



Unstitching the Restrictive Seams: Reclaiming The Body Through Adornment

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On Form and Flow

This thesis unfolds in three interwoven parts, each offering a different perspective on how adornment can become a means of returning to the body, particularly for those whose bodies have long been sites of scrutiny or control. Rooted in my practice as a multidisciplinary artist—grounded in fashion design and extended through the camera lens—this work brings together personal narrative, collaborative making, and theoretical dialogue to explore the emotional, relational, and political dimensions of dress. Each component reflects a different aspect of my inquiry into how clothing and bodily decoration—particularly within fat, queer, and religiously marked communities—can function as tools of care, expression, and resistance.



Part I: The Film ***Rituals of Returning***

The first part of this thesis is a short poetic film that brings together intimate moments with four of my loved ones—Ahmed, Gabe, Bex, and Dineo—as they dress in custom garments we co-created. The film captures not just the garments, but the rituals around getting ready, the act of seeing oneself, and the emotional textures of wearing something made for you, with you. Their stories became the foundation of my research, which later expanded through a public survey. Many of the survey responses echoed the same themes—shame, reclamation, visibility, and community—reinforcing the idea that adornment holds the power to reframe how we see and live in our bodies.

Part II: The Written Thesis

Unstitching the Restrictive Seams: Reclaiming the Body Through Adornment

The written component offers a deeper, more layered context to the themes surfaced in the film. It begins with a personal narrative about how sewing became both a form of self-love and survival. From there, it moves into the collaborative making of garments with my friends, and then to a broader engagement with public voices through a survey. The final chapters reflect on my intimate relationship with tools—particularly the sewing machine—as a site of mutual labour and care, and culminate in a discussion about how I've used leftover scraps from these projects to weave tiles into a curtain for my exhibition. The thesis does not seek closure but rather traces a cyclical, process-based way of working that mirrors how identity is constantly being re-stitched and reshaped.

Part III: The Supporting Sources

Lining the Work

The final section mirrors the structure of the written thesis, but instead of my own words, it presents a curated set of excerpts from the texts, theories, and voices that helped shape my thinking. These include academic sources, essays, interviews, and articles that form a sort of dialogue with the written thesis. By placing these sources in parallel with the chapters they helped to inform, this section acknowledges the intellectual and emotional scaffolding that holds up my practice. It is not an appendix or bibliography, but a continuation of the conversation—an act of giving credit and tracing lineage.



Together, these three parts form a constellation of practice, theory, and collaboration. This work is not about arriving at a fixed answer, but about holding space for the messy, intimate, and often contradictory ways we come to understand and adorn our bodies.

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Part I : The Film

Rituals of Returning

Rituals of Returning

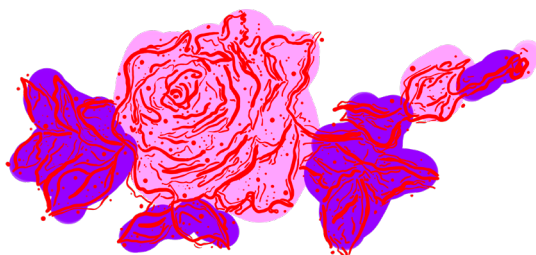
Bringing my work to life behind the lens has long been an extension of my practice. Photography and film are not separate from my work as a maker—they are another form of stitching, a way of composing and holding the relationships that shape me. The participants in this film—Ahmed, Gabe, Bex, and Dineo—are not just participants, but longtime collaborators and loved ones who have consistently been drawn into my creative orbit. Over the years, they've been sewn into my practice not only through the garments we've made together, but through the many times I've asked them to step in front of my camera.

While *Rituals of Returning* is not strictly about these four individuals, their presence carries the emotional and conceptual weight of the wider research. The film stages a series of intimate gestures: the act of dressing, of being witnessed, and of using adornment as a way to return to the body. These performances—rooted in friendship, trust, and mutual care—come to echo the broader findings of the public survey. In this way, their appearances become representative of a collective experience. It feels deeply fitting that they are the ones who bring this work to life on screen, because they have always been part of the work—woven into the seams of my practice, again and again.



Still from Rituals of Returning, 2025

Visit: zoemoolman.com/rituals-of-returning to view video.





Part II : The Written Thesis

Unstitching the Restrictive Seams: Reclaiming The Body Through Adornment



Chapter 1

The Unfolding

Unfolding is an act of care. It's how we examine something closely, slowly, with intention. This chapter unfolds the fabric of this work—revealing the themes, memories, and tensions stitched into it. Nothing pressed flat; the creases matter.

This thesis begins with the question of what happens when we adorn our bodies as a way to unpick the seams that have been stitched into our identities by systems of control.

Adornment—through clothing, hairstyles, tattoos, and more—is too often dismissed as superficial. Yet for those of us whose bodies are politicised, being either fat, queer, racialised, or bound by rigid codes of modesty and silence, adorning the body can be a radical act of resistance. It is a way to speak back to the world when language fails or excludes. My work explores adornment not as decoration, but as testimony: of resistance, survival, desire, and becoming.

Though I was trained in fashion, I don't see myself positioned within the fashion industry. I see myself, instead, as an artist—working with fabric as my medium, and the body as my site of exploration. I collaborated with loved ones whose bodies, like mine, are read as transgressive—shaped by societal structures that dictate what a 'good body' should look like, dress like, and move like. Together we designed custom garments for them, not to transform their bodies, but to listen to them. Each stitch became a conversation. These garments are not just clothes—they are containers of memory, tension, pleasure, and protest.

What emerged in these conversations with my loved ones was echoed time and again in the broader survey I later conducted. I invited the public to share how clothing, tattoos, hair, and other forms of bodily adornment shape their sense of self. Their stories affirmed what I had already witnessed intimately: that shame is often stitched into the body before we have the words to question it. Many spoke of navigating systems—religion, gender, race, fatphobia—that told them their bodies were too much, or not enough. But they also described moments of reclamation: the power of a shaved head, the defiance of a tattoo, the quiet affirmation of wearing something that was made to honour your body.

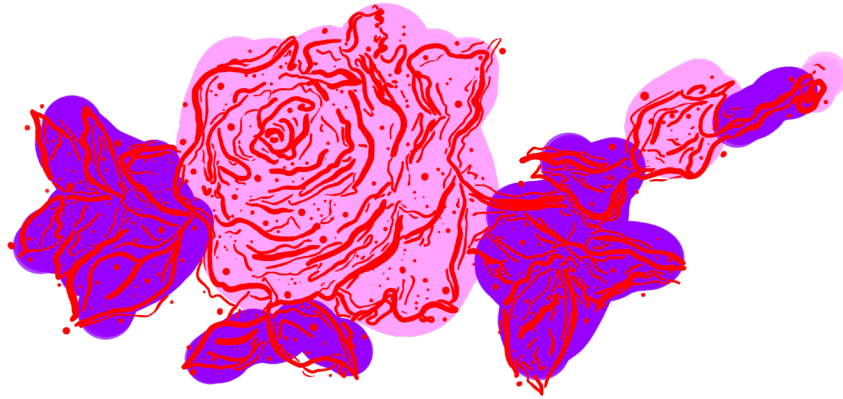
While my own story is woven throughout this project—it is, in many ways, where the thread begins—this work is not about me. It is about how we return to the body after it has been policed, shamed, or hidden. It is about the tenderness and tension of dressing ourselves when the world tells us not to be seen. And it is about the possibility that, through adornment, we can find a language for our bodies that feels like our own.

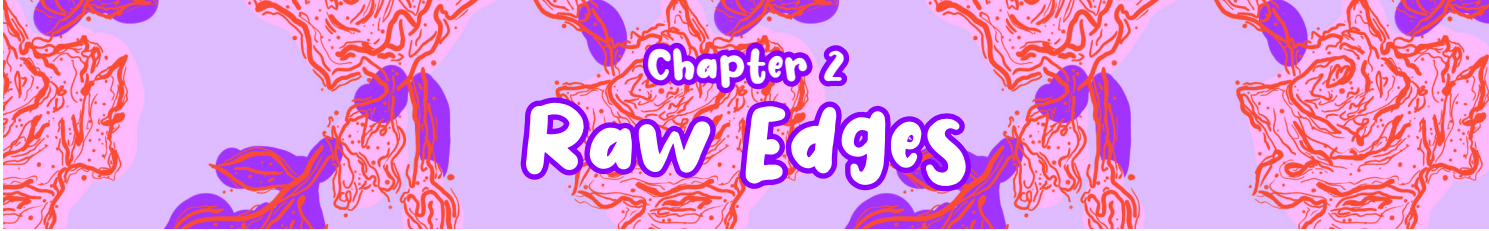
This project moves through layers: from my own story, to those of my dearly loved initial collaborators, to the wider public—and then, inward again. Along the way, I found myself returning often to the machine itself. Not just as a tool, but as a kind of companion. Our relationship is one of reciprocity: it feeds me as I feed it. When I clean, oil, and tend to it, it hums. When I rush or neglect it, it protests. There is an ethics in this exchange—a quiet reminder that care, like craft, requires attention, rhythm, and respect.

And still, there was more left over. Scraps of fabric, loose threads, offcuts that carried the imprint of each garment, each conversation. I collected these scraps and I started weaving them together, with

intention. These weaves became their own kind of archive. They ask what it means to rework what we've been taught to hide. How do we transform what's deemed undesirable into something that is our strength?

This thesis is a reclamation through adornment. A soft protest. Sometimes a hard one. Sometimes both at once. It gathers what has been cast off and stitches it back together—not into something seamless, but into something that holds. A reminder that the body—our first and lasting home—is always worthy of care.





Chapter 2

Raw Edges

Raw edges are the unfinished parts of fabric—frayed, vulnerable, exposed. They are not yet hemmed or hidden. This chapter is about my raw edges: the moments of unravelling, rupture, and reckoning that led me to sewing. It is about the seams of my life coming undone, and the steady, intentional process of stitching myself back together.

This chapter brings me to my story—and explains why this subject is so deeply personal to me. It begins with a traumatic experience I had as a teenager, one that I kept bottled up for years. In 2017, it all came undone—I had a total mental breakdown and was hospitalised for depression that had become worryingly severe. As a result, I gained a significant amount of weight—my body size doubled in the space of a year or two. This was due in part to the handfuls of medication I was prescribed, which drastically increased my appetite, and the binge eating disorder that formed as a result.

I had once lived in the world as a thin woman, and I had reaped the privileges of that on a daily basis. And then, almost overnight, that social currency was revoked. I could even feel the disgust radiating from some of my friends. It was devastating. I had already dropped out of university because of my breakdown, and now I was wearing my trauma, visibly, every day. My new, larger body confused people. I could see it in their eyes. I was literally wearing my trauma and there was no way to hide it. This visibility became unbearable, and I began to spiral. I isolated myself from the world, retreating into my apartment for a long, lonely stretch of time.

Fatphobia wasn't just internal—it was external too. I was experiencing it from every direction, and it was overwhelming. Even basic things, like shopping for clothes, became traumatic. I learned that the world actively works to invisibilise fat bodies: stores stocked only baggy, shapeless clothes in dull colours, with no patterns, no joy. Clothing stores were retraumatising spaces for an already traumatised group of people.

The only thing that helped me feel better was learning how to sew for myself. I asked myself questions no one else was asking: *What fabrics do I want? What styles do I want? What colours and patterns do I want to wear? How do I want to feel in this?* Sewing became a reclamation of my body—not just through how I presented myself to the world, but through the process of creating something that centred my desires and needs. Now instead of the stares I got towards my body, the attention was diverted to my loud colour and pattern choices, and actually I started to get compliments; “*wow, I love this dress*” and then instead of just a “*thank you,*” I could add, “*I made it myself*” at the end. That was so emboldening and empowering it was intoxicating. What a way to re-enter the world on my terms.

The following year, I decided to go to fashion school—not to join the fashion industry, but to learn how to sew better for myself. I had experienced so much hatred and shame directed toward my body that I felt I deserved the care and craft that went into wearing something perfectly tailored to me. It was always about me.

The more I developed my skills, the more I grew into my body. Wearing immaculate garments that I had created for myself was so empowering that it led to a radical acceptance—and actual genuine love—of my body. That confidence began to radiate. The confidence started wearing me instead

of my body wearing me. I extended that celebration by covering my body in tattoos. The tattoos started speaking for my body instead of the raw flesh. This was a second layer of 'defence' to the outside world; now instead of the first thing someone seeing was a fat body, it was first "*Wow, that's a colourful dress*" and then, "*Jesus, she has a lot of tattoos*" and then, "*oh, and she's fat.*"

After graduation, I arguably felt the best I ever had. Better than I ever did as a skinny woman. And that says something. I realised that when I was thin, I fit the mould of heteronormative beauty, and I relied heavily on that beauty—on being sexually desirable—for validation. But it left me empty. Once that was stripped away by my weight gain, I had to meet myself. Really meet myself. I had to become the person who could give me the validation I could no longer find in the outside world. I had to build resilience—because not only was I no longer being affirmed, but because I was actively being hated. There was a constant struggle: the world trying to erase or invisibilise me, and me fighting—desperately, fiercely—to be seen.

That version of me was brave enough to apply for a master's degree abroad. I moved to the Netherlands, but I was unprepared for how difficult the transition would be. Back home in South Africa, I had carefully curated the safest, most celebratory life. I had a dog who saved me daily by forcing me outside for walks. I had parents and a sister who held my hand through the darkest days. And I had the most stunningly and radically supportive friend group that I had ever felt comfort in: the truest weirdos who had found solace in celebrating and falling in love with the weirdness that had been weaponised against us for our whole lives before falling into the warmth of each other.

And then I landed in a country that felt cold in more ways than one. I had never ridden a train before. I had lived my adult life behind burglar bars for my own safety. Suddenly I was navigating self-checkouts, a culture I didn't understand, and an emotional climate so detached it felt almost hostile. I missed the warm "hello" to every person you passed. I missed the weather. I missed my dog.

I watched myself change. I went from outspoken and vivacious to shy and insecure. I couldn't even go into a grocery store without my partner, who had also moved to the Netherlands for his studies. Here, I noticed a different kind of fatphobia—quieter, more insidious. I was often the only fat person in the room, on the street, on the train. I saw how my partner would get complimented endlessly for his clothes, while I, wearing the exact same thing, would be ignored. The leopard-print coat became symbolic: when he wore it, people gushed. When I wore it, nothing. In two years, the only compliments I've received have come from one other fat woman—and children, drawn to my bright colours and prints. That says a lot.

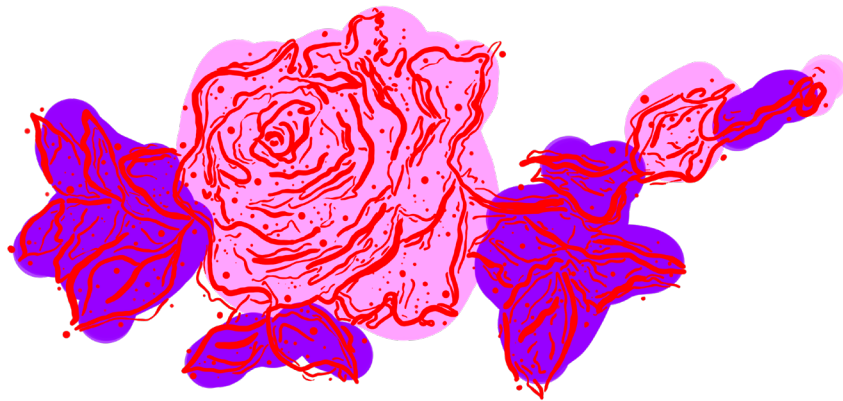
It changed the way I dressed. In South Africa, I was bold. Nothing was too extravagant, even for the grocery store. But in The Netherlands? I was scared to stand out and attract attention; I wanted to hide. And although I always wear colour, I felt that I had to dull it down. But slowly, in recent months, my confidence has started to return. I've begun to dress again in ways that feel like me. The way clothing can be used to conceal or reveal, depending on mood, context, or safety, actually became an emerging theme in my research to come.

I realised that my friends shared similar stories—about the ways we express ourselves through clothing and bodily decoration. This form of self-expression became a vital part of how we bonded. Our love story blossomed in the midst of our existential struggles, dressing up in the most extravagant and silly outfits, raving to our sound engineer friend's hard-thumping melodies. A party for five; falling into each other's embrace, talking about everything, laughing, crying, crying a lot, holding onto each other harder. It was an expression of different arts only for the consumption of each other. In these first few months of our blossoming love, we were living in a small coastal village called Kommetjie. I was so taken aback by how confident we were to gallivant around the town in these ridiculous outfits; it was like the trope of a 6-year-old raiding their parent's cupboard and coming out feeling so fabulous they have no idea how silly they look. The power of feeling really embedded in a community,

in *your* community, has on how confident you feel in presenting yourself to the world was, and still is, fascinating to me, and too became an emerging theme in my research. That kind of confidence seems like it can only come from being embedded in a community that really sees and celebrates you.

It was through this shared language that I realised my experience wasn't singular. The emotional weight of clothing, the power of colour, the choice to be seen—these were threads running through all of us. Our love for dressing up, even in our darkest moments, became more than a coping mechanism. It became a form of resistance.

And this is where the first part of my research began. With my beautiful friends.





Chapter 3

The Perfect Fit

The perfect fit is not about perfection—it's about alignment. It's the moment when fabric and body meet without tension, when a garment wraps around someone and says, "I see you." This chapter explores how, through collaborative garment-making, my friends and I sought to create pieces that not only fit our bodies, but our identities, our stories, and our resistance.

This experiment didn't begin with cutting fabric or taking measurements. It began with listening.

In December 2024, I invited five of my closest loved ones—Bex, Din, Gabe, Ahmy, and Greg—to take part in a small experiment. I asked them to reflect on their identities and how those identities intersect with clothing, self-expression, and body politics. I recorded short video clips of them dressing and undressing in pieces I had already made or sourced—second-hand, handmade, hand-me-downs passed between us. It was a tender, simple gesture. But through this process, something became very clear: bodily reclamation wasn't just about clothing. It extended to tattoos, hairstyles, adornment—to every decision we made about how we wanted to be seen, and by whom.

That first version of the project planted a seed. *What if we remade the video, but this time, with garments made especially for them? What if the process of making became part of the story?*

In early 2025, I began a more intentional version of the project: a collaborative, custom garment-making process with four of these friends—Bex, Gabe, Din, and Ahmy—unfortunately Greg couldn't join the final video due to distance and work, but his words stayed with me throughout the entire process.

I chose my friends intentionally. Each of them lives at a different intersection of marginalisation, and each of them expresses identity through dress and adornment in ways that are rich with meaning. Their bodies, like mine, have been misread or misunderstood—and like me, they have used dress, tattoos, hairstyles and adornment to write new stories.

Greg's story is one of longing—for expression, for safety, for softness. A pansexual man with a bright, expressive fashion sense, Greg told me, *"I wish I could just embrace all aspects of myself and my personality and express that through my clothing all the time—to feel on the outside how I feel on the inside."* But Johannesburg makes that hard. It isn't safe. He's been beaten up in high school for wearing nail polish. Called slurs in public. Even at home, small choices would be questioned. *"It's easier [to dress masculinely] than explaining to my parents why I'm wearing mom's skirt,"* he said. He was told certain things weren't for him. *"All of these things have affected my self-image and made it difficult to express myself."* Still, in queer spaces, with trusted friends, in places like Cape Town and with us, he allows himself to wear skirts and dresses and feel beautiful. To be fully seen. His words reminded me how high the stakes are when we talk about fashion as freedom.

They also reminded me why I wanted to do this project—not just to make clothing, but to make space. While Greg couldn't take part in the collaborative garment-making process, his testimony, like the others, helped shape its emotional core.

With the four friends who could participate—Bex, Gabe, Din, and Ahmy—the process began with questions. Not so much *what do you want to wear?* but *how do you want to feel in it? And why?*

Bex, a queer, chubby woman, spoke about how her femininity can sometimes feel like an erasure of her queerness. The world doesn't always "read" her correctly because of how she presents. Her body has known both harm and healing. *"My body has been used and abused,"* she told me. *"I learnt at a very young age how dangerous the world can be."* Tattoos have become her resistance—a refusal to shrink, a reclamation of space. *"Tattoos have helped me reclaim this body by decorating it in a way that feels like me,"* she said. *"Every tattoo I get, I am closer to who I want to be. I am fixing the broken girl inside me because she deserves it."* As a tattoo artist, she asked for darker colours—partly to avoid ink stains, but also to let her tattoos speak. Her tattoos are not just decoration—they are tenderness, resistance, and care. Her garment needed to make space for that ink, for that self-authorship.

Gabe, who wrestles with what it means to be a 'straight-presenting' man who craves gender fluidity in his clothing, brought a different kind of tension into the process. Though his immediate family isn't particularly conservative, his Lebanese heritage brings inherited cultural expectations—especially around masculinity. For Gabe, wearing something feminine isn't always a simple fashion choice. It's an act of defiance. An assertion of the self, outside of the narrow confines of gender performance. *"I feel entirely at ease wearing dresses, skirts, and clothing typically labelled as feminine,"* he told me. *"But I've also been accused of queer-baiting for wearing these outfits publicly."* Even when no harm is intended, the assumptions placed on him—by strangers, by queer communities, by cultural norms—make expression feel loaded. *"It's a paradox I'm still working to untangle,"* he said. Even getting tattooed was a conflicted act—an expression of freedom shadowed by internalised guilt, shaped by cultural and religious expectations that linger even in moments of self-claiming. His garment needed to hold that contradiction. To balance structure and softness. To allow him to step into his own fluidity without apology.

Din, navigating her biracial identity in the racially hostile terrain of South Africa, lives with constant misrecognition. Raised by her white father, with her black mother largely absent, she has often felt suspended between worlds. Her name—Dineo—is frequently questioned. *"I get asked at least three times a day how my name is 'Dineo' because I don't look Black enough,"* she told me. *"You must be coloured,"* people insist. *"You can't be from here."* Her natural hair, too, has been policed—labelled unprofessional or unruly in spaces that expect assimilation. But for Din, hair has become her most powerful site of resistance. *"I'm most comfortable with braids,"* she said. *"It's the hairstyle that feels most like me—and the one that feels accepted by both white and black people."* Her hair is where she used to negotiate belonging, but that has become her symbol for reclaiming it. Her garment needed to hold this complexity—neither hiding nor explaining, but asserting. It needed to mirror her duality: visible, unapologetic, graceful, and grounded.

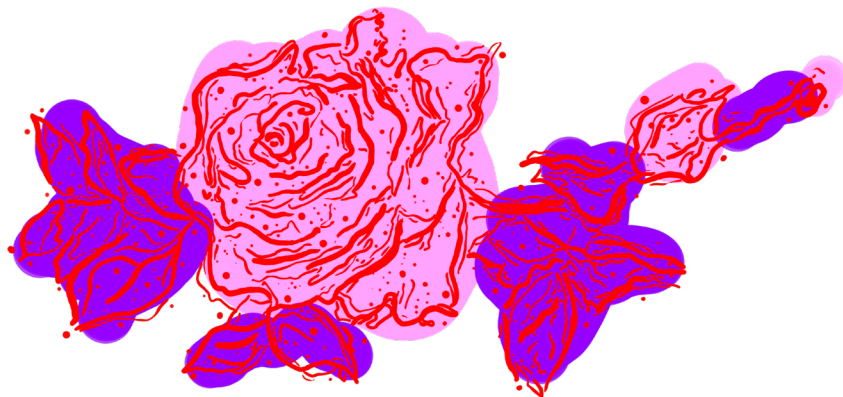
Ahmy wanted feminine styles—flowing lines, purple tones. Their desire for soft, expressive garments is inseparable from their story. A Sudanese national who grew up in Oman, they were raised within deeply conservative cultural and religious structures that enforced silence, modesty, and shame. Expression of queerness was not only forbidden, but dangerous. *"No colour, no jewellery, no long hair,"* Ahmy told me, *"just to not bring criticism on the family."* Since moving to South Africa, they've been able to live openly as non-binary and queer for the first time. For them, clothing is not just aesthetic—it's an articulation of long-denied selfhood. So is hair. Their pink locs are not just a style, but a statement—a refusal to perform gender in the way they were taught to. But even here, in a new country, there are barriers. They haven't seen their parents in five years. They've never visibly video-called them, because if their family saw their hair, the reaction would be unnerving (to say the least). And in the queer spaces they now inhabit—particularly in Cape Town—there is another kind of pressure. *"There's this performance of queerness that is expected of you,"* they told me. *"You need to look visibly queer to be accepted—and even that can feel restrictive sometimes."* The juxtaposition of freedom and restriction—between Sudan, Oman, South Africa, family, and chosen family—is one they carry daily.

As I worked—cutting, stitching, adjusting—I carried our conversations with me. The process of making was its own kind of intimacy. Because I was based in Amsterdam and my friends were in South Africa, most of this work unfolded through voice notes, photos, and long message exchanges. We built garments from across oceans—sharing screenshots of pattern ideas, sending fabric options, talking through measurements and moods. Even the distance became part of the tenderness. These garments were not just clothes. They were intimate archives. The lines of each seam were shaped by stories of trauma, resistance, joy, and becoming.

And what struck me most was how different forms of self-expression meant different things depending on the identity in question. A tattoo is never just a tattoo. For some, it's fashion. For others, it's defiance. For some, hair is a style choice. For others, it's the battleground of belonging. When I began this project, I thought I was researching how clothing could be used as a tool of reclamation. But as the process unfolded, it became clear that adornment is not limited to fabric. Hair, tattoos, and other forms of bodily decoration carry just as much weight—sometimes more. They speak the unspeakable. They protect, reveal, transform.

This realisation shifted everything. It showed me that the relationship we have with our bodies is not only shaped by what we wear, but by how we mark ourselves, how we style ourselves, how we insist on being seen. And it made me want to know more; it made me wonder how others might feel about their own relationship to adornment. How many people, like us, were using what they wear—or how they style their bodies—as a form of resistance, survival, or becoming?

This process reminded me that the 'perfect fit' isn't about precision. It's about feeling held. About recognising yourself in the mirror—not in spite of your body, but because of it. It's about adorning yourself in ways that make you feel like you belong to you.





Chapter 4

Wear and Tear

Wear and tear is often used to describe decline—something frayed, thinned out, broken down by time. But in this chapter, wear and tear becomes a metaphor for something else: the slow, necessary erosion of the structures we inherit. The quiet undoing of shame, silence, and surveillance. To wear something—again and again—is to make it yours. And to tear, sometimes, is to free yourself from the seams that no longer serve you. This chapter turns outward. It traces the shift from personal collaboration to public engagement, asking how others experience adornment as a form of resistance, visibility, and return.

After working intimately with my loved ones on the collaborative garment-making process, I felt the need to open the conversation further. The personal stories that emerged—about queerness, fatness, religion, race, gender, immigration—revealed the layered ways we come to inhabit or reject our bodies, and I wondered what others thought about this relationship between adornment and self-expression? Could adornment hold the same weight beyond the circle of my own community?

So I created a survey. A small act of outreach, scattered across digital and physical space—shared via a QR code on posters, social media, and word-of-mouth. The questions echoed: *what is your relationship with your body? Has this relationship got anything to do with societal beauty standards and/or being raised in a conservative/religious household or community? Has dress, hairstyles, tattoos or other forms of bodily decoration played a role in reclaiming your body/identity?*

The findings of this study suggest that shame is often stitched into the body long before we are conscious enough to name it. For many participants, this shame began in childhood—through parental control, religious doctrine, societal norms, or the not-so-subtle policing of gender and size. As a result, their bodies rarely felt like their own. This early disembodiment created deep vulnerability: to silence, to sexualisation, to external control, to exploitation. Many described growing up feeling either too visible or not visible enough—caught between being hyper-surveilled and completely unseen. These insights closely echoed the conversations I had with my friends during the collaborative garment-making process, confirming that these struggles are not isolated, but widely shared.

And yet, across these stories, a clear throughline emerged: adornment—through clothing, hairstyles, tattoos and piercings—became a way to reclaim what had once been taken. These were not just aesthetic choices, but radical gestures of self-possession. A pink coat, a shaved head, a visible tattoo—each became a portal back into the body. A way to feel not just seen, but sovereign.

While this return was rarely linear, many participants described a slow re-entry into their bodies, made possible by age, autonomy, and the presence of affirming community. But this wasn't true for everyone. Some remain estranged from their bodies, unable to feel at home within them. Others described fluctuating—moving between connection and distance, between moments of confidence and days when their bodies still felt foreign. The lucky ones have been able to radically accept both body and identity, and to express that acceptance outwardly.

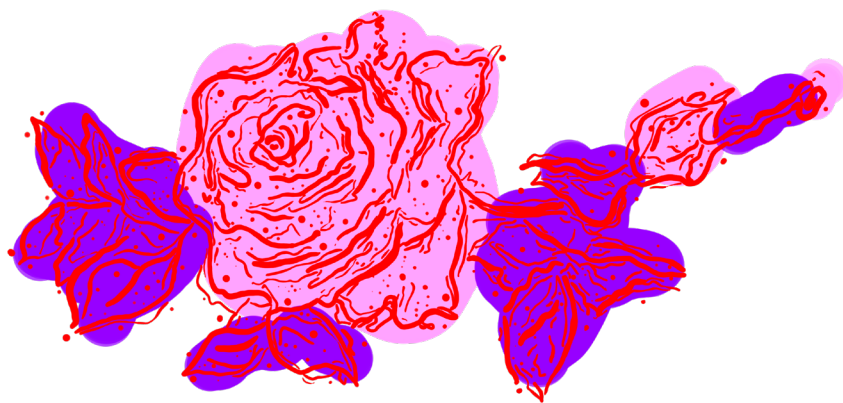
In this context, adornment becomes something more than decoration. It becomes a *ritual of returning*: to self, to agency, to a body finally understood not as a problem to be fixed—but as a place to come home to.

Adornment became a kind of language. For some queer participants, ‘queer-presenting’ aesthetics were a source of immense pride—a visual declaration of selfhood. But others felt alienated by these expectations, as if their queerness became invisible without the correct visual cues. Visibility, it seems, is never neutral; it’s always filtered through someone else’s criteria. Adornment, then, becomes both a method of self-definition and a negotiation with the gaze.

Across responses, it also became clear that different forms of adornment carry different stakes. Clothing is flexible, mutable—capable of quick transformation and concealment. Hairstyles, while more semi-permanent, can still be shifted or disguised. Tattoos, on the other hand, are declarations etched into skin—less easily hidden, and therefore often more vulnerable to judgment or risk. Even vulnerable to violence. For many, the impermanence or permanence of these choices shaped how they expressed themselves, and in which spaces.

And always, context mattered. What reads as resistance in one space can be dangerous in another. A shaved head, a visible tattoo, a gender-nonconforming outfit—these can be badges of pride or triggers for violence, depending on where and by whom they’re read. The same adornment that offers freedom can also invite surveillance. But even in the face of this tension, people continue to choose visibility, on their own terms. Even in risk, there is refusal.

What this survey revealed was not just *what* people wear, but *why* they wear it. How they choose to carry their bodies through a world that has tried to shrink, shame, or erase them. And how, in doing so, they begin to rewrite the scripts imposed upon them. In this sense, adornment becomes a soft, defiant tool—not to mask damage, but to name it, and to move through it. To wear your body with all its wear and tear is not a failure. It is evidence of life. Of survival. Of return.





Chapter 5

It Could Be the Tension

Tension is what makes the stitch hold. Too loose, and the thread slips apart. Too tight, and the fabric puckers or tears. In sewing, tension is not a flaw—it's a force to be balanced. This chapter explores the quiet dialogue between maker and machine, hand and thread. It is about the relationship that forms when a tool stops being just a tool, and starts becoming a collaborator. A rhythm, a conversation. This is not just about technique, but about ethics. About care. About learning to listen—so the thread doesn't snap.

As part of a Master's in Inter-Relational Art Practices, I have often reflected on how my work with people—through garment-making, testimony, and shared adornment—forms relationships. But what surprised me was how deeply inter-relational my practice became through my relationship with my sewing machines. These machines are not passive instruments; they are partners in process. We service each other.

At one point, my machine began skipping stitches and jamming unpredictably. I took it to a sewing centre for a service, only to be told there was a four-month waiting list. I panicked—production had to continue. There was no choice but to dive deep: I watched hours of YouTube videos, studied technical forums, and combed through the dense, dry language of the manual. Learning to service the machine myself was frustrating but deeply rewarding. I felt like I was no longer just speaking the language of the machine—I was studying its linguistics, learning its phonetics, discovering the dialect of gears and springs. It was like building a grammar for our shared communication.

The first time I diagnosed the problem and fixed it myself, the sense of satisfaction was immense. Not just pride in a technical victory, but something more intimate: the sense that I had finally learned to listen properly. That I had tuned into the specific frequency of this tool's needs. The machine had been trying to tell me what was wrong all along—it just required a different kind of attention.

Years earlier, in one of the loneliest, most depressed periods of my life, my sewing machine became a companion. I was teaching myself to sew at the time, fumbling through trial and error, with no plan except to keep making. In those quiet months alone, the machine offered something no one else could: rhythm, presence, and the gentle pressure of productivity without demand. It sat across from me like a friend. I turned to it each day not just to sew, but to cope. And in that process, I realised how much I didn't know—and wanted to know.

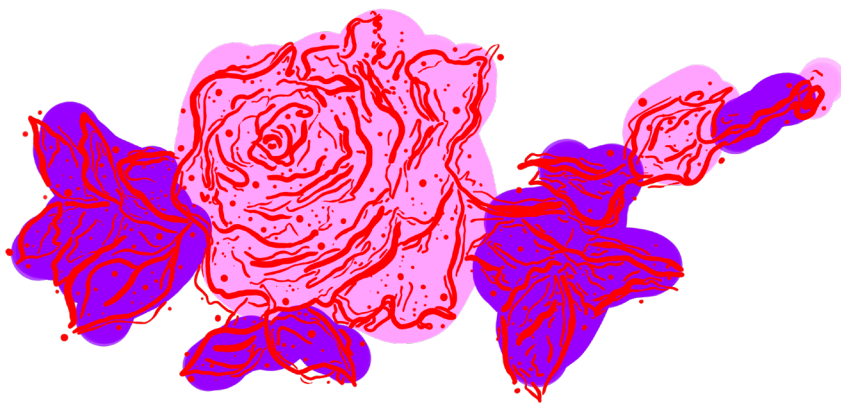
It was during that time that I added an overlocker to my life. Until then, I hadn't realised how vital it was. The sewing machine constructs the visible shell of the garment, but the overlocker secures the unseen structure beneath. If the sewing machine is for the outside world, the overlocker is for the inside—the seams, the edges, the parts that brush against skin. One dresses the body; the other protects it. One offers form; the other offers stability. If I were to speak metaphorically, I might say: the sewing machine is the face you show others. The overlocker is the spine that keeps you standing. This technical distinction carries emotional weight. I began to think about the unseen labour of stability—what we do to keep ourselves intact beneath the surface. The overlocker taught me that invisible work matters just as much. That clean seams and internal structure are not afterthoughts; they are care made material.

What I've come to love about my machines is their honesty. When something is wrong, it's just wrong. There's no shame, no subtext, no guesswork. Unlike human relationships, where miscommunication and emotion can cloud things, the machine gives clear feedback. It jams. It snags. It refuses. And in that refusal, it tells me: something is off. My job is to pause and figure out what.

This practice of attending—of noticing resistance, testing possibilities, adjusting, and returning—is a deeply relational one. It requires patience, trust, and repetition. The machines taught me how to listen without rushing, how to fix without blame, how to slow down and meet the problem where it is. These are the same skills I bring into my work with people: during fittings, collaborative making, or tender conversations around shame and identity. The machine sharpened my capacity to sit with discomfort until clarity arrived.

In many ways, learning to work with my sewing machines prepared me to work with people. Both require attunement, trust, and sensitivity to unspoken cues. Both rely on balance—between guidance and surrender, control and responsiveness. Both require care that is not only emotional, but technical. And both, always, come back to tension. Not as a problem to be fixed, but as a force to be felt, negotiated, and respected. Tension is what makes the stitch hold—and sometimes, it's what holds us, too.

Tension, then, is not something to resolve once and for all—it's something to stay in conversation with. As I moved from making to mending, from constructing garments to working with their remnants, I found myself drawn to the pieces left behind: the scraps, the edges, the off-cuts. In the next chapter, I return to these fragments—not to discard them, but to weave them into something new. What has been ripped can also be rewoven.





Chapter 6

Ripped and Rewoven

Some things must be torn before they can be reworked. A cut isn't always violent—it can be a necessary opening. To rip is to release. To reweave is to begin again, thread by thread, with what remains.

The entire process of sewing is sacred to me. It's never just about making a garment. It includes everything—thread, gesture, intention. Even the parts left behind. I feel deeply connected to the fabric I work with, and that connection doesn't disappear once the pattern pieces are cut. The scraps, the off-cuts, the edges—these are not waste to me. They are part of the process. Part of the story.

That's why I began weaving them.

Over time, I've come to see this act—of gathering and transforming the discarded—as a kind of closing ritual. A way of honouring what was used, what was touched, what carried the labour of making. Rather than throw these scraps away, I began collecting them and weaving them into tiles. These weaves are not functional. They don't serve a practical purpose in the way clothing does. And I like that. After so much functional work, it feels meaningful to create something that exists simply for the sake of holding the residue. It is art just for the sake of art. But art is hardly ever just art for the sake of art; it is a poetic comment on something deeper.

I started weaving scraps before I knew they would become part of this project. I bought a children's loom and intuitively started weaving using just my hands as the mechanism. My hands managed the tension, guided the strips, made the joins. It was slow and uneven, but that was the point. I built the warp from wool, and rowed the weft with strips of leftover fabric. It was repetitive and instinctive.

The process is slow and deeply physical. And while sewing has always felt intimate, weaving felt ancient. Like a return. I often thought of early weavers—those who worked by hand, creating cloth before sophisticated looms ever existed. I found myself sitting in the rhythm of it, not thinking so much as feeling. There was care in each repetition. In pulling fabric through fabric. In making something that didn't need to hold together perfectly.

These woven tiles became the final touch in my making process—a way to gather what had been left behind, not just materially, but emotionally. The scraps I wove carried the memory of fittings, conversations, and care. Some pieces still held markings, threads, tension. Each one a fragment of something larger. These weaves are not neat or polished. They are full of knots, abrupt endings, and edges that don't align. But that's the point. They show what was cast off, and what it can become when given a second form.

Many of the scraps I use in the weaves come from the selvage—the outermost edge of fabric, woven tightly to stop it from fraying. Unlike the rest of the cloth, the selvage is often marked: colour dots, brand names, collection seasons. It holds information about where the fabric came from—its identity, its origin, its history. And, in garment-making, the selvage is always removed.

The selvage has become a powerful metaphor in my practice. It's like the culture, religion, race, family, or societal structures you're born into. It's the history that shaped the fabric, but it's also the part you don't use. It's too stiff, too heavy, too restrictive to work with. The realness of you—the part

that actually becomes the garment, the part that moves and stretches and takes shape—is the rest of the fabric. The quality of you lies beyond the margins.

The selvage or history of a person matters—it informs your story. But it isn't the whole story. It's not something you build a garment out of, but something you learn from by cutting away. And often, it's not in spite of the selvage that you become yourself, but because of it. The act of removing it is part of the becoming. The selvage is necessary to recognise—but also necessary to release.

There's another layer to this metaphor. By weaving with the selvage—by literally taking that restrictive, unwanted edge and reworking it—I'm showing how it can still hold beauty and value, but only once it's been transformed. That transformation doesn't come from preserving the selvage as it is, but by ripping it off and giving it a new form. We all carry parts of ourselves that have felt unwanted or limiting. But when we choose how to work with them, how to re-thread them into something else, they can become powerful. The selvage needs to be ripped off before it can be rewoven.

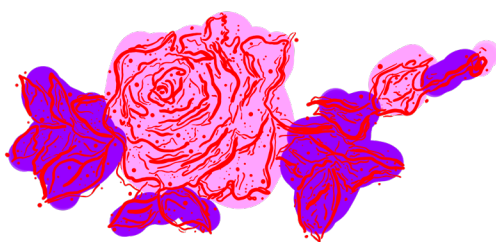
As part of the exhibition of this research, I have woven the individual tiles together to form a curtain. This curtain hangs at the entrance of the installation and acts as a soft privacy shield for the short film, which plays behind it in a quiet, comfortable space. The woven surface partially obscures the film, inviting viewers to pause, notice, and choose how they enter. It holds the physical remnants of the project and sets the tone for the more intimate reflections that follow.

The woven curtain brings these ideas into physical form, functioning as an archive. What I like most is the connection between what's seen on screen and what's hanging in the space.

Some fragments might look familiar—a pink scrap here, a piece of patterned fabric there—echoing garments seen in the film. It's not always obvious, but that's the point—it's a quiet riddle. The curtain holds what was left behind, but not forgotten. These aren't leftovers; they're evidence. The emotional residue of making. It's a quiet record of what was worked through and what was left out. The knots are visible, not tucked away. The threads hang loose in places. These imperfections matter. They speak to the labour of making, and to the kinds of relationships that leave marks.

In reflecting on this process, I began to notice the parts of myself I once tried to cut away. Weight gain. Silence. Private things that shaped me before I could name them. But I've also realised that I'm not alone in this. Everyone I worked with in this project carries a version of this edge—something they were told didn't belong, didn't fit, wasn't worth keeping. These selvages aren't always visible, but they show up in how we dress, how we move, how we speak about ourselves. They show up in the making. And in the unmaking.

This chapter has not been about repairing what was torn. It's about recognising the rip, working with the pieces, and deciding what to make from them. Reweaving is not restoration—it's authorship. It's about deciding for yourself what to carry forward, what to let go of, and what to turn into form. It's a refusal to throw anything out, especially not ourselves. Because the selvage is only restrictive until it's in our hands. Once we decide how to work with it, it becomes something else entirely. Something we get to name. Something we get to wear. Something that holds.



Chapter 7

The Folding

Folding is the final gesture. It brings something back into itself—not to hide it, but to hold it. A folded garment carries the imprint of its shape, the memory of its wear. It is not the end of the garment, just a pause before its next use. In writing, too, folding is how we bring loose threads back into view—how we mark the places we’ve been before setting the work down.

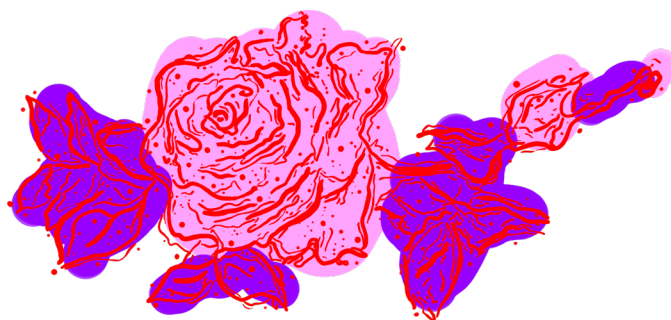
I began this thesis with a question: *what happens when we adorn our bodies as a way to unpick the seams stitched into us by systems of control?* Over time, this question unfolded into others. *What does it mean to reclaim a body that has been made into a battleground? What does adornment allow us to say when language fails—or when the dominant language was never ours to begin with?*

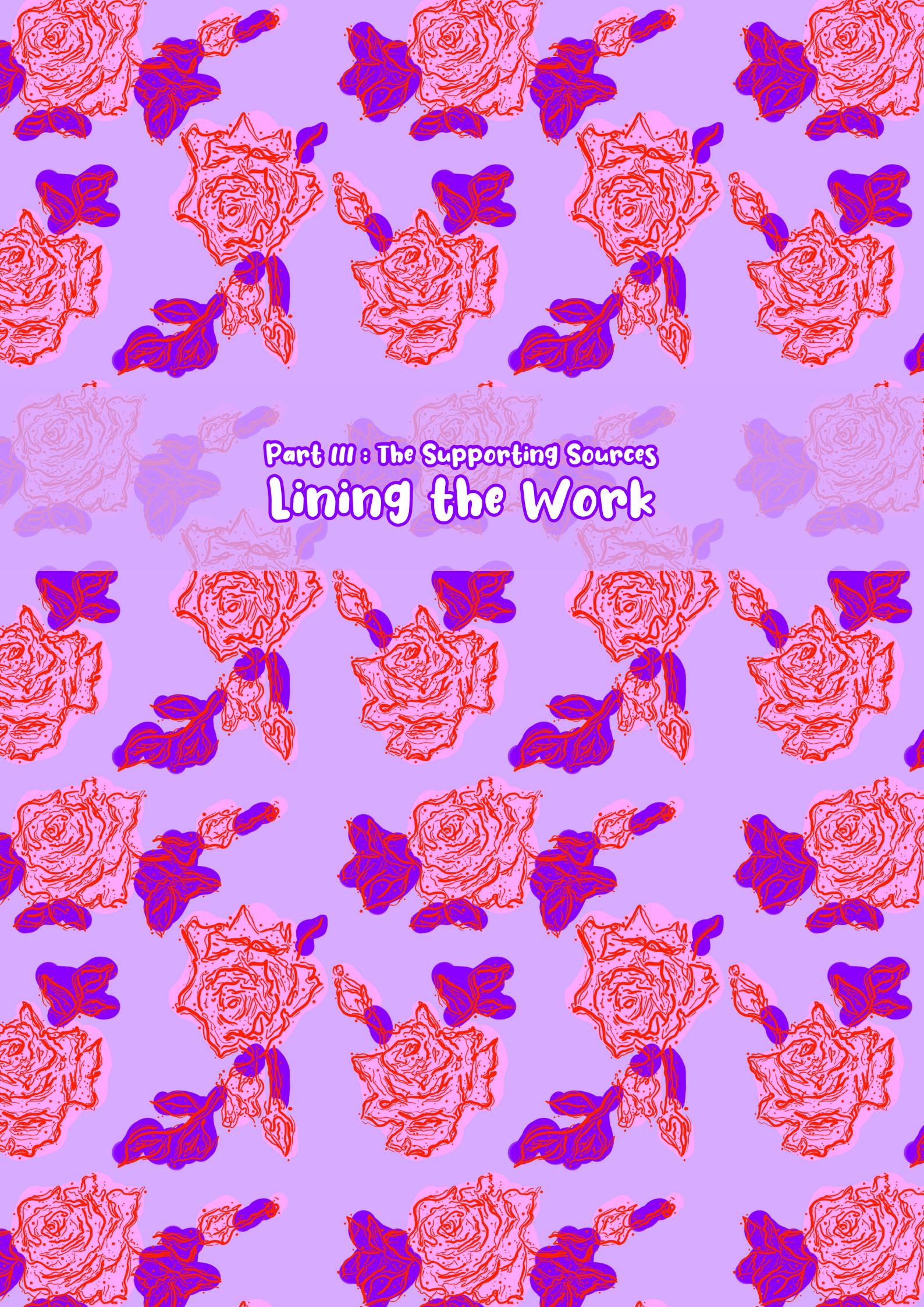
In asking these questions, I didn’t arrive at a single answer. But I did arrive at patterns—at rhythms and throughlines that repeated across stories, across bodies, across practices. I began to understand that adornment is rarely just aesthetic—it’s testimonial. That community is not just a backdrop to self-expression, but it is often a catalyst for it. That visibility is layered and carries different risks depending on who is being seen and in what context. That adornment exists on a spectrum—from the flexible to the permanent—and the stakes of each form are never equal. That transformation is not always loud or dramatic, but often lives in the quiet, repeated acts of getting dressed, doing your hair, or deciding what not to hide. These were the threads that ran through every part of this research.

This project has brought me closer to others, but also back to myself. It taught me that care can be a method. That sewing is a conversation. That garments can hold things even when words cannot. And that the parts of us that seem most frayed—most raw—often carry the most potential for reworking. In that sense, this entire project has been an act of unstitching the restrictive seams; they hold tight, but they can be undone. And in that undoing, we don’t fall apart—we make space for something else.

As I fold up this project, I don’t see it as finished. I see it as the beginning of something I will carry forward. This thesis has deepened my belief that art-making—especially adornment, especially with others—is a way of building knowledge, connection, and resistance. I will keep weaving, sewing, asking, unpicking. Not to find perfect answers, but to keep making form from the pieces we’re told to discard.

The seams may never lie flat. But they can still hold.





Part III : The Supporting Sources

Lining the Work

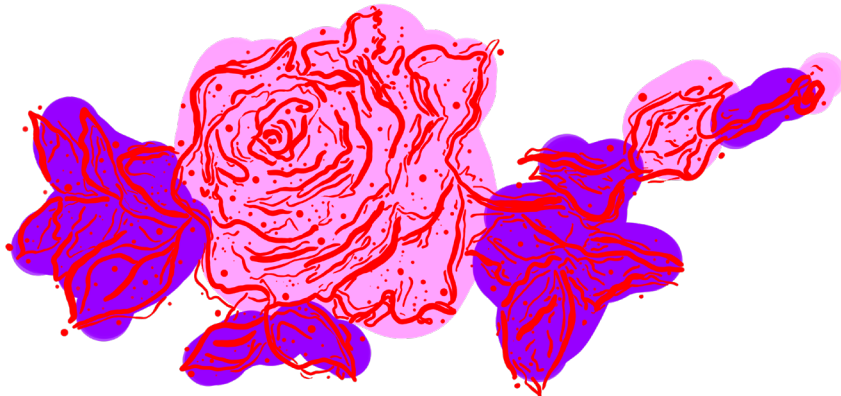


Chapter 1

The Unfolding

This section serves as the contextual lining of my thesis, a layered foundation that reveals the thinkers, artists, and makers whose words and works helped shape my own. What follows is not a traditional bibliography, but a textured companion to the main body of the thesis—a curated assemblage of excerpts, concepts, and citations that supported and stretched my thinking throughout. Mirroring the structure of the written thesis itself, each section gathers selected passages from the sources that most directly informed that chapter.

In doing so, this contextualisation lays bare the fabric of thought that underpins *Unstitching the Restrictive Seams: Reclaiming the Body Through Adornment*, acknowledging the interwoven voices that made this work possible. It reflects my position not only as a maker, but as a thinker in dialogue—one whose work is shaped through conversation, not in isolation. This is part of the unfolding: the careful act of opening up the influences behind the work, revealing their texture, and understanding how they continue to shape what is made.





Chapter 2

Raw Edges

Postrel, V. (2020). The Fabric of Civilization: How Textiles Made the World. Basic Books.

Postrel's historical account offered a grounding for how deeply textiles have shaped human development—not only through function, but through meaning. Her writing reminded me that cloth has always held cultural, spiritual, and aesthetic weight. The most poignant moment for me was her description of ancient cotton fragments found at Huaca Prieta:

“The offerings they left at Huaca Prieta tell us that for these long-lost people, as for us today, textiles were more than functional artifacts. The cotton fragments aren’t simply the tans and browns of the local cotton. They have blue stripes. Usefulness alone can’t explain why someone would go to the trouble of making blue cloth.”

This stayed with me. It affirmed that the urge to dye, to decorate, to go beyond utility, is ancient. These people extracted colour from their environment not because they had to, but because they wanted to—because beauty mattered. The pursuit of adornment has always been essential, not extra.

What struck me even more was how the search for colour—particularly synthetic dyes—eventually led to the development of chemistry itself. The desire to adorn sparked scientific innovation. It reframed adornment not just as cultural practice, but as one of the original drivers of scientific inquiry. And this, in many ways, is what grounded my fascination to adornment as a method of reclaiming the self: it isn't frivolous, it's foundational.

Barry, B., Evans, C., & Friedman, M. (2022). Fattening Fabulousness: The Joys and Risks of Troubling Gender Through Fat Fashion. Fashion Theory

This article affirmed what I had experienced firsthand: that for fat and gender-nonconforming bodies, dressing is never neutral. Drawing on madison moore's concept of 'fabulousness', the authors highlight how fashion becomes a form of embodied defiance—how clothing can affirm identity and joy even in the face of constant scrutiny. As they write, *“Fabulousness is an embodied practice... where marginalized folks, particularly queer and trans people of color, use style to take pride in their bodies in the face of oppression.”*

I saw echoes of this in my own experience and in the stories shared by participants in both the collaborative garment-making and the public survey. That duality—the joy of expression and the risk it invites—was something many people wrestled with. One participant puts it simply: *“My safety is already at risk to the general public who’s tirelessly conservative and afraid of bodies and queerness.”*

This article helped me frame adornment not just as personal, but political and emotional—a layered act of becoming that often carries both visibility and vulnerability.

Hodal, K. (2021). I've never worn trousers up a mountain and I never will: a Bolivian cholita climber on sexism and her next summit. The Guardian, 17 March.

This article profiles a Bolivian cholita mountaineer who insists on wearing traditional skirts while climbing some of the highest peaks in South America. Her decision is more than symbolic—it is a bold rejection of Western, gendered expectations around dress, utility, and belonging. In a

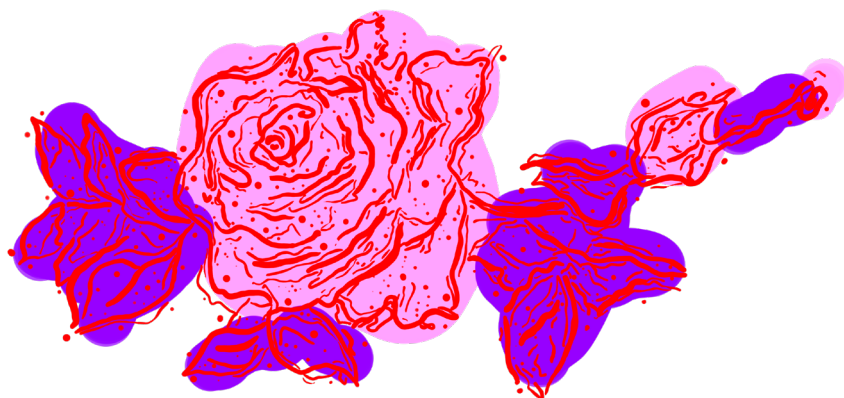
world that polices what bodies (and especially what women's bodies) should wear in different environments, her stance is an act of defiance. She says, *"I've never worn trousers up a mountain and I never will."*

Her refusal to separate tradition from performance, femininity from strength, or beauty from function, reminds me of what adornment can do when it doesn't seek permission. Like the blue-dyed cloth at Huaca Prieta or the tattoos in my participants' testimonies, her skirts mark her not as impractical, but as powerful. She climbs with a history on her hips. It's a reminder that style can be a summit, too.

Corbitt, T. (2022). Fashion as Resistance: Challenging Weight Stigma. Obesity.net. [Online]

This article explores how fashion can serve as a powerful tool for resisting societal norms that marginalise individuals based on body size. It highlights the ways in which people use clothing to express identity, challenge weight stigma, and reclaim autonomy over their bodies. As Corbitt writes, *"Fashion, traditionally seen as a means of self-expression, can serve as a form of resistance to societal norms that marginalize obese people."*

The discussion aligns with the central themes of my thesis, emphasizing adornment as a means of empowerment and resistance. By showcasing how fashion choices can confront and subvert oppressive standards, the article reinforces the idea that clothing is not merely decorative but deeply political and personal.





Chapter 3

The Perfect Fit

Goetz, J. and Wertz, J. (2016). *Suited [Documentary]*. HBO Documentary Films..

Suited follows the work of *Bindle & Keep*, a bespoke tailoring company that designs suits for clients across the gender spectrum—many of whom have felt excluded or misrepresented by mainstream fashion. The documentary beautifully highlights how a perfectly fitted garment can serve as more than just clothing; it becomes a site of self-recognition. Clients speak about the emotional power of being seen—sometimes for the first time—in something that honours both their body and identity.

This film deeply resonated with the ethos of this chapter: that the ‘perfect fit’ is not about precision or trend, but about affirmation. Watching people light up in their custom suits reminded me why collaborative garment-making matters. It is not just technical work—it is intimate, reparative, and often transformative.

As Ray, one of the tailors in the film, explains: “*I wouldn’t be interested in suits or clothing at all if it didn’t have this much meaning. You know, people always ask me about my relationship with the fashion industry, and I’m like ‘I have nothing to do with that’. You know, this is not that. For lots of people with all kinds of bodies and all kinds of identities, clothes can make or break every day of their lives.*”

Bruggeman, D. (2022). *Dissolving the Ego of Fashion: Engaging with Human Matters*. In: *Engaging with Fashion: Reflections on the (Post)Human Condition*. ArtEZ Press.

In this article, Daniëlle Bruggeman reflects on Pascale Gatzen’s project *Questioning the Concept of a Uniform*, in which eight female museum guards were taught to design and sew their own uniforms—many for the first time. The project shifted the meaning of fashion from something competitive and commodified into something relational. As Gatzen describes, “*The uniforms were created because the women created and cared for each other; they shared excitement, inspiration, respect, love and appreciation through the material reality of their self-made uniforms.*”

This passage captured something that deeply resonated with my own collaborative process: that when clothing is created not for an industry but for one another, it becomes a vessel for connection. The process of making garments for my friends mirrored this ethos—we were not trying to compete, impress, or produce for a market. We were trying to listen. To affirm. To care.

Keulen, M. (2024). *Befriending the Body Through Clothes: The Role of Clothing in Secular and Religious Women’s Body Appreciation*. Tilburg University.

This study (based on a 13-week course) supports my thesis by demonstrating how clothing can foster body appreciation through self-expression—particularly in contexts shaped by both religious modesty and secular fashion pressures. When participants were encouraged to explore clothing playfully and critically, they began shifting from using dress as camouflage to seeing it as assurance, individuality, and care. This echoed my own approach to adornment as both reclamation and resistance.

One of the study’s most compelling contributions was its discussion of *clothing cognition*—a psychological theory that examines how what we wear directly affects our thoughts, emotions, self-

perception, and social interactions. This idea became a key focus of the research: participants used clothing not only as aesthetic expression, but as a tool for empowerment, emotional regulation, and self-acceptance. It affirmed that dressing the body is not just surface-level—it's a psychological and relational act.

Strübel, J. & Goswami, S. (2022). Clothing and self-concept in cisgender and transgender individuals. Gender Issues.

This study investigates how clothing functions as a tool for self-expression and self-evaluation across gender identities, highlighting nuanced differences between cisgender and transgender individuals. It found that cisgender women experienced the strongest emotional and psychological attachment to clothing, with fashion deeply embedded in self-esteem and social comparison. For transgender individuals, clothing was significant but not always central—suggesting that while adornment supports gender affirmation, it often works alongside other tools such as pronouns, medical transition, or body modification. These findings underscore the complexity of dressing as both a communicative and self-validating act, mirroring my thesis's exploration of adornment as layered, flexible, and shaped by each individual's access, context, and identity.

The Issue Magazine. (2021). Queer Fashion and Identity. [Online]

This article explores the evolving expectations within queer communities around dress and identity, particularly the tension between visibility and authenticity. It offers an important reminder that the politics of appearance are not always liberatory, especially when individuals feel pressure to perform queerness visually in order to be recognised or accepted. One quote encapsulates this tension: *"Ultimately for me, the crisis of not looking queer or gay enough stemmed from a lack of community. How I dress truly has nothing to do with my personal identity but being mistaken as a straight person feels like erasure because of the personal struggles that I have had as a queer person."* This directly echoes my own collaborators' reflections—particularly those who felt alienated by visual markers of queerness or constrained by what it meant to "look queer." It reaffirms my research finding that adornment can be empowering, but also carries its own risks of misrecognition.

Mahnken, C. (2021). A History of Queer Fashion: How the LGBTQ+ Community Uses Fashion as a Signal. Sartorial Magazine. [Online]

This article outlines how fashion has long served as a covert language within queer communities—especially during times when queerness had to be hidden from mainstream society. The idea that *"certain accessories or styles of dress [were used] to communicate... sexuality without the rest of the world knowing the code"* resonates deeply with my research. One such example is the single earring worn in the right ear—a subtle but recognisable signifier of gay identity. These coded gestures show that adornment isn't just aesthetic—it is strategic, relational, and often subversive. Whether it's a small detail or an overt statement, queer dress signals both visibility and solidarity, operating as a form of cultural resistance and community-building. My work explores how this coded language of fashion continues today, though now with different risks and politics.

Watkins, H. (2021). The Construction of Identity through Tattoos: A Semiotic and Performative Exploration of Trauma. University of Leeds.

This dissertation examines how tattoos function as semiotic markers—embodied signifiers of both personal and collective trauma. Using Peirce's *semiotic theory*, it reads tattoos not simply as decoration but as meaning-making devices, each carrying layers of narrative, identity, and memory. The study discusses examples such as Holocaust survivor numbers, 9/11 memorial tattoos, and

mastectomy tattoos—arguing that these marks become permanent records of loss, survival, and transformation.

Particularly striking was the way the study links tattooing with the *embodied health movement*: a growing practice where individuals affected by trauma (especially medical trauma) use body modification to reclaim agency. Tattoos in this context challenge dominant narratives of femininity, beauty, and bodily integrity, turning wounds into symbols of resilience.

This reading of tattoos aligns directly with stories shared by my collaborators—particularly Bex, whose tattoos became a way to reassert control over a body that had been subjected to violence. For her, and many others, these marks are not just adornment. They are layered, living archives. They shift over time, just like the trauma they respond to—first signifying pain, then survival, then strength.

Torres, G. (2023). For the Colonized Body, Tattoos Are Reclamation. Yes! Magazine. [Online]

This poetic essay offers a visceral lens on tattooing as a form of resistance and embodied sovereignty. It reframes tattooing not as violence, but as consent—a deliberate wound that disrupts histories of colonization, erasure, and bodily control. The excerpted poem reads:

*Tattooing is a reclamation of my body,
where I consensually welcome a wound
as opposed to the ones that violently invaded my being,
physical and otherwise.
Tattooing is a sacred “fuck you” to colonizers and their attempted erasure of us...
Tattooing is a reiteration of “[my] wounds, [I] am healed.”*

The emotional and political potency of this piece mirrors how Bex described tattooing in our process: as both a way to make peace with past violations and to reclaim the surface of the body on her own terms. Tattooing here is not decoration—it is authorship, refusal, and healing. Much like the garments we created, the tattoos discussed in this essay function as declarations: of pain, yes, but also of survival, pride, and defiance.

Turgut, B.H. (2021). Feminist Ethnography As A Study of Oral History: Tattooed [Deq] Women of a Generation.

This feminist ethnographic study explores the traditional deq tattoos worn by Kurdish women, framing them as powerful sites of identity, memory, and resistance. While many of the women were illiterate, the tattoos became a visual language—a form of oral history etched into skin. Turgut’s research highlights how these tattoos operate both personally and communally, preserving cultural narratives and affirming womanhood within deeply patriarchal structures.

This directly connects to my project’s concern with how bodily adornment can carry stories that might otherwise be erased. Just as deq tattoos resist silence and erasure, many of my collaborators used tattoos to mark trauma, survival, and self-ownership. These inscriptions on the body are not simply aesthetic, but acts of defiant preservation.

Geach, B. (2024). Under the skin of an ex-Lavender Hill gangster — Turner Adams’s tattoos told more than one story. Daily Maverick. [Online]

Turner Adams’s tattoos served as a living archive of his life—chronicling pain, survival, and eventual transformation. Each mark on his skin told the story of his journey from being a high-ranking member of the 28s gang to becoming a man committed to redemption and social impact. The article details how his tattoos reflected not only the violence of his past but also his hope to inspire change,

stating that he “sought to be remembered not for the ink or his gang ties, but for the positive impact he had on his community.”

This resonates with the way tattooing emerged in my collaborative process—as a practice of testimony. Adams did not use ink to erase or deny his past, but to acknowledge it and write over it. The body becomes a visual narrative—one that holds harm and healing side by side.

Muholi, Z. (2010). Difficult Love [Documentary]. Directed by C. Oliver and P. De Vries. South Africa: Steps for the Future.

In *Difficult Love*, Muholi addresses the politics of visibility and the emotional toll of how queer people—especially Black LGBTI individuals—are represented. Their insistence on joy and love as political acts feels especially relevant to this project. “We hardly find images that speaks of love and joy in LGBTI individuals,” they say. The documentary reminds us that queer lives are often only shown in moments of pain or tragedy. Like Muholi, I wanted to create space for beauty, play, and celebration—without having to justify it through trauma. The participants in my work, like those in Muholi’s, are not tragic figures—they are vibrant, complex, joyful, and whole.

Muholi, Z. (2018). Art in the Twenty-First Century: Johannesburg, Season 9 [TV series episode]. Directed by C. Oliver and S. Fredericks. Art21/PBS.

In this episode, Muholi states: “I work with participants, they are not subjects in my photography”. This sentiment encapsulates the ethical approach I took throughout this project. I didn’t dress or film people as examples—I collaborated with them to co-create garments and scenes that reflected their stories. The word ‘participant’ implies agency, exchange, and care. This distinction helped shape how I approached consent, narrative, and representation—particularly in moments of intimacy and vulnerability.

Muriu, T. (2021). Camo Series [Photography and Artist Talk].

Thandiwe Muriu’s photographic work is grounded in the collaborative creation of garments, colours, and cultural references. Like me, she starts with fabric. Her process involves sourcing textiles, working with local tailors, referencing historical hairstyles, and then photographing the full look—each element chosen with and for her community. She often quotes the African proverb: “If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.” That ethos underpins my own process of collaborative garment-making.

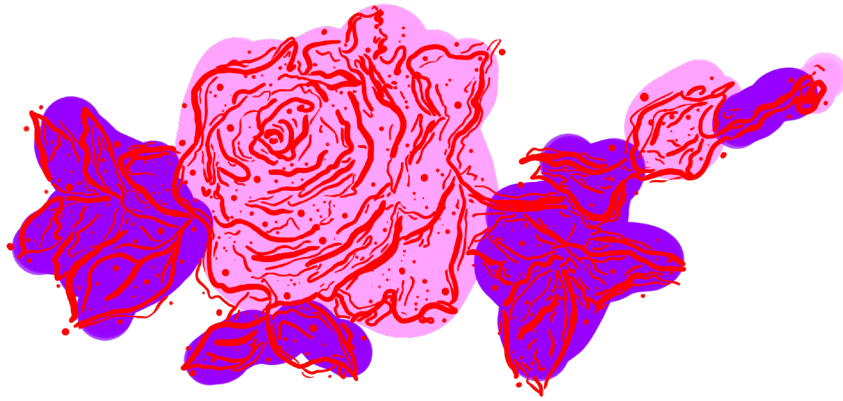
Muriu’s approach also reframes visibility. Her portraits are both striking and quietly subversive—women are styled to almost blend into decorative backdrops, reflecting how patriarchal society tries to erase them. And yet, their presence is bold and undeniable. As she puts it, her work is about “being unapologetically yourself; standing out, not fading into the background.” This resonates deeply with how the participants in my film and project use dress to assert themselves in spaces that often seek to silence or standardise them. Like Muriu, I see adornment as a form of refusal, presence, and power.

Hoek, J., Lantink, D., & members of SistaazHood. (2019). Sistaaz of the Castle.

Sistaaz of the Castle is a long-term collaborative fashion and photography project between Jan Hoek, Duran Lantink, and six trans women from the Cape Town-based organisation *SistaazHood*. *SistaazHood* is a peer-led activist group founded by trans women sex workers, supporting each other through access to healthcare, housing support, and advocacy for the decriminalisation of sex work in South Africa. Their sense of style—joyful, defiant, and deeply personal—is central to the project.

The book celebrates these aesthetics, placing fashion in direct conversation with survival and

visibility. It attempts to share authorship with the women, giving them control over how their stories are styled, told, and shared. But while the visual outcome is striking, the project also raises ethical questions. Despite the promise of shared authorship, the women could not travel to Amsterdam to see the exhibition of their work due to their housing status and the impossibility of acquiring passports. This disjuncture, between visibility and access, pushes me to question what collaboration truly looks like, and how I might commit more deeply to inter-relational methods in my own practice—especially when working with communities often excluded from institutional spaces.





Chapter 4

Wear and Tear

The sources that shaped this chapter come directly from the public survey I created as part of this research. These responses reflect lived experiences and personal reflections on the role of adornment in reclaiming identity and navigating societal pressure. Rather than relying solely on academic theory, this chapter draws authority from the voices of those who participated—offering grounded, intimate insight into how bodies are dressed, adorned, and understood in everyday life.

“I would love to meet a woman that grew up being told to love her body instead of change everything about it. I’m not overweight but in times of great stress I’ve gained weight. For some reason this invites so much comment. Especially when you lose it again so many people comment. It makes you realise how people saw you when you were at your lowest. Then if you ever find yourself at a low spot again you’re also reminded about the back handed compliments people gave.”

“I was raised by a fairly conservative Afrikaans mother with an eating disorder, to believe that I had to be thin and conventionally attractive to attract a husband one day and insinuated that this was the most important thing I’d do with my life.”

“Yes. I grew up around Catholic Lebanese communities who were very conservative and close-minded. While my immediate family (parents + sister) broke away from that, I was still around very controversial opinions. For example, not feeling comfortable wearing a pink item of clothing because of all the comments that would come. Piercing my ear as an 18 year old and being told I pierced it in the “gay” ear?? WTF? Same with tattoos, just very taboo and I internalised that when getting my first tattoo(s)”

“I used to hate myself and my body so much. People bullied me and called me names. Some people said that if I dyed my hair blonde, I’d be liked more, people said that I should be on one of those makeover shows that were on TV a lot at the time. But my dad never let me even experiment with how I looked. Since my sex assigned at birth is female, I needed to have long hair.”

“I gained weight, around 8 kilos, and [at] the time I wanted to travel to Iran, [but] I had fear because in our culture the first thing you hear is that [you’re getting] chubby or skinny, so I hated that and felt uncomfortable a lot!”

“My body feels more like a pet I’m in charge of than anything else”.

“Growing up in such a strict and religious household/family brought a lot of restrictions on what I was allowed to do with my body and the way I presented myself. So, after coming to South Africa, becoming more independent, and living in a more progressive country, I could finally freely explore my identity and express myself. I was never allowed to grow my hair for longer than 3-6 months nor dye it, and now I have been growing it for 4 years and dyeing it in my favourite colours. I never knew my hair could be this beautiful, naturally loc and grow to this length! It has been a dream of mine to grow my hair and dye it since I was a little kid, so it has been a privilege and wholesome and healing journey to get the opportunity to finally grow into that. Clothes also played a massive part in reclaiming my body and identity. I was never allowed to wear any ‘feminine’ or colourful

clothes and jewellery, so I always wore all-black outfits. But over the past 5-6 years of living in South Africa, I was able to explore my own style and choose what I wanted to wear. It was interesting because, through all of the indoctrination, I almost forgot what I was initially drawn into and how I wanted to represent myself. Healing from that was a journey of tracing back my thoughts and tastes before my self-expression and individual identity was taken away from me. As well as embracing and celebrating all of it again and fighting those negative thoughts. Surrounding myself with a lovely, like-minded community of family and friends also plays a huge role in the healing journey. I feel less alone in being the outcast, and we all celebrate and embrace each other's identities, appearances and journeys."

"When I started to wear pants (at age 18) I felt so powerful and free. It also had to do a lot with leaving the strict (and scary) ideas and doctrines of my religion. Wearing pants felt (and still feels, I'm 21 now) like the symbol of my freedom and autonomy. At the same time, when I wear a skirt now, I feel smaller, a bit more unsure, and more looked at."

"Being tattooed has provided some kind of armour or at least distraction from certain parts of my body that I never loved. Claiming my body as my own and portraying it in my own controlled way. Ironically tattoos do make one more "perceivable" to the public and can attract more unwanted attention. But it feels like people are seeing the tattoos and not me, which feels safer. I like to dress in a less feminine way and feel less sexual or appealing to the male gaze. I dress in comfortable clothing that feels like it's for me and not for men."

"I got a tattoo after moving here, which I have been planning for long. After years of suffering different forms of depression, being cruel to my soul and body and being terrified to make big moves in my life, I decided that once I do this I will stick to myself no matter what. Everytime I look at my tattoo, it's a reminder who was there and will be there on my hardest days: me."

"Yes absolutely! When I was twenty or so I decided to cut my hair short to feel more connected to my masculinity, which did not work out as great as I was expecting it to but I'm still happy it's short now. Recently I've also changed a few things, got a belly and a lip piercing and dyed my hair pink. Ofcourse it helps that now when I look in the mirror and see more things that I like and think are pretty but it also helps to build confidence in a bigger way, I am now visually, noticeably, queer in the biggest sense of the word. It's a bit of rebellion, showing people that we are in fact everywhere, it makes me feel proud."

"I also remember the first time I used nail polish as an adult, and it felt so freeing yet scary to walk outside with it on. More recently, I did get my first tattoo, which was a huge step for me to take towards gaining more control of my body, and it felt very liberating. Especially coming from a strictly religious background and upbringing, I have been indoctrinated my whole life to think that my body is a temple that does not belong to me. It rather belongs to Allah, and only he dictates what I can do with it, as well as the societal pressure and dynamics of doing something that is forbidden and irreversible. All of that is still so embedded in my brain and brings a lot of fear within me that I can feel in my body whenever I choose to wear or do something that goes against those ideologies and common societal beliefs. At the same time, I think my relationship with feeling comfortable in wearing certain pieces of clothes fluctuates due to my mental health or safety. On some days, I feel like I can not wear "feminine" or flashy/colourful clothing items to not bring any attention to myself or hide from being constantly looked at. At the same time, wearing "masculine" clothes makes me feel a bit conflicted because I am not necessarily drawn to them, but they give me the opportunity to hide while remaining safe. I think, especially in a South African context, I feel safer walking on the street by myself while wearing toned-down "masculine" clothes to avoid being a target of gender-based violence, hate crimes or getting robbed."

"If I'm wearing a cute little dress I feel exposed and vulnerable and like I don't look like me, [but when] I wear something that is more masculine presenting I feel empowered and cool."

"Some days I wake up and want to remove all decoration that makes me stand out and I might even hate how society looks at my now that I've got the facial piercing and pink hair, but for the most part it's been positive, even the nasty or shocked looks I get make me giggle. It's like I'm in on a secret with only a few other people."

"I like my 'edgy' style even if it's not regarded as the most beautiful in societal beauty standards. Also I do like to look unapproachable or even scary so that men would stay away from me and not harass me."

"They often make me second guess myself. Especially when I see people who look a certain way getting rewarded with social acceptance and social currency and when people treat me differently. This is a personal experience from the way I've been treated when I have gender normative hair styles versus how I'm treated when I do not. For example, people don't ask my pronouns when my hair is long, only when it is short."

"I have always been drawn to what is considered 'ugly' in beauty standards. Not to say that anything else is not beautiful, but I think everyone and everything is beautiful in their own way, and it just comes down to personal preferences and what I am personally drawn into. For example, in Black communities, my freeform locs would be considered 'ugly' and 'dirty' because it was not twisted by a hairstylist/loctician, and it does not have the neat and clean look that twisted locs have. That ideology and way of thinking stems from colonialism and Western beauty standards, but I think that there is beauty in rejecting societal expectations of 'neatness' and letting my hair grow naturally without any intervention. I also think rejecting beauty standards brings a sense of individuality, which can uniquely represent who we are, where we come from, and our stories in a beautiful way."

"I feel like I'm expected to dress in baggy clothes because I am overweight."

"It is often that I see plus size women dressing dreadfully, as the only clothes that fit us only come in horrendous patterns, cuts and fabrics that make it difficult to want to dress up."

"I think my whole style nowadays is to be free from [my dad]."

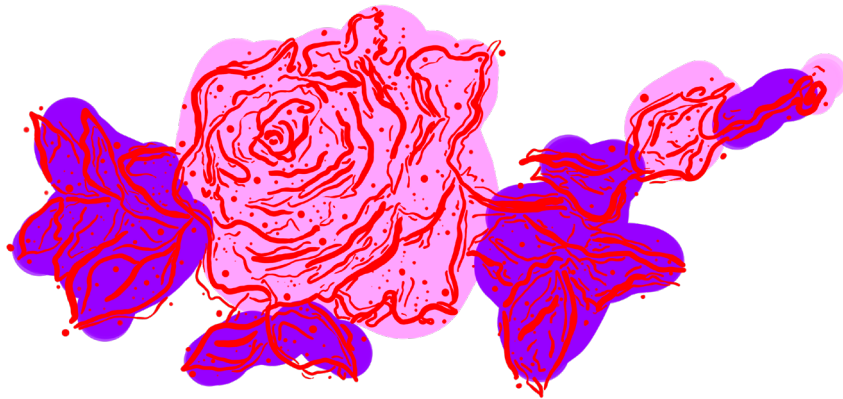
"After [the Women, Life, Freedom uprising] was the first time i wanted to go in public without wearing a scarf and it was one of the scariest feelings I have had because they could arrest me and kill me! The feeling of not wearing a hijab was not freedom but fear and I did this, and I have been doing this so far to show that I am against it."

"I would say in my teen years when I felt very controlled by my family situation, it pushed me into further extremes with my goth and emo style. My mom used to force me to go to church where they were islamophobic and homophobic, and I would still dress that way in that space as a way of signalling that I was not one of them. As a woman, I often felt my body belonged to society and to men, and being tattooed has been the biggest way in which I've reclaimed that sense of ownership, despite reading reddit posts about men saying they would never see tattooed women as 'marriage material'."

"[In Iran], I used to wear clothes like boys so police wouldn't recognise that I'm a girl, to protest against the regime .also I shaved my head not to wear the hijab. To show my rage"

*“Yes, my caretakers expected me to be athletic, blonde, tan and well dressed even if with modesty. So I shaved my head, started cross dressing. The message was : you (bully, teacher, priest, parent) and me, we are very different, don’t confuse me with your flock
I shave the sides of my head and wear pride flags gear and pronoun pins so queer people know I’m queer. I like that. I wouldn’t say it’s to resist oppression, it’s more of a way of saying “you’re safe with me” to other queer people.”*

“Yes, I [have altered my style as a form of resistance in response to oppression] by not wearing the Hijab in public.”



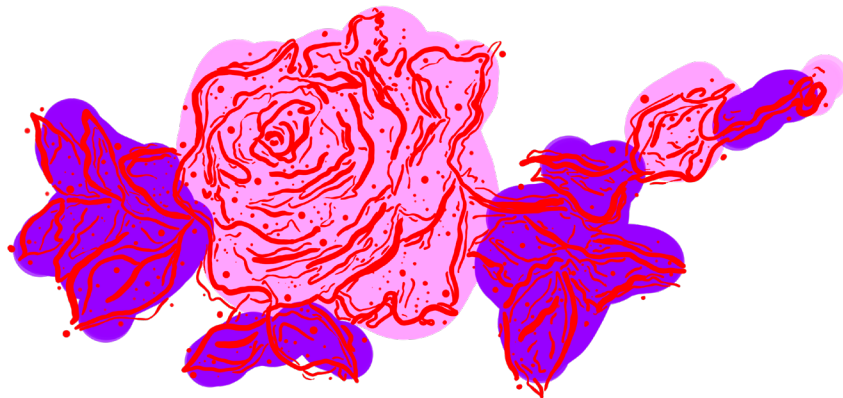
It Could Be the Tension

Elna (n.d.). Elna eXperience 580: Instruction Manual. Elna International.

This manual became my unexpected companion when my sewing machine started malfunctioning and I couldn't wait months for professional servicing. Through trial, error, and a growing familiarity with the language of tension settings, bobbin cases, and needle alignment, I began to learn the internal mechanics of my machine. The sewing machine handles the visible construction—the outer seams, the lines that the world sees. Its precision allows the garment to hold its form, shaping how the body is read. This manual was not just technical—it helped deepen my dialogue with the tool, making the machine feel less like equipment and more like a collaborator.

Elna (n.d.). Elna 664 Overlocker: Instruction Manual. Elna International.

In contrast, the overlocker manual guided me through the invisible architecture of the garment. The overlocker is not for show—it finishes raw edges, prevents fraying, and reinforces seams. It ensures the inside of the garment is just as cared for as the outside. Learning to use it, and to troubleshoot it, reminded me that internal structure holds as much significance as external form. If the sewing machine speaks to what we show the world, the overlocker deals with what keeps us together underneath. The manual taught me how to stabilise fabric—and, metaphorically, how to stabilise myself. This internal labour of reinforcement became a quiet metaphor for care, repair, and durability.





Chapter 6

Ripped and Rewoven

Millner, J. (2021). Caring through art: Reimagining value as political practice. Artlink.

This article features an excerpt on textile artist Sierra Waters, whose reflections deeply resonate with my practice. Waters discusses the paradox of textiles as both comforting and discomforting—linked to the domestic sphere, which is often associated with softness and safety, yet simultaneously a site where harmful societal norms are reproduced. This duality echoes throughout my work: how fabric, and by extension the home, can hold care and trauma at once. Especially for those from marginalised or restrictive households, the very materials associated with comfort may also carry memories of control or silence. Waters’s insight affirms how textile practices, even in their tenderness, can bear political weight. This idea is especially present in *Ripped and Rewoven*, where I work with scraps and selvages—materials that carry emotional and historical residue—to create something new. The act of weaving becomes both an acknowledgement of this tension and a quiet refusal to discard what shaped us.

Pinatih, A., Johnson, L., & Fray-Smith, W. (2024). Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles in Art. Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam & Barbican Centre.

This exhibition brought together over 40 international artists to explore how textiles can challenge power structures, tell stories of resistance, and reimagine value through care and repair. *Unravel* offered a powerful example of how textile-based practices can be both deeply personal and politically charged. Seeing large-scale textile works displayed with such reverence inspired me to imagine how my own woven curtain piece—stitched from the scraps and off-cuts from the projects in my practice—might hold space in a similar context. The exhibition affirmed that softness does not preclude strength; rather, it can be a medium through which histories are held, challenged, and transformed.

Chapter 7

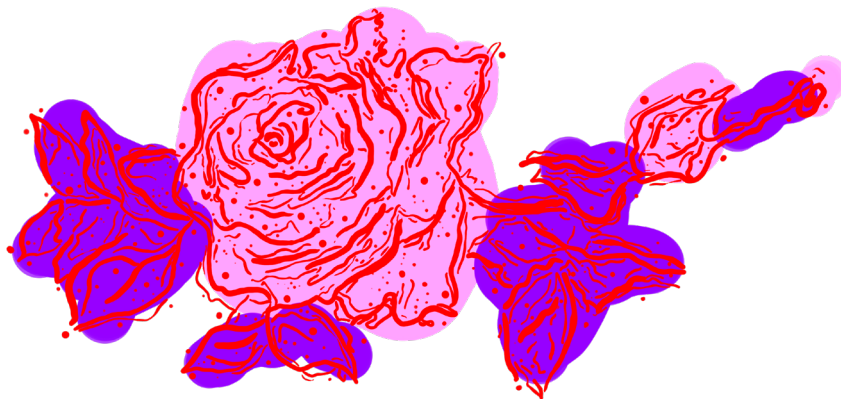
The Folding

This contextualisation section has traced the interwoven threads of theory, art, activism, and personal narrative that have informed and supported this thesis. Much like the garments, testimonies, and woven tiles in the project itself, these sources reflect a layered and collaborative process—an unfolding of voices that challenged, expanded, and affirmed my thinking.

Together, these texts, exhibitions, films, and oral histories helped me situate my own practice within a broader fabric of discourse around identity, visibility, resistance, and care. Some sources provided conceptual frameworks—like *'clothing cognition'* or *'fabulousness'*—that clarified what I had only felt intuitively. Others offered artistic methods or case studies that echoed my own desire to work with, not on, my collaborators. Many foregrounded the power of adornment as a political act, particularly for bodies that are misread, marginalised, or erased.

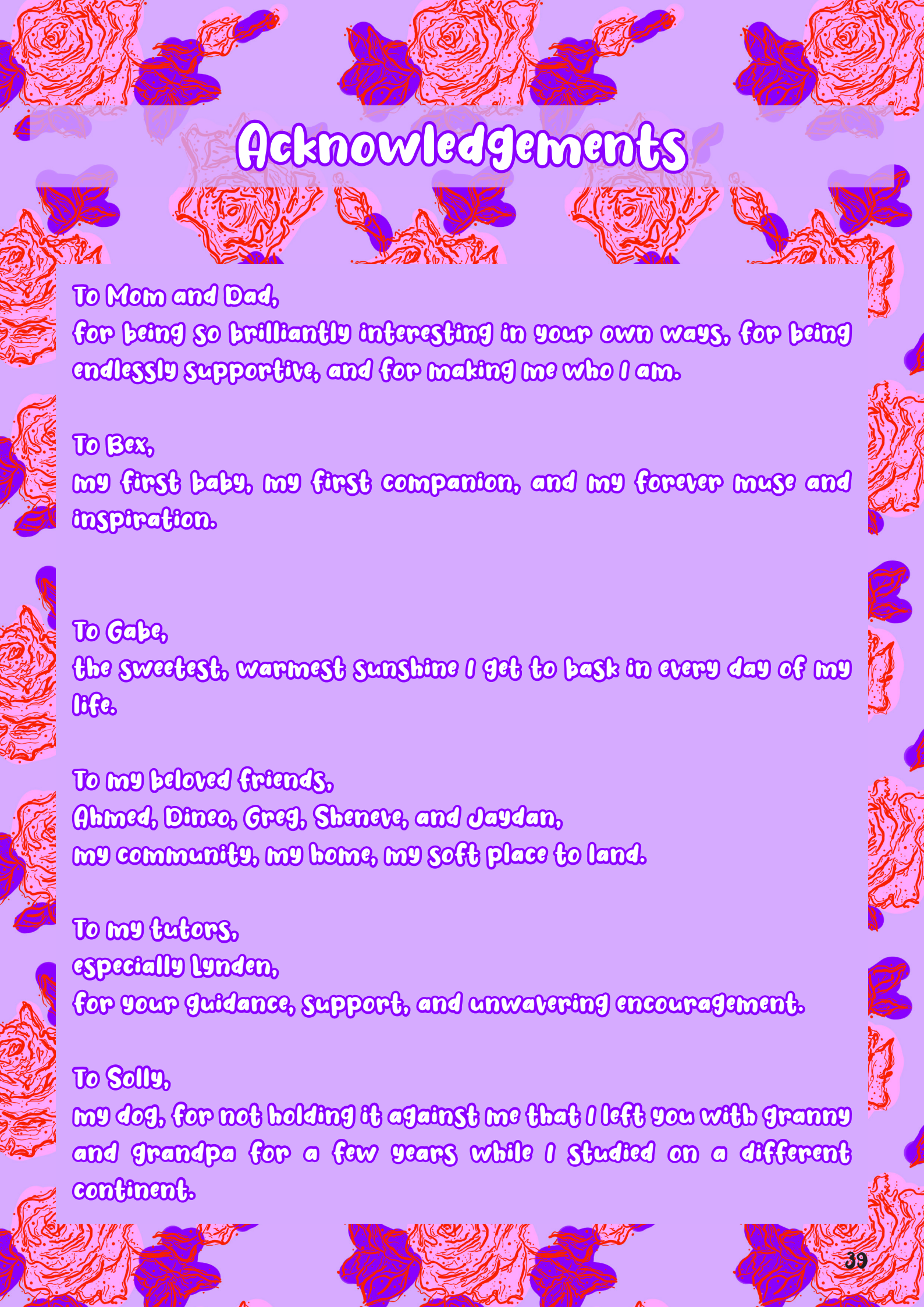
Across disciplines and formats, these references demonstrated that adornment is never just about aesthetics—it is about access, agency, authorship. This section does not stand outside the thesis, but sits within it—like a lining, or a backstitch—quietly reinforcing its shape. In gathering these sources, I am not only crediting their influence, but showing the kind of inter-relational making that defines my work. Thought, like cloth, is not created in isolation. It is pieced together.

And now, like a garment carefully folded after wear, these ideas are held—not hidden, but ready to be carried forward.





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