to be revealed. My job was to notice a few of them. Yes, I also worked hard, was diligent, read texts and grafted, but chance encounters are a fundamental part of the process. This is the way in scientific breakthroughs (gravity! penicillin!) as much as in poetic inspiration. Donna Haraway speaks of “visiting” in a polite and open minded/hearted fashion in order to greet the unexpected; she recommends “method alert to off-the-beaten-path practices” (2015 p.6). Responding to intuition as much as to “hard facts”.

As to my autoethnographic material, two years ago, at the start of this master's, I would have categorised myself as an older, single woman. Module to module, I tracked my personal changes in response to the readings, plotted how the theories affected me on a bodily as much as an intellectual level. Through the force of the course I am moving away from self-categorisation and categorisation of others, and am fumbling towards more relational ways of understanding and being. The thesis continues this process as the autoethnographic content plays with the entanglement of my studies, my skin hunger, my age, my friends, my city, my experiences as a
baby, my femaleness, my singleness. The intra-action between academic exposure and my own corporeal and intellectual and emotional responses continues to astound me and to profoundly illustrate my lived reality.

The principle of autoethnography is that whatever personal experiences are encountered, these may have wider application to society and to others (Wall 2006). So as the words and touch of my friends have helped me, it is possible (perhaps inevitable) that my own words and touch may ripple back to my interviewees, my social circle and perhaps beyond. Further, by declaring my own positioning as clearly as possible, this undermines the “god trick” (Haraway 1988 p.581). I am not neutral. I am not distant. Autoethnography also lays bare the blatant nature of co-construction in the way I gather information, analyse, edit and present it. Additionally, such material seeks to put me more on a par with my research participants, for I also speak intimacies.

Regarding writing itself, I am constantly inspired by Laurel Richardson’s ‘Writing As A Method Of Inquiry’, as through the act of typing or putting pencil to paper, the process constantly unfolds itself, untangles itself in small areas, for temporary, uncertain moments (2000). Cixous is also on this track, commending writing as a fundamental act of freedom, of discovery, of exploration (1976 p.875). Donna Haraway links writing, intuition and serendipity:

When I am writing, I often try to learn something, and I may be using things that I only partly understand, because I may have only recently learned about them from a colleague, a student, a friend. This is not altogether a scholarly proper thing to do.

(Lykke, Markussen & Olesen 2008 p.33)

Such “improper” methodology threads its way through this paper.

I chose to conduct interviews regarding the key question “How do older, single people in Britain negotiate touch?”, as I did not have an answer. By interviewing other humans, the aim was to get outside my head, beyond books, into an unexpected location. This is risky, a leap of faith. Haraway writes of encounters with animal others “this curious practice is not safe”; but such instability also applies to human encounters (2015 p.8). I recall that my first reference to “knotty entanglements”

Interviews were conducted, and analysed, within a co-constructed, relational format (Cerwonka 2011 p.67; Shohat 2002). Shohat embraces the nature of entanglement, the “permeable interwoven relationality” of life, and stresses the importance of finding links (relationality) between disparate entities (2002 pp.69-70). According to Cerwonka: “Looking at identity relationally means understanding how experience and identity are constructed in relation to other identities and social categories or experiences …We need to do so with an eye to the very fluid historical and political contexts…” (original italics) (2011 p.67). Although she refers to “categories”, these are not fixed (ibid). Rather, awareness of the specificities of time and place, of the fluidity of intra-actions, works precisely to counter essentialism (ibid; Shohat 2002 p.73). In the context of interviews, Cerwonka is particularly alert to the relationality between interviewer and interviewee, as actual people, with real feelings, assumptions and desires, engaged in interminable power dynamics, compromises and misinterpretations (2011 p.69). In this way, research is gathered which is self-consciously partial and situated (2011 pp.69-70).

As to my interviewees, I chose people with whom I was already well-entangled. All are part of my friend circles; I am a central hub as very few of them are close friends with each other. In 2016, I interviewed nine female friends and made the sound piece ‘A New Currency’ from their collaged voices (Dob Dob Dob 2016). In 2018, I re-contacted the same women, five of whom were available to re-interview. For the thesis I extended the entanglement and approached older, single men in my friend groups; I interviewed three male participants. The selection method was therefore hand-picked, pre-ordained and generally well-disposed to help me. Notably, I did not interview my friends because I knew what they were going to say; rather it was the opposite - I interviewed them precisely because I did not know what was going to come out of their mouths. Further details of my interviewees and their characteristics are set out in the Materials section.

There are particular issues, dynamics, pros and cons when interviewing friends (Owton & Allen-Collinson 2014; Garton & Copland 2010). On the one hand, perhaps my interviewee-friends measured what they said, aware of the continuing relationship, knowing they will bump into me later at the climbing wall or out at a gig. On the other hand, perhaps they would not have spoken so
candidly to a stranger (Garton & Copland 2010 p.548)? Further, will I manipulate or slant the
interpretation of data, given what I know about the people already? To check this, my results are
embedded in the grain of people’s words, rather than in broader life experiences.

Semi-structured interviews were based on question sheets (Appendices A-C), were recorded on
either my phone, my mac or both, and (in 2018) lasted 8-68 minutes. Five 2018 interviews were
held at my house, two in other people’s houses and one in a cafe. For the first 2018 interview I
asked a single, open, target question: “Talk to me about touch”. As this stumped my interviewee, I
then clarified it somewhat, adding the caveat: “(how do you get touch as a single person, is it
important to you?)”; and with some people I talked about the “Touch people” post, which geared
answers towards touch as health-giving and non-sexual, which was my initial starting point (Barker
2016).

I understand, writing a thesis, one is meant to set out with a specific list of sub-questions. I did not
do this. I did not ask any of the following: What different touch-sources do you experience? Is it
difficult getting touch as a singleton? What are the barriers? Does it get harder or easier with age?
Are different parts of your body satisfied or yearning? How does your gender affect access to
touch? Would you like more or less touch? In an ideal world, what would be your non-sexual touch-
dream? Do you prefer giving or getting touch? Have you ever paid for non-sexual touch (massage/
tools/other)? When were you last touched by a human? How would you rank touch by human and
non-human entities? I did not walk along the beach looking for dolphins. I did something else:
Stood in the sand and noticed the tide, boats, seals, bladderwrack, clouds. Through this open-ended
process, specific questions did emerge, as set out below, and Entanglements A-K bobbed to the
shore like flotsam.

My interview style, having asked my one, open-ish question, was to remain relatively silent, and
smile, and allow the speaker to go off “on a roll”. Meandering around a subject and dipping
between dialogue and monologue, such answers can drift into narrative, into storytelling (Riessman
2008 p.24). This ramble-facilitating approach allows the priorities of my interviewees to take
precedence; it maximises opportunities for the body, the gut, the skin to muscle in (Wilson 2015).
Not a neat back-and-forth of question and answer like kicking a ball to each other; more like fell
walking or skydiving, conversationally.
The lay-out of transcriptions follows Richardson’s poetic representation in order to “express the sense of the whole or the essence of the experience” (2003 p.193). I transcribed interviews verbatim, keeping the repetitions, filler-words, pauses, wrong-starts and noises; I had a strong instinct that the marginalised borderlands of language might well provide the habitat for whatever critters I was seeking.

At the end of each interview, participants were invited to play The Miscellaneous Items Game. This is a touch experiment whereby people were invited to select, by touch, one item out of a pillow case containing the following ten small objects: A round granite pebble, glass marble, down feather from a vulture, child’s plastic farmyard model of a horse, a square of silk fabric, a seashell, headphone cables, a bay leaf, a wooden darning mushroom, a key. This experiment was conceived in the gut and communicated to my frontal lobes about half an hour before my first 2018 interview. I swept around the house rapidly chucking things into a pillow case. No items were reviewed or taken back out. It was whatever was to hand. Serendipity. Luck. Whilst the specifics were somewhat spontaneous, I had been mulling for some while how to lift the methodology out of pure discourse in words and engage it with touch. I had been impressed by Öberg’s paper on investigating ageing, where he had given his interviewees a mirror and asked them to talk about what they saw; it had added a layer of corporeality to the proceedings (1996 p.710). Oddly, I was mildly embarrassed bringing out the Miscellaneous Items Game, as can be seen by the interview excerpt in Entanglement A. It seemed silly, childish. I didn’t know what could come out of it but I was doing it anyway. It is to the credit of my friends that they all engaged quite seriously with the experiment nonetheless, and none of them expressed any doubt about my process; they had more faith in my blind-muddling artistic-inspiration hunches than I did myself.

My method of analysis was close-reading of transcripts, keeping in mind the the situated time and place of the interviews and the provisional nature of interpretation (Lukić & Expinosa 2011 p.106; p.109; Riessman 2008 p.11; Ochs & Capps 1996). Transcripts were “read and reread” (Eck 2013 p.40). Through this process the narrative themes for Entanglements A-K emerged, clarified and clumped together. While “How do older, single people in Britain negotiate (non-sexual) touch?” had been the starting point of inquiry, the following sub-aspects emerged when considering the results:

How do interviewees negotiate physical access to touch?
How do interviewees negotiate the discourse surrounding touch?
Are negotiations marked by gender and age?

I paid particular attention to accessing and interpreting subconscious aspects of conversation, through analysis of prosody and language (Cerwonka 2011 p.67). Clearly this is alarming territory - using my power-position as the academic, the writer, shall I have the temerity to set out what I believe the participants meant, rather than what they intended to communicate (2011 p.66)? I feel the noose of this entanglement tightening. But I have done close reading on speeches of my own, and only on analysing my own words in depth did I realise what a latent core of me was trying to convey (Dobner 2016). As Haraway says, “There are always more things going on than you thought!” (Lykke, Markussen & Olesen 2008). So in a provisional manner, I make guesses and deductions in this paper (Cerwonka 2011 p.70). I also include a large number of original verbatim quotations, partly by way of evidence, but also to facilitate entanglements directly between readers and interviewees; readers can then make guesses and deductions of their own.

With its less-traditional writing, structuring and the touch game, my approach has experimental aspects (Lykke 2010 pp.160-161). Overall, I assembled a mixed methodology, befitting to feminist research (ibid). My intention in finessing these various methods is to freeze-frame momentary, conscious and unconscious fragments of short conversations, small actions, throw-away remarks, and present them as a partial, situated commentary on being a single, older person in a certain working/middle class friend group in Bristol in March 2018.
Entanglement F - Touch as a numb spot:

Autoethnography - Attraction/repulsion

Personally? Me and touch? How do I manage it? A twisted helix of ambivalence. I am socially awkward with touch, I like a lot of ‘personal space’ and sexualise touch. I am also extremely tactile and suffer skin hunger. I twirl and spin:

Attraction/repulsion

My own deep internalisation of the horror of touch. Recoil. Very English. Going to a five rhythms dance class and people want to engage, to touch, I hate it; holding hands in a circle at the end, I hate it. The awkwardness of hellos and goodbyes. This is training, surely - touch is forbidden, bad, misinterpreted, inappropriate; so many confusing social codes, best avoid the whole thing; but also lack of judgment. Lack of boundaries. So when my body is touched, it answers something completely different, it says YESYESYES and loses all inhibition. This is not safe, socially, STD-wise, any of it. I get confused as different parts of me are loudly saying conflicting things. The body over-rides. My eyes cloud over. Touch me. I beg you. I beg you.

(Field notes, 5 February 2018)

Interviewees - Denial and cauterisation

How do my interviewees negotiate their own touch and singleness? One pattern is overwhelming: Seven out of eight interviewees exhibit denial and/or cauterisation. As to “denial”, there is a refrain of saying touch is nice, shortly followed (or the other way around) by asserting that they don’t need it or think of it or miss it. Others appear to have “cauterised”, or burnt out, their touch-needs. Their narrative is that they don’t miss/think of touch at all until someone/something touches them - and then the latent sensations of lack (temporarily) twang:

Sue: But I just think like it’s a nice thing to do. I wouldn’t say it /
    it’s not something I feel I have to do - but I ju/
I just think it’s a nice thing to do-

_Sam:_ It’s not something I actively seek. I do really like it.

_Polly:_ …Ummm /
then it _is_ nice that he’ll come and sort of / you know /
ruffle my hair or cuddle me or whatever /
buts /
errrm/
Yeah! That is kind of nice!
Or just sort of / I can sit with my feet on his knee or something /
eeraaaaa / [tut] /
but apart from that…nnn/I don’t/ think it’s /
it’s not something that REALLY /
it’s not like something I really massively _crave_ /

_Liz:_ And of course I…..you do /
I do miss touch when I stop to think about it but it’s not something I consciously lament. And it’s probably only when I do get touched that I realise how much I liked it when I did /
[…] and of course I miss someone giving me a good cuddle and so on /
but I can cope with that/
it’s not a great sadness in my life.

_Kate:_ I just don’t -
I don’t miss that stuff _that_ much -
every now and then I’ll get a massive urge for a big snog and um / go a bit - wild - I suppose.
But /
Um /
otherwise - I just -
I just go into kind of - stasis - is that a wo/
like you just kind of do your thing /
and just something’s on hold/ ha ha ha! /
and that’s fine.

Helen: … I really loved being in the same bed as another person.
I miss that.
That’s a long long time ago. So I for/
I forgot that I missed it.

Alex: Yeah!
It’s amazing how you don’t notice that you don’t get it! And then -
you just need s/someone to put their hand on your back or give you a / a cuddle or a
strok/and you just MELT
and you think - yeah! - that’s…..
Missed that.
Don’t know that I miss it until it arrives and then you just like/
bleeeuuggghhhhhhhwhaaaaaa…

[5 mins 15 seconds later:]
Alex: You’re talking about satisfying needs?
SJ: for touch/
Alex: Yeah
I’m not aware / I mean I’m /
I’m not aware that - I have a need.

I sense I may be at “X marks the spot” where the treasure lies. Or I may be barking up the wrong
tree entirely. What’s the attraction of this denial/cauterisation mechanism?

Firstly, for some people, taking their word at face value, they have sufficient touch and genuinely
do not need or want more. I am, however, disinclined to this view. “The lady protests too much,
methinks”, in the words of Queen Gertrude (Wells & Taylor 1988 p.673). Having sat with each
person, I am not persuaded by the truth of every denial. The denials also negate themselves, being
compounded, as they are, with narratives of lack.
It is possible that the body may in fact be sated - having satisfied its touch needs through, for example, a mixture of running, touching in a work context, manicures or stroking a pet - often without the conscious mind realising how this satisfaction has taken place. This might explain how some people didn’t feel a lack of touch but, when reminded about a form of touch they hadn’t been having lately - especially heterosexual intimacy - they realised, well yes, they missed that.

Certain recurring myths may be at play here. For example, myths of “the one”, of human supremacy and of Britishness (Entanglements E, D and C). My interviewees are situated in the relational, vibrating, invisible webs of such multiple, intermeshed value systems. If a single man is getting his touch needs met by stoking his cat, this could be embarrassing; if a single woman is getting her touch needs met by playing an instrument, this is culturally suspect. Whilst researching this, I came across a piece on a long-term Canadian prison inmate who had taken to smearing his body with blood and saliva in order to encourage flies to walk across his skin; he thirsted for any independent touch and said it reminded him of his wife - an erotic, charged, inter-species entanglement (Burton 2017). This encounter smacks of deviance. Transgressing from the prescribed heterosexual touch-target is still taboo and brings risks. Better to deny it.

On the other hand, most of the denial/cauterisation was directed towards human touch, specifically towards touch with someone of the opposite sex. Why? My initial thought was that denial was a mechanism to cope with this very lack. If you can’t get something, you say to others, and indeed persuade yourself, that you didn’t want it anyway. Suppression of the hunger pangs.

Is there more to it than this? I wondered if, for some of my interviewees, vehement denial might be because intimate relationships have been too painful, or difficult, or costly (Dob Dob Dob 2016). In this context, denial of touch is an act of self-protection and works to preserve the safety of their single identity. Touch, as we have seen, touch is risky, a gamble, Alice’s rabbit hole, a magician holding out the pack saying “Pick a card!”, where some cards are aces but others are jokers and they all look the same when they’re fanned out and presented. In this context, singleness is safe. Perhaps my friends have experienced too many jokers. It’s best not to touch.

Whatever which way, it was certainly a prevalent response.
Materials

The section on Methodology sets out how I gathered materials for this research and why I chose those methods, along with discussion of the upsides and downsides of those choices. In this section I summarise the materials I ended up with: Primarily my autoethnographic writings and the interview data. These comprise the knotty matter of Entanglements A-K on which I base my findings. I also set out details of the category characteristics of myself and my interviewees.

My compulsive reflexivity over the past two years has spun into poetry, film, field notes, diary entries, voice memos, assignments, scribbles on the pad by the side of my bed and key words in my iPhone. These sources have been plundered for the autoethnographic sections. There are frequent musical references in sync with my music-making background; knowledge from the visceral touch of songs. Regarding situating myself, I am a white, cisgender, bohemian-middle-class, heterosexual, older woman who, by some definitions, is single.

As to interview material, this is gleaned from two batches. There are limited excerpts from my 2016 sound piece, ‘A New Currency: Older, Single Women’, which is available online at <https://dobdobdob.bandcamp.com/album/a-new-currency-older-single-women> (Dob Dob Dob 2016). ‘A New Currency’ is a collage of interview material with nine single women in my friend group aged between 38 and 73 years, where the women were asked about their experience of being older and female and single (Appendix A). The material is arranged thematically. Much of the time several voices (up to five or six at a time) are playing simultaneously; all the voices are panned so that listening on headphones, they all speak from a slightly different location/perspective. I created an entanglement, even before I was aware of Barad’s meaning of the word. In 2018 I conducted eight further interviews focussing specifically on touch. Five interviews were with some of the same women from ‘A New Currency’ and three with older, single men of my acquaintance (Appendices B & C). The interviews included the Miscellaneous Items Game as a touch experiment (Entanglement H). All 2018 interviews were transcribed; this paper utilises a large number of verbatim quotes.
My interviewees are all cisgender, heterosexual, white and part of an indeterminate, fluid class made up of “fallen” middle class people: “I think I’m shabby genteel” (Helen) and “risen” working class folk: “some kind of weird no-man’s-land of being an educated person from the working classes which means I’m nowhere” (Polly). All are British citizens, living in or around Bristol, although many hale from different parts of the UK including the Midlands and Scotland. Regarding singleness, they embody a diverse mix of widowed, divorced, never-married, long term single, only recently separated, childless/childfree, parents, living alone, living in house-shares, celibate, with regular lovers and / or dating. Regarding age, I use the term “older”, to mean those out of their childhood, teens, youth and twenties; a wide range covering at least the age span of my interviewees (ie. 37-76 years). At times, I refer to the older and younger interviewees within the participant group; where this occurs I make it clear in the text.

A summary table of interviewees showing gender, age, and length of time single is set out below. I also place myself in the table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Length of time single</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>2.5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>8 months, preceded by 8 month relationship, 2 years and 4 months single before that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>6.5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SJ (author)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polly</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>11 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>36 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Entanglement G - Power and touch:

Autoethnography - Fair game

Stupidly, I hadn’t thought about power (Foucault 1980). I’d been focused on touch as good, as health-giving. It wasn’t until my fifth interviewee made express the power in touch-relations, linked it to the #MeToo movement and gave examples of bad touch, that power and touch hit me squarely in the face (MeToo 2018). Again, how had I forgotten? What rose-tinted, cuddly spectacles had I been wearing? Touch is ever entangled with power; the touchee, the toucher, hierarchies of species and age and gender. I was reminded of a poem I had written in June 2016, just months before the start of the master's programme:

**Rape was introduced as an offence against the man because you had defiled the property he owned. If a father doesn't own a girl and a husband doesn't own a woman then she is fair game, that is to say, prey**

When I was five I hit
my grandfather for trying to give me a dribbly kiss
Didn't like the shiny puckers of flesh at the corners of his mouth
It was a pleasantry saying goodbye. I got told off

At sixth form the head of the English department
was meant to be coaching me for Oxbridge but instead went
on and on and on about his love for another girl in my class
(she glanced at him! they wore the same colour shirts! it was a sign!)
I went off English. I chose the wrong course. I didn't get in

As a young single parent on welfare flip-flapping
between maternal joy and breakdowns
I went for support at an old friend's house (how lovely to be cared for!)
until her boyfriend cornered me when she went out to work
I didn't stay there any more

Aged eleven, reading my storybook in bed
the grandfather came into my room and slid
his hand under my nightie places I'd never touched myself
saying “rub your bot-bot, rub your bot-bot”
(I was thinking my bottom's not there what's this baby talk?)
Years later I told my parents
Nothing was done. He still came to visit
Power and touch and singleness are threaded through this. On some level I have been processing these issues for years. My brain has been thinking, my hands composing. My body is, daily, negotiating.

This poem focusses on my touch powerlessness. However, these dynamics are not fixed. I have touch power over some things, not over others. This may change moment to moment, day by day. Such fluidity of privilege is another lesson from the master's.

**Interviewees - The body wants and the body takes**

Regarding power in general, my friends and I all enjoy financial independence (some more on the breadline than others, but still independent) and the freedoms of the Global North. This research is self-consciously privileged and situated; patterns and findings cannot be universalised. As noted in Literature Review (ii), many single people are structurally, financially and socially disempowered. These results are located specifically in my cohort, in contemporary Britain.

Various stories and strategies come out of the interviews. One theme is that if a person has power, they use it, commonly on something less powerful than themselves. The body wants, and the body takes. A predictable (subliminal) Enlightenment power hierarchy is in evidence, with men imposing touch on women, women imposing touch on babies and humans imposing touch upon other animals and objects. There are limited stories of restraint.

As to human-to-human contact, there are vestiges of conventional gender dynamics on display. This is evident in language as well as content, as can be seen in a number of the quotes which follow. There are examples of touching by men whilst some women speak of being touched; men as the active, women as the passive. This, from my male friends, who are lovely. And from my female friends who, I assure you, are a feisty lot.

In some male to male contact, power is a factor. Alex details a hierarchy to me, whereby levels of closeness with his male friends is ranked by touch. Handshake is at the bottom, followed by a two-handed clasp, and then a full hug:
Alex: And there’s/ there’s a level of acceptance in the friendships -
that if you’re not sure where you stand with some of the guys / and you haven’t seen
each other for a while and you go and you’re not sure whether it’s /
you know/
one of the handshakes and you can just see the look of like/ it’s a fucking hug!
For you.
With me.

Touch with women has less value, according to Alex’s testimony. In addition, he uses “I” more,
indicating he is more in control of the interaction:

SJ: With female friends, is it different?
Alex: Female friends you get hugged anyway.
SJ: Ha! So there’s no currency with it?
Alex: No. There’s a weirdness if you give a handshake - to a female friend -
SJ: Yeah. That’s true isn’t it/
Alex: I handshook a female client the other day and I felt like I was being rude - but -
felt like a thing I should do.

But natural instinct was to have a hug / a goodbye hug /
but all she got was a handshake /
I felt like I might be short-changing her.

As part of the co-constructed nature of the conversation, I introduce the ‘New Currency’ financial
analogy (Dob Dob Dob 2016). Alex continues the imagery by noting he felt he physically “short-
changed” the female work client. Heterosexual touching is thus coded with transactional buying-
and-selling overtones.

The men in my sample do not report hostile touch to me. In Entanglement C, Sam indicates his
touch-uncertainty: “I’m a bit unsure sometimes […] why they want to touch me….”. The closest
reference to unpleasant touch is described as rare:

Tom: The worst [hug] is that one that you don’t want to be a part of /
SJ: Yeah

Tom: But / um / yeah / there’s very few of those.

By contrast, Liz vocalises her female experience of unwanted touch, of being touched, or “touched up”, expressly by men:

Liz: - but on the other hand sometimes people touch you who you don’t want to touch you
and you really just think/
you know what mate! Just back off. So!

Kate notes her somewhat ‘pet’ status at her traditionally male-dominated workplace:

Kate: Um / Even when I’m at work now/ I get my hair stroked - on a regular basis!!

[laughing].

Whilst dealing with this in good humour, it is a trope that women get handled in this way. It is a particular issue for women of colour (Fombo 2017; Solange 2016).

So are the women just “victims”? No. Positions of vulnerability and hegemony are commonly occupied simultaneously. Accordingly, several women turn to touch-targets whereby the women have more power. The primary two targets cited were babies and cats:

Liz: As an older woman you do get to / you do get to / um / sounds a bit weird doesn’t it!
But you do get to cuddle other people’s babies -
[...] Their little fat legs! And their little chubby perfectness and their beautiful smooth skin! And it does, it does/
It feeds you somewhere, doesn’t it.

SJ: It does.

Liz: […] but/that makes it sound like you’re feeding off them but of c/
I don’t mean it like that, it’s reciprocal isn’t it -
you’re looking after them b/…you know /something’s going on/

SJ: Yeah yeah
Liz: Maybe no-one wants to stroke you particularly but - ha ha! - but you’ve got a little child.

There is power here. The child cannot escape. Similarly with cats:

Sue: I love giving this cat a hug but he hates me! Ha ha!

Polly: …well they’re kind of a captive audience aren’t they?

You can kind of go and pick em up/

[…] You can kind of pick em up whenever you want to and they’re / they’re small enough that you can do that / and / uh /

I mean they might not like it much sometimes /

but [intake of breath]

mine put up with it / errrm / [tut]/

and they come and / you know/

sit on me and look at me and all that sort of thing and it is/ it/ ah.

This dynamic is not confined to the “mad old cat ladies”. Exactly the same phenomenon is reported by one of the men:

Tom: I like it more than he does /

Oh I don’t know actually - he likes it sometimes!…

I think I want more of it - than he does -

There is some recklessness as to consent here. I know this feeling. I pick my cat up and tumble her.

It is noticeable that in the above quotes the ‘taking’ of touch is often counter-pointed with justification that the baby or animal is also compliant and/or benefitting. Is this sensitivity to the animal’s needs or projection of desire? This pattern is discussed later on, regarding objects picked by the men in the Miscellaneous Items Game (Entanglement H).

Power is always negotiated and matter often kicks back (Barad in Lykke 2010 p.120). Babies cry, cats scratch. This provides a healthy limitation on our exercise of dominant power; when resistance
is there, one can’t go too far. Liz notes, with appreciation, the boundaries asserted by rock when rock-climbing. Her respect and pleasure are obvious:

\[\text{Liz:} \quad \text{But it challenges you! And fights back! Ha ha!} \]
\[\text{Well, it doesn’t fight back - it can’t. But - it resists.} \]
\[\text{It resists.} \]
\[\text{It offers a resistance.} \]
\[\text{It is very / it is a very, very satisfying activity, isn’t it.} \]

Another interviewee describes the power held by her tree companions:

\[\text{Helen:} \quad \text{…one species I recognise holds its arms out - like somebody saying “Pick a card!”} \]

This tree has so much agency here. It is a magician figure, holding all the cards, all the power; the embodiment of Haraway’s witty agent or trickster (1988 p.593). In a similar vein, Rossiter notes the prevalence of rock-climbing narratives where nature demonstrates volition (2007 p.295).

There are limited overt stories of self-restraint. These seem to occur when the power imbalance is too blatant and/or the touch-target does not offer any credible resistance. In a posthuman setting, Sue states:

\[\text{Sue:} \quad \text{I love seeing those things but I don’t necessarily feel the urge to touch them.} \]
\[\text{[…] Like the really fine petals really fine butterfly wings} \]
\[\text{things like that I find amazing, but I don’t wanna touch it!} \]
\[\text{Cos it’s very delicate.} \]
\[\text{Very tender.} \]
\[\text{And it’s enough to just look at it and say \textit{Come on then!} [cute vox].} \]

In this context, touch is presented as potentially toxic; will touch will destroy the things you love?
Ethics

Research is never innocent. It is more complicated, more sordid, more greyscale than that. What I may think is a good idea will be insidious to another. In gathering, using and interpreting material from and about others, there is never one correct way. So ethics becomes a compromise, a tip-toe through the minefield. In this section I explore matters pertaining to non-human actors, interviews and my own autoethnographic content.

As to non-human actors, domestic cats, in particular, feature highly. Whilst the pets are often lavished and adored, they also inhabit a “lesser than” status. They are owned. Half the owners remark, unprompted, that they impose their touch needs on their cats, that they cuddle their cat when the cat doesn’t want it. I am not aware of any of the pets mentioned in this paper being unhappy or distressed. As my cat was a stray, and could re-home herself again at will, I rely on her continued presence as a show of choice, an indication of consent for me to stroke her. Nevertheless, this research has been conducted from a human point of view; animals have been talked about but not consulted. In a footnote to ‘When Species Meet’, Haraway finds she has often privileged a human-centric perspective:

Had I known in 1980 how to cultivate the curiosity […] I would have spent much more time at risk at field sites with the scientists and the monkeys and apes, not in the facile illusion that such ethnographic fieldwork would give the truth about people or animals where interviews and documentary analysis mislead, but as a subject-forming entanglement that requires a response one cannot know in advance (2008 pp.312-313).

The ethical shift here is meeting animals on their terms, and being open to that newness of knowledge.

Regarding the interviews, when I made ‘A New Currency’ in 2016 (Dob Dob Dob), I was not a master’s student. There was no formal paperwork. I merely asked for each woman’s verbal consent and scribbled phrases like “Yes, all of it” and “Anything you like [smily face]” on the bottom of that interviewee’s question sheet. The thesis has given me the opportunity to go back and rectify the
paper trail. All nine women in ‘A New Currency’ (including the 5 who re-interviewed in 2018) signed the consent form at Appendix D. The form covers the women’s right to pull out at any time, to not answer any questions they do not want to; to manage the way their data is presented (clean audio / distorted audio / text only) and distributed and confirms the redaction of identifiable information and use of pseudonyms (Denscombe 2007 pp.146-147 was used as a starting template). A simpler consent form (not dealing with ‘A New Currency’ data) was signed by all the men (Appendix E).

The researcher has enormous power: I get to pick which quotes, which lens, which conclusion, which slip of the tongue is analysed. There is a weight of responsibility not to offend or simplify or misinterpret information. One pragmatic approach in dealing with interview data is to see material provided as a “gift” handed over by the participants (Oakley 2016 p.208). The gift allows the researcher to process data without having to constantly re-check with informants that the way the interview material is being used is acceptable; it smooths over a multitude of dubious complexities. However, as I know my interviewees personally, I wanted to take a stronger ethical stance. I therefore emailed when I had an 80% draft and asked if anyone wished to check how I was using their transcripts. No one took me up this offer; a few responded effectively confirming the “gift”, for example this from Alex: “No need to review…I trust you with my Big Data” (personal correspondence, 13 April 2018).

In addition, interviewees are not without agency: Answers can be obscure or obfuscated, memories can be erased (Oakley 2016 p.208-209). Nevertheless this may be a more tricky position for friends to take; can they really withhold their consent, change their minds and disrupt your project, when they know how invested you are in it (Denscombe & Jessop in Oakley 2016 p.198)? Whilst most of my interviewees were voluble, one was much terser whilst being recorded, than he is in everyday life. In this way he refused, quite understandably, to cede full control.

Nevertheless, how do to justice in practice? How not to distort people’s meaning? How not to be corrupted by this academic power? Cerwonka gives helpful ethical guidance by suggesting that relational dynamics not only allow, but put an obligation on the researcher, to comment, interpret and extrapolate, beyond merely bearing witness to a participant’s experience, even though any such
analysis will be “provisional and partial” (2011 pp.66; 72). Having a go at interpreting material is thus an act of taking responsibility.

Both Haraway and Barad speak of ethical responsibility, and both do it using the vocabulary of touch. In ‘When Species Meet’, Haraway states “My premise is that touch ramifies and shapes accountability…” (2008 p.36). And so touch, contact, connection is the very thing, the key, which generates an ethical response. Barad coins the term “response-ability” to crystallise this link between touch-response-accountability (2012 p.215). Relationality, my entanglement with my friends, with single people, with rocks and pets, ferments an ethical response. Hafford-Letchfield, Lambert, Long and Brady in their study of older, single women, emphasise that these people should be the main stakeholders in any research findings (2017 p.323). This sounds wonderful. However, as set out in Entanglement K, any benefit to participants is unlikely to be clear or significant or even acknowledged.

Regarding autoethnographic input, there is a tension between my desire for “truth” and my sense of ethical responsibility. Art, for example, is a quest for the heart of a matter, a no-holds-barred arena of exploration; but when I look at what I’ve fashioned, I have to make an ethical evaluation. For the issue is, who else have I implicated in my revelations? This quandary is discussed by Lapadat in her analysis of autoethnographic relational ethics (2017 p.593). So I have songs that I’ve only sung once I’m sure no-one’s recording. Poetry I might submit to obscure poetry magazines that, I assume, no-one I know will ever read. These tactics are a tightrope walk over twanging lines of respect and fear and desire. Assessments are made on a case by case basis, one step at a time. The path is opaque. Perhaps I perform a function that is not entirely clear: A minstrel, Cassandra, the court jester. Kvale and Brinkmann in their book ‘Interviews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing’ quote Foucault:

My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. (1997 p.256, in 2009 p.76).

Which neatly sums up the ethical territory. Artists are dangerous. Academics are dangerous. Sometimes I get it wrong. I hope I have mainly got it right in this paper.
Entanglement H - The touch experiment:

Autoethnography - Vulture feather

I knew the game. I had gathered the items. I thought, actually, I would choose the granite pebble. However, when I actually played the touch experiment, this happened:

SJ: Hah….oooh-ah….Oh my God, you feel - yeah!…oh no…This is fun! - Ah /
My God I’ve picked the feather! Hoooa, the f/
I’ve picked the vulture feather.
Smelling it. I love the smell of this feather.
Can still smell the incense on it - it’s like incense and roast dinner [breathing in]
it’s an amazing smell -
suuuper fluffy/…feeling it against my nose, actually! Against my face. It’s like being in/ [sigh]
Maybe / that’s very baby chick isn’t it/ it’s like being under the mummy - ngmmm!
[child voice] mummy all snuggled in/ and all those soft down feathers[pause] [breathing in]
There you go!
A little fluffy feather.
For me.

Hear the surprise ("My God I’ve picked the feather!")! What’s going on?! My fingers over-rode my brain, and chose an item my body wanted to handle. I went on to intensify the touch, holding the feather against my face, my nose.

The vulture feather came from a solo trip to Northern Spain in 2016:

In the same way Gretel scanned for breadcrumbs on the path I am constantly looking for signs

Its smell is the most surprising thing
vast and enveloping of
incense in church
and warm beds in the morning

The second most surprising thing is a feather so
fluffy puffy and silly as a boa
could have grown
on the breast of a vulture

(Author poem, 29 May 2016)

The smell of it, the touch of it. Gretel was trying to find her way home, by the breadcrumbs. Playing the game, the feather transported me to a fairytale home, a place of belonging, of roast dinners (how British!).

I played the game after everyone else. If I’d played it at the start, would I have picked the granite?

**Interviewees - Soft and hard**

This game was a last-minute hunch. I had an instinct that doing touch might produce different data than talking about touch. Here are the items:
When I set up the game, I had no plan as to what might come of it or what I was trying to achieve (Entanglement A). My friends still played quite seriously. Time taken to choose ranged between approximately 20 seconds to over a minute, with an average time of 47 seconds. Those who were older, and had been single for longest, generally took the longest time to choose. This might suggest, again, a growing caution with age and singleness when dealing with touch interactions. Touch is a gamble with unforeseen consequences; better not get it wrong.

The items chosen, and the discourse used, show a stark, gendered polarisation. Four of the five women chose hard items, often using (relatively) aggressive vocabulary; whilst all three men chose soft items, all using gentle language. These are the objects selected, ordered by gender and, within that, by age (youngest to oldest):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Item</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>headphone leads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>silk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>silk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>key</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polly</td>
<td>shell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>headphone leads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz</td>
<td>marble</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Alex in fact chose three items, the silk first, plus the shell and the marble. I have chosen to simplify his choice to the first selection of “silk” as he said the reason he liked the hard objects was because they were all silky; he added that if he’d realised the shell had spiky ends, he wouldn’t have picked it.
I tried to deduce other patterns - a correlation between item and age? Between item and length of
time being single? - but nothing. Nothing I could see. But by gender? Clear as night and day. You’ll
see that Sue transgressed by picking the headphone leads. We’ll come to this later.

A “position of strength” narrative emerges from the women. Initially, there are associations with
homeliness and belonging, a place of safety (as happened to me with the feather):

Kate:   [Choosing the key]
       But it’s one of the most reassuring feels I have.
       So, on a constant basis, every day, I check my pocket for my key, my bike key
       […] umm, so I’m always doing that
       and when it’s in my hand I always feel like Ahhhhhhhhh, like SAFE, um,
       any key!
       I love it when I’ve got my home key… / in my hand /
       I just find it really reassuring, comforting thing.

Polly:   [Choosing the shell]
       It’s a previously/ well it’s not a living being but it’s been the house of a living being.

The key, in particular, seems to have the status of a companion object (Turtle 2007 p.9; Perrier &
Withers 2016). A special relationship, a protective talisman.

There is also a narrative of violence by some of the younger female interviewees, both in items
selected and in language used:
Kate: I picked the key. It’s got a nice weight - um - for maybe nice and sinister reasons. […] on a darker note, if I’m walking alone at night, as everyone often does, and I like to position my keys in a way that I’ve convinced myself would make me - a weapon of mass destruction [laughing] to anyone who came my way - umm - which probably wouldn’t work that way / but it always makes me feel a bit more secure - so I’ve picked that one even though there is a nice stone in there that actually when I - go walking / I quite often have a stone in my pocket that I like to hold in my hand / Um / but this one filled me with more like - ACCCHHH. Yes! Claim The Key! So I think I’m just used to grabbing keys - close. So - um - that’s what I picked.

So here Kate deliberately chooses a fighting tool, remodels herself as a “weapon of mass destruction” and uses aggressive language as to getting hold of it - “grabbing” and “claiming”. This is not the “ladylike” language of passively waiting! Polly demonstrates the same narrative of control and containment:

Polly: The other thing that was in here that I might have grabbed was what feels like a marble, possibly, […] Nice size - fits in the old hand - can hang on to it - yeah.

Again - “grabbing”, hanging on to, imprisoning, almost.

When touch actually happens, in the Miscellaneous Items Game, feral attitudes of power seem to reveal themselves. This is consistent with the assertive ways some women satisfy their touch needs (Entanglement G). These miscellaneous items have less power than the women and the women take them. The body wants and the body takes.
Looked at relationally, women are more exposed to hostile stereotypes and judgments than men, will be aware of the toxic domestic violence statistics (two women a week in the UK are killed by a present or former partner (Refuge 2018)), and will have inevitably suffered from unwanted touch. Do they respond by “armouring up”? Are they choosing aggression as the best form of defence; as a way, in a toxic environment, to negotiate the sort of touch they want and like? If this is so, the genius of the term “weapon of mass destruction” (“WMD”), in a British context, is that the UK infamously went to war with Iraq on the basis of their WMD capability whereas, in fact, the weapons of mass destruction did not exist. So the violence of the women, as described by Kate, is a mental construct, a fabrication - the women do not hold the power after all - but the imagery is potent for all that, and still effective against weaker adversaries.

These results stand in stark contrast to the way the men played the Miscellaneous Items Game. All three of the men chose soft things - silk, silk and headphone cables. Field notes the associations people associate with specific textures:

…(…denim, wax, sandpaper, silk) evoked distinct emotions (e.g. depression, embarrassment, relief and contentment respectively)…(2010 p.371).

Contentment. So far, so good. The men also give explanations of a dramatically different tone and content to the explanations given by the above women. Two of the men speak expressly about reciprocity, the agency of the items, the items in fact picking them:

*Tom:*  There’s ten things in here? …So I’m immediately drawn to this, like - wirey one - that’s just because it seems to be everywhere at the moment /
What’s the really heavy one? / St/ heavy / ooh! shelly one / spinney wooden one…/
I’m gonna go for the annoying one that’s everywhere - where did that one go again? - That one!
Yeah - that one.

*SJ:*  Why did you choose that one?

*Tom:*  Cos it was everywhere - I couldn’t put my hand anywhere without it being there - um - I quite like that.
I like that - er - it was so - persistent - for my touch.
**SJ:** That’s beautiful/

**Tom:** More so than anything else, it really wanted to be involved with my fingers.

Even though the cables are wiry and annoying, Tom still selects them because he responds to their desire. Such agency of non-animate matter is a feature of feminist new materialism (Haraway 1988 p.593; Barad 2003 p.821; Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2012). Alex also values the agency of the inanimate objects:

**Alex:** And as I rummaged through, they all wanted to stay in my hand -

The men here appear to respond to the volition of the other. They are not grabbing, questing or imposing their needs. This is complete a flip of the “men as active, aggressive and assertive; women as passive, sensitive and caring” stereotypes.

Or is it? A conflicting hypothesis is that the men are presuming consent. This is a feature of hegemonic masculine discourse - “she wanted it” - and comes from a place of entitlement to the object, and confidence in one’s own attractiveness and desirability. None of the women presumed the objects wanted them.

There are also sexual undertones:

**Sam:** One that I like the feel of?
Okay [whispering] I quite like that [the silk] - the ribbony type of thing -
that feels nice -
that’s kind of light in the hand -
it’s got warmth - yeah! -
gentle -
it sits nice and lightly and you can sort of -
bounce it - [laughs].
In this quote by Sam the silk becomes sweet, compliant, the girl-next-door: “nice…light…warm…gentle…nice” - you can bounce her on your knee! Oh dear. She seems a far cry from the corporeal, contemporary women who are grabbing pebbles and keys.

And what of Sue, who transgressed the pattern by choosing the soft headphone leads? Touching these also seems to slip into sexualised language:

Eyrr. I just /
I quite like that sort of / ha ha ha! /
that sort of plasticy thing that I can roll in my fingers!! [laughing] /
It’s soft.
It’s not cold.
And - er - and it’s like - squidgy - it’s a bit squidgy - it’s nice
[ends quiet. uproarious laughter for 12s. from both of us…]

I can’t be certain she was reminded of a flaccid penis, but I definitely was. There was too much laughter for it to be anything else, I suspect! It’s how the British respond to sexual prompts.

So, in choosing, did the men choose female-like stereotypes (soft, bouncy), whilst the women selected male tropes (hard, weapon-like). Did my heterosexual interviewees express normative, sexual preferences through their fingertips? Is all touch, even of a collection of knick-knacks in a bag, an erotic experience? As quantum entanglement approach blurs matter and the void, it inevitably spins non-sexual and sexual together. Talk of “non-sexual” touch in this paper was revealed to be something of a nonsense by the touch game. It is not clear whether this discourse of desire is a feature of single people, or of gender, or of sexual preference. More research is needed.
Analysis

“…banged, tangled, spangled and spaghettied!”

Hair (MacDermot, Ragni & Rado 1968)

I grew up listening to Hair, the heavy, old, vinyl LP, a musical about inter-racial intra-action, supremacy-snubbing and women expressing non-married desire. I know every word.

(Field notes, 7 May 2018)

I tried, I really did, to tie this thesis together into one neat knot, a sensible summing-up. But always the stands slipped through my fingers and strings yanked from the side. And then I remembered that this is the territory of entanglements, that I had asked an improper question, and so should not expect a tidy answer. I asked of my interviewees “Talk to me about touch”, with none of the standard side-questions; I walked along the shoreline looking at seaweed and picking up jetsam. This discussion will be improper: A rag tag of things I found on the beach, miscellaneous items in a pillow case, serendipitous clumps which jammed the comb. Various knots have been laid out, as Entanglements A-K. In this discussion, I make links across Entanglements and interweave fibres of theory and threads of literature. It is a snarled up, webbed account (Haraway 1988 p.588). Haraway speaks about increasing the opacity of thinking technologies, of thickening analysis, of bringing out the complexities (Lykke, Markussen & Olesen 2008 p.35). She makes the messiness express:

_When Species Meet_ works by making connections, by trying to respond where curiosity and sometimes unexpected caring lead. No chapter has a bottom line, but they all have barely contained traffic between the lines and between the foretext and endnotes…

(Haraway 2008 p.301, original italics)

The text is a writhing place of entanglements, knotting and re knotting, constantly making new connections, driven by love and serendipity. Similarly, Shohat states, “our challenge…is to produce knowledge within a kind of a kaleidoscope framework of communities-in-relation” (2002 p.69). I attempt to interpret this kaleidoscope of singleness, myth, cats and Britishness. The moment I finish typing, and look away, I suspect the strands will re-configure. The data seems so very alive.
Notwithstanding the above, I will attempt to brush this into some sort of shape! As a starting point, I pick up from the research literature on single people and touch, where I confirm and complicate current knowledge. Thereafter the discussion arcs out on various non-conclusive trajectories, rolling hither and thither, like a kitten chasing a ball of wool.

Beginning with current academic knowledge, Field sets out the importance of (non-sexual) touch and reflects that older, single people without pets are vulnerable to touchlessness (2010 pp.379-380). Similarly, Hafford-Letchfield et al. remark on the skin hunger reported by singletons and observe the importance of pets (interspecies touch) in satisfying these needs (2017 p.328). Despite not beginning with a list of fixed questions, as set out in Methodology, the transcripts coalesced into a web of negotiations surrounding access to touch: Negotiations carried out by the body and by discourse; negotiations marked by both gender and age; negotiations which appear to be both conscious and subconscious (Entanglements A-K). These results seem to confirm the present knowledge that (non-sexual) touch is important to single people, there is a “touch drive”, and tactics to achieve this touch appear to be non-stop, diverse, aggressive, clandestine, contradictory and in flux.

Regarding the importance of pets, all but one of my participants shares a house with a cat, thus confirming this touch-strategy (as suggested by Field 2010 p.380 and Hafford-Letchfield et al. 2017 p.328). I coin the term “furry lovers” after a throw-away comment by Tom (Entanglement D). Behaviours by people with their cats are reported in a remarkably similar fashion, irrespective of age and gender: Cuddles are enjoyable, yet my interviewees know they are imposing their touch needs, at times, on reluctant animals (Entanglement D). There is a discourse of power here, with more dominant humans taking touch (“feeding”) from less powerful creatures (see also Entanglement G). Interviewees are aware of the relational underpinning of women being more shamed for these connections than men, via the trope of the “mad old cat lady” (Entanglement D). More of this, below. Hafford-Letchfield et al.’s paper (2017) is written solely about single women; these results indicate that pets as furry lovers cut across gender. Feline touch-partners are important companion species (Haraway 2008). Haraway emphasises: “Animals are everywhere full partners in worlding, in becoming with” (2008 p.301). A cat or a dog is not a lesser companion than a woman or a man. Sue says she is moving to exactly this world view (Entanglement D).
How else do people satisfy their skin hunger? Regarding touch activity, the body appears to be constantly feeding. It gets what it needs (Entanglements D & E). It has agency (Barad 2003). Even isolated, touch-averse interviewees have strategies (Entanglement C). Touch-targets cover a wide range of human and posthuman possibilities including friends (“huggables”), trees, soft fabrics, other people’s babies, cliff faces, self-massage and being crushed next to strangers on the London Underground (Entanglements D & E). This diversity is consistent with the theory of quantum entanglement whereby we are, all of us, constantly and deeply entwining with everything else (Barad 2007). A veritable smorgasbord of tactile pleasure!

Complicating this, however, are patterns of discourse which undermine such connectivity. The first is a discourse of shame concerning close, non-human entanglements (Entanglement D). We’ve just seen this, above, via the “mad old cat lady”. Shame in this regard is a gendered and aged feature, reserved for the oldest women in society and reported by the oldest women in this study (Entanglements D & E). This hostile, matted zone is a knotting of cultural policing of single, British women (Entanglement B; see also Literature review (ii) - Singleness), Anglo prioritisation of a heterosexual, romantic partner for females (Entanglement E) tied with human exceptionalism (Entanglement D). Whilst my interviewees all seem comfortable with cat relations, as connections move into ostensibly insensible touch companions, narratives of shame intensify (Entanglement D).

One strand I wish to review in depth is a “turn” away from one romantic partner (“the one”) to touch-bonding with features of the natural environment: Trees, rocks and so on (Entanglement D). This turn is a feature of myself plus all the older women in the study, specifically Liz, Helen and Sue. These women, all over 50, appear to have found “companion landscapes”, marked by intimacy and reciprocity and delight. I present two, conflicting, hypothesis as to the reasons behind this pattern. A relational diagnosis might see this behaviour as pragmatic. The women have been hurt or disappointed in love, feel rejected and belittled by society and by men and so have fallen back on the open arms of nature - for whilst “the one” is something of a mythical trip-wire, connection with the landscape is a vast and comprehensive safety net (Dob Dob Dob 2016; Entanglement B). However, there was a perception that this was a second best, the wooden spoon rather than the prize (Entanglement D).
Nevertheless, looked at from the point of view of entanglement alone, something else may (also) be happening. Sue describes a burgeoning spiritual aspect to touch as she has grown older (Entanglement C). I am reminded of a passage towards the end of Nan Shepherd’s book ‘The Living Mountain’. Shepherd was, I believe, a single woman, writing in Scotland in the 1940s where she walked the Cairngorms:

…at first I was seeking only sensuous gratification […] the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes […] But as I grew older…I began to discover the mountain in itself. Everything became good to me, it’s contours, its colours, its waters and rock, flowers and birds […] I believe that I now understand in some small measure why the Buddhist goes on pilgrimage to a mountain.

(2011 pp.107-108)

Here we see a shift away from physical gratification (albeit also with the mountain) to a spiritual connection. Shepherd also mixes flesh and sensuality and sight and implies the sounds of water and birds (ibid). Again, looking at Sue’s testimony, she describes being happy to just look at a flower. My initial interpretation was that touch was thereby irreconcilably associated with damage (Entanglement D). But another might be that there is, with age and life experience, less distinction between touch and sight and smell and taste and sound; less division between the senses; they entangle. In a film about Gwen Moffat, a pioneering female rock climber now in her 90s, she states of the mountains: “I don’t miss them […] they’re part of me” (Randall & Carter 2015). This is profound entanglement with the landscape. I place myself on this path; aware already that there is little distinction between the stuff of me, due to be scattered as ashes at Pembroke on my death, and the dust of the limestone cliffs. None of the men demonstrate this proclivity; however, none of my male interviewees are as old as these three women. If I interviewed some men in their late 50s, 60s and 70s, what would they say? Again, what impact does being partnered have on older women and their touch experiences? What of age, class, dis/ability, different cultural communities? I am a climber and all the oldest women in my study are outdoorsy; in an arty cohort, or an intellectually-focussed person, would there be a “turn” with age, but to something other than the landscape?

Another significant pattern, which disrupts the free-flow of touch-connectivity, is a potent discourse of denial and cauterisation. All of the women and two of the three men (i.e. seven out of eight
interviewees) assert that they do not need or miss touch (Entanglement F). This discourse is human-specific and, for my heterosexual cohort, often spaghetties around people of the opposite gender. I speculate about the reasons for this, suggesting that interviewees may indeed have sufficient touch (from elsewhere), that they employ a “Don’t want what you can’t get” strategy, are avoiding being emotionally hurt and/or are forcefully preserving their singleness (Entanglement E; Reynolds 2008 pp.56-58; Simpson 2015 p.395; Evertsson & Nyman 2013 p.68). I myself have felt and communicated all these conflicting rituals. These patterns fit with current knowledge about the vacillating, equivocal dynamic of everyday negotiations for single women (Reynolds 2008); regarding non-sexual touch it appears that some older, single British men also occupy ambivalent territory.

Touch can constitute a threat to singleness, and is at times avoided, both as it might give the impression a person “is available”, but also due to the “Midas Effect” of physical touch which has the capacity to dissolve established barriers (my “YESYESYES” response, Entanglement F; Field 2010 p.371; Morhenn, Park, Piper & Zak 2008; Levav & Argo 2010). My interviewees indicate an instinctive awareness of this propensity. Alex refers to the “gamble” of dating and partnership, which he avoids (Entanglement F). By contrast, Helen seems willing to risk picking a card held out by a tree. This would not, in our culture, jeopardise her solo status. She is willing to gamble/gambol with nature (Entanglement D).

Chasing a different (but interlinked) strand, I wish to follow up Kate’s line “[the key] would make me - a weapon of mass destruction [laughing]” as the results of the Miscellaneous Items Game astonished me. How did a fun touch experiment turn into this?! For my research on non-sexual touch as a source of healthful happiness became twisted up in narratives of power. From a relational perspective, power influences who touches who, where, when, and in what manner (Braidotti 2013 p.12). Entanglements A-K reveal a swirl of apparently contradictory behaviours, including dominance by the strong (e.g. a man cuddling a reluctant cat), compliance by the weak (e.g. a woman at work having her hair stroked by male co-workers), power-plays by the weak (e.g. women as weapons of mass destruction) and softness by the strong (e.g. men choosing silk in the touch experiment). We all, no doubt, play different roles at different times and in different contexts. Below, I look at the latter (perverse) combinations in more detail.
Power plays by the weak and softness by the strong, an “aggressive women / passive men”
dynamic, contradicts stereotypical labelling of gendered function. Analysed in a relational setting,
differing possibilities present themselves as to why this flip might occur. My female interviewees
report being more bruised, scarred, and battered than their male peers by the impact of hostile
stereotypes, “failed” romances and histories of unwanted touch (‘Dob Dob Dob 2016’;
Entanglements E, F & G). This inequality of experience is consistent with the literature on the
gendered impact of singleness (Reynolds & Taylor 2005; Sharp & Ganong 2011). It has been a long
war, marked in the flesh (Winterson 1992). In response, perhaps, a military narrative emerges of
women going into battle mode themselves when presented with touch-opportunities, becoming
cavalier around consent, embodying weapons of mass destruction, dodging bullets and grabbing
what they can get: keys, marbles, babies, cats (Entanglements G & H). On all occasions, these
entities are perceived as having less power than the female protagonists. This pattern is expressed
both in actions and words. It is exhibited by both older and younger female interviewees. Other
driving forces are likely to supplant or co-exist with such armouring up: Perhaps these women are
also more touch-starved and so more disinhibited in satisfying their touch needs? A matter of
personality?

By contrast, the men in my study appear more attentive and considerate to both objects and, on
occasion, other humans (Entanglements G & H). In the era of #MeToo and in the context of my
friend group of emotionally literate men, there is high awareness of consent issues. As an aside, this
emotional competency contradicts the view of British men found by Walsh (2007). On the one
hand, their considerateness could be personality-based; kindness, pure and simple. But little is pure
and simple. No touch is innocent (Barad 2012). Given the above relational understandings,
casualness and largess is, perhaps, entangled with entitlemen. No need to grab; one implication is
that they can take what they like. Men are allowed to waltz through their singleness. They do not
report feeling judged or measured or watched, as the women do (Dob Dob Dob 2016; Entanglement
B). They are eligible, desirable! Of course the silk wants them! The headphone leads want them!
This is consistent with Eck’s finding of a discourse around choice for men (2013 p.41).
Alternatively, did the men show restraint in order to demonstrate their maturity, in accordance with
Eck’s hypothesis (2014 p.148)? A tactic which appears generous but is designed to re-assert a
(moral) supremacy. Is this finding a quirk or has it wider significance? Is it a feature of singleness
or do partnered women demonstrate the same aggression? Are married men more assertive? What of other sexualities, other classes, other ages?

And for myself, I am pushed and pulled by different threads. Regarding landscape, I am tied to the oldest female interviewees; regarding lovers, I am knotted with the younger cohort - so both old and young. Regarding my pick of a soft feather in the Miscellaneous Items Game, I align myself with the men; regarding my experience of unwanted touch, I link with the women - so both male and female. My body and performance muddle age categorisations and weave around gender. So it goes on. Tangles upon tangles upon tangles. A ravaged ball of wool in the middle of the carpet.

How to wrap this up? Just to state again the impossibility of tidy, discrete findings. Why? Because every aspect is in fact tangled in everything else: The cats with the stereotypes, touch with language, age in the denials. The literature reviews, theory, ethics, Entanglements A-K are all simultaneously part of the same messy thatch - each already in the other as matter is in the void, and vice versa (Barad 2012 pp.211-213). And a movement in one strand vibrates the entire network.

There are numerous caveats to this study, the most glaring of which are set out in Limitations. Further, many of my deductions have been teased out of the interview material by close reading. This technique seems to facilitate a glimpse down the kaleidoscope into subconscious discourses regarding both what is said and what is done. Whilst there appears to be widespread conscious awareness of certain cultural relationalities, such as British touch constraints and singleness stereotypes (Entanglements B & C), many dynamics of power, shame, denial and cauterisation are, I would say, not so conscious (Entanglements F & G). Few of the participants, I would hazard, are consciously aware of all the reasons they picked their item and what is (potentially) revealed in their spoken commentary when playing the Miscellaneous Items Game (Entanglement H). I have attempted to understand the results and attribute meaning (Cerwonka 2011 p.70). However, I am aware that my analysis is just one interpretation (Riessman 2008 p.185). My interviewees may dispute my reading; other scholars will take down my beehive and coiffure a plait. Indeed, I may well read the transcripts tomorrow and come to manifold other conclusions.

And so I walked to the local climbing gym and chatted to a young man. He was wearing a
t-shirt which said “Crazy Cat Dad”. This cheered me: An interlinking of clothing and discourse, generational disruption, serendipity and autoethnographic writing tangling itself into the Analysis. Here it is. Change is already happening. Now back to my desk.

(Field notes, 23 May 2018)
Autoethnography - “Ngmm!”

Translating touch into words is problematic. A world of nuance is lost. The tongue must adapt. Going back to the transcript of myself participating in the touch experiment, there are a number of breaches of the Queen’s English:

SJ: Hah….oooh-ah….Oh my God, you feel - yeah!…oh no…This is fun! - Ah /
My God I’ve picked the feather! Hooooa, the f/
[…]…it’s like being under the mummy - ngmmm!
[child voice] mummy all snuggled in/ and all those soft down feathers[pause] [breathing in]

A few things happen with language here, largely in the prosody. Firstly, there are the sounds, which convey a feeling, but are not in the English dictionary, the ooohs and ngmmms. Written down they remind me of text-speak, how modern technology, a disembodied format, has forgone the starchiness of the Mother Tongue and taken to reveling in unsanctioned relations with noise. Secondly, when touching the item, I collapse into child-speak, a regression, a connection to the past, a fantasy past, even, a dream-scape of safety and warmth in a comforting nest. It doesn’t take long for this transition. A matter of seconds once I touch the feather. The barriers are gossamer.

Interviewees - “Bleepuuggghhhhhhhwhhhhh”

How do older, single people in Britain negotiate touch? Partly by haggling with language. Just as I had done, my interviewees transgress standard English when trying to talk about touch and when playing the touch game. Noises, made-up words, cartoon voices and body shapes supplement conventional conversation.

Participants use a lot of sounds in lieu of words:
Sue: I’m able to be a bit more free with my Ooohhh looooooo!….You know, and I wouldn’t feel like Oooohiiiiooohooohoooh (laughs), you know!

Kate: Sometimes I just go out for a crazy night. Um. Yeah. And sometimes it doesn’t happen! And you just like ooouurggghhh!!

Alex: Don’t know that I miss it until it arrives and then you just like bleeuuuggghhhhhhhwhaaaaaaa.

The feelings are too big, too different, too messy for orthodox vocabulary. It is also striking how both Kate and Alex change from “I” to “you”, thus distancing themselves from the unmanageable feelings, from the unspeakable.

People also create made-up words. Significantly, this new vocabulary is only used for new relationalities. No-one uses made up words to describe “standard” heterosexual touching (where, presumably, vocabulary exists). So Alex uses the term “huggables” to describe his close, male friends; he adds that hugging his male peers is a new development, in the past 8-10 years. Tom also mentions “man-hugging”, with regard to older, male relatives. He describes actively trying to introduce this form of touch into the family. “Man-hugging” as a phrase has only appeared in my lifetime; before this, there was no word, no phrase - reinforcing that, traditionally in British society, there was very little of this activity.

Adding a “y” at the end of a word creates a diminutive, a new intimacy. Regarding human-pet encounters, Sue offers: “I’m more of an animaly sort of person than a human person”. Similarly, Polly and Tom both respond with made up diminutives when coming across objects in the touch game:

Polly: I like smooth things - smooth roundy things…

Tom: …this, like - wirey one - […] ooh! shelly one / spinney wooden one…
If there are no words for certain forms of touch, surely they become harder to negotiate? A gap in language represents a gap in behaviour. By making up new words when making these new, affectionate connections, people are naming the less-familiar entanglements. Once a word goes into common usage, so, perhaps, may the behaviour.

Another phenomena is a change in voice when talking about or, particularly, doing touch. Typically cartoon/baby/primal voices come out. For myself:

**SJ:** …ngmmm, [child voice] mummy all snuggled in/ and all those soft down feathers…

Polly, playing the touch game:

**Polly:** …feels like a mushroom… [humming gently]  
   toy animal of some sort…key….  
   what do I do, just pick one out that I like?  
   rootle-rootle-rootle!  
   what’s that? …[humming]  
   … leaf!

as she went into a happy child place of touch and naming and play. And another:

**Alex:**  Yeah  
   Touch  
   It’s very nice  
   Touch Good.

Here, “Touch Good” is like a prehistoric cave-dweller, ‘Tarzan’ persona. These seem examples of the undertouched core, breaking through a surface crust of civilised discourse, to say Me! Me! Touch Me! As we saw in Entanglement F, this voice is almost invariably immediately silenced.

Several interviewees bluntly communicate their difficulty in expressing what they want to say about touch in words:
Sue: I definitely felt / errrrr / more aware of…. [sigh/exhale]…of/er/I suppose…I don’t know how to describe it really/…” (my italics);

Kate: To be honest though, I’m a bit like a - what’s the word for it? - Um […] / I just go into kind of - stasis - is that a wo/ (my italics).

Movement is also part of the communication. Some interviewees went into physical hieroglyphics when talking about touch. There were plenty of “shapes” pulled, and legs crossed and re-crossed, a lot of fiddling and self-touching. Sadly, I could see this going on but didn’t have the expertise to code it alongside the interview. This is a shame. More information was in there. Next time.

These transgressions, together, imply that “standard” English is insufficient and does not talk about touch generously, fluidly or with enough variety. Such failures of the English tongue have been challenged in feminism for a long time, particularly by women of colour and post-colonial writers; ones who have/had other languages, ones on whom English was imposed, ones who found that “standard” English did not express how they felt (hooks 1994 p.175). The skin has been colonised by language; matter has been bullied by words (Barad 2003 p.801). These transgressions demonstrate how in myself and a number of my single friends in contemporary Bristol, UK, the borders of language are being continually pushed, kneaded, moulded, and modelled into something more fit for purpose.
Limitations

Further to a philosophy of situated research, all findings are necessarily provisional, partial, localised and unstable (Rich 1986; Haraway 1988). Within this overriding context, this section presents a summary of what I see as the primary limitations of this study.

The sample is blatantly normative: Cisgender, white, heterosexual, of a particular Bristol class bubble, part of my friend group. How did this happen? This was the profile of all the women in ‘A New Currency’ (Dob Dob Dob 2016). It made sense, to provide comparable data, for the men to also be cis, white, of the same class and heterosexual. The specificity of interviewees gives some kind of feel for the position of this community of British singletons. Plus, this demographic of men, in particular, is under-studied. I also am cis, white, British and heterosexual myself; belonging to this slice of life gives me the sense of entitlement necessary in order to ask questions and do the research. Simultaneously, however, it is clearly a conspicuous limitation. In addition, given a sample of five women (or nine in toto, including all the contributors to ‘A New Currency’), and just three men, any generalisations beyond the specifics of these tiny groupings are highly provisional.

Eck’s 2014 study concerns white, heterosexual, middle class, able-bodied men in America; she notes that other demographics will face different cultural projections (Eck 2014 pp.149-150). Bristol has a 16% Black and Ethnic Minority (BAME) population. Far from “scientific”, but going on Tinder, there are almost no BAME men, nowhere near 16%. Where are they? What does being single mean to someone Black British? Pudrovska, Schieman and Carr conclude that race does impact upon singleness (2006). Similarly, regarding sexuality. When making ‘A New Currency’ a lesbian acquaintance, who was older and single, pulled out of a planned interview on the grounds she did not see herself in those terms. Is the perception of “single” different for gay women? A recent paper on British older, single, gay men notes a heightened anxiety of ageing in this community (Suen 2017). Class, dis/ability, non-binary, religion - all would produce different insights. These are areas for further research.

A word about essentialism. I fear, at times, the slump into tidy knots. Any patterns woven together in the Analysis are just some angles, some edits, some arrangements of words and wool. So,
sometimes I write of “the men” in the study, or “some of the women”; But what of the other women? What about other dynamics in the men? What of the youngest ones when I highlight patterns in the oldest ones? There is not space, here, to cover every possibility (there never is, and besides, the possibilities change), yet there is always slippage, the non-fitting, the excess. By way of just one example, what about Sam and his nervousness around touch (Entanglement C)? This counters the powerful “men have choice” hypothesis (Eck 2013). Men lacking confidence with touch is a lesser-told narrative; and again, I have not told it here.

In addition, this study is tragically human-centred. How do the cats feel and analyse these entanglements? I didn’t spend time with them and ask them. What does the rock think? I didn’t stay and watch. I attempted to catapult objects into the discussion by introducing a sack of bric-a-brac into each interview - but what were the items themselves trying to say? As set out in the Conclusion, different methodological approaches could remedy this imbalance.

Using written language to talk about touch is problematic, as seen in Entanglement J. There is a truth communicated by the touch of bodies, which cannot be duplicated in words (Braidotti 2002 p.21). Furthermore, in this thesis I am writing about touch and then submitting that, from another country, in electronic format; the contact becomes ever more remote. Other formats might better convey (to some people or creatures at some times) access and significance of touch, for example sculpture, music, video, dance. Projects in the future may further develop these areas.

I am also a limitation. My quirks, interests and biases thread through this research and both limit and drive it. One flawed example stands out for me: I had drafted a moment in the question sheets (Appendices B & C) whereby I would lean forward and touch interviewees (Does the “Midas Effect” hold true? Do people speak/release more?) but on each and every occasion I “bottled out” and was too inhibited to carry out that action and touch someone. I am still in the process of learning.

A final caveat about opacity. I know my interviewees have not revealed everything about their touch relationalities. They are my friends, and I have more knowledge about them than is packaged under this research banner. Neither have I exposed everything about myself. Any deductions are
therefore further compromised and provisional (Entanglement C; Denscombe 2007 p.200; Riessman 2008).
Autoethnography - Songs of love

Yesterday I was riding shotgun with a friend in her camper van. Now we all have electronic navigation tools, my only job as a passenger is to DJ the music. I started picking tracks:

- Make Me Feel - Janelle Monáe;
- Supermodel - SZA;
- Tie My Hands - Lil Wayne;
- LOVE - Kendrick Lamar…

(2018; 2017; 2008; 2017)

and realised that all the songs I’d chosen were about love. Most of them were queered (genderbending; non-monogamous; about a city). Jill’s quote came back to me from ‘A New Currency’ (Dob Dob Dob 2016):

Jill: I know some very bitter women -
that cannot read books of love, or anything to do with relationship -
because they don’t have the touch in their life that they miss so much.

Love and touch are entangled. My heart was broken in 2013. I didn’t hold anyone’s hand, or kiss, until 2017. This year I have written love poetry for a cat, my house, a number of men and a limestone cliff. I choose love songs from my iPhone.

I guess that finally (at this time, in this place) I have enough touch.

Interviewees - “I suppose it made me think”

If the interviewees are the primary stakeholders, how have they benefitted so far from this research?
In the 2018 interviews, I asked the women if ‘A New Currency’, recorded in 2016, had had any impact on them (ibid). Responses can be ordered by age. The oldest two singletons flatly replied “No”. The other three women said the research and the sound piece had prompted them think about singleness. Two remarked upon issues of identity:

Sue: Ahmmm…I suppose it made me think about it a bit more -
think about my situation a bit more -
and actually made me feel more comfortable about it.

Polly: It was very interesting /
very, very interesting to do /
very interesting to hear the final product as well
[...] so / urwah/
did it have any effect on the way I do things?/
I don’t/
I don’t think it affected my sort of actual approach to life particularly but I think it just gives /
it just gave me something to think about / in terms of / errm / I /
I guess that whole idea of /you know/
how you identify yourself -

So for some participants, the research started jostling the discourse, began a conversation.

As to this paper on touch, will that vibrate certain individuals, swirl around the friend groups? Will some people reach out and make physical contact in situations where, but for the research, they would have merely talked? Who knows. I won’t know unless someone tells me. It’s too early to inquire right now.

‘A New Currency’ was an art piece (Dob Dob Dob 2016). Art disseminates information and feeling in a different way to academia; touches different people, different spots, in different ways. It has been uploaded on the internet since 2016. Who knows who has listened and what impact it may have had? Who knows who may listen in the future and be consoled, empowered, frustrated, bored,
confused? Once an artwork is in the public sphere the artist loses control of who interprets it and how. It becomes wild, feral, uncontrollable; it entangles itself every which way like Barad’s indiscriminate atoms.

Similarly with academic work. Who will read this, after it has been appraised by my opponent and the examiner? Will it lie quietly in its electronic prison cell, or spread through the world wide web and make both planned and random connections both within and without the Academy?
Conclusion

The focus of this study is the cross-tangling of two unstable, non-definitive, non-privileged entities: Single people and (ostensibly) non-sexual touch. Singletons are marginalised under Anglo-Western relationalities (DePaulo & Morris 2006). Matter is denigrated (Barad 2003), touch is down the line regarding prioritisation of the senses (Field 2010 p.379) and non-sexual touch is even more absent from discourse (DePaulo & Morris 2006 p.253; Literature review (ii) - Singleness). My motivation is personal, as I am - by some definitions - a single person and I have experienced my share of skin hunger. There is also a political element, in my wish to contribute to a cultural change in attitude towards these sidelined discourses; the personal and political being twisted together in feminist research like DNA (Riessman 2008 p.15).

In choosing to investigate touch and singleness through the framework of entanglement, I created a monster. Knots of meaning clumped together, objects jumped up, songs threw themselves into the airwaves, strangers offered their stories and poems sidled their way into academic text. These maverick entities seemed fairly happy to nestle in as Entanglements A-K. However, attempts to coax them into a comprehensive, cohesive tagline failed. They stubbornly refused to be ordered or simplified; each time I made a link, that connection only generated more threads, more possibilities. The Analysis section is therefore a webbed account, flawed and feral and guided, in the end, by my own curiosity and care (Haraway 2008 p.301).

At the risk of alarming the monster, I feel impelled to provide some sort of summary. The question I put to my older, single interviewees was “Talk to me about touch” (Appendices B & C). I then focussed on how I and my participants negotiated physical touch, discourse, gender and age (Methodology). My hand-picked findings from the webbed Analysis are set out below arranged, approximately, from those demonstrated by all participants to those with more specific application. Firstly, regarding skin hunger in my single British interviewees, it appears the body is constantly “feeding” on human and posthuman touch-targets; secondly, cats, as companion species, appear to be important touch-friends, irrespective of people’s age and gender; thirdly, seven out of eight participants exhibit a powerful narrative of denial and cauterisation regarding human-to-human touch-needs; forth, much of behaviour and discourse concerning my singleton interviewees and
their negotiations with touch seems to occur on a sub-conscious level; fifth, (some) single women in the study “armour up” and assert their touch-power against less powerful people and objects whilst (some) single men demonstrate more express patterns of respect/restraint; and finally, there is a turn, shown in the oldest, single women, away from a romantic partner towards connection with the landscape.

I am alert to the paradox of saying The Entanglements won’t knit together! and then laying out a summary of six nice points. This paper is awash with such contradictions: Simultaneous desire and denial; the co-existence of particles and waves (Entanglement F; Barad 2003 p.815). This study is woven together largely from a small number of interviews, 30 minute segments of participants’ lives and my life; momentary scraps of impulse, offhand lines and casual actions. The provisional and partial quality of these findings is inherent in a framework of entanglement, relationality and situated knowledge (Barad 2007; Shohat 2002; Rich 1986; Haraway 1988). In Limitations, I assert further caveats.

On the basis of such provisionality, what is the importance, the significance of this research? Touching another, touching oneself, being in touch introduces obligations of communication and tenderness. Field, Cocozza and Barker in the “Touch people” post celebrate touch as care on a personal level (2010; 2018; 2016). Haraway, Barad and Montagu associate touch with care on an ethical, community level (2008 p.36; 2012 p.215; 2012; 1986 p.xiv). Of course, the two inter-tangle. Creating and sharing this knowledge can be read as an act of care, of touch, of fulfilling some sort of responsibility (Lorde 2007 p.40). The paper will be uploaded to the internet. And then who knows what entanglements, if any, unfold? Any impact of this research is likely to entwine, diffract, disappear and duplicate in the unpredictable fashion of quantum matter (Barad 2012 p.212).

As to my interviewees specifically, what contribution can I make (Entanglement K)? There is this paper, yes, but also participants’ experiences stem from the interview space. For some women, there was a thought-legacy following the 2016 interviews. For others, there was seemingly nothing. What of this research? Might some participants start to explore more diverse touch options - whether that be landscape, wider human touch, objects, animals? Additionally, by bringing sub-conscious actions to the fore, might others become aware of, and appreciate more, the kaleidoscopic variety of touch the body is already enjoying? This could go some way to remedying the narrative lag, so the
conscious mind can catch up with the body. Those are the practicalities of touch. Further, could this study tug a little at the negative discourses, the human relationalities, the restraining myths which hobble us, as Brits, as singletons? Can narratives of shame, of denial, of cauterisation, be reframed, re-tied? There is the opportunity for new threads to be woven in, and some old threads to be cut.

I am cautious about making any recommendations to a so-called group of older, British singletons. Nevertheless, in its partial, localised way, this study raises questions and highlights areas for debate: How might touch and change and discourse apply in differing contexts? Is pursuing good, non-sexual touch for its health-giving, psychological, chemical benefits time well spent, in thought and deed (Field 2010)? What are people’s dialogues around touch? Around singleness? There are still profound social, financial and mythical barriers facing single people in Britain, particularly women (Literature review (i) - Singleness). Singleness is a jostling place of negotiation between freedom and vulnerability (Reynolds 2008). Added to this, touch is a trickster (Entanglement D). In accordance with Barad’s quantum atoms and Haraway’s feral words, side-stepping society’s precepts and loosening internalised restraints are likely to lead to unexpected outcomes (2007; 1991).

Wider still, these findings might challenge normative ideas in the wider community regarding both singletons and touch. Putting new narratives into the public sphere can change behaviours; introducing new vocabulary can alter what is possible. Perhaps in the future, more of us, single or not, might enjoy intimacies with roundy objects and various huggables. On a policy level, more awareness of touch-needs and touch-vulnerabilities and touch-differences (across age and gender and other categories and preferences) could have an impact on health strategies and policymaking. Such impact is beyond the scale and scope of this paper.

Having teased out these strands of significance, what remains? There is a quantity of excess. Straggly, half-combed, messy locks dangle out of this paper, stray hairs, tendrils and threads left hanging. There is much potential for further research, particularly in the following areas:

Regarding companion species, cats are a key source of touch-satisfaction for my single interviewees (Entanglement D). However, a recent survey reported that over 10% of partnered British people love their pet more than their spouse (Nationwide 2017). Companion species are therefore clearly
not confined to singles! Nevertheless, are there differences? How does human contact with animals and birds and fish differ across different demographics? In addition, further research should put animals as the central participants in these touch-tales. As Haraway suggests, “Much collaborative and inventive work is underway on these matters, if only we take touch seriously” (2008 p.41; p.312).

As to further posthuman touch, is there a similar “turn” towards deep connection with landscape in older men, and in partnered people, as was found in the oldest, female interviewees (Entanglement D)? How does class, race, cultural background and location influence such connections? What of companion objects? A stranger I was chatting with last week, serendipitously, volunteered that, as a child, she would watch her grandmother smoothing the tablecloth. She said “I always thought it helped her think” (Ahmed & Stacey 2001). Does our relationship with companion objects differ as a partnered or single people? Playing the Miscellaneous Items Game, women in this study chose hard objects whilst men chose soft things (Entanglement H). Was selection linked to gender? To heterosexual desire? What might gay and lesbian participants pick out?

Regarding human interactions and dynamics of power, would the pattern of “aggressive women and passive men” be repeated with other participants (Entanglements G & H)? Do partnered people behave differently? Who grabs and who shows restraint? Does denial and cauterisation still figure for those in relationships (Entanglement F)? Is there consciousness of inadvertent touch, the same degree of self touch (Entanglement E)? How much is touch a gamble for people with partners? For those with other relationalities?

Going back to ritual 4, “Touch people” in the 2016 article, is there a correlation, for singletons, between touch and happiness (Barker)? There were narratives of people “singling well” and “singling badly” - but did the happier ones get more/better touch? How often do they need to cuddle a pet? Or go climbing? Or stroke a tablecloth?

More threads involve using alternative theories and methodologies. Ahmed’s focus on affect, on “Thinking through the skin”, for example, could provide more sensory-based results regarding both human and posthuman touch (Ahmed & Stacey 2001). Doing a longitudinal study, noting touch-changes over a life course, would provide interesting information on touch changes with age.
As to where I take this research myself, the interview material I already hold includes a wealth of additional data, beyond negotiation of touch. Interviewees responded to a number of open questions on diverse aspects of singlehood including sex, love, age, finance and gender (Appendices A & C). A follow up paper could analyse these interviews for further insights. In particular, there are gaps in qualitative research on the testimony of single, older British men.

In addition, my instinct is to explore touch from an artistic angle. This would use other aspects of my skill-set, and open up the discourse to a different audience. The Miscellaneous Items Game, for example, could be adapted into a touch-installation whereby people put their hands into places they cannot see and have a touch experience (as my participants did with the pillow case) which they then attempt to communicate in sound - I could make keyboards and percussion instruments available. This would generate an orchestra of touch, co-created by the gallery-goers. It would bypass the usually-privileged communication mechanisms of word and vision. Another, more modest, idea is to create “touch tiles”, akin to runes or angel cards. The tiles would feature various touch-possibilities: Cats, dogs, trees, clothing, humans, and so forth. Like a lucky dip, people in need of touch-inspiration could reach in and pull out a touch-suggestion. Paper tiles would do, but pottery would be better - a different feel. This could give credence to wider touch opportunities and sensations. It would be nice to offer tiles to each of my interviewees; a physical memento thanking them for their contribution.

For myself, these results have made me watch myself more. How do I negotiate access to touch? Am I respectful, do I grab? What of my sub-conscious discourses? These days I have touch-ambitions! More same-sex non-sexual touch; a resolution to articulate better my touch needs. This research has raised my consciousness of the inexhaustible touches I presently experience: Hard-metal of my computer as I type; the squishiness of the cushion; the breeze coming in through the window, a South-Westerly, warmer now we are moving into May. Who and what we tangle with changes each of us, sometimes by imperceptible drift and sometimes by a wild swing, for touch is a maverick force, a gamble, a risk. My touch-connections have expanded since the start of this thesis, since the start of this master's, since the difficult days of 2016. The ontology of entanglement has gone from the page and into my flesh. My solo touch-relationalities are messy, complex, comical and contradictory. I am concomitantly touch averse and skin hungry, simultaneously in partnership
and single. I find myself connected with a thousand and one entities across time and place: Graphite, witches, guitars, limestone, skin, Linköping and my friends. Am I already, always, entangled with all of them?
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Appendices

Appendix A - Interview sheet for ‘A New Currency’ (2016)

1. How old are you?
2. How long have you been single?
3. Talk to me about age and being older.
4. Talk to me about being single.
5. Talk to me about love.
6. Talk to me about sex.
7. As a single person, talk to me about work / finance / being self-supporting.
8. Talk to me about being a woman (in this world and what it means to you personally).
9. What keeps you going? (What motivates/ drives you / gives life meaning /what makes you get up in the morning?)
10. Do you identify with older, single women / feel part of a group?
11. How do you think, as an older single woman, you are viewed from the outside?
12. If these emotions were % in an ink-jet printer, with 0 for nothing and 100 for max capacity, please give percentages for the following 10 emotions/feelings: anger [    ]; happiness [    ]; tiredness [    ]; passion [    ]; confusion [    ]; sadness [    ]; boredom [    ]; a sense of achievement [    ]; disappointment [    ]; fear [    ];
13. Is it okay for me to use your voice and/or words in an artistic project on older single women?
Appendix B - Supplementary interview sheet for the women (2018)

1. How would you describe yourself for research purposes (gender / sexuality / class / education / ethnicity / religion…).
2. Please remind me of your age…
3. Would you still describe yourself as single? How many years now?
4. Do you think doing the interview / being involved in ‘A New Currency’ had any effect on you?
5. [Any thoughts / feelings / developments since 2016?]
6. I have one extra question / area I’m looking at now: As an older single woman / person, please could you talk to me about touch (how do you get touch as a single person, is it important to you).
7. Play the miscellaneous items game! Why did you choose that one?
   • [If I reach forward and touch the person, does that change their answer, does that add anything, make them open more, give more, like in the literature?]
Appendix C - Interview sheet for the men (2018)

1. How would you describe yourself for research purposes (gender / sexuality / class / education / ethnicity / religion…).
2. How old are you?
3. How long have you been a single person?
4. Talk to me about being single.
5. How do you think you are viewed, as an older single person, from the outside?
6. Do you identify with older, single people / feel part of a group?
7. Talk to me about love.
8. Talk to me about sex.
9. Talk to me about touch (how do you get touch as a single person, is it important to you).
10. Play the miscellaneous items game! Why did you choose that one?
   • If I reach forward and touch the person, does that change their answer, does that add anything, make them open more, give more, like in the literature?
11. Talk to me about work / finance / being self-supporting.
12. [What keeps you going? (what is your motivating force?)]
13. [Talk to me about being a man].
Appendix D - Consent form for the women (2018)

1. **Researcher / Artist**: is Sarah-Jane Dobner, sidobner@gmail.com; (Sarah-Jane);

2. **Background**: In 2015-16 Sarah-Jane interviewed you (“the First Interview”) and made a collage audio sound piece called ‘A New Currency’. ‘A New Currency’ was released into the public domain in April 2016. Sarah-Jane is now carrying out research for a Master's Thesis in Gender Studies, Intersectionality and Change based at Linköping University, Sweden; (“the Thesis”); The Thesis is investigating singleness, particularly how older, single people live and describe their lives. It is due to be submitted on 27 May 2018. Sarah-Jane is inviting you to a second interview (“the Second Interview”); she may also make further artworks (“the Further Art Works”);

3. ‘A New Currency’:
   - The Participant consents to:
     - the First Interview material being incorporated in ‘A New Currency’ - YES / NO;
     - Are you still happy with the following credit?…………………………- YES / NO;
     - Your contribution to ‘A New Currency’ being used as research material for the Thesis - YES / NO;
     - Original interview material from the First Interview being used as research material for the Thesis - YES / NO;

4. **The Second Interview**:
   - The Second Interview will take approximately 20-30 minutes;
   - The interview will be audio recorded;
   - You may interrupt at any time, ask questions, refuse to answer questions, or stop the interview at any time;
   - The Participant agrees to be interviewed by Sarah-Jane - YES / NO;

5. **The Thesis**:
   - Regarding confidentiality, a pseudonym will be used and all identifiable information will be redacted;
   - The Participant may review material from the First and Second Interview and which quotes, if any, are used; please ask me at any time up to a week before submission of the Thesis if you wish to do this;
• The Participant consents to allowing material from the Second Interview to be used as research material for the Thesis - YES / NO;

6. The right to withdraw consent (the Thesis): The Participant may withdraw consent at any time, up to one week before submission of the Thesis;

7. The Participant consents to material from the First and Second Interviews being used as research material for future academic projects - YES / NO;

8. Use and confidentiality regarding the Further Art Works:
• The Participant consents to allowing material from the First and Second Interviews to be part of the Further Art Works:
  • Audio material (clean) - YES / NO;
  • Audio material (distorted/unrecognisable) - YES / NO;
  • Transcription material (confidential/anonymised) - YES / NO;
  • If such material is used, how would you like to be credited? ........................................;

8. The right to withdraw consent (Further Art Work): The Participant may withdraw consent at any time, up to publication of the Further Art Works;

9. No payment, but a copy of the Thesis / electronic Further Art Works (where available) will be available on request;

10. Security of data: Aside from the Thesis / future academic projects / the Further Art Works, data from the First and Second Interviews will not be given or shown to any third party.

I have read and understood the details provided for me about the First Interview / ‘A New Currency’ / the Thesis / the Second Interview / future academic projects / Further Art Works and agree to participate:

Name: ...................................................... (Participant)

Signature ....................................................

Date ....................................................... 

Name: Sarah-Jane Dobner (Researcher/Artist)

Signature ....................................................

Date .......................................................
Appendix E - Consent form for the men (2018)

1. **Researcher / Artist**: is Sarah-Jane Dobner, sjdobner@gmail.com; (Sarah-Jane);

2. **Thesis / Art Work**: Sarah-Jane is carrying out research for a Master's Thesis in Gender Studies, Intersectionality and Change based at Linköping University, Sweden; (“the Thesis”); The Thesis is investigating singleness, particularly how older, single people live and describe their lives. Sarah-Jane is inviting you to participate in a recorded interview (“the Interview Material”). Sarah-Jane may also make artworks (“the Art Works”) relating to the Interview Material;

3. **Interview Material**:
   - The interview will take approximately 30 minutes - 1 hour;
   - The interview will be audio recorded;
   - You may interrupt at any time, ask questions, refuse to answer questions, or stop the interview at any time;
   - The Participant agrees to be interviewed by Sarah-Jane - **YES / NO**;

4. **The Thesis**:
   - Regarding confidentiality, a pseudonym will be used and all identifiable information will be redacted;
   - The Participant may review the Interview Material and which quotes, if any, are used; please ask me at any time up to one week before submission of the Thesis if you wish to do this;
   - The Participant consents to allowing the Interview Material to be used as research material for the Thesis - **YES / NO**;

5. **The right to withdraw consent (the Thesis)**: The Participant may withdraw consent at any time, up to one week before submission of the Thesis;

6. The Participant consents to the Interview Material being used as research material for future academic projects - **YES / NO**;

7. **The Art Works**:
   - The Participant consents to allowing the Interview Material to be part of Art Works:
   - Audio material (clean) - **YES / NO**;
   - Audio material (distorted/unrecognisable) - **YES / NO**;
   - Transcription material (confidential/anonymised) - **YES / NO**;
   - If such material is used, how would you like to be credited? …………………………….;
7. **The right to withdraw consent (the Art Works):** The Participant may withdraw consent at any time, up to publication of the Art Works;

8. **No payment,** but a copy of the Thesis / electronic Art Works (where available) will be available on request;

9. **Security of data:** Aside from the Thesis / future academic projects / the Art Works, data from the Interview Material will not be given or shown to any third party.

I have read and understood the details provided for me about the Interview Material /Thesis / Art Work and agree to participate:

Name: …………………………………………………….. (Participant)

Signature ………………………………………………………

Date …………………………………………………………

Name: Sarah-Jane Dobner (Researcher / Artist)

Signature ………………………………………………………

Date …………………………………………………………