



UNIVERSITY OF
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FASHIONING IDENTITIES:
AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF
BEING-BECOMING A FASHION
DESIGN LECTURER AT A
UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

by

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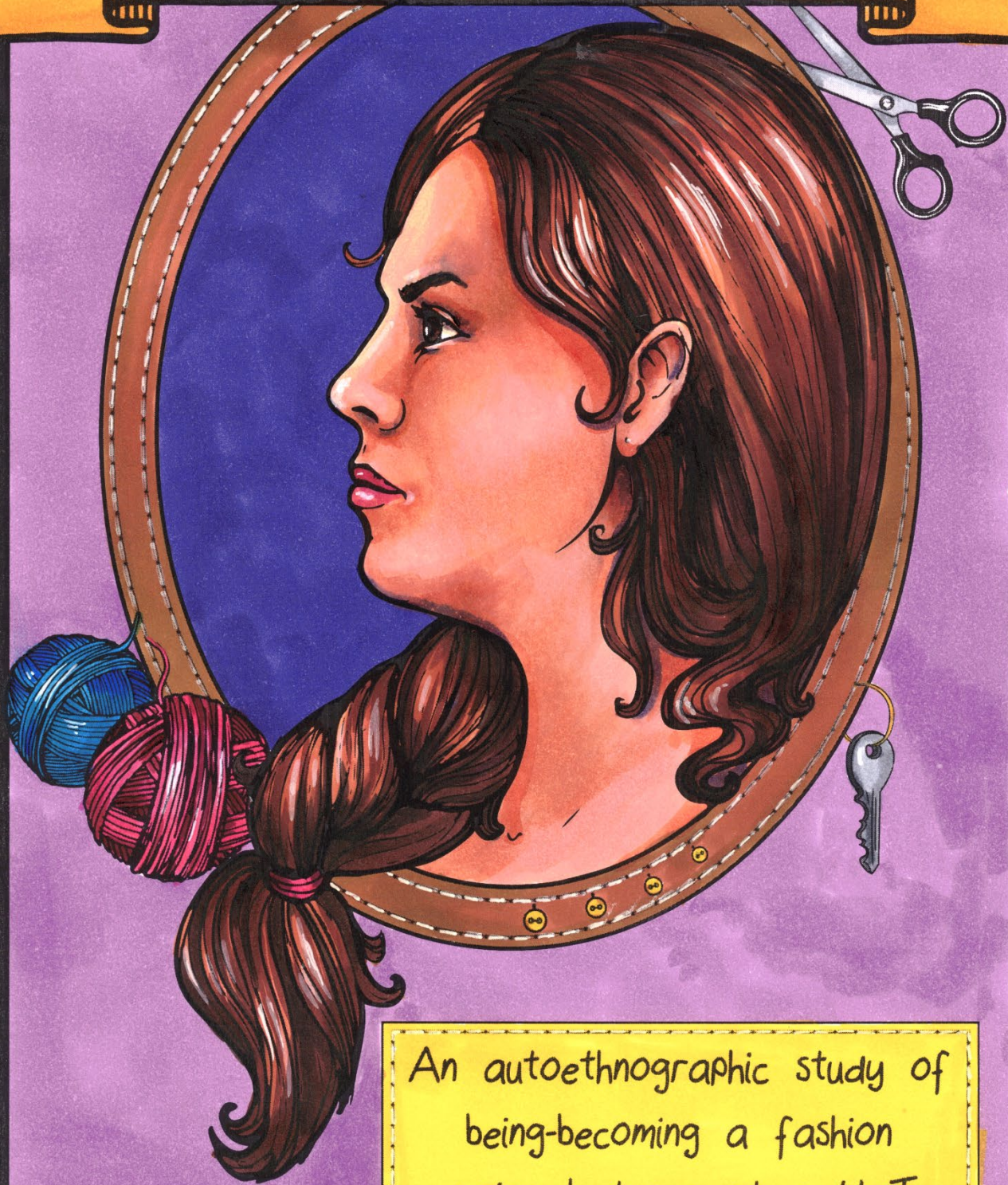
A dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
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Fashioning Identities



An autoethnographic study of
being-becoming a fashion
design lecturer at a UoT

ABSTRACT

This visual autoethnography explores my process of being-becoming a fashion design lecturer within a University of Technology, highlighting the fluid and entangled nature of identity formation in academic contexts. Through a feminist new materialist stance, it considers how identities are performed, negotiated, and shaped through intra-actions with the human and non-human. Drawing on theories of performativity, materiality, and intra-action, I move beyond fixed notions of emerging academic identities. From this open, naked space, I embrace the opportunity to engage in multiple relationalities—remaining open to change, fluidity, and the non-rational.

The ‘auto’ component of autoethnography positions me as both subject and object of inquiry, entangling my be(com)ing within broader sociocultural and historical contexts. The ‘ethno’ component critiques enduring institutional norms and culture that shape my experiences as a fashion design practitioner. The ‘graphy’ element connects my visual and narrative data to critically examine my be(com)ing as a fashion design lecturer. This analysis highlights the complexities of identity formation in navigating the interplay between academic and professional contexts.

Embracing the ‘visual,’ I employ arts-based methods—like comic doodles, metaphor drawings, and concept mapping—to deeply engage with my lived experiences. These visual texts function as data, capturing embodied aspects of becoming a lecturer, and as analytic tools, surfacing cultural narratives and professional tensions that shape my identities as both practitioner and academic. This research demonstrates how arts-based research and visual methods in autoethnography can offer nuanced insights into identity and professional development, challenging traditional methodologies by foregrounding often-unspoken, affective dimensions of scholarly inquiry. This combination of methods, creative practice, and theoretical analysis works together to enrich the understanding of complex, lived experiences within higher education.

The findings reveal that visual methods effectively illustrate the intricate processes of uncovering the self, making visible often-overlooked stories of experiences, emotions, and the entangled materiality of cultural norms. Through vulnerability, reflexivity, and creativity, this study challenges conventional writerly academic expectations, moving towards inclusive and dynamic approaches to knowledge production. This visual autoethnography shows practitioner-academics how they might integrate artful inquiry, artistic practice, and scholarly knowledge to enrich the understanding of identity within professional contexts.

DECLARATION

I, Michaela Cavanagh, declare that:

- (i) The research reported in this thesis, except where otherwise indicated, is my original research.
- (ii) This dissertation/thesis has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.
- (iii) This dissertation/thesis does not contain other persons' data, pictures, graphs, or other information, unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other persons.
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Michaela Cavanagh

28th February 2025

As the candidate's supervisor, I agree/do not agree to the submission of this dissertation/ thesis.

Signed:

6th December 2024

Supervisor: Professor Daisy Pillay

PREFACE

Prior publications/papers arising from this research project and related professional activities:

Cavanagh, M. (2019). Theoretically speaking – an autoethnographic journey in crossing disciplines to being-becoming a practical scholar. *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies*, 1(1), 1-12.

Cavanagh, M. (2018a). Fashion students choose how to learn. In D. Remenyi (Ed.), *4th e-Learning Excellence Awards 2018: An Anthology of Case Histories* (pp. 23-36). Academic Conferences and Publishing Limited.

Cavanagh, M. (2018b). A little black number: Undressing transformation from student to pattern maker. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 32(6), 197-214.

Cavanagh, M., & Peté, M. (2017). Fashion students choose how to learn by constructing videos of pattern making. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 48(6), 1502-1511.

Xulu-Gama, N., Nhari, S. R., Alcock, A., & Cavanagh, M. (2018). A student-centred approach: A qualitative exploration of how students experience access and success in a South African University of Technology. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 37(6), 1302-1314.

The following conventions have been applied in this thesis:

([]) has been used to indicate approximate page numbers on publications from Internet sites, following Hofstee (2006, p. 252).

e.g. Rosewell and Ashwin (2019, p. [2347])

EndNote X9 referencing software has been used, with the APA 7th referencing style.

While the web addresses of individual websites mentioned in the text as examples are given, the websites are not listed in the reference list.

Personal communications (telephone conversation, online meetings, interviews, and e-mail) are noted in the in-text reference as “Personal Communication” but are not included in the Reference list.

To maintain anonymity, pseudonyms have been used to replace the names of all university staff and students mentioned in the thesis, except in the case of theses, articles, papers, and/or reports published or disseminated for open access.

Following Jawitz (2009), identifying names have been changed for anonymisation and will be referred to by the following pseudonyms: the institution is South African University of Technology (SAUT), the fashion campus is Button Lane, and the institutional learning centre is Institute for Exemplary Education (IEE).

Authorial naming conventions (e.g., capitalisation and spacing preferences such as “lisahunter,” elke emerald, and bell hooks) and preferred pronouns have been respected, using gender-neutral pronouns (they/them) where specific pronouns were not known.

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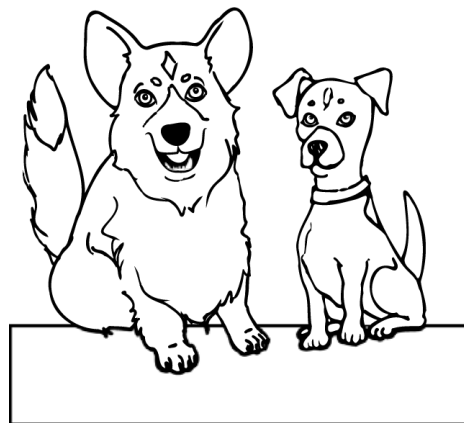
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I dedicate this thesis to my Gran.

Your infectious passion for knowledge made me into the person I am today. You showed me that I didn't need to make conventional choices and gave me permission to make the right choices for me.

ABBREVIATIONS AND INITIALISATIONS

BTech – Bachelor of Technology

HAI/HWI – Historically Advantaged Institution(s)/Historically White Institution(s)

HDI/HBI – Historically Disadvantaged Institution(s)/Historically Black Institution(s)

HEI – Higher Education Institution

HoD – Head of Department

IEE – Institute for Exemplary Education (fictionalised learning centre name)

MTech – Master of Technology

MAA – Master of Applied Arts

PCOS – Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome

PGCE – Post Graduate Certificate in Education

PhD – Philosophy Doctorate

SAUT – South African University of Technology (fictionalised institutional name)

UoT – University of Technology

GLOSSARY

CAD - In the fashion industry, the term “CAD” is used to refer to digitally constructed (Computer-Aided) technical drawings of garments, sometimes called ‘fashion flats’, which include construction details, finishes, trims, print or surface embellishments, fabrication, and colour, and should not be confused with the 3D modelling software also known as CAD (Burke, 2013).

Civvies Day - In South Africa, school children usually wear uniforms, and “civvies day” is a special treat where children can pay (a small fee usually donated to charity) for the privilege of wearing “civilian clothing” to school on a designated day (van Laren, 2012). This is known as “Mufti Day” in the UK.

Matric – In South Africa, ‘matric’ is the final of twelve school years or grades. Matriculation is when learners have completed their secondary education, qualifying them for entry into tertiary education.

Pracademic - academics within higher education who were or are still practitioners (Dickinson et al., 2022).

Precariat – A class of people in precarious employment situations such as fixed-term contracts who lack the stability and benefits of permanent employment. In this study, I refer to the academic precariat (McKeown, 2022; Rao et al., 2021).

Sewist – A sewing enthusiast or a person who sews. Historically, a person who sews would have been called a dressmaker or seamstress (if female). In my personal experience, the term “seamstress” also carries connotations of low paid, low-skill work, but many sewing enthusiasts (male, female, and non-binary) are highly skilled crafters who may sew for love or money or both. I prefer the term “sewist”, which is gender neutral and “subverts the traditionally normative assumption that sewing is a feminine pursuit” (Bain, 2016). Additionally, “sewist” avoids the ambiguity of “sewer” (a person who sews), which can be confused with “sewer” (relating to sanitation) in written text.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	I
DECLARATION.....	II
PREFACE.....	III
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	IV
ABBREVIATIONS AND INITIALISATIONS	V
GLOSSARY	VI
LIST OF FIGURES	XI
1. FASHIONING THE AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC JOURNEY: INTRODUCTION	1
1.1. Introduction to the study.....	1
1.2. Rationale for the study	3
1.2.1. <i>Personal rationale: Who am I, and why does it matter?</i>	3
1.2.2. <i>Professional rationale: What does it mean to be a fashion design lecturer</i>	5
1.2.3. <i>Contextual rationale: How does my context shape my becoming?</i>	12
1.3. Aim of research and research problem.....	13
1.3.1. <i>Conceptualising the thesis structure</i>	13
1.3.2. <i>The research problem</i>	15
1.4. Research questions	17
1.5. Threads of inquiry: Main themes and key terms.....	18
1.5.1. <i>The autoethnographic protagonist</i>	18
1.5.2. <i>Stories</i>	20
1.5.3. <i>Discourses</i>	22
1.5.4. <i>Identity</i>	23
1.5.5. <i>Culture</i>	23
1.5.6. <i>The power of visuals</i>	24
1.6. Reading the visuals.....	25
1.7. Visual devices for differentiating voices.....	26
1.8. Thesis overview.....	28
1.9. Summary.....	30
2. GENERATIVE ENTANGLEMENTS IN THE LITERATURE	32
2.1. Introduction.....	32
2.2. Section A – The concept of being-becoming	33
2.2.1. <i>Defining being-becoming</i>	33
2.2.2. <i>Diffraction being-becoming and identity</i>	35
2.2.3. <i>Situatedness and context</i>	36
2.2.4. <i>Troubling language: Material-discursive practices</i>	37
2.3. Section B – Entanglements of UoT transitions and lecturer be(com)ing	38
2.3.1. <i>UoT in transition: Historical shifts and structural reconfigurations</i>	38
2.3.2. <i>Contesting knowledge: Vocationalism and the neoliberal University</i>	44
2.3.3. <i>Cultures of practice: Navigating macro, meso, and micro levels</i>	45
2.4. Section C – Being-becoming a fashion design lecturer.....	50
2.4.1. <i>Lecturer identities in transition within UoTs</i>	51
2.4.2. <i>Fashion design lecturers: Unique challenges and opportunities</i>	52
2.4.3. <i>Academic identities as assemblages</i>	53
2.5. Section D – Fashion design and the performance of identity	59
2.5.1. <i>Fashion as a medium for identity</i>	60
2.5.2. <i>Gender and fashion: Performing and disrupting norms</i>	60
2.5.3. <i>Fashion and cultural identity</i>	61
2.5.4. <i>Fashion as aspirational and performative</i>	61
2.5.5. <i>Fashion, objects, and identity traces</i>	62
2.6. Section E – Theory as generative entanglement	63
2.6.1. <i>Beyond human-centred frameworks: Material-discursive assemblages</i>	63
2.6.2. <i>Identity as performed and situated</i>	63
2.6.3. <i>Discourses and Social Identity Formation</i>	64

2.6.4.	<i>Interconnected narratives and relational contexts</i>	64
2.6.5.	<i>Reimagining identity through post-qualitative inquiry</i>	65
2.7.	Summary	65
3.	TRACING THE THREADS: POST-QUALITATIVE INQUIRY	67
3.1.	Introduction	67
3.2.	Section A – Philosophical stance	69
3.2.1.	<i>Post-qualitative turn</i>	70
3.2.2.	<i>Feminist new materialism: Entangled agencies and relational becoming</i>	71
3.2.3.	<i>Key concepts in feminist new materialism: Materiality, intra-action, and diffraction</i>	72
3.2.4.	<i>Contextualising my be(com)ing: Stories of the material world</i>	74
3.3.	Section B – How did thinking with materiality shape inquiry?	76
3.3.1.	<i>Tracing the roots: A Brief history of autoethnography</i>	76
3.3.2.	<i>Autoethnography: Can you research the self?</i>	77
3.3.3.	<i>Good autoethnography: What are the core tenets?</i>	78
3.3.4.	<i>Thinking with art: Embodied ways of knowing in visual autoethnography</i>	79
3.4.	Section C – Data generation methods	81
3.4.1.	<i>How did I generate my data? Arts-based methods</i>	81
3.4.2.	<i>Self-Narrative as storytelling</i>	83
3.4.3.	<i>Comic doodles</i>	84
3.4.4.	<i>Comic illustrations: Researcher reflexivity through artmaking</i>	84
3.4.5.	<i>Object inspired narratives</i>	86
3.4.6.	<i>Visual metaphor assemblages</i>	88
3.5.	Section D – Data re-presentation	89
3.5.1.	<i>Narrative re-presentation: Telling and re-telling stories</i>	90
3.5.2.	<i>Visual strategies for re-presentation</i>	94
3.5.3.	<i>Theoretical lenses guiding analysis</i>	105
3.6.	Section E – Reflections on trustworthiness	106
3.6.1.	<i>What challenges did I experience?</i>	106
3.6.2.	<i>Ethical considerations</i>	108
3.6.3.	<i>How does trustworthiness apply to visual autoethnography?</i>	111
3.6.4.	<i>Critical friends and mentors</i>	112
3.7.	Summary	113
4.	(RE)PRESENTING THE FASHION DESIGN LECTURER NARRATIVE	114
4.1.	Introduction	114
4.2.	Section A – Self-narrative	114
4.2.1.	<i>Growing up: Girlhood</i>	115
4.2.2.	<i>Becoming a fashion design student</i>	122
4.2.3.	<i>Becoming a fashion designer</i>	132
4.2.4.	<i>Becoming a lecturer</i>	134
4.2.5.	<i>Becoming a PhD scholar</i>	144
4.2.6.	<i>Becoming a legacy</i>	146
4.3.	Section B – Responding to “who am I?”	151
4.3.1.	<i>Growing up as a privileged white girl</i>	152
4.3.2.	<i>Is ‘creative’ the same as ‘artistic’?</i>	153
4.3.3.	<i>What’s the difference? Academic, lecturer, researcher?</i>	155
4.3.4.	<i>What does being a woman have to do with it?</i>	158
4.4.	So, who do I think I am?	162
4.5.	Summary	162
5.	PERSONAL STORIES AS THE SITE FOR (UN)LEARNING	164
5.1.	Introduction	164
5.2.	Section A – Stories of girlhood	165
5.2.1.	<i>Childhood</i>	166
5.2.2.	<i>Tweenhood</i>	173
5.2.3.	<i>Teenage years</i>	178

5.2.4.	<i>Adolescence</i>	189
5.3.	Section B – Synthesis	198
5.3.1.	<i>Everyday Kaila</i>	198
5.3.2.	<i>Creative Kaila</i>	200
5.3.3.	<i>Academic Kaila</i>	202
5.3.4.	<i>Gendered Kaila</i>	204
5.4.	Key learnings from personal experiences	206
5.5.	Summary	206
6.	PROFESSIONAL STORIES AS A SITE FOR (UN)LEARNING	208
6.1.	Introduction	208
6.2.	Section A – Stories of being-becoming a professional	208
6.2.1.	<i>Becoming a fashion designer: My transition from industry to academia</i>	211
6.2.2.	<i>On the other side of the lectern as a novice lecturer</i>	214
6.2.3.	<i>Unlearning as a site for becoming a novice academic</i>	222
6.2.4.	<i>Being academic as a scholarly space:</i>	224
6.2.5.	<i>Becoming a PhD scholar: An autoethnographic lens</i>	229
6.3.	Section B – Becoming a fashion design lecturer: Professional discourses in the context of UoT and fashion design education	231
6.3.1.	<i>Everyday fashion design lecturer Kaila</i>	231
6.3.2.	<i>Fashion design creativity and creative Kaila</i>	233
6.3.3.	<i>Fashion design education and academic Kaila</i>	234
6.3.4.	<i>Fashion design education and gendered Kaila</i>	235
6.4.	Insights from (un)learning professional experiences	237
6.5.	Summary	238
7.	TANGLED THREADS: INTERWEAVING PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL	240
7.1.	Introduction	240
7.2.	Section A - Unravelling singular stories of self in recreating fashion design lecturer differently	241
7.2.1.	<i>Everyday Kaila: Exploring my middle-class, imaginative self</i>	242
7.2.2.	<i>Creative Kaila: Artful knowing in my personal and professional journey</i>	245
7.2.3.	<i>Academic Kaila: Shaping my teaching and learning practice</i>	246
7.2.4.	<i>Gendered Kaila: Reimagining fashion norms</i>	247
7.2.5.	<i>Reflecting on the stories of self</i>	248
7.3.	Section B – Seepages between the personal and professional	248
7.3.1.	<i>Not looking the part</i>	249
7.3.2.	<i>Reimagining femininity: Navigating gendered expectations</i>	249
7.3.3.	<i>Recreating white, middle-class Kaila</i>	250
7.3.4.	<i>Finding community amidst isolation</i>	250
7.4.	Summary	251
8.	CULTURE, EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES AND BE(COM)ING	252
8.1.	Introduction	252
8.2.	Section A – Object inspired stories of self	253
8.2.1.	<i>An extension of my hand (scissors)</i>	253
8.2.2.	<i>Unlocking a lecturer self</i>	263
8.3.	Section B – Unlearning the practice and theory binary	272
8.3.1.	<i>Shifting struggles: Becoming practitioner, researcher, academic, neoliberal subject</i>	273
8.3.2.	<i>The space between the vocational-academic divide</i>	274
8.3.3.	<i>Culture, the neoliberal turn, and becoming</i>	274
8.3.4.	<i>Be(com)ing in a shifting academic landscape</i>	275

8.4.	Moments of displacement as opportunities for recreating self	275
8.5.	Summary	276
9.	BE(COM)ING THROUGH PLAY	277
9.1.	Introduction	277
9.2.	Section A – Dressing up assemblages	278
9.2.1.	<i>Lifeworld assemblage: Everyday Kaila and cultural contexts</i>	279
9.2.2.	<i>Fashion designer assemblage: Tailoring the self through fashion</i>	285
9.2.3.	<i>Fashion design lecturer assemblage: Navigating the classroom</i>	288
9.2.4.	<i>Embodied assemblage: Fashioning my own path</i>	292
9.2.5.	<i>Fashioning identities through paper doll assemblages</i>	297
9.3.	Section B – Pictorial tensions	298
9.3.1.	<i>Navigating discomfort in tensions</i>	298
9.3.2.	<i>Pictorial tensions</i>	298
9.3.3.	<i>Pictorial embodiment: Exploring visual selves</i>	300
9.4.	Summary	303
10.	THE FINAL STITCH: A REFLEXIVE DISCUSSION	305
10.1.	Introduction	305
10.2.	Section A – My interpretive scholarly understanding	306
10.2.1.	<i>Pictorial tensions: Personal reflections on uncomfortable insights</i>	306
10.2.2.	<i>Embodied discomfort</i>	308
10.2.3.	<i>Uncovering my ‘truths’: Unlearning notions of fashion</i>	310
10.2.4.	<i>Moving forward differently</i>	312
10.2.5.	<i>Weaving the fashion design lecturer into being</i>	312
10.3.	Section B – Methodological contributions	320
10.3.1.	<i>Embracing methodological messiness and liminality</i>	320
10.3.2.	<i>Visual autoethnography in fashion design education</i>	321
10.3.3.	<i>Entangling the visual and the written</i>	322
10.4.	Section C – Theoretical contributions	324
10.4.1.	<i>Theoretical insights on creative be(com)ing</i>	324
10.4.2.	<i>Being a connection for practitioner-academics</i>	325
10.5.	Section D – Practical contributions	326
10.5.1.	<i>Being-becoming a fashion design lecturer</i>	326
10.5.2.	<i>Fashion education: Integrating practical and conceptual learning</i>	327
10.6.	Avenues for further research	328
10.7.	Carrying the threads forward	328
	APPENDIX A – ETHICAL CLEARANCE	330
	APPENDIX B – LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT	331
	APPENDIX C – GATEKEEPER’S LETTER	333
	APPENDIX D – EDITING CERTIFICATE	334
	APPENDIX E – TURN IT IN REPORT	335
	APPENDIX F – EXTENDED GUIDE TO READING THE VISUAL	336
	REFERENCES	343

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1: Emotional whirlwind.....	1
Figure 1.2: Photograph of my grandmother, her PhD thesis and me, taken by my mother	8
Figure 1.3: Through my lens: Entangling perspectives.....	11
Figure 1.4: Thesis structure as a self-portrait	14
Figure 1.5: Drawn to drawing.....	19
Figure 1.6: Super PhD.....	20
Figure 1.7: Once upon a story	21
Figure 1.8: Narrative voice visual frame.....	27
Figure 1.9: Talking heads visual frame (transcript extracts).....	27
Figure 2.1: Discipline density.....	58
Figure 3.1: Research design concept map	69
Figure 3.2: Anonibeian example.....	86
Figure 3.3: My chosen objects.....	87
Figure 3.4: Seeing through ‘things’	88
Figure 3.5: Features of storytelling.....	91
Figure 3.6: Re-storying framework.....	92
Figure 3.7: Doodle Kailas growing up.....	96
Figure 3.8: Story board thumbnail examples from comic illustration	98
Figure 3.9: Thumbnail extract	99
Figure 3.10: Colour coding schema of the analytic approach	100
Figure 3.11: Example thumbnail showing colour schema	101
Figure 3.12: Base identi-doll	103
Figure 3.13: Process work – the hand drawn items scanned in	104
Figure 4.1: My father, sister, and me (around 1989)	115
Figure 4.2: My mother and me (1989).....	115
Figure 4.3: An early drawing.....	116
Figure 4.4: A life changing sewing machine.....	119
Figure 4.5: Me standing in front of the waterfall.....	121
Figure 4.6: Portfolio cover	123
Figure 4.7: Portfolio intro.....	123
Figure 4.8: Digital illustration	123
Figure 4.9: Fashion designs.....	123
Figure 4.10: Pencil sketch	123
Figure 4.11: Sewing tutorial.....	123
Figure 4.12: Pom, me, and the scissors storyboard.....	124
Figure 4.13: My 3 rd year fashion range on the night of the show	127
Figure 4.14: Examples of my artwork during my student days.....	129
Figure 4.15: ‘An old friend’ storyboard.....	129
Figure 4.16: Meeting doodles in ballpoint pen.....	139
Figure 4.17: Examples of my figure drawings (charcoal and pastel on card)	140
Figure 4.18: Lilacs – oil on canvas	141
Figure 4.19: The Three Graces (oil on canvas)	142
Figure 4.20: Gran and me at the reception for her 2 nd wedding.....	147
Figure 4.21: Intergenerational threads story board	148
Figure 4.22: Identity self portraits	162
Figure 5.1: Kaila-the-girl comic doodle.....	167
Figure 5.2: Extract from Kaila-the-girl comic doodle.....	171
Figure 5.3: Kaila-the-learner part one comic doodle	174
Figure 5.4: Extract from Kaila-the-learner comic doodle	176
Figure 5.5: Extract from Kaila-the-learner part one comic doodle.....	178
Figure 5.6: Extract from Kaila-the-learner part one comic doodle.....	179
Figure 5.7: Kaila-the-learner part 2 comic doodle.....	182
Figure 5.8: Extract from Kaila-the-learner part 2 comic doodle	183

Figure 5.9: Extract from Kaila-the-learner part two comic doodle.....	185
Figure 5.10: Extract from Kaila-the-learner part two comic doodle.....	186
Figure 5.11: Extract from Kaila-the-learner part two comic doodle.....	187
Figure 5.12: Kaila-the-student comic doodle	190
Figure 5.13: Extract from Kaila-the-student comic doodle.....	192
Figure 5.14: Extract from Kaila-the-student comic doodle.....	194
Figure 5.15: Extract from Kaila-the-student comic doodle.....	195
Figure 5.16: Extract from Kaila-the-student comic doodle.....	197
Figure 5.17: Everyday Kaila personal concept map	199
Figure 5.18: Creative Kaila personal concept map.....	201
Figure 5.19: Academic Kaila personal concept map	202
Figure 5.20: Gendered Kaila personal concept map	204
Figure 6.1: Professional be(com)ing comic illustration.....	210
Figure 6.2: Extract from Professional be(com)ing comic illustration.....	211
Figure 6.3: Extract from professional be(com)ing comic illustration.....	216
Figure 6.4: Extract from professional be(com)ing comic illustration.....	218
Figure 6.5: Extract from professional be(com)ing comic illustration.....	225
Figure 6.6: Extract from professional be(com)ing comic illustration.....	228
Figure 6.7: Extract from professional be(com)ing comic illustration.....	229
Figure 6.8: Everyday Kaila professional concept map	231
Figure 6.9: Creative Kaila professional concept map.....	233
Figure 6.10: Academic Kaila professional concept map.....	234
Figure 6.11: Marginalised feminist Kaila professional concept map.....	236
Figure 6.12: Interconnected cultural contexts	238
Figure 7.1: Unravel.....	241
Figure 8.1: A photograph of my fabric scissors.....	255
Figure 8.2: From student to teacher storyboard.....	259
Figure 8.3: Making the cut storyboard.....	261
Figure 8.4: A photograph of my office keys	264
Figure 8.5: Becoming a lecturer storyboard.....	266
Figure 8.6: Earning my keys storyboard.....	268
Figure 8.7: Handing over storyboard.....	270
Figure 9.1: Lifeworld assemblage.....	281
Figure 9.2: Fashion design assemblage.....	286
Figure 9.3: Fashion design lecturer assemblage	290
Figure 9.4: Embodied Assemblage.....	294
Figure 9.5: Uncomfortable thoughts.....	299
Figure 9.6: Pictorial representations of Kaila.....	302
Figure 10.1: Visualising be(com)ing	314

1. FASHIONING THE AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC JOURNEY: INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction to the study

This PhD emerged from the need to fashion a more insightful and compassionate self – a lecturer capable of navigating the chaos of institutional demands while meaningfully supporting my students.

I was sitting in a conference session around 2017, surrounded by my fellow academics discussing the 'emotional whirlwind' of being a student entering university (Christie et al., 2007). As the presenter spoke passionately about how lecturers should better support their students, I doodled on a Post-it note. The doodle (see Figure 1.1 below) depicts a woman (me) caught in a chaotic storm of floating emoji-like faces, each representing the conflicting emotions of my students and my own turmoil as their lecturer. At the time, I attended these conferences because I was desperate to learn how to better support my students. But their realities went far beyond what was being discussed in those conference rooms. In my classroom, I saw every aspect of human life and struggle in students with extraordinary challenges: some couldn't afford transport to class, basic supplies, and sometimes food; others hadn't written essays or used a computer before starting university. Many juggled working, caring for siblings or children, or navigating physical and mental health conditions. Some dealt with death, crime, trauma, and abject poverty. All while trying to build a future for themselves in a system that wasn't designed with their struggles in mind. These conferences weren't showing me how to make the meaningful difference I so desperately wanted. I felt trapped in a maelstrom of institutional pressures, departmental expectations, and the overwhelming weight of my students' lived realities. It was in the middle of this whirlwind that I realised I needed something more, something deeper. I turned to this PhD as a way to fashion myself into the lecturer I aspired to be – one who could navigate the tensions pulling at every corner of my professional and personal life, while honouring the resilience, diversity, and humanity of the students in my classroom.

Figure 1.1: Emotional whirlwind



To “fashion” something means to bring something into being, to create or form it, but it can also refer to the transient nature of style trends (such as clothing, accessories, or design aesthetics) that change over time. In this thesis, I explore the metaphor of fashioning to reflect the dynamic interplay of my identities, which are always shifting and transforming to reflect my unique sociocultural context. Rather than presenting fixed answers, fashioning as a metaphoric lens invites a deeper engagement with how identity unfolds through entanglements with people, practices, objects, and environments. By focusing on this relational and iterative process, I aim to open up questions about how personal and professional identities are shaped and reshaped in the lived realities of my work as a fashion design lecturer at a University of Technology.

To be human is to be “unfinished” (Campbell, 2004, p. 5) because we are “always in a state of becoming” (Davids & Waghid, 2017, p. 7). We are constantly shaped and reshaped by our interactions, environments, and experiences, evolving as new possibilities for being emerge. The experience I described in the opening story (Figure 1.1) sparked a deep curiosity in me. I was witnessing my students changing, becoming fashion designers right in front of me. Guiding them through this transformation, even as they navigated the complex realities of their lives, was both challenging and fascinating. Soon, my curiosity turned inward. How was I, their lecturer, being shaped by these same entanglements? What forces – personal, professional, institutional – were influencing my own becoming?

This question felt deeply connected to my upbringing in a home filled with strong, creative women. My mother, grandmother and the other women in my family were resourceful and resilient, fostering nurturing environments through communal crafting and mentorship. I learnt through them that the tools we use, the materials we touch, and the actions we take are not just practical; they carry stories, values, and histories that shape who we are. These memories, steeped in craft, making and mentorship, taught me that identity is never static but always being shaped – woven together – through our interactions with the world.

Inspired by these experiences, I explore the idea of being-becoming not as a fixed state but as an iterative, relational process. Barad’s (2007) notion of relationality helps illustrate this, suggesting that identities emerge not in isolation but through interactions with the people, objects, and discourses around us. Through this lens, my own becoming as a lecturer is not separate from the tools I use, the lessons I teach, or the institutional forces I face. These entanglements, material and discursive, continuously shape my identity, opening up new possibilities for who and what I might yet become.

It is this framing of being-becoming that guides this inquiry, enabling me to delve into the interplay of personal and professional transformations within the context of fashion design education.

Stetsenko (2010, p. 11) argues that the “process of Becoming [is] embodied through our past, present and future deeds that create the world we live in.” This highlights how our actions not only shape our identities but also influence the social worlds we inhabit. Like my students, I too am in a state of being-becoming, navigating the discourses and disciplines that shape my identity as a fashion design lecturer. It is this framing of being-becoming that guides this inquiry, enabling a deeper exploration of the interplay between personal and professional transformations within the context of fashion design education.

This thesis investigates the entanglements of identity formation through a feminist new materialist lens, focusing on how identities are shaped and negotiated within the sociocultural, material, and institutional dynamics of a University of Technology. By questioning traditional notions of identity as fixed, this autoethnographic study highlights the fluid, relational processes through which fashion design lecturer subjectivities emerge, shift, and evolve. These subjectivities are framed as contested spaces—dynamic and open to reshaping. In doing so, this work contributes to broader conversations on relational self-identity as ethical practice in educational and higher education pedagogic settings, offering new ways to understand and navigate the complexities of being and becoming.

1.2. Rationale for the study

As an autoethnographer, I explore what it means to become a fashion design lecturer within a University of Technology. While deeply personal, this process is relational and participatory, shaped by my interactions with those I teach, work with, and care about. By examining how my becoming is entangled with these relationships and the broader institutional culture—including the taken-for-granted routines, habits, and practices—I aim to understand not only myself but also how these cultural flows constrain innovation, erasing what is new, different, or othered, and making visible the spaces where resistance and transformation might emerge.

1.2.1. Personal rationale: Who am I, and why does it matter?

I grew up as a white, middle-class girl surrounded by strong, resourceful women who mentored and inspired me. Like many young girls, I was taught traditional handcrafts (Kokko, 2009) like knitting, crocheting, and most important to me, sewing (Gordon, 2009). These activities were not just solitary creative outlets; they were communal acts of making and learning, spaces where knowledge, resources, and stories were shared. Crafting together with my mother, sister, grandmother, and aunts fostered a profound sense of belonging, connection, and inclusion. These get-togethers taught me that creativity is not just an individual act but also a deeply social one, where collaboration and mutual support amongst women bring ideas to life (Gordon, 2009).

Through these women-led experiences, I was introduced to an alternative way of being a woman – one that valued creativity, independence, and self-expression over more traditional or prescriptive roles. For me, crafting was also a gateway to imagining a professional future as a fashion designer. However, I recognise that introduction to craft was shaped by privileges I didn't recognise at the time, such as access to an electric sewing machine and store-bought fabrics, threads, and patterns. These resources are not universally available and reflect a classed dynamic of craft-making (Patel & Dudrah, 2022). This stands in contrast to crafters from marginalised backgrounds who face barriers to learning crafts and limited resources, including physical space and access to materials and tools (Comunian & England, 2022). These differences highlight how crafting practices are shaped by socio-economic and cultural contexts, underscoring the privilege embedded in my own crafting journey (Patel & Dudrah, 2022).

Crafting was not just about creating objects but about engaging in a deeply embodied practice. The tactile process of working with tools, fabrics, and threads fostered a sensorial connection that shaped my understanding of creativity and identity as a girl. These artefacts became more than finished products; they carried the stories, emotions, and histories embedded in the act of making. Through crafting, I learnt to think through doing, where materials and actions coalesced in ways that influenced my perspective. This connection between making and meaning laid the groundwork for how I view the interplay of personal experience, creativity, and professional practice. As this study reveals, these entanglements are not static but continually evolving, shaped by material, social, and cultural dynamics that flow across time and space. Thinking with a feminist new materialist stance, this understanding reframes identity as a relational and material process of becoming, entangled within these interconnected forces and always open to reconfiguration.

My family valued formal education deeply, instilling in me a lifelong love of learning. While my mother was a teacher, my grandmother lectured before transitioning into social work. Throughout my childhood, mentoring and teaching were modelled to me through what Lortie (2020) describes as an “apprenticeship of observation,” where I absorbed informal and authentic approaches to guiding others. The “heart of a teacher” (Palmer, 1997) seemed almost an inherited trait, passed down as an intergenerational disposition that celebrated the joy of sparking learning in others. However, this apprenticeship also revealed the harder truths of teaching through my mother's experiences. I saw her dedication to her students and the immense challenges she faced – emotional exhaustion, long hours, inadequate recognition, and the struggle to navigate a prescriptive education system. These observations shaped my early resistance to the idea of becoming a traditional schoolteacher, a profession I saw as both demanding and undervalued.

It was only through my own experiences of mentoring and being mentored that I began to see teaching differently. My early exposure to craft-making at home introduced me to a more collaborative, exploratory experience of learning. Crafting with my family was not just about making; it was about guiding, sharing ideas, and problem-solving together. These moments formed my understanding of teaching as a relational, creative process, where knowledge is constructed through sharing, observing, making, and telling stories – as experiencing beings – rather than being transmitted as static facts. This vibrant materiality of crafting and creating something contrasted with the “sage-on-stage” model I had encountered in school. These experiences gradually shifted my perspective, making the idea of teaching – on my terms – an appealing prospect.

However, as a fashion student, I was taught primarily through procedural, transmittal methods. Lecturers demonstrated skills and techniques, and we were expected to replicate them. At the time, this felt engaging because it was hands-on, but in hindsight, I realised it was still rooted in the “sage on the stage” model described by King (1993). When I became a lecturer, I initially adopted this same approach, expecting students to absorb the rules and processes of fashion design through replication. But it wasn’t working. On reflection, I realised that my early teaching was misaligned with the values I held about learning as a creative and collaborative process.

My privilege shaped my access to opportunities and informed my understanding of teaching as a fulfilling, creative pursuit. Yet, my students’ lived realities often collided with the assumptions I brought to my practice. I began to understand that effective teaching required more than reproducing the methods I had learnt; it demanded a deeper engagement with my students’ experiences and a willingness to adapt my approach.

The daily tension I encountered in my teaching practice and the complex realities of my students’ lives make this study deeply significant for me as an early-career academic. Through this inquiry, I seek to understand how my own being-becoming as a fashion design lecturer is entangled with these intersecting forces. By critically examining my teaching practices and beliefs within the sociocultural context of the UoT, I aim to explore the material nature of fashion design education and articulate a more nuanced understanding of what it means to become a fashion design lecturer. This inquiry offers an ethical response that recognises thinking as materially situated (Pahl, 2017), allowing me to reimagine how I engage with an environment marked by diversity, complexity, and transformative possibilities.

1.2.2. Professional rationale: What does it mean to be a fashion design lecturer

This study focuses on my being and becoming as a fashion design lecturer within the context of a UoT. What it means to be a lecturer and the everyday work that lecturers need to do in a University

of Technology has evolved from vocational education to professional disciplines (De Wet, 2017). However, the practice of hiring professionals of a discipline without pedagogical training or experience persisted (Chitanand, 2015). These novice lecturers were frequently mentored by experienced faculty members who had come from Technikon backgrounds themselves (Mtshali & Sooryamoorthy, 2019). Many practitioner-turned-lecturers need to rely on their apprenticeship of learning (Lortie, 2020), modelling their teaching on how they were taught.

The fashion design discipline falls under the Faculty of Art and Design. The faculty has its own traditions and culture, steeped in the vocational legacy of practical art and design education. Further to that, I worked in the Fashion design department, which has discipline-specific ways of viewing and valuing knowledge (Barnett & Coate, 2004; Clarence & McKenna, 2017; Dittrich, 2006). There are specific ‘ways of being’ within the departmental culture that shape the lecturers and their educational practices. When I first began lecturing, the dominant ‘way of being’ a lecturer focused on teaching competency and skills, and not the practical application of skills through understanding – which Dall’Alba (2009) argues is imperative for teaching professional disciplines. The shift in fashion design from a vocation to a professional discipline (De Wet, 2017) was already beginning to take place in my department. With limited opportunities for formal staff development, training, and preparation, lecturers were often left to navigate and adapt their teaching and learning practices independently.

Teaching is not neutral (Gee, 2008; Richards, 2011). I bring my personal beliefs into the classroom with me (Stetsenko, 2010). I am shaped by the sociocultural context of my institution, as well as my home culture in a South African, white, middle-class family. All of which have a bearing on who I am as a white, early-career academic and lecturer. Understanding my positionality within this cultural context, as a female academic lecturing fashion design at a UoT, is central to this autoethnographic study. Critiquing the histories that shaped my worldview is an ethical responsibility. In doing this, I can be more intentional and reflexive in my practice, helping me to improve my teaching (Barkhuizen, 2008).

Tracing the feminist thread

There is a matrilineal history of teaching, learning, and academics in my family, which has significantly shaped my beliefs about education and identity. In commencing this autoethnographic study, I found myself asking: where does my story begin? Did my desire to become an academic stem from years of observing and being mentored by the educated women in my family? The habits, values, and dispositions of my family – what Bourdieu (1977/2020) might describe as a familial *habitus* – created an environment that emphasised education, resilience, and creativity.

These influences trace a matrilineal line from my grandmother to my mother. My grandmother completed her Master's and PhD after having children. My mother completed her PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education) when I was in high school, showing me the possibilities of combining personal growth with professional purpose. My sister, with her multiple qualifications across disciplines, further exemplified the importance of education as a means of self-expression and empowerment. These examples of strong, educated women laid the foundation for my own beliefs and aspirations, subtly shaping my feminist orientation.

As I reflected on my being-becoming as a lecturer, I realised how deeply my feminist stance is rooted in my lived experiences. It is not just a theoretical position but a deeply personal and ethical one. The feminist stance provides a lens through which I can critically examine the interwoven forces of personal, professional, and cultural contexts that shape my being-becoming as a lecturer. By acknowledging and interrogating these influences, I aim to challenge dominant discourses around teaching and learning while contributing to more equitable and inclusive practices within fashion design education.

Figure 1.2 captures the thread of strong women that have fashioned me. More than a photograph; it is a visual text that prompts reflection and storytelling. The image holds layers of meaning, evoking not only memories of that winter day but also deeper cultural and historical narratives. As Pahl (2017) suggests, visual artefacts can serve as powerful prompts for tracing the stories that remain untold or marginalised, revealing connections that may otherwise go unnoticed. This photograph invites questions about the silenced histories within my family, particularly the struggles of women navigating male-dominated academic spaces. It becomes a site of intra-action, where personal and collective memories are entangled with the sociocultural forces that shaped – and continue to shape – our identities. Through the visual, I am prompted to confront the lingering influences of Western and Androcentric educational traditions, tracing the cultural and familial threads that weave into my own story of being-becoming.

Figure 1.2: Photograph of my grandmother, her PhD thesis and me, taken by my mother



Note. Photograph with permission.

Figure 1.2 is a photograph of my grandmother and me sitting on a bench outside on the grounds of her old age home in the KwaZulu Natal midlands. Open on my lap, I'm holding her doctoral thesis. The photograph was taken by my mother during a visit on a winter's day in July 2019. During that visit, I audio-recorded her as she recounted stories of her lecturing days and completing her PhD, while sharing memories and photographs with my mother and me. Listening to her stories about navigating a male-dominated academic space and witnessing her resilience and determination left a profound impression on me. She spoke about how she was not "allowed" to take up a permanent lecturing position because she was the wife of a faculty member and how she was "just filling in" until a man could take her place. Hearing these stories deepened my appreciation for the struggles and triumphs of women in academia, shaping my understanding of what it means to persevere and thrive within such contexts. Reflecting on her journey and her ability to balance personal challenges with professional aspirations profoundly influenced how I see myself as a lecturer and a scholar.

The conversations we had over this shared connection brought us closer together. Asking about her thesis and her PhD journey created a space for her to share stories – not only about her academic pursuits but also about our family history. These stories illuminated the interwoven narratives that shaped who I am and opened possibilities for what lies ahead. In the foreword to *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, (Campbell, 2004, p. XXXV) Estés explains that storytelling, particularly among women, has long been a way of fostering community, preserving shared knowledge, and transmitting cultural wisdom across generations. Through these exchanges, personal histories become collective

narratives, rich with the lived realities and aspirations of those who came before us. In this way, her stories became more than memories; they were powerful acts of connection and meaning-making that continue to influence my journey as an academic and a woman.

I have always found it inspiring that my grandmother became a lecturer during a time when the field was dominated by men. On the day that this photograph was taken, I found out that she only did her PhD years after she had stopped lecturing. When I asked her why she chose to do her PhD when it wasn't required for her job, she said she just loved learning. My grandmother passed away in August 2021. The photograph (Figure 1.2) captured the last time that I saw her in person. I moved to the UK in September 2019. Including her in my thesis feels like a way to honour her memory and the inspiration she has been in my life. Her story is part of my story and leaving her out of my thesis – the story of my being a fashion designer and becoming a fashion design lecturer – would be incomplete.

This inclusion also reflects a feminist stance, one that values the significance of women's voices and stories as vital sites of knowledge-making. Through the telling of "previously untold stories" of women and marginalised groups, society is re-shaped and "old prejudices are opposed" (Randall & Randall, 1995, p. 298). As hooks (2015) argues, the personal is inherently political, and women's lived experiences are critical for challenging dominant narratives and addressing systemic inequalities. My grandmother's resilience, her pursuit of education despite the gendered limitations of her time, and the intergenerational sharing of her stories shaped my understanding of the need to bring women's lives and voices to the forefront of academic inquiry.

In doing so, I aim to situate my own being-becoming within a broader feminist tradition that seeks to connect personal experiences to socio-political and historical contexts. This perspective, entangled with my personal-professional identities, forms the foundation for the feminist new materialist lens I adopt throughout this study. It is through this lens that I examine not only the assemblage of materials, relationships, discourses, and histories that shape my identity but also the collective entanglements that inform the larger context of my work.

Researcher positionality: A feminist new materialist stance

This study focuses on my own experiences of being and becoming a fashion design lecturer at a University of Technology. Building on the feminist insights shaped by my grandmother's story and the significance of women's lived experiences, my feminist perspective – particularly feminist new materialism – frames this exploration by emphasising the intra-active nature of identity. Identity, in this view, is co-constructed in relation to the world around me, including the material and social elements of my teaching and design practices. Autoethnography offers a space for me to 'hear the

other side' of my identity as it forms, shifts, and interweaves within the social, cultural, and material contexts that shape my work. This relational understanding is essential in making sense of how my identity as both educator and designer is fashioned through intra-actions with the students, materials, and institutional structures that constitute my teaching environment.

Why autoethnography

I want to understand who I am and how I have come to be this way so that I may grow and change. To do this, I need to tell my story. One of my favourite quotes is: “we’re all stories in the end, just make it a good one, eh,” (Bennett, 2010). If we’re all stories, then this is my story. In this thesis, I am the researcher-storyteller. I tell and relive the stories that have shaped me through the social, cultural, and historical contexts of my being-becoming. Ontologically, I understand life as storied, fluid, and co-constructed. I believe that through engaging with my stories, I can deepen my understanding of who I am and how I got here.

As a white, female fashion design lecturer working within a University of Technology in South Africa, my identities are shaped by intersecting forces of privilege and responsibility. My positionality cannot be separated from the sociocultural and institutional context within which I teach – a context marked by the enduring legacies of inequality and exclusion. Autoethnography provides a lens through which I can critically examine the entanglement of my personal and professional experiences with these broader systemic forces (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). By reflecting on how my beliefs and practices are shaped by this context, I aim to cultivate reflexive awareness and challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions that underpin my role as a lecturer.

Autoethnography also allows me to explore the tensions between my personal values, my professional practices, and the expectations of teaching within a UoT. This relational approach positions my stories not as isolated reflections but as part of a larger, dynamic assemblage of material-discursive elements – students, institutional structures, objects, fashion design practices, and cultural norms – that shape my being and becoming.

As Wenham (2022) reflects, storytelling fosters agency and connection, allowing readers to find resonance in shared experiences. Reflexively examining my narratives creates opportunities for growth, change, and accountability, both for myself and within my teaching practice. In this way, autoethnography becomes not just a method of inquiry but an ethical practice of engaging with the material, cultural, and professional forces that shape who I am and who I am becoming as a lecturer.

Figure 1.3: Through my lens: Entangling perspectives



Note. Figure created by the author.

The self-portrait in Figure 1.3 represents an act of externalising the self, a deliberate step in positioning myself as both researcher and subject of inquiry. By turning the gaze inward, I, as the autoethnographer, begin the process of interrogating how my personal and professional experiences, beliefs, and practices are entangled with and shaped by broader cultural, material, and institutional forces. This act of externalisation aligns with the methodological approach of this study, which uses reflexivity to explore the complex assemblages of my being-becoming as a fashion design lecturer. The self-portrait signals the starting point of this inquiry, inviting critical examination of the self while acknowledging the multiplicity of influences – social, cultural, material, and institutional – that shape identity. Positioned at the intersection of these forces, the image serves as both a reflection and a provocation, prompting deeper questioning of how identity is co-constructed within this dynamic context.

In this thesis, I use autoethnography to explore my being-becoming as a fashion design lecturer. This process positions my identities not as fixed but as part of a dynamic assemblage shaped by the social, cultural, and material forces of my context. Rather than a linear or binary understanding of self, this approach allows me to engage with the multiplicity of influences that entangle and co-constitute my identity. Feminist new materialism emphasises the intra-active nature of these forces, where personal and professional selves are formed through their relationships with people, practices, objects, and institutional structures.

In the process of writing this thesis, I have struggled with the disconnect between who I am as a fashion designer and who I need to be to complete the PhD. It has been a fight between my practitioner self and my scholarly self. I've come to realise that it needn't be, that I can be and am both. To bring together both of these very different sides of me, I've used art making and visuals to help me have these conversations with myself (Tversky, 2011).

As Smith and Sparkes (2006, p. 169) explain, “the stories that people tell and hear from others form the warp and weft of who they are and what they do.” These stories become the warp and weft threads woven into the assemblage of being-becoming, intertwining the personal and collective, the material and discursive. By engaging with my own narratives, I seek to unravel the threads that constitute my being-becoming, while recognising that this process remains open-ended, continually shaped by the entanglements of my lived experiences.

My personal and professional experiences as a fashion design student at a UoT post-merger, and later as a lecturer, reflects these changes. As a white student taught by racially diverse lecturers (most of whom had started as Technikon lecturers), I qualified, understanding my profession as “practical skills training with a vocationally focused curriculum,” in line with the observation made by Smal and Lavelle (2011, p. 197). Later, as a white lecturer from an educated family teaching predominantly black, majority first-generation students, I experienced firsthand the contrast between my lived experiences and those of my students. The additional contextual factors of language, class, privilege, and access were played out in the same classroom as the shift from a skills-based to a knowledge-based curriculum.

1.2.3. Contextual rationale: How does my context shape my becoming?

In autoethnographic studies, an individual’s context is crucial to understanding how the sociocultural elements have shaped one’s multiple selves. My specific context after my family and my general education is located at a University of Technology (UoT), itself a particular type of higher education institution (HEI) steeped in tradition, tension, and transition.

The UoT emerged as part of South Africa’s transformation agenda to address Apartheid-era inequities in higher education (see authors like Badat, 2010; Chetty, 2010; Cooper, 2015; Du Pré, 2009; Du Pre et al., 2004; Hlalele, 2010; Lewin & Mowoyo, 2014; Manik, 2015). The transformation agenda led to the merger of historically white institutions and historically Indian and black institutions (Chetty, 2010; Du Pré, 2009), as well as the conversion of Technikons into Universities of Technology in the early 2000s (Badat, 2010; Du Pré, 2009; Du Pre et al., 2004; Koko, 2010). While this transformation broadened access to higher education, it also created challenges in governance, curriculum alignment, and the merging of distinct institutional cultures (Badat, 2010; Chetty, 2010; Du Pre et al., 2004).

For practitioner-lecturers, this shift required adapting vocational, practice-based teaching approaches to meet the academic and theoretical demands of a university framework (Du Pré, 2009). In fashion design, this transition involved reconciling hands-on, skills-based methods with critical and theoretical approaches to prepare students for evolving professions (De Wet, 2017). While some

lecturers embraced the opportunity for growth and innovation (Gumbi & McKenna, 2020), others found the shift challenging, exacerbated by limited institutional support (Badat, 2010; Mtshali & Sooryamoorthy, 2019). These tensions profoundly shape my experiences as a lecturer navigating the intersections of vocational and academic imperatives.

This evolving context raises ethical questions for practitioner-lecturers like me: How can I honour and teach the tacit knowledge embodied in fashion design education – knowledge that is material, sensory, and deeply human – while navigating the theoretical and academic expectations of a professional discipline? How do I balance the hands-on, practice-based approaches central to the craft of fashion design with the need to cultivate critical, adaptive, and reflective capacities in my students? These tensions are further complicated by the entanglement of institutional forces, competing drivers of vocational and academic imperatives, and the broader assemblage of human and non-human elements shaping my being-becoming as a fashion design lecturer within the UoT context. Navigating this assemblage demands a reflexive, relational approach that engages with the material-discursive dimensions of teaching, learning, and identity formation within a space marked by tradition, transition, and transformation.

Although this is a visual autoethnographic study, it contributes to the wider context of higher education in South Africa. By reflecting on my experiences of being and becoming a fashion design lecturer, this inquiry examines the interplay of identities, materiality, and academia. It interrogates the conflicts between personal beliefs, professional expectations, and systemic pressures within a shifting educational landscape. This reflective exploration not only enables me to address assumptions about what it means to be a ‘good’ lecturer but also seeks to position practical skills alongside academic demands. In doing so, I hope this study offers insights for future practitioner-scholars navigating the complexities of identity and pedagogy in higher education.

1.3. Aim of research and research problem

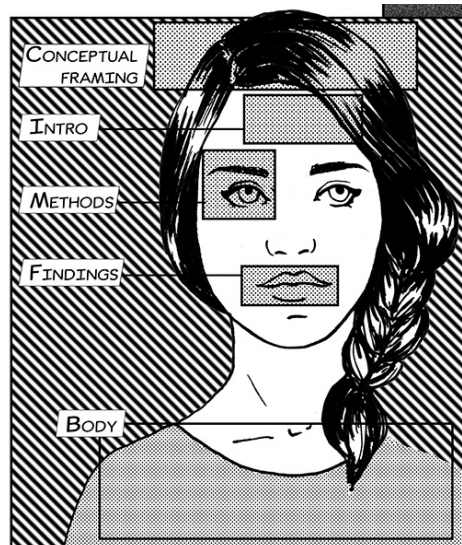
This study adopts a visual autoethnographic approach, interweaving visual and narrative texts to explore my being-becoming as a fashion design lecturer within the dynamic sociocultural and institutional context of a University of Technology. Rather than adhering strictly to traditional linear structures, this thesis embraces a narrative and relational style, allowing the stories of my being-becoming to emerge through entangled assemblages of text, image, and reflection.

1.3.1. Conceptualising the thesis structure

While the structure of the thesis is shaped to align with the conventions of academic inquiry, it also embodies a creative and reflexive sensibility. Figure 1.3 presents a comic-style self-portrait that visually maps the thesis structure, highlighting and naming its different sections. This visual

representation situates the thesis as an artefact of inquiry, reflecting the intra-action of the personal, professional, and contextual forces that shape my journey as both a scholar and practitioner.

Figure 1.4: Thesis structure as a self-portrait



Note. Figure created by the author.

The comic-style self-portrait (Figure 1.4) offers a visual representation of the thesis structure, [re]imagining its conventional components through the entangled lens of autoethnographic inquiry. Each labelled section of the image aligns with traditional thesis elements, yet challenges their rigid boundaries, instead embracing the relational, embodied, and intra-active processes of being-becoming that underpin this study.

“Conceptual framing” is represented as a box outlining my head. This placement signals the entanglement of thought, theory, and context – not as static theoretical or conceptual frameworks, but as dynamic, diffractive intra-actions between the personal, material, conceptual, and theoretical. Drawing on Mazzei and Jackson (2023), this lens invites the reader to think *with* theory, understanding it as both a stance and a tool for engaging with the complexities and multiplicities of this inquiry. The “Intro” points to my forehead, a playful nod to the pun between ‘forehead’ and ‘foreword.’ As a starting point, it grounds the inquiry in the sociocultural and institutional forces that entangle and shape the stories of being-becoming explored in this study.

Under “methods,” a line extends to my eye. Here, the eye signifies perception – not as a neutral act, but as an actively shaped and shaping process. Taking a post-qualitative approach, I engage in bespoke methods (MacLure, 2023), acknowledging that methods are emergent and relational, unfolding in response to the inquiry itself. The methods in this study encompass visual and narrative texts as diffractive practices, intra-acting with the world to illuminate the entanglements of being-

becoming. These methods move beyond reflecting or observing to generate new ways of seeing and knowing, entangled with the material-discursive forces at play.

The section labelled “findings” points to my mouth, representing the articulation of insights through voice – spoken, written, and visual. In place of traditional generalisable ‘findings,’ this study offers assemblages: relational readings of concepts and stories as they intra-act and entangle with one another. These ‘findings’ give voice to the unspoken, the unheard, and the relational, co-created stories that emerge from engaging with inquiry. The visuals I have drawn and curated are not illustrative but integral to these assemblages, disrupting the binaries of seeing and saying, and opening new spaces for meaning-making.

The title “body” points to my physical body, emphasising its role as an active participant in this inquiry. The body is not merely a container for the researcher but a site of intra-action, connecting the personal and professional, the material and the discursive. As a fashion design lecturer, my body is both subject and object within this assemblage, entwined with the narratives and materialities that constitute this study.

This visual resists the rigidity of compartmentalised research structures, offering instead a fluid and relational perspective. The absence of a box labelled “conclusions” reflects the open-endedness of this inquiry. In autoethnography, conclusions are not definitive endpoints but moments of pause in the ongoing process of being-becoming. As Barad (2007, p. 161) reminds us, “what is ‘inside’ and what is ‘outside’ are intrinsically indeterminate,” highlighting the entangled, iterative nature of becoming. This study embraces this indeterminacy, resisting closure and inviting continued inquiry and dialogue.

Similarly, the final section, traditionally devoted to “recommendations,” embodies the intra-active and collaborative nature of this inquiry. This study is not a solitary act but part of an ongoing entanglement with others’ stories, lives, and contexts. These ‘recommendations’ are an invitation – provocations for others navigating their own being-becoming, offering not prescriptive solutions but resonances, insights, and openings for further exploration in the messy, dynamic assemblages of academic and professional identities.

1.3.2. The research problem

The real-world problem, or life-world problem (Waghid, 2002, p. 472), that grounds this inquiry is deeply personal: how do I come to understand myself, where I am now, and how I arrived at this point in my being-becoming? This is not merely an introspective task but also a question entangled with the lived realities of other practitioner-lecturers who face the daunting, and often

incomprehensible, shift from industry practice to academia. Added to this is the parallel transition I am navigating – from academic lecturer to doctoral scholar – each shift demanding new ways of thinking, being, and doing. These are not isolated challenges; they are systemic realities echoed by many practitioner-academics (see Ennals et al., 2016; Faerm, 2015; and Leavy, 2015), making this study not only personally meaningful but potentially valuable to a broader professional community.

What, then, is the research problem? It is the part of the real-world problem that can be diffracted through the scope of a doctoral inquiry (Pratt, 2016, p. 1). This study embraces visual autoethnography to explore these transitions, not to resolve them but to engage with them as entangled, intra-active processes. My aim is twofold: first, to articulate to academics with a more conventional background (if there is such a thing) what it means for a practitioner to become an academic at a University of Technology; and second, to offer solidarity, comfort, and possibilities for future pathways to practitioners undergoing similar transitions.

Undertaking this inquiry has surfaced the tensions between practice-led knowledge and the “writerly” expectations of a doctoral thesis. My fashion design background suggests that I would be much more at home *drawing* or *sewing* a thesis, embodying my knowledge practice through a familiar visual, tacit, and creative process. As Melrose (2003, p. 14) points out, professional expertise is a practice that is sensed rather than observed, yet this type of knowledge-practice is often “othered” within conventional academic structures, if not directly marginalised (Melrose, 2003, p. 2). Traditional research frameworks can sometimes feel, if not artificial, at least detached from the intuitive, sensory nature of fashion practice, where skill, aesthetics, and material “speak” to the maker, not just through verbal or written means.

This study thus grapples with the question: how might academic inquiry evolve to honour and incorporate these embodied, material-discursive practices? Could my work serve as a resource to challenge and expand how practice-based expertise is valued and integrated into higher education? By asking these questions, I seek not only to deepen my understanding but also to contribute to broader discussions about the entangled nature of personal-professional identities.

By facing these questions, my research becomes more than just an account of my “story.” It also invites discussion about how academic practice might evolve to better support practitioners undergoing similar transitions. I am reminded that the true impact of this study may lie not just in my personal insights but in how it ultimately influences students’ learning. Autoethnography, then, offers the space to diffract these tensions, weaving together personal narrative, theoretical argument, and visual inquiry to communicate the lived realities of these transitions. My research problem becomes a dynamic, relational challenge:

My research problem statement, then, is:

To explore how practitioner identities are shaped, challenged, and reimagined within institutional Discourses.

This inquiry aims to use a visual autoethnographic approach to vividly recount my experiences through story and visuals, supported by scholarly evidence while engaging critically with academic conventions. This study is both a personal undertaking and an invitation to rethink how practitioner-scholars might be supported in navigating the complexities of their own being-becoming within the entangled assemblages of academia.

1.4. Research questions

This research question emerges from the need to understand how institutional, professional, and personal Discourses shape the being-becoming of practitioner-academics. By exploring these entanglements, I examine the tensions between practice and research, personal and professional identities, and the vocational-academic divide.

The main question upon which this investigation is based is: *“What Discourses have underpinned my being-becoming a fashion design lecturer at a University of Technology?”*

This question invites an exploration of the entanglements of my fashion practice, pedagogy, and research within the specific assemblage of a University of Technology (UoT). It seeks to uncover the Discourses – both tacit and explicit – that shape my being-becoming as a lecturer, recognising that these Discourses are not isolated but intra-act with the material, social, and cultural forces that constitute my teaching environment.

This inquiry considers the sociocultural dynamics of my teaching context, where diverse student experiences and institutional expectations intra-act with my own upbringing, training, and professional practices. These entanglements form an assemblage, shaping not only what and how I teach but also how my being-becoming unfolds in relation to others. To answer this main question, I need to understand not only my individual story but also how it entangles with the assemblage of identities, practices, and contexts that co-construct my being-becoming as a fashion design lecturer at a UoT. To reach this understanding, I ask the following sub-questions:

1. Who am I as a fashion design lecturer at a University of Technology?

This question prompts a deep reflexive inquiry into the multiple, shifting identities that constitute my being-becoming. Through an autoethnographic lens, I explore the cultural threads,

socio-material entanglements, and personal narratives that have shaped my identities as a fashion design lecturer. What are the intra-acting forces – material, cultural, and ideological – that have woven together my ways of being?

2. *What personal-professional experiences shaped my fashion design lecturer identities at a University of Technology?*

This question focuses on the lived, relational experiences that have influenced my being-becoming. It examines how my lived experiences personally and professionally intra-act to shape my becoming as a lecturer through the material-discursive context. By tracing the trajectories of these experiences, I seek to unravel how I came to be as a fashion design lecturer, and how these experiences continue to shape me.

3. *How did the cultural context of a UoT shape my be(com)ing a fashion design lecturer and my educational practices?*

This question situates my being-becoming within the broader institutional and sociocultural context of a UoT. It explores how the tensions between social, cultural, historical, and material forces shape my teaching practices and professional identities. How do Discourses of race, class, gender, and privilege diffract and intra-act in my educational practices? This question also addresses the material-discursive dimensions of my UoT context, where vocational and professional Discourses converge and sometimes conflict. How have these entanglements shaped the assemblage of my being-becoming as a lecturer?

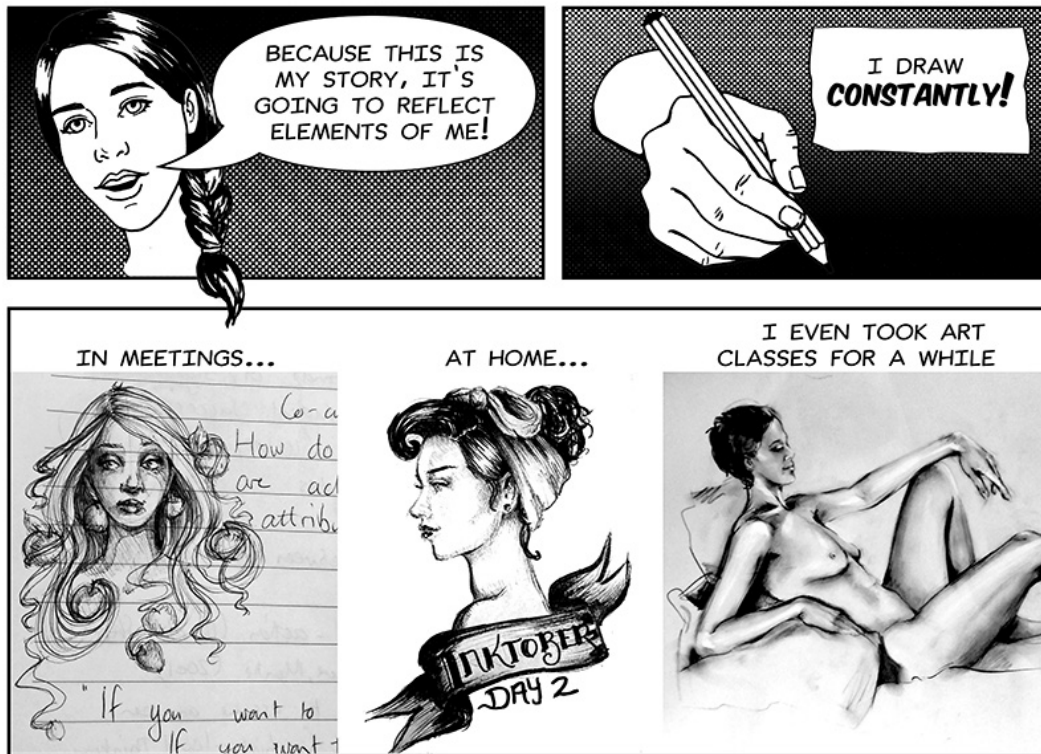
1.5. Threads of inquiry: Main themes and key terms

To situate the reader within the entangled context of this inquiry, and to offer insight into the intra-active processes shaping the approach I have chosen, it is necessary to introduce some of the key themes that weave through this thesis. The following section offers a diffractive overview of concepts I feel are significant to foreground in this introductory chapter, inviting the reader into the assemblage of ideas, materialities, and experiences that underpin this study.

1.5.1. The autoethnographic protagonist

I'm choosing to include visual texts in my PhD because not only do they help me to think, but they show me and others who I am. The comic illustrations (Figures 1.4 and 1.5) foreground the relational and embodied nature of autoethnography. In Figure 1.5: *Drawn to Drawing*, I illustrate how drawing is not simply an activity but an integral part of my being. The figure reflects how drawing emerges as an intra-active process – materialising my thoughts and allowing me to engage reflexively with my experiences. This visualisation becomes a means of knowing, a way to externalise the self and explore the entanglements of my identities.

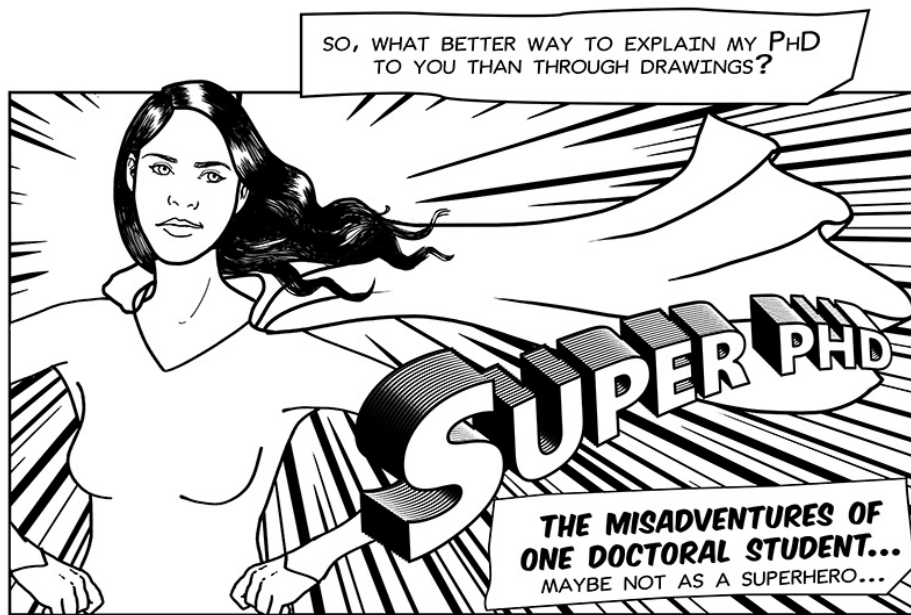
Figure 1.5: Drawn to drawing



Note. Figure created by the author.

In Figure 1.6: *Super PhD*, I ask: what better way to explain my PhD than through drawings? I playfully position myself as the hero of this story, aligning with McCloud's (1994, p. 67) observation that "everybody is a hero in their mind." Every story has a protagonist, someone who is the 'hero' or leading character. If, following Bochner and Ellis (2016), I understand my own life as storied then I am the 'hero' in this story. However, this is not a solitary hero's journey. The autoethnographic protagonist engages relationally with the socio-material assemblages that shape their being-becoming. By visualising myself as the autoethnographic protagonist, I signal the intra-active nature of this inquiry, where I am simultaneously the researcher and the subject of study.

Figure 1.6: Super PhD



Note. Figure created by the author.

1.5.2. Stories

In Figure 1.7: *Once upon a story*, I engage with the idea that “human life is itself storied” (Smith & Sparkes, 2006, p. 169). Stories are not mere sequences of events; they are entangled assemblages of meaning, shaped by cultural, social, and material contexts. Following Sousanis (2015, p. 95), I understand stories as “the framing of experience” that intra-act with the world, giving form to the seemingly fragmented nature of our lived realities. We tell stories to explain how we experience our world (Dillow, 2009, p. 1344), to explain the sequence of events that happened, to help us unpack and understand what transpired (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 13).

As humans, we use stories to give meaning to our experiences and our existence. From gathering around the fire to share stories to telling stories on a stage, to television and film, humans have found ways to tell and hear stories because our souls need stories (Campbell, 2004, p. XXXI). People are, in essence, “story-telling animals” (Smith & Sparkes, 2006, p. 170). We do not need to be “taught how to tell stories” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 13), we instinctively know. I need to tell my story to give meaning to my experiences because the telling of stories “is an innate part of being human” (Dillow, 2009, p. 1345).

Figure 1.7: Once upon a story



Note. Figure created by the author.

Stories are about human experience and what makes us human. Polkinghorne (1995, p. 7) argues that the subject of all stories is *human* action even if the protagonist is a company, institution, animal, mythical beast, or the like. To be a story, these non-human protagonists are given anthropomorphic characteristics and are shown to complete ‘human’ actions. They are made human-like in telling the story. As Randall and Randall remind us, there is a “connection between having a story and being a person” (1995, p. 297).

The story “seems to resonate with the deepest features of our being” (Randall & Randall, 1995, p. 83). But our stories, like our lives, do not exist in isolation (Randall & Randall, 1995, p. 10). It is impossible to tell my stories without including others (Ellis, 2016, p. 209), nor can I ignore the influence of cultural and historical context (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 94). In this sense, stories are entangled with the social, cultural, and historical aspects of life. My being-becoming is narrated by my sociocultural-historical upbringing and the contextual factors within my storied life.

Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity (Adichie, 2009).

There is a power in telling stories. Like any power, it can be used for good or ill. Depending on who is telling the story and how they choose to tell it, stories can connect across generations, give comfort to those in similarly difficult situations, help us see new perspectives, teach valuable lessons, and create community (Pahl, 2017, p. 30). But they can also ‘flatten’ a person’s experiences by making it the only story of a person (Adichie, 2009).

Each story has the power to change our views, to change our truth. When telling our stories, we have a responsibility to reach for a truer story (Rosenberg, 2016), one we may not want to hear, but one

that has the power to introduce change. When we tell one story – the same story over and over – we are telling an incomplete truth. We cannot grow from these sanitised stories. Adichie (2009) discusses how storytelling is power, and powerful people can use stories to push their own agenda. I need to be aware of how I am telling my stories and how I reinterpret the stories of others in order to be authentic, responsible, and critical.

Because we tell stories from our own perspectives, the stories we tell are fragments of the whole. We are fractured in our view of “the truth” (Noy, 2003, p. 3). Our stories only share the fragments we choose to include, and this is where the power of stories can be used for good or nefarious purposes. Sharing a single story can leave out essential details like the perspectives of others, or contextual specifics that would aid understanding or thoughts and actions we are ashamed or embarrassed by. The truth cannot be a single story but is glimpsed through the lens of many stories. As McCloud (1994, p. 62) explains, we can only perceive the world through our senses – incomplete fragments of reality. He argues that “our perception of ‘reality’ is an act of *faith*, based on mere *fragments*” (McCloud, 1994, p. 62; emphasis in original text). We use our past experiences and the stories of others to try to complete the picture from these fragments, but this is not always accurate.

Incomplete as they are, stories are doorways (Sousanis, 2015, p. 95). They can become portals in space and time that allow us not only to see from another perspective but also to see ourselves. By stepping through these metaphorical doors, we are opening up new worlds and opening ourselves up to new perspectives. A door’s hinge “allows for the possibility of an opening, through which to pass and displace one’s existing frame of reference.” (Sousanis, 2015, p. 94). Through these doorways, we can begin to see the other side.

1.5.3. Discourses

Gee (2008, p. 3) defines Discourses as “ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing, that are accepted as instantiations of particular identities.” These Discourses do not exist in isolation; they are socially negotiated and intra-act with material and cultural contexts. My inquiry seeks to unravel how these Discourses shape my being-becoming as a fashion design lecturer, recognising that they are not merely frameworks to be adhered to but dynamic forces to be navigated and questioned.

These Discourses are socially negotiated. For someone to become a member of the Discourse, that person must be “socialized into a practice” that “other people have already mastered” (Gee, 2008, p. 45). For this reason, Gee emphasises the fact that the discipline practices within a Discourse are entangled with the social practices, as they are socially situated. It is not enough simply to understand the discipline content; one must be able to say and do the right things in the right way at the right

time while being the right type of person. Discourses encompass a set of unspoken and often presumed “theories” about the correct ways of being within that Discourse. Failure to “be” this type of person marks one as an outsider or pretender.

Everyone has a primary Discourse that they were inducted into as children. This is something we are socialised into, but what Gee (2008) refers to as “secondary Discourses” may stem from inclusion into discipline professions, communities or social assemblies, among other types of groups. Gee (2008, p. 176) goes on to define ‘literacy’ as “mastery of a secondary Discourse”. This shows, however, that we have multiple Discourses at any given time, just as we are multi-faceted and are not a “single, uniform identity” (Gee, 2008, p. 93). These intersections reveal the assemblages of power, identity, and practice that shape my being-becoming, highlighting the need for reflexivity in understanding the socio-material entanglements of teaching and learning.

1.5.4. Identity

Identity, within this inquiry, is not a fixed or singular entity but a fluid and relational process of being-becoming. Drawing on (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009) and (Gee, 2008), I understand identity as an assemblage of multiple selves, shaped by sociocultural contexts and material-discursive forces. Identity is not only relational (Ennals et al., 2016) but also performative (Butler, 2002), enacted through the intra-actions of personal, professional, and institutional elements.

This study interrogates how my identities as a fashion designer, lecturer, and academic are co-constructed within the entanglements of my lived experiences, institutional context, and cultural background. By engaging reflexively with these assemblages, I aim to challenge traditional notions of identity as static or predetermined, instead embracing its fluidity and multiplicity.

1.5.5. Culture

Because this is a visual autoethnographic study, the goal is to understand myself through my cultural context (Chang, 2008). This means that, although it is a contested and laden term, I need to define ‘culture’ for my study. Culture, as Chang (2008, p. 13) describes, is a “group-oriented concept by which self is always connected with others.” I understand culture as a social grouping with specific ‘ways of being’ related to belonging and membership. The aim is to use autoethnography as “the study of a culture of which one is a part, integrated with one’s relational and inward experiences” (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008, p. 448). It is through this relational understanding that I examine my cultural context, recognising that culture is not merely a backdrop but an active participant in shaping my being-becoming.

In this inquiry, I engage with the cultures of fashion design and academia as distinct yet overlapping assemblages. These cultures, with their own Discourses and ways of being, often clash, creating tensions that I navigate as a practitioner-lecturer. By positioning culture as a dynamic and entangled process, this study moves beyond static definitions to explore how cultural forces intra-act with personal and professional identities.

1.5.6. The power of visuals

More than just seeing the visual information, designers are able to construct meaning beyond the surface level, finding patterns and connotations that are less obvious (Schön & Wiggins, 1992, p. 135). Designers have made a professional habit of interacting with visuals, having conversations, and constructing meaning from images. Designers, perhaps inadvertently, know how to have conversations with themselves through artmaking (drawing, painting, technical design, printmaking, or any number of art mediums). Part of becoming a designer is learning to speak the visual language fluently – interpreting space, scale, portion, colour, form, etc. becomes a natural part of designing. In ‘stepping back’ from their work, as they are often encouraged to do to gain a new perspective, designers are taught that reflexivity is a core aspect of creation. Having been trained as a fashion designer, I am fluent in this visual language. Interacting with visual language and engaging in reflective practices has become second nature to me, often happening without conscious effort.

In this PhD study, I am intentionally foregrounding my interactions with visuals, drawing on my lived experience as a fashion designer while also engaging with the scholarly practices required in academia. This means actively merging the intuitive, often invisible visual fluency I have developed through years of design work with the deliberate, reflective processes necessary for my scholarly work. These two aspects of myself – the designer and the academic – have often felt like separate entities, but they are deeply interconnected.

To aid readers in navigating this complex intersection, I have included a write-up about Reading the Visuals in the next section (see section 1.6 below). This guide provides an interpretive framework, encouraging readers to engage with the visuals as layered texts that extend beyond surface-level observation. In it, I outline key interpretive strategies, informed by both design principles and academic inquiry, which align with the visual language of this study. By bringing together these two sides of my practice, I aim to create a space where both my artistic and academic selves can coalesce in meaningful ways. This reconciliation is not just about integrating visual and textual elements but also about challenging traditional academic boundaries by embracing the complexity and fluidity of identity formation.

1.6. Reading the visuals

The visuals throughout this thesis are not supplementary illustrations but integral “texts,” engaging readers with the complex, multilayered dimensions of meaning shaping my journey of be(com)ing a fashion design lecturer. They extend beyond representation to create a reflexive space for interpreting identity, memory, and practice. Many scholars highlight that visuals possess a distinct epistemological language, revealing insights and evoking emotional responses that go beyond what text alone can achieve (Bartleet, 2022; Leavy, 2015; Mannay, 2015; Mitchell, 2011).

My use of visuals aligns with Cross’s (1982) concept of “designerly way of knowing,” which engages deeply with patterns, connections, and symbolic interaction to create meaning. This approach weaves in my background in fashion design and my autoethnographic commitment to exploring embodied, relational ways of knowing. Drawing on visual grammar (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020), the visuals in this thesis are designed to communicate through multiple layers of meaning: *representational* (what is depicted), *interactive* (how the reader engages with it), and *compositional* (how elements are organised). These visuals function as cultural texts, inviting interpretation through personal and social lenses shaped by *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977/2020). This visual grammar offers readers an invitation to explore how visuals function as cultural texts, embedded with relational and symbolic meanings that unfold through interpretation.


While this chapter touches on these visual concepts, Chapter Three further explores their integration and evolving role within this visual autoethnography. There, I expand on how comics, metaphors, and concept mapping function as creative methods, deepening the inquiry into the material-discursive forces shaping identity and pedagogy. In addition, for readers unfamiliar with visual inquiry or interested in a more in-depth discussion, a detailed guide to interpreting the visuals is provided in Appendix F. This guide offers tools for engaging with the visual texts reflexively, aligning with the designerly ways of knowing that underpin this thesis.

I recognise that the subjective nature of visual methods might be viewed as a limitation by some readers. However, this subjectivity is central to their strength: the visual methods employed here make visible the tacit, affective, and embodied aspects of my lived experience, which are often inaccessible through text alone. By embracing the subjective and interpretive nature of these methods, I challenge the privileging of objectivity in traditional research paradigms and to contribute to the growing recognition of arts-based methodologies in qualitative inquiry (Mitchell, 2011; Tversky, 2011).


1.7. Visual devices for differentiating voices

In this thesis, I have made use of distinct visual devices to help the reader differentiate between the different narrative ‘voices’ and modes of expression. This is both a practical and symbolic choice, reflecting the layered nature of my identities and their corresponding stories.

Autoethnographer Voice: The primary text, written in my voice as the autoethnographer, is presented in a straightforward format, without any decorative elements. This is the core scholarly and reflexive narration of the thesis, remaining in standard Times New Roman font throughout.

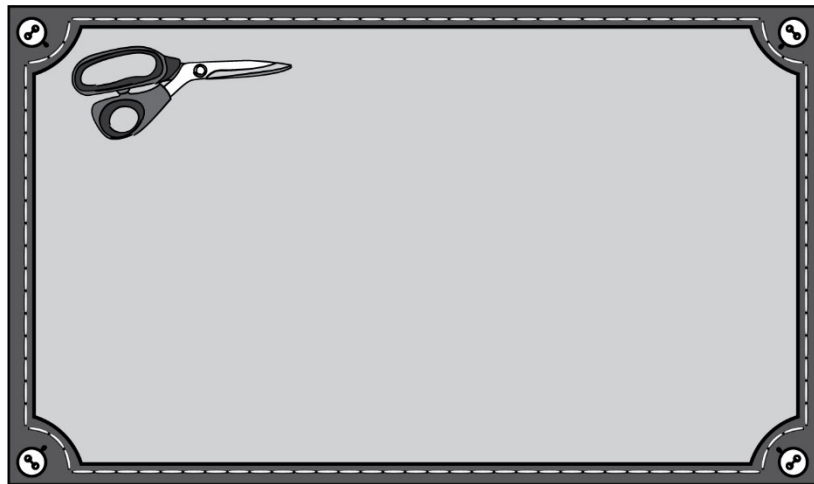


Self-Narrative (Becoming Kaila-the-Lecturer): Represented in Chapter Four, the self-narrative emerges as a personal story told from the perspective of everyday Kaila reflecting on personal and professional experiences that led to her becoming a lecturer. This section is set apart visually by a top and bottom border resembling a line of sewing machine stitching (shown here bounding this text), evoking my fashion design background. When extracts from this self-narrative appear in other chapters, they are indicated by italicised and indented text.



Fashion Designer/Fashion Lecturer Narratives: Narratives that have been inspired beyond the self-narrative by other sources, such as those evoked by objects or reflections on comic doodles, are framed in a decorative textbox (Figure 1.8), featuring stitch-like borders with buttons in the corners. These are marked by a graphic icon of my fabric scissors. This symbolises my voice as a fashion designer and fashion design lecturer. This subtle distinction maintains continuity while highlighting the different professional identities.

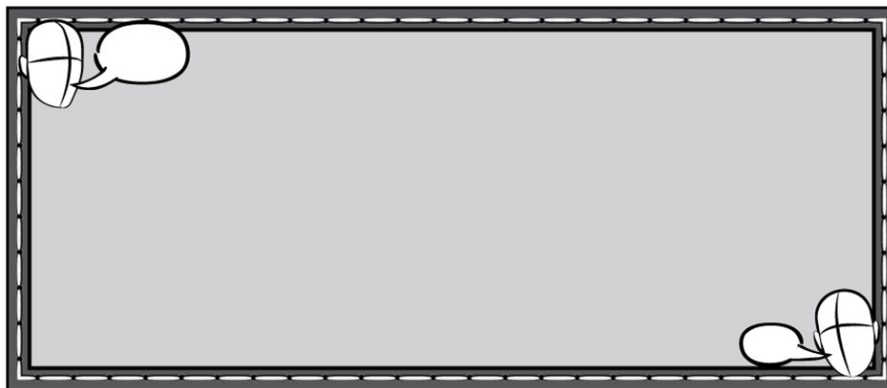
Figure 1.8: Narrative voice visual frame



Note. Figure created by the author.

Transcript Extracts: When presenting dialogues from meetings or conversations, a separate frame is used (Figure 1.9). This border also features a stitch-like motif, although simpler and without buttons in the corners. However, this frame includes talking head icons with blank faces and speech bubbles, suggesting dialogue. This visually conveys the conversational nature of these interactions, with the positioning of the heads representing an ongoing exchange.

Figure 1.9: Talking heads visual frame (transcript extracts)



Note. Figure created by the author.

These design choices serve both an aesthetic and functional purpose, visually embodying the multiple facets of my identity while offering clarity for the reader. By engaging with these different narrative forms, the visual elements deepen the autoethnographic experience, entangling the personal and professional voices that shape my being-becoming.

1.8. Thesis overview

In Section 1.3, I reflected on the limitations of the traditional thesis structure, which often compartmentalises research into neat boxes. However, this study, much like the process of identity development itself, is messy and non-linear. Despite that, I acknowledge the importance of providing a clear map for the reader, ensuring that the rich complexity of my visual autoethnography remains comprehensible and accessible. The following structure retrospectively organises the entangled, reflexive nature of this study into a readable form.

Chapter One: FASHIONING THE AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC JOURNEY: INTRODUCTION

Chapter One sets the context of the research, explaining my being-becoming a fashion designer to lecturer to doctoral candidate. The research questions build onto each other, aiming to answer the main research question of what Discourses have underpinned my being-becoming a fashion design lecturer. My motivation and rationale for conducting the study are explained. Key terms and themes are briefly discussed to set the context for the rest of the thesis. The use of visuals and artmaking is explained, with an emphasis on how I use visual and narrative methods to navigate my autoethnographic journey.

Chapter Two: GENERATIVE ENTANGLEMENTS IN THE LITERATURE

This chapter engages with the scholarly work that underpins this study, weaving together key concepts through a feminist new materialist lens. Section A explores the notion of being-becoming, focusing on transitions experienced as a student, practitioner, lecturer, academic, and doctoral scholar. Section B examines the institutional and sociocultural context of a University of Technology (UoT), with attention to the legacy of mergers and the shift from Technikon to university. Section C considers the entanglements of being-becoming a fashion design lecturer, exploring how identities are co-constructed within these contexts. Section D investigates how fashion design and dress perform identity, focusing on their material and communicative dimensions. Finally, Section E introduces theory as a generative entanglement, discussing performativity, materiality, intra-action, and interconnected stories to articulate the theoretical stance informing this study. Together, these sections highlight the relational, intra-active, and fluid assemblages that shape my being-becoming within the context of a UoT.

Chapter Three: TRACING THE THREADS: A FEMINIST NEW MATERIALIST APPROACH

This chapter outlines the inquiry, situated within a feminist new materialist stance that emphasises relationality, intra-action, and becoming. Visual autoethnography is presented as an approach that fosters reflexivity, allowing for an exploration of entangled personal, professional, and material-discursive assemblages. The arts-based methods, including self-narrative, object-inspired narratives, comic doodles, comic illustrations, and visual assemblages, are discussed as generative practices that

illuminate the intra-active dynamics of identity and context. Ethical considerations are addressed, particularly in representing the entangled nature of personal-professional identities. The chapter concludes by engaging with concepts of trustworthiness, verisimilitude, and rigour, reconceptualised within a post-qualitative lens.

Chapter Four: (RE)PRESENTING THE FASHION DESIGN LECTURER'S NARRATIVE

Chapter Four focuses on presenting my self-narrative, which serves to answer the first research question: “*Who am I as a fashion design lecturer at a UoT?*” Through the lens of Gee’s (2008) Discourses, I critically explore how my personal history, experiences, and the cultural contexts of my upbringing have shaped my professional identity. The self-narrative is visually enhanced through photographs and drawings, offering a rich, multi-modal way of exploring the sociocultural context I was raised in.

Chapter Five: PERSONAL STORIES AS THE SITE FOR (UN)LEARNING

This chapter draws on the identities discovered in Chapter Four. I use comic doodles to focus on the personal experiences that have shaped my identity, aiming to answer the personal aspect of the second research question: “*What personal-professional experiences shaped my fashion design lecturer identities at a UoT?*” These visual narratives highlight significant nodal moments in my personal history, including childhood and educational experiences, which helped shape my way of being. Here, I engage with Butler’s performativity to analyse how gender and societal norms have shaped my identity as both a woman and a professional.

Chapter Six: PROFESSIONAL STORIES AS A SITE FOR (UN)LEARNING

Where Chapter Five focuses on the personal experiences that have shaped my identities, this chapter highlights the professional experiences. I use comic illustrations to explore the professional experiences that have shaped my identity, answering the professional aspect of the second research question. I reflect on how working in the context of a UoT has influenced my development as a lecturer, making use of Barkhuizen’s model of interconnected stories to analyse how the micro, meso, and macro-level cultural contexts have narrated my professional identity.

Chapter Seven: TANGLED THREADS: INTERWEAVING PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL

Chapter Seven synthesises the findings from Chapters Five and Six, drawing together the personal and professional threads to fully answer the second research question. This chapter thinks with Barad’s (2007) intra-action to reflect on the interplay between my personal and professional identities, highlighting tensions, overlaps, and shifts in my being-becoming a fashion design lecturer. Reflexivity and visuals are key tools in this synthesis, allowing for a deeper exploration of how personal experiences seep into professional practice and vice versa.

Chapter Eight: CULTURE, EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES AND BE(COM)ING

This chapter addresses the third research question: “*How did the cultural context of a UoT shape my being-becoming a fashion design lecturer and my educational practices?*” Through the evocative objects of my fabric scissors and office keys, I explore how everyday objects act as narrative prompts, revealing deeper insights into my professional identity and teaching practices. Both objects are analysed for the stories they inspire and how these stories reflect larger sociocultural Discourses within the UoT.

Chapter Nine: BE(COM)ING THROUGH PLAY

Chapter Nine uses the visual metaphor of paper dolls to interrogate the dominant Discourses that have narrated and shaped my identities as a fashion design lecturer. This chapter answers the main research question by visually exploring the Discourses that shape my career. By examining how these sociocultural influences are donned and doffed over time, I illustrate the fluid and performative nature of identity. Drawing on Barad (2007), Butler (2002), and Gee (2008), I interrogate the tensions between complicity and resistance within these Discourses, showing how they have influenced my being-becoming.

Chapter Ten: THE FINAL STITCH: A REFLEXIVE DISCUSSION

In the final chapter, I reflect on the findings of the study and the insights gained through the visual autoethnographic process. I summarise the key contributions to knowledge, particularly to understanding identity through visual methods and performativity. This chapter also includes a final, polished comic illustration that visually represents the core themes and findings of the thesis. Additionally, I offer recommendations for future research and practical insights for practitioners transitioning into academic roles without formal pedagogical training.

1.9. Summary

In this chapter, I’ve established the context and rationale for my autoethnographic exploration, setting the stage for a deeply personal, yet academically rigorous inquiry into my being-becoming a fashion design lecturer at a University of Technology. Through the lens of identity as fluid and multiple, this study embraces the complexity of autoethnography. Here, I turn the gaze inwards, to where the researcher is also the researched. My personal experience becomes a critical tool for unpacking the sociocultural forces that shape who I am and who I am becoming.

Autoethnography provides me with the space to critically engage with my stories, using them as a reflective mirror to understand larger cultural Discourses that influence not just my individual practice but the profession as a whole. It is worth taking this approach precisely because it merges

the personal with the scholarly, acknowledging that our lives and identities are deeply intertwined with the institutions, practices, and communities we inhabit.

In the chapters that follow, I explore how these experiences, stories, and Discourses inform my practice, offering insights into both the complexities and the possibilities of professional identity formation. By doing so, I hope to highlight the value of reflexivity and arts-based methods in creating new ways of understanding ourselves within the ever-shifting context of education and professional practice.

2. GENERATIVE ENTANGLEMENTS IN THE LITERATURE

2.1. Introduction

As Müller (2020, p. 50) reflects, “methodological inventiveness requires you to leave the known, tried-and-trusted methods behind and search actively for new pathways that might not always be easy to follow.” Embracing new pathways, this review does not aim to represent a linear narrative of existing scholarship but seeks to experiment and create, following St. Pierre’s (2018) call for inquiry that embraces the possibilities of new and novel ways of doing and knowing. This necessitates relinquishing familiar terminologies – like “data” or “methodology” – that carry implicit assumptions of representation, instead navigating the “messiness” of tension, ambiguity, and possibility (St. Pierre, 1997, p. 176). This chapter adopts a post-qualitative stance, rejecting the conventional notion of ‘gaps’ in knowledge. Instead, it traces the entanglements between concepts, thinkers, and ideas, exploring their resonances and tensions as they intra-act with this study.

This chapter seeks to trace the lines of inquiry that emerge from the intersection of core concepts of being-becoming, identity, and professional practice within the context of fashion design education at a University of Technology (UoT). Set out in a way that reflects interconnectedness, this ‘literature review’ entangles these ideas within a post-qualitative and feminist new materialist stance. This chapter draws on a diverse array of literature to engage with the entanglements that shape subjectivities, highlighting the relational, material-discursive forces at play.

The texts that I’ve engaged with here reflect not only the interests of scholars but also the value positions embedded within their ontological and epistemological strategies. Bhattacharya (2021, p. 180) reminds us that knowledge is never neutral but always implicated in power, inviting us to critically reflect on whose interests are preserved and perpetuated by aligning with particular scholars. This reflexivity resonates with Charmaz’s (2017) critique of the assumption that researchers can enter inquiry without preconceptions. Instead, methodological and theoretical strategies are grounded in deeply held assumptions, shaping what we do and how we understand.

The chapter is structured to explore key themes central to this study. Section A begins by situating the concept of being-becoming within broader theoretical conversations, followed by a discussion of UoTs in Section B and fashion design lecturer identities in Section C. Section D then transitions into an exploration of professional identity formation, the role of fashion as a communicative practice and a contested space for (re)producing gender, race, class and ethnicity relations and other forms of oppression and hierarchical relations. Section E thinks with theory as a generative entanglement to explore how concepts intra-act and shape understanding. Each section contributes to the overall

argument, foregrounding the dynamic interplay of theory and practice, materiality, and discourse, and the personal and institutional in shaping subjectivities and becoming.

2.2. Section A – The concept of being-becoming

This study centres on the phenomenon of being-becoming, as a fluid, entangled process shaping subjectivity and identity. Like many of the concepts used in this study, being-becoming is difficult to concretise and express. It resists static categorisation, flourishing in the “messy and fluid objects of the world” (Lather, 2016, p. 22) essential for post-qualitative research. As Attia and Edge (2017) argue, being and becoming are not discrete states but overlapping, non-linear processes of development and transformation. Hancock and Fontanella-Nothom (2020, p. 83) elaborate, saying “becoming is an infinite process without origination or end, produced through discourse.” Building on scholars like (Kuby & Zhao, 2022, p. 36), who note that “being is always, already becoming,” I embrace the complexity of being-becoming, allowing its relational, emergent nature to shape my understanding of how subjectivities are co-constructed.

Through this section, I unpack being, becoming, and be(com)ing as theoretical constructs, and situate them within post-qualitative and feminist new materialist thought. Finally, using the concept of diffraction (Barad, 2007), being-becoming can be understood as a process of intra-action that reconfigures identity. Rather than replicating identity, it entangles with it in ways that produce new configurations and possibilities for being (Ros i Sole et al., 2020).

2.2.1. Defining being-becoming

Being-becoming, therefore, encapsulates the interplay between who we are (our *being*) and the ongoing processes of transformation (our *becoming*). Scholars have approached this intersection in diverse ways. Ennals et al. (2016) studied practitioners transitioning to academia, focusing on how doing (practising their profession), being (as practitioners), becoming (shifting into academics), and belonging (failing or thriving in how they process becoming academics) entangle. Dall’Alba (2009) discusses ways of being and the ambiguities of becoming as transformations in identity through professional practice. Enright et al. (2017) surface tensions many academics experience in being and becoming within a neoliberal university, framing it as ongoing and unsettled. Fataar’s (2010) work with student teachers argues that ‘teacherly’ and ‘educational’ becoming is an emotional, social and cultural process while calling for institutions and academics to be sensitive to these contexts as students proceed through their being and becoming. McMillan and Gordon (2017) consider the complexity involved in “being and becoming” academics in universities. Stetsenko (2010) positions being and becoming as deeply social and cultural projects, entwined with learning and identity development. Finally, I point to Thesen (2009) on ideological becoming, where changes in ways of thinking (ideologies) develop through engagement with learning. Across the different ideas and

issues related to being-becoming, I highlight that it is a complex, tangled phenomenon and method for identity (re)making.

Butler (2002) views becoming as iterative and open to intervention, intersecting with social constructions of gender, race, and cultural belonging. Butler's (2002) focus, however, has been critiqued for being human-centric. Yet, post-qualitative scholars like Lather (2016, p. 23) urge us not to "kill the mother" and outright dismiss Butler's work, but rather "entangle Barad into the mix." Hancock (2020) agrees, exploring how integrating Barad's feminist new materialist emphasis on material agency and relationality moves becoming beyond the human. Furthering the de-centring of the human, Braidotti (2006, p. 201) conceptualises becoming as an "assemblage of forces, flows, and intensities," foregrounding the interconnectedness of humans and non-humans. Similarly, Haraway's (1988) "situated knowledges" and Barad's (2007) agential realism challenge anthropocentric notions of identity by highlighting the intra-actions between matter, discourse, and agency. Braidotti (2006, p. 199) advocates for a "process ontology," where being is about dynamic becoming, not static substance. Knowledge and subjectivity are always situated, and embedded in time, space, and material context.

From Barad's (2003, 2007) view, "becoming" as a theoretical construct incorporates intra-action, where human and non-human entities are not pre-formed but emerge through relational entanglements. Hancock (2020) elaborates, emphasising that becoming is a momentary, material-discursive practice that dynamically produces differential becomings. As Braidotti (2014, p. 173) maintains, "Being and becoming confront each other in an unsteady balance." This tension echoes the complexities of subjectivity as both grounded in the present and dynamically emergent. Stetsenko (2010, p. 11) discusses that the "process of Becoming [is] embodied through our past, present and future deeds that create the world we live in" – an assemblage of the material-discursive forces that opens the path for being as well as the possibilities for becoming.

The term *be(com)ing* evolves from these foundations, amplifying the relational and intra-active dimensions of *being-becoming*. I've found the term *be(com)ing* helpful in depicting this fluidity in ways that move beyond traditional words – the way that the word "becoming" is bracketed allows it to be read as being-coming-becoming all at once. This subtle non-traditional use of punctuation helps to convey the fact that "be(com)ing" incorporates both the state of being and the process of becoming as intertwined, rather than separate or linear phases. Also, the use of the Present Continuous Tense indicates the infinite quality of being, coming and becoming as the process is never-ending. I first encountered the term in Attia and Edge (2017, p. 34), where they describe it as an "interactive rather than a linear relationship," highlighting that one's being always involves a sense of becoming. This

etymological play aligns with Barad's (2007) notion of intra-action, where entities are not pre-formed but emerge through their relational entanglements.

Drawing on these perspectives, I choose to use the deliberately hyphenated *being-becoming* and strategically bracketed *be(com)ing* throughout this thesis to signify its intra-action and continuity.

2.2.2. *Diffractioning being-becoming and identity*

The concepts of *being-becoming* and identity are closely intertwined, yet they diverge in critical ways. Diffraction, in contrast to reflection, focuses on the generative interplay of forces. A diffractive lens maps “where the effects of difference appear” (Haraway, 1992, p. 300), illuminating the entanglements between these concepts. By adopting diffraction as both a methodological and conceptual tool, this study explores *being-becoming* and identity not as separate entities but as relational processes that shape and reshape subjectivity.

Relational ontologies and the entanglement of identity and being-becoming

Initially, this study followed a sociocultural understanding of identity as multiple, fluid, and relational. McDonnell (2017, p. 64) illustrates that identities are “built and rebuilt through our interactions with the world,” shifting and adapting to each new context. Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) conclude that identities can only be fully understood in context. Identities are relational because the identities we perform in a given situation depend on the people we are relating to – or trying to relate to (El Refaie, 2012).

However, as I delved into feminist new materialist and posthumanist thought, it became clear that this sociocultural framing, while valuable, was incomplete. This perspective is still largely centred on human relationality and overlooks the entanglement of material-discursive forces that continuously shape the possibilities for being and becoming. The feminist new materialist lens revealed how identity is not merely constructed through interaction but is also co-constituted by the material and discursive intra-actions within which we are embedded. As Lather (2016, p. 27) advises, this shift does not necessitate abandoning incomplete concepts (“killing the mother”) like my previous understanding of identities, but rather “entangling” them with perspectives that extend them and give me different ways to *think with theory* (Mazzei & Jackson, 2023).

Entangling Barad's (2007) agential realism broadens the understanding of identity by positioning it as co-constituted through intra-actions – dynamic, relational entanglements between humans, objects, and discourses. For instance, identity is not only shaped by cultural norms but also by the material conditions in which those norms are enacted. This perspective shifts the focus from individual agency to distributed agency, where non-human actors, such as spaces or objects, actively

participate in shaping who and what we become. Braidotti's (2014) relational ontology further broadens this understanding by emphasising the assemblage of forces – social, cultural, material, and affective – that converge to produce subjectivity. Her focus on becoming as an ongoing, collective process resists anthropocentric and static notions of identity. Instead, it invites us to see identity as an unfolding entanglement of relational intensities, where human and non-human forces coalesce in dynamic, productive ways. This aligns with Lather's (2016, p. 23) call for methodologies that “flatten ontologies” and embrace the dynamic entanglements of posthuman subjectivities. Together, Barad's agential realism and Braidotti's relational ontology challenge human-centric, static views of identity, offering instead a vision of subjectivity as emergent, dynamic, and deeply entangled with the material-discursive world.

As Hancock (2020) notes, diffraction resists binary distinctions and focuses on generative entanglements, creating space for understanding identity and being-becoming as relational processes. In this way, being-becoming does not replace identity but expands its possibilities, situating it within a flattened ontology, where materiality and discourse intra-act to shape subjectivity.

2.2.3. Situatedness and context

Being-becoming is deeply embedded within assemblages of material-discursive entanglements, where subjectivity emerges from intra-active relations between the social, cultural, historical, and material. Barad (2007) introduces the concept of intra-action to emphasise that entities – whether human or non-human – do not pre-exist in their encounters but come into being through relational entanglements. Braidotti (2014) extends this idea, conceptualising subjectivity as an assemblage of forces, flows, and intensities that are never static but always in the process of becoming.

As Enright et al. (2017, p. 1) remind us, “the process of becoming an academic does not stop because the being has been achieved” – a statement that encapsulates the ongoing and relational nature of subject formation. Within the assemblage of a University of Technology (UoT), the sociocultural histories, institutional Discourses, and material objects that populate academic life intra-act to shape possibilities for being-becoming. These assemblages are not merely backdrops to identity formation but active agents in the co-constitution of subjectivities.

Haraway's (1988) concept of “situated knowledges” also informs this study, emphasising that knowledge and being-becoming are always partial, embodied, and context-specific. Situatedness rejects universalism in favour of acknowledging the material and historical specificities that shape intra-actions. For instance, the tools and practices of fashion design – such as the material artefacts of fabric scissors or office keys – serve not only as symbols but as active participants in the discursive-material constitution of subjectivity. This view situates being-becoming as entangled with

the affective and material conditions of its enactment, offering a nuanced lens to explore professional identity formation.

Through a feminist new materialist lens, the sociocultural and material-discursive context of the UoT is not merely a backdrop but a dynamic force that intra-acts with and shapes subjectivities. This study positions being-becoming as inseparable from these entanglements, revealing how cultural Discourses, institutional practices, and material forces interconnect as assemblages of lecturer personal-professional identities.

2.2.4. Troubling language: Material-discursive practices

“Language has been granted too much power,” Barad (2003, p. 801) argues, rejecting the tendency within traditional frameworks to privilege language as the dominant mode of meaning-making, a key challenge posed by feminist new materialism. Barad (2003, p. 819) contends that discursive practices cannot be reduced to words, grammar, or syntax; rather, they are entangled with material conditions, shaping, and being shaped by the intra-actions of discourse, social actors, and environments. This perspective aligns with Gee’s (2008) notion of Discourses as ways of being enacted within social practices, where the meaning of language emerges not solely from the words themselves but through their enactment within specific contexts. Meaning, therefore, is produced through the dynamic interplay of material and discursive forces.

This entangled view reveals the limits of language. St. Pierre (1997) warns that language is both a tool and a trap, reinforcing hegemonic discourses and traditional practices that constrain our ways of thinking and being. She asks: “How can language, which regularly falls apart, secure meaning and truth?” (St. Pierre, 1997, p. 179). The problematic nature of language is also highlighted by Sousanis (2015, p. 52), who asserts that “the medium we think in defines what we can see.” Language, with its boundaries and inherent limitations, risks constraining our imagination and obscuring possibilities beyond its borders. Eisner (1997, p. 4) similarly critiques the exclusivity of language, advocating for alternative forms of representation that engage with the complexities of meaning-making. These criticisms collectively underscore the need to de-centre language in post-qualitative inquiry and explore other modes of knowing and representing. Barad’s (2007) intra-active thinking offers a way forward, suggesting that meaning is not pre-given but emerges relationally through the material-discursive practices that produce it.

In this study, the arts – particularly metaphors, drawings, and other visual methods – offer a way to trouble language and expand its boundaries. Visual practices enable abstract thinking, uncovering deeper, often unspoken dimensions of meaning (Tidwell & Manke, 2009). Thomas and Beauchamp (2011, p. 764) highlight how the poetic language of metaphor can describe identities in ways that

escape the rigidity of conventional linguistic representation, allowing participants to explore their subjectivities “in alternate, sometimes simplistic but often highly descriptive ways.” This aligns with Mitchell et al.’s (2009, p. 119) argument that visual methodologies help “us see things differently,” helping researchers engage with the affective, embodied, and relational dimensions of subjectivity.

Arts-based methods also align with feminist new materialism’s emphasis on embodied and relational ways of knowing. Guyotte et al. (2018) describe how artmaking creates spaces for deep reflection, offering a means to engage with complexity and nuance that language alone cannot capture. (Pratt & Peat, 2014, p. 10) argue that the arts help “transcend language and cultural barriers,” providing a means for exploring the fluid, emergent nature of subjectivity. These methodologies are not merely illustrative but integral to the co-constitution of meaning within this inquiry.

Through the integration of material-discursive practices and visual methods, this study challenges the privileging of language, foregrounding the entangled, affective, and embodied dimensions of being-becoming. Engaging with feminist new materialist and posthumanist thought offers a way to trouble language’s boundaries and embrace alternative forms of representation that honour the complexity and fluidity of subjectivity.

2.3. Section B – Entanglements of UoT transitions and lecturer be(coming)

Universities of Technology (UoTs) can be understood as material-discursive assemblages (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2014), where sociocultural, historical, and material forces intra-act to co-construct institutional practices, Discourses, and subjectivities. As sites of ongoing transformation, UoTs occupy a unique position within the higher education landscape, having transitioned from vocational training institutions to universities. Drawing on Barkhuizen’s (2008) model of interconnected stories, this section examines the macro, meso, and micro narratives that coalesce to shape the cultural dynamics of UoTs. The tension between UoT’s historical roots and contemporary demands profoundly shapes the being and becoming of both lecturers and students.

2.3.1. UoT in transition: Historical shifts and structural reconfigurations

Universities of Technology (UoTs) occupy a unique and contested space in the higher education landscape (McKenna & Powell, 2009). Emerging from the legacy of Technikons in South Africa (Du Pré, 2009; Mtshali & Sooryamoorthy, 2019), these institutions were originally designed to deliver vocational training that supported industrial and economic development (Du Pré, 2009; Du Pre et al., 2004). With their focus on applied knowledge and technical skills, Technikons were institutionally and epistemologically distinct from traditional universities, which emphasised research and theoretical knowledge (Badat, 2010). However, the transition from Technikon to UoT represents not

merely a change in nomenclature but a profound structural, epistemological, and cultural transformation (McKenna & Powell, 2009).

This transformation was driven by a national imperative to create an integrated and equitable higher education system in post-apartheid South Africa (Mabokela & Mlambo, 2017). The restructuring of higher education sought to dismantle the racial hierarchies entrenched under apartheid (Hlalele, 2010), which had relegated black students and staff to underfunded, inferior institutions (Hay & Monnapula-Mapesela, 2009; Mabokela & Mlambo, 2017). The transition to UoTs was framed as part of this broader movement toward equity and redress (Badat, 2010). Yet, as Jansen (2009) cautions, such transitions are often fraught with contradictions, as efforts to address historical injustices intersect with new forms of inequality driven by global neoliberal pressures.

The shift to UoT status also introduced tensions between maintaining a vocational orientation and meeting the demands of a knowledge economy increasingly shaped by research output and professionalisation (Subotzky, 2003). UoTs were tasked with repositioning themselves as academic institutions capable of competing within a global higher education market, while simultaneously preserving their commitment to practical, industry-relevant training (Mtshali & Sooryamoorthy, 2019). This multilayered mandate has created a liminal institutional identity, where the boundaries between vocational and academic paradigms remain contested and fluid (Ntshoe & De Villiers, 2008).

These tensions are further exacerbated by the resource disparities that persist across South Africa's higher education system. Post-apartheid racial inequity within higher education is still systemically embedded, and this is reflected in the language – scholars discuss historically black universities (HBU) and historically white universities (HWUs) (Badat, 2010; Bozalek & Boughey, 2012), or historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs) and Historically advantaged institutions (HAIs) (Ntshoe et al., 2008; Ntshoe, 2004). HAIs were previously white, English and Afrikaans language-of-instruction, and well-resourced under apartheid, but continue to enjoy greater financial stability and institutional prestige (Hay & Monnapula-Mapesela, 2009), due to their “inherited privileges” (Ntshoe & De Villiers, 2008, p. 20). In comparison, HDIs have maintained the historic disadvantage resulting from decades of being systemically under-resourced (Ntshoe et al., 2008). The physical characteristics of the campuses, for example, are stark reminders of the level to which Historically Advantaged Institutions were privileged (Chetty, 2010). Badat (2010) explains that the physical environment at HAIs often reflected the values and norms of the dominant white society, creating a sense of exclusion for black students and academics. As UoTs are often former HDIs, their capacity to navigate the demands of their transition is constrained by financial pressures, infrastructural deficits, and the lingering effects of apartheid-era inequalities (Badat, 2010).

Drawing on Braidotti's (2014) relational ontology, the transition of UoTs can be understood as an assemblage of entangled forces – historical, economic, cultural, and material. These forces intra-act to shape the possibilities for being-becoming within UoTs, creating spaces of potential as well as resistance. For example, the physical infrastructures of UoTs – buildings designed for vocational training, and laboratories equipped for technical education – continue to inscribe certain epistemological and pedagogical practices, even as the institutional discourse shifts toward academic research and theory. Similarly, the histories and memories embedded in these spaces shape how staff and students navigate their being-becoming within the UoT context.

The merger of historically black and white Technikons: Legacies and frictions

Under apartheid, higher education institutions were rigidly divided along racial lines (Hay & Monnapula-Mapesela, 2009) and education was structured to prepare white South Africans for dominance and relegated black South Africans to subordinate menial roles (Mabokela & Mlambo, 2017, p. 794). Historically Advantaged Institutions (HAIs) enjoyed significant advantages in terms of funding, resources, and academic reputation compared to Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs) (Hay & Monnapula-Mapesela, 2009; Ntshoe & De Villiers, 2008; Ntshoe, 2004). This deliberate segregation resulted in vast disparities in educational quality and opportunities for black South Africans (Jansen, 2009). The Extension of University Education Act of 1959, a cornerstone of apartheid legislation, further entrenched this segregation, leading to the creation of a higher education system that was fundamentally unequal and unjust (Mabokela & Mlambo, 2017).

The merger of historically black and white Technikons into Universities of Technology (UoTs) was a central component of South Africa's post-apartheid higher education restructuring (Hay & Monnapula-Mapesela, 2009). Framed as a means of fostering equity and integration, these mergers aimed to dismantle the racial and spatial divisions that had defined the apartheid higher education system (Karodia et al., 2015). Yet, as scholars have noted, the process of merging institutions with vastly different historical legacies, resources, and cultures has often intensified existing inequalities rather than resolving them (Badat, 2010; Jansen, 2009; Ntshoe, 2017; Subotzky, 2003).

Historical legacies of Technikons

The culture of UoTs is deeply rooted in their Technikon legacy, a uniquely South African institution (Kokt, 2010, p. 18) that evolved from technical training colleges to focus on vocational skills and applied learning (Du Pré, 2009). The emphasis at Technikons was on “primarily *technikon-type* [sic] academic programmes” (Cloete et al., 2015, p. 34) and undergraduate education, with limited postgraduate offerings (Gumbi & McKenna, 2020). This focus further reinforces their role in preparing students for immediate entry into the workforce rather than pursuing academic careers

(McKenna & Powell, 2009). This contrasts with traditional universities, which prioritise research and offer a wider range of postgraduate programmes.

Under apartheid, the higher education system was explicitly designed to reproduce social stratification along racial lines (Badat, 2010; Mabokela & Mlambo, 2017). Technikons were established to provide vocational education for specific racial groups, with white Technikons (Historically Advantaged Institutions) receiving greater resources and prestige compared to their black counterparts. Black Technikons (Historically Disadvantaged Institutions), by contrast, were underfunded and subjected to tight state control, ensuring they served as pipelines for low-skilled labour rather than pathways to social mobility (Cooper, 2015). The racialised disparities in funding, infrastructure, and academic freedom entrenched during this period created enduring inequalities that continue to shape the institutional cultures of UoTs today (Badat, 2010; Du Pré, 2009).

A significant shift occurred in 1993 when the Technikon Act granted these institutions degree-awarding status, bringing them closer to traditional universities in terms of their offerings but without the use of the term “university” (Du Pré, 2009). However, the legacy of limited postgraduate programmes and focus on undergraduate education as Technikons had enduring effects on newly transformed UoTs. They were at a disadvantage compared to traditional universities with strong and well-developed research structures in place (Mtshali & Sooryamoorthy, 2019). Additionally, in the past Technikons, were not mandated or funded for research, resulting in a weaker research culture and fewer research outputs compared to traditional universities (Gumbi & McKenna, 2020; McKenna & Powell, 2009; Mtshali & Sooryamoorthy, 2019). Unsurprisingly, despite being called ‘Universities’ of Technology, many UoTs have struggled to build a strong research culture in line with their traditional university counterparts (Gumbi & McKenna, 2020).

Cooper (2015, p. 259) explores the concerns of “academic drift” as UoTs strive to emulate traditional universities, potentially compromising their unique strengths and limiting access for students who might not meet the stricter entry requirements of traditional universities. Du Pré (2009, p. 81) agrees, adding that maintaining the different specialisations between a traditional university (research-focused) and UoT (technology and industry-focused) brings greater diversity and international competitiveness to South African higher education. Additionally, “academic drift” could “erode distinctions between university and UoT missions” (McKenna & Powell, 2009, p. 43), undermining the UoT’s broader purpose of increasing access to a diverse range of students (Du Pre et al., 2004).

The merger process

The merger process sought to address these historical inequities by combining institutions with disparate resources, cultures, and pedagogical priorities into single entities. However, as Jansen

(2009) argues, the process was often fraught with conflict, as the legacies of privilege and marginalisation clashed within newly merged institutions. White Technikons frequently sought to preserve their established cultures and practices, while black Technikons fought for greater representation and recognition within the new institutional structures (Chetty, 2010). These dynamics reflect the intricacies of institutional mergers, characterised by struggles over power, identity, and belonging (Cooper, 2015). While the goal of integration aimed to unify historically segregated institutions, in reality, the process often amplified tensions, as differing values, priorities, and practices came into conflict (Chetty, 2010).

Beyond institutional distinctions, there was a fundamental difference in the ways Technikons and traditional universities approach knowledge (Gumbi & McKenna, 2020). These epistemological differences reflect contrasting views on the nature, purpose, and validation of knowledge (Badat, 2010).

The merger process also highlighted the material and symbolic inequalities embedded in the apartheid-era system (Ntshoe & De Villiers, 2008). For instance, white Technikons often brought significantly more resources – modern facilities, experienced staff, and established industry connections – to the mergers (Du Pré, 2009), while black Technikons were burdened with infrastructural deficits, higher student-to-staff ratios, and limited research capacity (Subotzky, 2003). These disparities not only complicated the logistics of integration but also reinforced perceptions of inequality (Chetty, 2010). Historically Black Technikons were often positioned as unequal partners, needing substantial “catch-up” efforts, which inadvertently framed them as less resourced or less academically rigorous compared to their historically White counterparts (Ntshoe, 2004). This framing perpetuated imbalances of power and created a narrative of inequality within the merged institutions (Hay & Monnapula-Mapesela, 2009).

Cultural frictions and institutional identity

The mergers also exposed deep cultural frictions between the institutions involved. As Badat (2010) notes, institutional cultures are shaped by their histories, values, and practices, and these cultures do not easily align when institutions with contrasting legacies are combined. White Technikons often maintained hierarchical, Eurocentric cultures that prioritised efficiency, formality, and individual achievement, while black Technikons emphasised collectivism, community engagement, and resistance to systemic oppression (Ntshoe & De Villiers, 2008).

The collision of these cultural paradigms within merged UoTs created tensions that continue to influence their institutional identities. For example, the administrative and pedagogical practices inherited from white Technikons often dominate, marginalising the epistemologies and practices that

emerged from black Technikons' histories of resistance and resilience (Badat, 2010). This dynamic perpetuates what Braidotti (2014) describes as "hierarchical dualisms," where certain ways of knowing and being are privileged over others, undermining the inclusivity that the merger process purported to achieve.

Moving beyond the binary

Through a feminist new materialist lens, these tensions can be understood as more than interpersonal or ideological conflicts. Instead, they reflect the entangled intra-actions of material, discursive, and historical forces that shape the being-becoming of UoTs. The physical infrastructures, funding allocations, and institutional Discourses inherited from apartheid-era Technikons continue to intra-act with the aspirations and resistances of staff and students within merged UoTs, producing dynamic assemblages of inclusion and exclusion, stability, and flux.

Barad's (2007) concept of intra-action offers a way to move beyond binary framings of privilege versus marginalisation or black versus white. Instead, it emphasises the relational processes through which power, identity, and subjectivity are co-constituted within UoTs. By recognising the entangled nature of these forces, this study seeks to illuminate how the legacies of apartheid, the material-discursive conditions of the merger, and the ongoing struggles for equity and representation intra-act to shape the possibilities for becoming within UoTs.

Epistemological frictions and institutional identity

The transition to UoTs has exposed the epistemological frictions between vocational and academic paradigms. Vocational education, with its emphasis on skills and application, often clashes with the more abstract, theoretical orientations of academic education. These tensions are not merely philosophical but have material and structural implications, shaping curricula, research priorities, and institutional cultures (Karodia et al., 2015).

For instance, UoTs must balance the demands of industry, which prioritises graduates with practical skills, against the expectations of academic legitimacy, which often emphasises theoretical contributions and research outputs (Gumbi & McKenna, 2020). This balancing act creates what Subotzky (2003) describes as "competing rationalities," where UoTs are pulled in opposing directions, struggling to define their identity within the higher education landscape.

Further concerns about "academic drift," (McKenna & Powell, 2009, p. 42) are highlighted by the distinction between 'lecturers' in Technikons and 'academics' in universities. The term 'academic' became prevalent only during the transition from Technikons to Universities of Technology (UoTs), reflecting a drift towards research and scholarship (Gumbi & McKenna, 2020).

A posthumanist perspective

Feminist new materialist and posthumanist perspectives offer valuable insights into these tensions by challenging binary distinctions between vocational and academic paradigms. Braidotti's (2014) concept of relational ontology emphasises the interconnectedness of different knowledge systems, suggesting that vocational and academic paradigms need not be oppositional but can coexist within a broader assemblage of educational practices. Similarly, Barad's (2007) notion of intra-action highlights how knowledge is co-constituted through the entangled relationships between material, social, embodied and discursive forces.

Through this lens, the transition to UoTs can be seen not as a linear progression from vocational to academia but as an ongoing process of negotiation and intra-action. The material-discursive legacies of Technikons – such as their curricula, infrastructure, and institutional cultures – continue to shape the possibilities for knowledge production within UoTs, even as these institutions strive to reimagine themselves as spaces of critical inquiry and intellectual engagement. This study draws on theories of knowledge production that recognise tacit and embodied knowledge, and from the arts and a practice-based understanding, new possibilities are opened up for understanding fashion design education practice and becoming differently.

2.3.2. Contesting knowledge: Vocationalism and the neoliberal University

The reconfiguration of Technikons into Universities of Technology (UoTs) unfolded within the broader context of neoliberal reforms in global higher education. These reforms have profoundly shaped how knowledge is valued, produced, and distributed, privileging economic utility over intellectual diversity (Barker, 2017; Shore & Wright, 2020). For UoTs, the neoliberal university presents both an alignment and a tension: vocationalism's emphasis on employability resonates with market-driven imperatives, yet its procedural focus risks relegating these institutions to the margins of academic legitimacy. This section explores how UoTs navigate these competing pressures, situating their struggles within the wider discourse on neoliberalism in higher education.

Neoliberal rationalities and knowledge economies

Neoliberalism has redefined the purpose of higher education, framing it as a driver of economic growth within global knowledge economies. Universities are increasingly pressured to demonstrate their "value" through measurable outputs, such as graduate employability, research metrics, and industry partnerships (McKeown, 2022; Parfitt et al., 2021). This marketisation of higher education has entrenched a utilitarian view of knowledge, privileging disciplines and practices that promise direct economic returns while marginalising those perceived as less "useful" (Marginson, 2013). Karodia et al. (2015) argue that neoliberal economic policies have influenced higher education in

South Africa, leading to a focus on market solutions and potentially neglecting the social and historical context of the country's transformation.

For UoTs, this utilitarian logic intersects with their historical mandate to produce industry-ready graduates. As institutions with a vocational legacy, UoTs are uniquely positioned to align with neoliberal demands for applied, skills-based education. However, this alignment also creates tensions, as the commodification of knowledge under neoliberalism often devalues the critical, reflexive dimensions of education (Karodia et al., 2015; Shore & Wright, 2020), which are central to the academic identity UoTs seek to cultivate.

Vocationalism and neoliberal pressures

The neoliberal university's focus on performance metrics and economic outcomes amplifies the epistemological frictions already present in UoTs' transition from vocational to academic paradigms. Vocational education's emphasis on skills and employability resonates with neoliberal imperatives, but its perceived lack of theoretical depth can marginalise UoTs within the hierarchies of higher education. This marginalisation is compounded by the unequal distribution of resources, prestige, and funding, which often privileges traditional research universities over their vocational counterparts (Gumbi & McKenna, 2020).

Moreover, the neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility and entrepreneurialism reshapes how vocationalism is conceptualised within UoTs (Mtshali & Sooryamoorthy, 2019). Students and staff are positioned as "knowledge workers" (Kokt, 2010, p. 17) who must continually adapt to the demands of a competitive, market-driven world (Ntshoe, 2004). This discourse aligns with vocationalism's focus on practical skills but risks reducing education to a transactional exchange, eroding the critical and transformative potential of learning (Du Pré, 2009).

Resisting neoliberal logics

Despite these pressures, UoTs also offer sites of resistance to neoliberal rationalities. By integrating vocational and academic concepts, UoTs have the potential to disrupt binary distinctions between "practical" and "theoretical" knowledge, creating hybrid spaces for intellectual and professional growth. This potential aligns with feminist new materialist and posthumanist critiques of neoliberalism, which emphasise relationality, interconnectedness, and the co-constitution of knowledge as a collective endeavour (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2014).

2.3.3. Cultures of practice: Navigating macro, meso, and micro levels

UoTs are shaped by overlapping and interconnected cultural dynamics that operate at macro (institutional), meso (faculty), and micro (departmental) levels. Drawing on Barkhuizen's (2008)

model of interconnected stories, this section maps how these cultural levels intra-act to produce the practices, identities, and discourses that define UoTs. This mapping shows how the neoliberal and post-apartheid legacies at the macro level are entangled with the creative, designerly cultures at the meso level, and the vocational, skill-based imperatives at the micro level, shaping the material-discursive intra-actions that construct UoTs' institutional life.

Macro-level narratives: Institutional logics and historical legacies

At the macro level, UoTs are entangled within broader socio-political and economic narratives that shape their institutional logic. Neoliberal imperatives, including performance metrics and graduate employability (Shore & Wright, 2020), interact with South Africa's post-apartheid policies aimed at equity and transformation (Badat, 2010; Du Pré, 2009). As former Technikons, UoTs straddle the line between vocational and academic mandates, tasked with producing work-ready graduates while fostering knowledge creation and academic inquiry (McKenna & Powell, 2009).

These institutional logics often create tensions, as UoTs must reconcile their historical mission of applied education with the demands of academic legitimacy (Gumbi & McKenna, 2020). The government mandates to transition from Technikons to UoTs to match global standards (Du Pré, 2009; Kokt, 2010) and the post-apartheid mergers to redress previous racial inequity (Karodia et al., 2015) have been widely criticised. As Jansen (2009) and Ntshoe (2017) note, these transformations often fail to address the structural inequalities embedded in South African higher education. Instead, they can exacerbate institutional fragmentation, creating friction between inherited vocational practices and neoliberal academic paradigms.

Meso-level cultures: Artistic, designerly, and practice-based epistemologies

At the meso level, faculty cultures within UoTs play a critical role in shaping academic and professional identities. In faculties of design, art, and creative disciplines, a "designerly way of knowing" (Cross, 1982) often permeates the culture, foregrounding creativity, collaboration, and practice-based learning. These values align with the vocational emphasis on skills and employability (Harrison, 2016), yet they introduce tensions when juxtaposed with the theoretical and research-driven expectations of a university environment.

Practitioner-based disciplines frequently celebrate iterative processes, material engagement, and tacit knowledge, challenging traditional academic hierarchies that privilege textual and theoretical outputs (Pahl, 2017). However, integrating these practices into a university framework is fraught with difficulty. Faculties must navigate the conflicting demands of professional practice and academic legitimacy, particularly as UoTs transition from their Technikon heritage. The challenge is further compounded by the lack of an established research culture among staff, many of whom were

historically focused on teaching and learning (Karodia et al., 2015). Additionally, staff with strong practitioner identities often perceive research as an auxiliary responsibility rather than an integrated component of their academic role (Wood, 2016).

Traditional research output measures frequently fail to reflect the applied, practice-oriented research characteristic of UoTs and practitioner disciplines (Dittrich, 2006). For example, the material-discursive nature of design practices resists standardised academic metrics, creating an ongoing tension between what is recognised as legitimate knowledge production and the innovative, practice-driven contributions of these fields.

This tension is further explored by Jawitz (2009), who highlights the interplay of practitioner and academic identities within a UoT design department. Jawitz notes that academics with strong professional practitioner identities may struggle to serve as role models for new academics pursuing purely academic trajectories. Van der Bijl and Oosthuizen (2019) emphasise the importance of practitioner experience for UoT lecturers, arguing that it enriches teaching but complicates the alignment with traditional academic norms. These dynamics illustrate how academic identities and career trajectories within UoTs are shaped by the interplay of professional, teaching, and research communities of practice.

Professional knowledge, therefore, extends beyond technical proficiency. It encompasses theoretical frameworks, ethical considerations, and an understanding of the social and cultural contexts that shape professional practice (Clarence & McKenna, 2017). This multifaceted understanding aligns with the vocational legacy of UoTs but also poses significant challenges in adapting to the research-intensive demands of higher education. Ennals et al. (2016) observe that vocationally oriented disciplines like design, nursing, and occupational therapy often attract academics with strong practitioner identities but limited experience in scholarly research. These academics face considerable challenges, including acquiring new skills, navigating the pressures of publication and grant acquisition, and reconciling their practitioner expertise with academic expectations. This transition is often marked by confusion, stress, and isolation, highlighting the need for alternative pathways to support their academic becoming.

The revising and (re)imagining of vocational and professional knowledge continues to respond to shifting societal needs and industry demands (Faerm, 2015). The increasing emphasis on academic qualifications and research in higher education raises questions about the balance between practical expertise and theoretical knowledge (Skjold, 2008). Dittrich (2006) captures this tension, questioning whether the “best” teachers in design disciplines should be field-specific experts or more broadly grounded in academic methodologies. This ongoing debate reflects the broader challenges within

UoTs, where the integration of vocational and academic paradigms continues to shape institutional priorities.

Faculty cultures often celebrate interdisciplinary practices that draw on art, industry, and science, creating opportunities for innovation but requiring careful negotiation of academic boundaries. These practices challenge dominant hierarchies that privilege textual or theoretical contributions (Ingold, 2013). Ultimately, the integration of these diverse paradigms within UoTs highlights the complexities of being-becoming in institutions that continue to evolve from their vocational origins.

Micro-level dynamics: Departmental cultures and vocational legacies

At the micro level, departmental cultures within UoTs reflect the immediate, everyday practices that shape subjectivities, particularly in fashion design education. Historically, fashion design departments have focused on procedural knowledge and technical skills, reflecting their vocational roots in Technikons (De Wet, 2017). The curriculum emphasised garment construction, pattern-making, and other technical proficiencies aimed at preparing students for industry demands (Smal & Lavelle, 2011). However, as UoTs transitioned into universities, these departments faced increasing pressure to integrate academic rigour and align with broader institutional imperatives for academic legitimacy (De Wet, 2017).

Vocational disciplines like fashion design previously prioritised practical skills and “learning by doing,” a pedagogical tradition characterised by long hours of studio-based, iterative design work (Schmidt & Zarestky, 2021). This focus on hands-on training has been essential for equipping students with the skills necessary for the highly competitive fashion industry. In South Africa, fashion design was framed as “practical skills training with a vocationally focused curriculum” (Smal & Lavelle, 2011, p. 197). Undergraduate programmes traditionally included trade theory and Eurocentric dress history and emphasised technical mastery over critical engagement or theoretical inquiry (De Wet, 2017; Harvey & Lucking, 2017).

Yet, vocational disciplines are not static. As Higher Education Institutions in South Africa transitioned from Technikons to UoTs, fashion design shifted from a purely vocational focus to positioning itself as a professional discipline (De Wet, 2017). This evolution demanded that departments incorporate broader theoretical frameworks and research methodologies into their curricula, creating tensions between vocational and academic concepts (Faerm, 2015; Postlethwaite, 2022). The interplay between these paradigms reflects the complex mandate of UoTs to prepare students for industry while meeting academic expectations for scholarship and innovation.

Each discipline constitutes knowledge differently, valuing specific practices and epistemologies (Clarence & McKenna, 2017). Dittrich (2006) categorises vocational disciplines like fashion design as occupational profiles requiring a mixture of practical skills and contextual knowledge. However, the increasing emphasis on academic qualifications and research output in higher education raises questions about how fashion design programmes can balance these competing imperatives (Skjold, 2008).

This tension is evident in global trends as well. Lam et al. (2022) highlight that many prestigious fashion schools continue to favour highly technical curricula, focusing on garment construction and pattern-making despite shifting industry demands. In South Africa, similar challenges arise as programmes attempt to align with UoTs' broader goals for research-intensive and interdisciplinary education. Faerm (2015) critiques the "sink or swim" approach often adopted in fashion education, where practitioners transitioning to academia are expected to succeed as educators without formal pedagogical training. This mirrors the experiences of South African lecturers, who often enter academia with strong industry expertise but limited exposure to scholarly research or teaching methodologies.

Aspers and Skov (2006, p. 803) remind us that "people may shape things, but there is also a distinct possibility that things shape people". This multidirectional exchange highlights how material artefacts influence the embodied, iterative processes that define fashion design education. The interplay between material and discursive practices reflects the entangled nature of these micro-level cultures, where technical expertise and theoretical inquiry are not separate but intra-actively co-constituted.

Material-discursive intra-actions are central to the cultures of fashion design departments, where tools, spaces, and artefacts actively shape the practices and identities of both lecturers and students. Barad (2007) emphasises that objects are not passive but intra-act with discourses and practices, co-constituting subjectivities within specific contexts. In fashion design education, tools like fabric scissors, sewing machines, and paper patterns serve not only as instruments for technical skill development but also as active agents mediating the relationship between vocational practices and academic discourses.

However, as fashion design education navigates the shift from a vocational to a professional discipline, departments are increasingly adopting broader lenses to navigate these complexities. Postlethwaite (2022) notes that despite incremental changes, fashion design programmes often lag in integrating critical and reflective practices that align with evolving industry and academic expectations. Departments must now prepare students to engage with the broader socio-economic

and cultural systems shaping fashion, while also fostering scholarly inquiry that contributes to the academic legitimacy of the discipline. Fashion design education thus occupies a unique space within UoTs, balancing its vocational heritage with the demands of a professional discipline, creating opportunities for innovation but also risk-taking and care-full support, as departments strive to integrate theoretical, embodied and practical knowledge in diffractive ways that honour material and practice-based traditions.

Relationality across levels: Interconnected stories

Barkhuizen's (2008) model of interconnected stories provides a lens for understanding how these macro, meso, and micro levels intra-act to shape the cultures of UoTs. These levels are not discrete or hierarchical; rather, they are entangled, producing the assemblages that define institutional life. Macro-level narratives of neoliberalism influence meso-level faculty priorities, which, in turn, shape micro-level departmental practices. Conversely, innovations at the micro level can ripple outward, informing meso-level cultures and contributing to macro-level discussions about institutional identity.

This relationality underscores the complexity of UoTs as spaces of being-becoming. By examining the entangled narratives and practices across these levels, this study illuminates how institutional cultures are co-constructed through material-discursive intra-actions, offering insights into the possibilities and limitations of subjectivity within UoTs.

2.4. Section C – Being-becoming a fashion design lecturer

The previous sections explored the conceptual framework of being-becoming and the institutional transitions shaping Universities of Technology (UoTs). This section focuses on the lecturers inhabiting these complex spaces, particularly those teaching fashion design. It examines how institutional histories, pedagogical expectations, and sociocultural dynamics influence their professional identities, revealing the entanglement of personal and institutional forces in their being-becoming.

While there is a substantial body of international scholarship on fashion design education (including Almond & Power, 2018; Bill, 2012; Faerm, 2015; Gale, 2011; Kataria, 2018; Postlethwaite, 2022; Schmidt & Zarestky, 2021; Skjold, 2008; Souza & Pereira, 2020), and a growing body of South African literature on fashion education (including De Wet, 2017; Harvey & Lucking, 2017; Harvey

& Smal, 2021; Smal & Lavelle, 2011)¹, there has been less focus on the lecturers themselves within their uniquely situated contexts. Vlok (2017), for example, discusses fashion design at a UoT in South Africa but focuses on student and graduate experiences. Makhanya (2016), a fashion lecturer at a UoT, reflects on her early lecturing experiences but centres her narrative on mentorship received during her upbringing.

This section now zooms in on the lecturers who are navigating the complexities of being-becoming within UoTs. It explores how these lecturers experience the entanglements of material-discursive forces in their everyday professional lives. Drawing on a Feminist New Materialist and Post-Qualitative stance, the section highlights how material and discursive elements co-construct subjectivities, influencing the professional identities of fashion design lecturers in UoTs.

2.4.1. Lecturer identities in transition within UoTs

The evolution of UoTs from Technikons to academic institutions has brought significant changes to lecturer responsibilities and identities. These institutions are characterised by their focus on vocational training and academic rigour, creating tensions and opportunities for educators (McKenna & Powell, 2009). Lecturers at UoTs are often practitioners transitioning into academic roles, a shift requiring the negotiation of professional expertise and institutional expectations.

Norodien-Fataar (2021) examines curriculum practices at a South African UoT, highlighting the challenges lecturers face in adapting to academic demands. Similarly, Chitanand (2015) discusses the lack of pedagogical training for many new academics, which can hinder their ability to navigate their roles effectively. For lecturers without formal teaching qualifications, the shift to academia often involves learning on the job, which can feel overwhelming and isolating.

Ennals et al. (2016) describe the complexities of transitioning from professional practice to academia, noting that lecturers must not only adapt to new institutional cultures but also reconcile their vocational identities with academic expectations. In the context of UoTs, this involves balancing

¹ It would be remiss of me not to include my own work in this field, although citing myself in relation to others feels self-aggrandising. Suffice to say, I have published on this topic in:

Cavanagh, M. (2018b). A little black number: Undressing transformation from student to pattern maker. *South African journal of higher education*, 32(6), 197-214.

Cavanagh, M. (2018a). Fashion students choose how to learn. In D. Remenyi (Ed.), *4th e-learning excellence awards 2018: An anthology of case histories* (pp. 23-36). Academic Conferences and Publishing limited.

Cavanagh, M., & Peté, M. (2017). Fashion students choose how to learn by constructing videos of pattern making. *British journal of educational technology*, 48(6), 1502-1511.

industry-relevant training with the demands of research and theoretical engagement (Gumbi & McKenna, 2020).

Tensions between vocational and academic expectations

The institutional mandate for UoTs to merge vocational and academic education creates inherent tensions. Lecturers are expected to equip students with industry-ready skills while contributing to the institution's research profile (Mtshali & Sooryamoorthy, 2019). This pressure can feel contradictory, particularly for lecturers whose primary expertise lies in practical disciplines (McKenna & Powell, 2009).

Mafenya (2013) critiques the systemic barriers to integrating vocational and academic education, noting that many lecturers struggle to reconcile their beliefs, experiential knowledge, and competing priorities. The shift from vocational training to academic engagement requires not only new pedagogical strategies but also a reimagining of professional identity. Hiralaal (2018), reflecting on her experiences teaching accounting emphasises the difficulty of aligning personal educational values with institutional constraints, a challenge echoed across disciplines within UoTs.

Practitioner-lecturers and identity shifts

The term “pracademic” captures the multidimensional identity of practitioners transitioning into academia (Dickinson et al., 2022). These individuals often experience imposter syndrome and uncertainty as they adapt to new roles. Chitanand (2015) notes that many practitioner-lecturers struggle with the academic focus on research and publication, which may feel disconnected from their vocational expertise. Ennals et al. (2016) highlight the ongoing negotiation involved in balancing practitioner and academic identities. This dynamic process reflects the broader theme of being-becoming, where professional roles are not static but continuously reshaped by personal, institutional, and disciplinary influences.

2.4.2. Fashion design lecturers: Unique challenges and opportunities

Fashion design education, traditionally rooted in vocational training, presents specific challenges for lecturers navigating the shift to academia. Faerm (2015) critiques the assumption that professional designers can seamlessly transition into teaching roles, noting that designing apparel and educating students require distinct skill sets. Without pedagogical preparation, lecturers may struggle to develop effective teaching practices or critically engage with the evolving demands of the fashion industry (Smal & Lavelle, 2011).

In South Africa, the transition to UoTs has necessitated a rethinking of fashion education. De Wet (2017) calls for greater incorporation of research and critical inquiry into curricula, aligning with

global trends in fashion scholarship (Schmidt & Zarestky, 2021). Harvey and Lucking (2017) argue for decolonising fashion education by integrating African textiles and cultural narratives, challenging the Eurocentric focus that has historically dominated the field (Roos & Harvey, 2024).

Fashion design lecturers thus navigate a complex interplay of industry expectations, academic mandates, and cultural contexts. Their roles require balancing practical competencies with critical pedagogy, fostering both technical skills and intellectual growth in their students (Harvey & Smal, 2021).

Fashion research often builds on the practical skills of practitioners (Skjold, 2008). However, to succeed in this evolving landscape, fashion design education must move beyond traditional, vocationally-focused models and embrace broader, interdisciplinary, and theory-centric approaches (Faerm, 2015). In contrast to American fashion design education, which historically has a stronger vocational focus, British fashion design education developed a more scholarly and research-based approach (Faerm, 2015; Postlethwaite, 2022). Fashion design education remains relatively under-theorised compared to other art and design disciplines (Faerm, 2015). In South Africa, fashion design education continues to struggle against a lack of experienced academics and academics with post-graduate qualifications (Mbatha, 2017). Smal and Lavelle (2011) agree, explaining that fashion design education in South Africa is less focused on research and academics.

2.4.3. Academic identities as assemblages

The process of being-becoming an academic is deeply relational, entangled with broader social and institutional structures. As Stetsenko (2010, p. 7) argues, “social practices are viewed as producing not only knowledge but also identities.” This perspective underscores how academic identities are co-constructed within the norms and practices of disciplines and institutions (Jawitz, 2009), which dictate what counts as valid knowledge, how it is taught, and who belongs within the discipline (Clarence & McKenna, 2017). In this way, professional disciplines act as gatekeepers, influencing who is considered a legitimate member of the field.

Gee’s (2008) exploration of disciplinary identity further elaborates on this, suggesting that becoming a professional involves adopting specific ways of thinking, acting, and being that align with the traditions and values of a given field. However, these norms are often invisible, making them challenging to interrogate. This dynamic manifests in teaching practices, where individuals instinctively replicate the methods internalised through their “apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie, 2020), perpetuating exclusionary norms unless actively questioned.

At the macro level, neoliberal pressures on universities emphasise metrics, marketisation, and performativity, commodifying academics, and constraining autonomy (Enright et al., 2017). For early-career academics, these tensions are compounded by the intersections of institutional culture, socio-political context, and personal-professional identities.

Marginalisation and assemblages of power

For marginalised groups, the process of academic becoming is further complicated by systemic inequities and exclusionary practices. Guyotte et al. (2018) highlight the unique challenges faced by racially diverse women in male-dominated academic spaces, where they navigate the pressures of tenure and inadequacy. In the South African context, higher education remains deeply influenced by its colonial and apartheid-era history. As Maseti (2018) argues institutional cultures continue to centre whiteness, alienating black academics and perpetuating inequities in representation, curriculum content, and access. These Eurocentric paradigms often marginalise the voices and experiences of black academics and students, particularly women (Mabokela & Mlambo, 2017). Mudaly (2015) documents her struggle as a black female academic within historically white institutions, underscoring the intersection of race, gender, and power in academic identity formation.

Women face additional layers of marginalisation shaped by intersecting forces of race, gender, and institutional power. For academic women, motherhood can be a significant source of tension, in terms of the guilt associated with the time and inconvenience of pregnancy, maternity leave, and parental duties, but additionally the guilt of working and not being ‘good mothers’ (Guyotte et al., 2018). Hernández et al. (2010) highlight the experiences of women in academia, discussing hostility from older male colleagues, limited or non-existent support for family responsibilities, and a lack of opportunities offered to women in academia. Gender stereotypes of women as ‘helpers’ may lead women academics to feel more comfortable teaching than engaging in research, and some will use teaching as a way to “camouflage” their perceived lack of research productivity (Ennals et al., 2016). Gender stereotypes also manifest in the sexualisation and devaluation of women’s contributions. Mtshiselwa (2015) highlights how patriarchal norms in South Africa position women as incapable of leadership. While Edwards (2017, p. 622) provides a detailed account of her experiences of misogyny and failure to advance into leadership positions, explaining that “sexism remains active but hidden in university life.”

These intersecting forces – of race, gender, and institutional power – shape the assemblages within which academics navigate their professional lives. Academic becoming, therefore, is not merely an individual journey but a relational process shaped by systemic forces that reproduce or resist marginalisation. For women academics in particular, this involves balancing the embodied, material

practices of their work with the intellectual and institutional demands of academia (Mtshiselwa, 2015).

Vocational and academic knowledge entanglements

The hierarchical division between vocational and academic knowledge further reinforces marginalisation, particularly in disciplines like fashion design. Historically, vocational knowledge has been dismissed as trivial or amateur, relegated to the domestic sphere and associated with femininity and marginalised groups (Levine, 2010; Luckman, 2013). This “othering” of craft (Patel & Dudrah, 2022) reflects broader systemic hierarchies in higher education, where vocational knowledge – often embodied, tacit, and material – continues to be undervalued in favour of abstract, theoretical knowledge (Gordon, 2009).

For early-career academics, particularly those in practice-based disciplines, navigating historically gendered and racialised spaces becomes fraught with tension. Women practitioners entering academia face multipronged challenges: first, negotiating the hierarchical view of vocational knowledge as subordinate to professional and theoretical knowledge, and second, pushing against the gendered expectations that associate their work with trivialised domestic craft rather than intellectual labour (Luckman, 2013; Patel & Dudrah, 2022).

Fashion design education exemplifies this tension. Sewing and garment construction, often labelled as “women’s work” (Kokko, 2009), are undervalued compared to design ideation, despite the embodied and tacit knowledge embedded in making practices (De Wet, 2017). This reflects broader systemic hierarchies where the material, sensory, and tacit knowledge of craft is diminished in favour of theoretical and abstract knowledge (Levine, 2010; Patel & Dudrah, 2022). Additionally, there is a “valorisation” (Patel & Dudrah, 2022, p. 1549) of the “Westernised, white, middle-class version of craft practice,” which further classes indigenous, local, and traditional craft as ‘less than.’ Luckman’s (2013) discussion of the elevation of home-based crafts to the high street subtly supports this, where only certain types of crafts and aesthetics are seen as valuable enough to be elevated.

The re-evaluation of craft as a legitimate form of knowledge challenges these systemic hierarchies (Singleton, 2021). Scholars like Gordon (2009) and Luckman (2013) have argued for the need to reframe domestic and craft practices as sites of creativity, innovation, and resilience. By reclaiming craft as a form of feminist knowledge-making (Bain, 2016; Winge & Stalp, 2013), practitioners and scholars alike can disrupt the binaries of art/craft, masculine/feminine, and intellectual/manual, offering new ways of understanding identity and labour. Recognising the value of embodied and tacit

knowledge is critical for transforming fashion design education into a space where diverse knowledges are equally valued.

These experiences within the broader context of dispossession and marginalisation can be framed by “the disposable bodies of women, youth, and others who are racialised or marked off by age, gender, sexuality, and income are inscribed with particular violence in this regime of power” (Braidotti, 2014, p. 178). These intersecting forces contribute to the marginalisation of certain identities, further complicating the assemblages within which academics navigate their professional lives.

Eurocentric legacies in higher education

The academic becoming of South African scholars is deeply entangled with the country’s colonial legacy, which continues to shape the assemblages of knowledge, identity, and institutional practices. Waghid (2009) highlights how the dominance of Western knowledge systems and languages of instruction reinforces historical inequities, limiting access and participation for previously marginalised groups. Within this context, academics navigating these assemblages are not only negotiating personal and professional identities but are also engaging with systemic structures that privilege Eurocentric paradigms while marginalising African epistemologies. Jansen (2017, p. 14) questions this dominance, advocating for a curriculum that is “inclusive of the store of human knowledges anchored in the African experience but richly engaged with and related to other knowledges of the South.” This call for inclusivity underscores the relational and contextual nature of academic becoming, which must contend with the material-discursive forces of coloniality.

In fashion design education, these Eurocentric legacies manifest through the privileging of Western aesthetics, histories, and theoretical frameworks. As Roos and Harvey (2024) observe, the curricula have historically prioritised Eurocentric traditions, sidelining African fashion narratives and other indigenous knowledge systems. De Wet (2017) adds that this marginalisation positions African fashion as “other,” relegating it to the periphery of academic inquiry. Such curricular choices not only shape what is taught but also influence how academic identities are formed, requiring academics to navigate these exclusions while striving for inclusivity. For practitioners-turned-academics in fashion design, these tensions become part of the assemblage of their academic becoming, where the institutional privileging of Western knowledge conflicts with the lived realities and cultural contexts of their students and their own positionalities.

The entanglement of Eurocentric and gendered assumptions about knowledge further complicates this assemblage. Historically, the division between art and craft reflects a patriarchal hierarchy that devalues practices associated with femininity and domesticity (Levine, 2010; Luckman, 2013). This

hierarchy persists in fashion design education, where skills like sewing and garment construction – frequently coded as “women’s work” – are undervalued compared to design ideation, which is framed as more intellectual and masculine (Gordon, 2009). For academics within this assemblage, becoming is shaped by these cultural and institutional hierarchies, which influence not only their professional practices but also their sense of belonging within the academic community. Recognising and challenging these forces is integral to reimagining academic becoming as an inclusive and relational process that values diverse knowledges and practices.

The impact of institutional cultures

Institutional cultures play a significant role in shaping academic identities. Barkhuizen’s (2008) framework of macro, meso, and micro contexts provides a lens to examine how institutional policies, departmental norms, and interpersonal relationships interact to influence identity formation. At the macro level, the neoliberal university, with its emphasis on metrics, marketisation, and performativity, creates pressures that commodify academics and constrain their autonomy (Enright et al., 2017).

For early-career academics, these pressures often manifest in heightened tensions between their ideal, ought, and actual (Lauriala & Kukkonen, 2005) selves. The *ideal self* might envision meaningful teaching and research, while the *ought self* feels bound by institutional demands for publications and metrics, leaving the *actual self* struggling to reconcile these competing priorities.

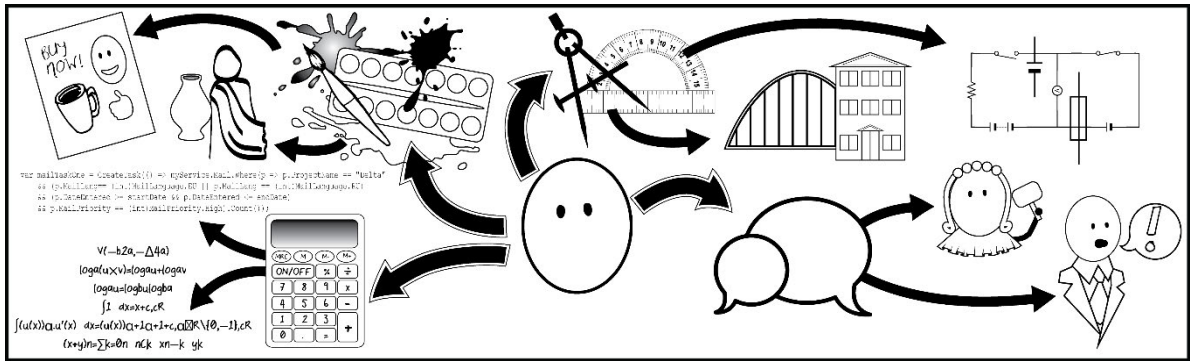
Semantic density and disciplinary norms

The notion of academic assemblages is further illustrated in the comic panel below (Figure 2.1), which draws on Clarence and McKenna’s (2017) concept of semantic density. It visualises how different disciplines emphasise specific forms of knowledge, practices, and values, shaping the identities of those within them (Barnett & Coate, 2004). Disciplinary discourse has the power to include and exclude and define meanings of what to think, do and be. Disciplines such as mathematics and engineering foreground logic and precision, while the arts emphasise creativity and visual communication. These differences illustrate how disciplinary systems and structures shape what is taught and influence how lives are lived, entangling identity formation with the social, cultural, and institutional forces within these spaces (Gee, 2008).

The four corners of the diagram represent diverse disciplinary orientations. Fashion design, situated within the creative arts (shown with a paint palette), values both practical skill and creative ideation. Unlike fields centred solely on logic or technical precision, fashion design integrates creativity, aesthetics, and communication into its practice. Designers must balance innovation with practical

execution, crafting garments that are not only visually compelling but also functional and culturally resonant.

Figure 2.1: Discipline density



Note. Figure created by the author.

These examples, while illustrative, are not exhaustive. They highlight how disciplinary traditions shape professional identities through their emphasis on particular values and practices (Dall’Alba, 2009; Stetsenko, 2010). Within the Faculty of Arts and Fashion Design Education specifically, this means prioritising creativity, practical skill, and the ability to communicate ideas visually and materially. These values inform not only what is taught but also how educators and students navigate their roles, shaping the unique identities that emerge within this disciplinary context.

These disciplinary assemblages are not neutral; they are embedded within broader socio-political and cultural contexts that influence who is included, who is marginalised, and how knowledge is valued. For fashion design educators, this entails questioning the Eurocentric and gendered norms that often underpin the discipline and working towards more inclusive practices that reflect the diversity of their students and contexts.

(Re)imagining becoming academic as assemblages

Viewing academic identities as assemblages offers a lens for understanding the entangled, relational, and dynamic nature of being-becoming within academia. This perspective invites us to critically examine the institutional, disciplinary, and individual norms, routines and practices that shape fashion design education practice. Assemblages of becoming explore what it means to be a lecturer; and how the position of fashion design lecturer opens a site for challenging exclusionary and hierarchical knowledge systems, relations, and practices to foster more equitable and reflective academic cultures. By recognising the forces – personal, disciplinary, institutional, material, and sociocultural – that assemble to entangle, we can better make sense of the complexities of academic becoming as fashion design lecturers.

2.5. Section D – Fashion design and the performance of identity

We communicate or signal our identities to others through what we wear (Black, 2008). McCloud (1994, p. 38) believes that clothing can transform both the way others see us and how we see ourselves. We might dress in a specific ‘identity uniform’ because we want people to perceive us in certain ways (Amin & Govinden, 2012) or we want to signal our belonging to specific social groups (Barnard, 2013). We match our fashion choices to how we want to signal these things – often instinctively (Peirson-Smith & Peirson-Smith, 2020). But the choices we make in dressing result from our sociocultural understandings as well - what people should wear, or how they should look (Barnard, 2013).

The choices we make in how we dress are significant in shaping and expressing our identities. Mitchell et al. (2012, p. 7) explain that there is a “relationship between dress and what can be described as ‘selfing’ or the ongoing processes of self-construction, self-representation and self-reflection that occur as we select and wear our dress.” Similarly, (Hancock, 2020) explores how dress becomes an integral part of our personal narratives, embodying both spoken and unspoken aspects of our stories. In her discussion of veterinary students receiving white lab coats during a ceremonial ritual, she illustrates how these garments symbolise formal inclusion into a profession and the responsibilities and privileges it entails. The lab coat, in this context, signifies the student’s transition into the role of a doctor. While wearing the white coat, students are supposed to wear “the identity of doctor” (Hancock, 2020, p. 102). While Hancock focuses on the white coat of a veterinarian, parallels can be drawn with the red doctoral robes worn in South African PhD graduations. These garments, imbued with symbolic meaning, serve as physical representations of the transformative rituals of becoming a scholar and a doctor.

But for a fashion designer or lecturer, there is no ritual outfit, no special robe. There is an unspoken idea of what fashion designers should wear, and what lecturers should wear... but there is no rule or formal definition. Moletsane et al. (2012) have become intrigued with this idea with their edited book *Was it something I wore?* Scholars like Amin and Govinden (2012, p. 323) have used dress as a way of understanding how we communicate identity, cultural values, and gender roles. But they also argue that this can be “independent of the wearer’s notions” (Amin & Govinden, 2012, p. 323).

Fashion, as visual material and material culture plays a significant role in the performance of identity (Peirson-Smith & Peirson-Smith, 2020). It operates not only as a means of self-expression but also as a medium through which societal norms, cultural expectations, and personal aspirations are negotiated. This section examines how fashion performs identity, focusing on intersections with gender, race, class culture, and personal becoming.

2.5.1. Fashion as a medium for identity

Barnard (2013) explains that where clothing refers to purely functional garments (worn for warmth, protection from the elements, and modesty), fashion comes from the specific choices we make about what we wear that conveys more information about who we are. Black (2008) argues that fashion is a compelling communicator – revealing a variety of unspoken messages and showcasing social positions. Barnard (2013) elaborates on this by showing that fashion choices can communicate both belonging (such as tradespeople wearing coveralls, goths wearing only black, and sports fans wearing their team’s colours) and individuality, as people compile their own ‘unique’ styles to express personal identity (Barnard, 2013; Peirson-Smith & Peirson-Smith, 2020). In this way, fashion can reflect class (Shi, 2023) or wealth (Peirson-Smith & Peirson-Smith, 2020) while simultaneously signalling social and personal identity.

The subject of fashion as communication is dense. At its core, Barnard’s theory of fashion as communication emphasises that what an individual wears expresses their identity (both intentionally and unintentionally). However, a central tenant of his theory is that the meanings expressed are always read within the sociocultural context of the individual. The clothes themselves present signifiers, but these must be interpreted by individuals familiar with the cultural meanings behind the signifiers. These are dependent on the sociocultural context and different for each group. An outfit that communicates modesty and propriety in one sociocultural context will be read as immodest and improper in another. For example, bare breasts and beaded necklaces are modest in isiZulu culture, but immodest in a Western or Islamic context. A skirt that ends at the knee would be acceptable in traditional Western cultural contexts but would be unacceptable for Islamic or Mormon women to wear.

I bring this in here to explain that how I dress shows others who I am. In trying to understand my multiple identities, it is helpful to start with how I express those identities in a sociocultural context to others.

2.5.2. Gender and fashion: Performing and disrupting norms

Gender identity can be communicated through fashion choices (Barnard, 2013) – where clothes are categorised as masculine, feminine, or androgynous, and gender-fluid or gender-queer individuals consciously dress to express their multiple identities on a given day. Like clothing, jewellery can be worn as a signifier of gender identity and can convey nuanced cultural and social meanings within the context (De Beer, 2012). For many women, what they wear is tied to complex oppressive gendered inequities that can make fashion choices potentially deadly - Mitchell et al. (2012) discuss the prevalence of women’s stories of harassment, gender-based violence, sexual assault and other personal attacks because of what the person was wearing.

The “gendering” of clothing begins with young children’s socialisation (Blaise, 2014; Halim et al., 2014), as they accommodate or resist learnt social norms and preferences about what is for “boys” and what is for “girls” (Rogers, 2020). Young children use clothing to help them categorise people by gender (Hill & Tenenbaum, 2022) and to express their own gender identity (Halim et al., 2014). For many women, playing ‘dress up’ as children was our first foray into “trying on” different identities (De Beer, 2012, p. 344). Dressing up as “mother” and playing house, dressing up as princesses, teachers, and a host of identities we might one day become. For Driscoll (2005, p. 227), “Barbie represents girls playing with gender,” and for many girls, their dolls and Barbies are where they can use clothing for gender exploration and expression.

2.5.3. Fashion and cultural identity

Entwistle (2023) explains that fashion is a “situated bodily practice,” where dress operates within specific cultural and social frameworks, signifying who we are and how we relate to the world around us. Barnard (2013) explains that people use fashion to signify their cultural identities, through colours or styles that show membership (such as team or gang colours, or specific sub-cultural aesthetics), or the wearing of symbols and signifiers to indicate belonging to cultural groupings (religious icons, cultural signifiers of marital status, or traditional or national costumes, for example). Gardetti and Torres (2012, p. 6) confirm that fashion is a “deep cultural expression” conveying identity and interpersonal connections. Fashion enables people to express cultural identity visually, by wearing elements of traditional dress to signal belonging or preserve cultural traditions (Shi, 2023).

For Amin and Govinden (2012) compare the wearing of a sari as a prescription for ‘reading’ the body as a form of text – the sari is a signifier of a particular culture and wearing one is inscribed with tradition, cultural norms and values. But these cultural meanings are not neutral and can be read differently in different contexts - as Amin and Govinden (2012) explore further in their chapter on the subject.

2.5.4. Fashion as aspirational and performative

Barnard (2013) suggests that fashion transcends the functional and is deeply embedded in how individuals convey messages about themselves to the world. This aligns with Black’s (2008) consideration that fashion operates within the realm of desire - people aspire not only to follow trends but to project a certain self-image through their clothing choices. In this sense, fashion functions as a form of “performing” (Butler, 1988), wherein individuals continuously construct and reconstruct their identities through dress.

From an aspirational standpoint, fashion allows individuals to craft the identity they wish to perform, often tied to ideals of success, beauty, and social belonging. The act of dressing becomes a way to align oneself with desired societal positions, allowing the wearer to “dress for the part” they wish to play in life (Barnard, 2013). De Beer (2012) argues that clothing and accessories can profoundly influence both how a person is perceived and how they perceive themselves. This echoes the performative nature of identity as outlined by Butler (1988), where dress acts as a repeated performance that solidifies identity within a given social context.

Moreover, Gardetti and Torres (2012) suggest that women, in particular, have been socialised to view shopping and dressing as key aspects of their identity formation. The act of acquiring clothing is not merely transactional but a ritual that affirms societal roles and individual desires. Barnard (2013) further explains that purchasing and wearing clothes can elevate mood and provide an avenue for self-expression, reinforcing one’s identity while allowing individuals to explore and experiment with their sense of self. This highlights fashion’s multilayered role: it satisfies both an internal, personal desire and an external, societal expectation.

For lecturers, this performative aspect is particularly relevant. The absence of a formal ‘uniform’ for fashion educators means that their clothing choices are not only personal but also pedagogical, functioning as a form of embodied communication that conveys values of creativity, professionalism, and inclusivity (Barnard, 2013; Entwistle, 2023). This dynamic underscores the importance of self-reflexivity in fashion design education, where lecturers must critically examine how their sartorial choices influence their teaching and their students’ perceptions.

2.5.5. Fashion, objects, and identity traces

Fashion’s materiality extends beyond clothing to encompass objects and artefacts that carry personal and cultural significance. Riggins (1994) and Rowsell and Pahl (2007) discuss how objects act as extensions of identity, embodying traces of personal and social histories. For example, a lecturer’s choice of accessories or tools, such as sketchbooks or fabric swatches, can reveal their personal-professional beliefs, perspectives, and priorities in their everyday practices.

In fashion education, these material traces also shape the learning environment, influencing how students engage with the discipline. As Peirson-Smith and Peirson-Smith (2020) argue, fashion is not only a form of self-expression but a relational practice, where clothing and objects facilitate dialogue between individuals and their cultural and professional contexts.

Ultimately, fashion is a dynamic site where identities are at play and can be creatively (re)imagined. As Entwistle (2023) highlights, fashion serves as a form of cultural production that both reflects and

constructs social norms, situating the body as central to the performance of identity. For fashion design lecturers, this negotiation is particularly complex, involving the inter[play] of embodied and tacit knowledge-culture, visual material and identities. By examining fashion design practice as a material-discursive space, we can reposition the way we think and what we want to be and become.

2.6. Section E – Theory as generative entanglement

This study's theoretical approach draws on feminist new materialist and post-qualitative perspectives, embracing a fuller, dynamic, and relational view of the worlds of fashion design lecturers. Creatively thinking about the concept of "being-becoming" a fashion design lecturer sits at the heart of this autoethnographic study. In foregrounding the entangled, multi-relational, and non-linear processes of being-becoming and identities as continually [re]forming the material-discursive entanglements plug into assemblages of human and non-human elements, affect, and sociocultural forces and relationalities.

2.6.1. Beyond human-centred frameworks: Material-discursive assemblages

Feminist new materialist thinkers such as Barad (2007) challenge anthropocentric frameworks by introducing concepts like intra-action and material-discursive entanglements. In this context, the material is not passive or inert but plays an active role in shaping identities. For instance, in my study, objects such as fabric scissors or studio spaces and human bodies intra-act and shape how I teach, create, and perceive the world.

This material-discursive as an ethical stance situates concepts becoming and identity within assemblages where human and non-human entities coalesce, influencing and being influenced by one another. Assemblages, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) describe, are both process and product, emphasising the fluidity and interconnectedness of elements within a system. Braidotti (2014) builds on this, framing subjects as "nomadic" assemblages and relational assemblages, always in the process of becoming through dynamic interactions with the world. This understanding enables a shift away from hierarchical relations and binary structures, embracing a flattened ontology (Lather, 2016) where different things, objects, values, concepts, relationalities, and interconnections jostle for space.

2.6.2. Identity as performed and situated

Butler's (1988) theory of performativity is foundational for understanding how identities are enacted and sustained through repetitive acts within social and cultural contexts. Butler (1988) conceptualises identity as a "stylized repetition of acts," where norms are internalised through performance. However, feminist new materialist perspectives critique Butler's (1988) Anthropocentric focus,

extending performativity to include the agency of matter. Barad (2003), for instance, argues that matter itself participates in these performances, broadening the scope of what constitutes identity formation.

In this study, Butler's (1988, 2002) insights are entangled with Barad's (2003) materialist focus to consider how both human actions and material forces contribute to the ongoing negotiation of identity. The performative acts of teaching, creating, and mentoring are not isolated from the materiality, sensations, emotions, and environments in which they occur. Instead, they are co-constituted through intra-actions that reveal the entangled nature of becoming.

2.6.3. Discourses and Social Identity Formation

Gee's (2008) concept of Discourses further enriches this theoretical framing by offering a lens to examine how identities are shaped by socially negotiated practices and norms. Gee's (2008) distinction between "small d" discourses (everyday language-in-use) and "big D" Discourses (broader ways of being) illuminates how professional identities are cultivated within disciplinary and institutional discourses. For instance, as a fashion design lecturer, I have been socialised into the Discourses of fashion, fashion design education and fashion design lecturer in a UoT each of which carries its own unspoken norms, values, meanings, and practices.

These Discourses are inherently hierarchical and exclusionary, marking insiders and outsiders within professional and social groups. However, by viewing Discourses through a feminist new materialist lens, we can move beyond rigid binaries to consider the complexity and relationality of these dynamics. In this view, Discourses become part of the larger assemblages that shape and are shaped by the material, social, and affective dimensions of identity.

2.6.4. Interconnected narratives and relational contexts

Barkhuizen's (2008) model of interconnected stories provides a layered framework for exploring identity as interconnected stories. At the micro level, personal stories capture individual experiences and emotions, while at the meso level, Stories reflect relational and institutional interactions. At the macro level, STORIES situate these narratives within broader socio-political and cultural contexts. This 'model' resonates with feminist new materialist approaches by emphasizing the interconnectedness of individual, social, and systemic forces.

In this study, Barkhuizen's (2008) model is reimagined to account for the material and affective dimensions of identity. Stories are not just human narratives but include the intra-actions of objects,

environments, and affective flows. For instance, my experiences as a lecturer are shaped not only by institutional policies and student relations and interactions but also by the materiality of the studio, the tactile engagement with fabrics, and the emotional resonances of creating and teaching. These entanglements illustrate the assemblage-like nature of identity, where human and non-human elements intra-act to produce the ‘self’ as materially situated.

2.6.5. Reimagining identity through post-qualitative inquiry

This theoretical framing aligns with post-qualitative inquiry by resisting rigid methodological structures and embracing fluid, emergent, and speculative ways of knowing. As Bhattacharya, one of the authors in Bozalek et al. (2020), explains, post-qualitative research seeks to move beyond traditional paradigms by questioning foundational assumptions and exploring new relationalities. This visual autoethnographic approach invites creative and conceptual courage to imagine fashion design lecturer identities and practices differently. It foregrounds the entangled nature of being-becoming, where personal narratives, professional practices, material environments, and broader socio-political forces coalesce to shape who we are and who we might yet become.

2.7. Summary

This chapter has explored the conceptual and theoretical entanglements that underpin this study, tracing the dynamic interplay of identity, being-becoming, and material-discursive forces within the context of fashion design education at a University of Technology (UoT). The feminist new materialist lens offers a way to make sense of being-becoming as an emergent, relational process shaped through intra-actions between human and non-human elements, sociocultural forces, and institutional contexts. Framing being-becoming as entanglements of concepts, theories of knowledge production, stories, visual, and culture, offers practice-based understandings of the fashion designer self – and from this understanding fashion design pedagogy looks quite different.

By foregrounding concepts such as diffraction, relationality, and assemblages, this chapter has emphasised the fluid and multi-layered nature of subjectivities. It has also demonstrated how institutional histories, vocational legacies, and cultural narratives converge to shape the identities and practices of fashion design lecturers within UoTs.

The theoretical lens established here provides the foundation for the methodological approaches explored in the next chapter. The methodology chapter expands on visual autoethnography. Specifically, it will discuss how arts-based methods engage with the material-discursive entanglements shaping my be(com)ing as a fashion design lecturer. By integrating post-qualitative

and feminist new materialist orientations, the methodology chapter will illuminate the creative and reflexive processes through which this study's field texts have been generated and explored.

This transition marks a shift from mapping the theoretical terrain to delving into the practices and processes that animate this inquiry, continuing the study's commitment to embracing the entangled, emergent, and generative nature of knowledge production.

3. TRACING THE THREADS: POST-QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

3.1. Introduction

Identities are not static; they are dynamic, entangled, and continually open to recreating and reinvention through lived experiences. Guided by feminist new materialism, I understand identities as assemblages – fluid and relational, shaped by the intra-actions of personal history, the material world, and sociocultural forces. In this study, I explore how my identities as a fashion design lecturer are continually being (re)formed within these entangled assemblages. Drawing from my fashion designer practice, I investigate the intersections of self, culture, and practice to examine my being-becoming a fashion design lecturer at a University of Technology (UoT).

Using visual autoethnography allows me to critically examine my lived experiences of being-becoming a fashion design lecturer, engaging with the tacit, embodied, and visual dimensions of identities. These visual dimensions refer to artful and material practices, such as drawing and making, that foster reflective and creative ways of knowing. Traditional textual methods cannot fully capture the complexities of my becoming; therefore, I turn to visual texts as both method and site of inquiry. These texts – comprising self-narratives, object-inspired narratives, comic doodles, and visual assemblages – disrupt the dominance of language (St. Pierre, 1997) to create unexpected pathways for reflection and meaning-making (Pahl, 2017). Through these arts-based methods, I seek to move beyond language's representational limits and embrace the material-discursive entanglements of be(com)ing.

The theoretical foundation for this work, discussed in Chapter Two, integrates multiple perspectives. Gee's (2008) theory of Discourses provides a framework for understanding socially established ways of being, while Butler's (2002) concept of performativity highlights how identities are iteratively enacted through practice. Barkhuizen's (2008) model of interconnected stories supports an exploration of how personal narratives link with broader sociocultural contexts. As well as Braidotti (2014) and Barad's (2003) concepts of becoming, intra-action, and diffraction, and Barad's (2007) assemblage and the material-discursive guide attention to the relational entanglements between material and human entities. Together, these inform my approach to studying identities and help me respond to the central research question of this study: *“What Discourses have underpinned my be(com)ing a fashion design lecturer and my educational practices at a UoT?”*

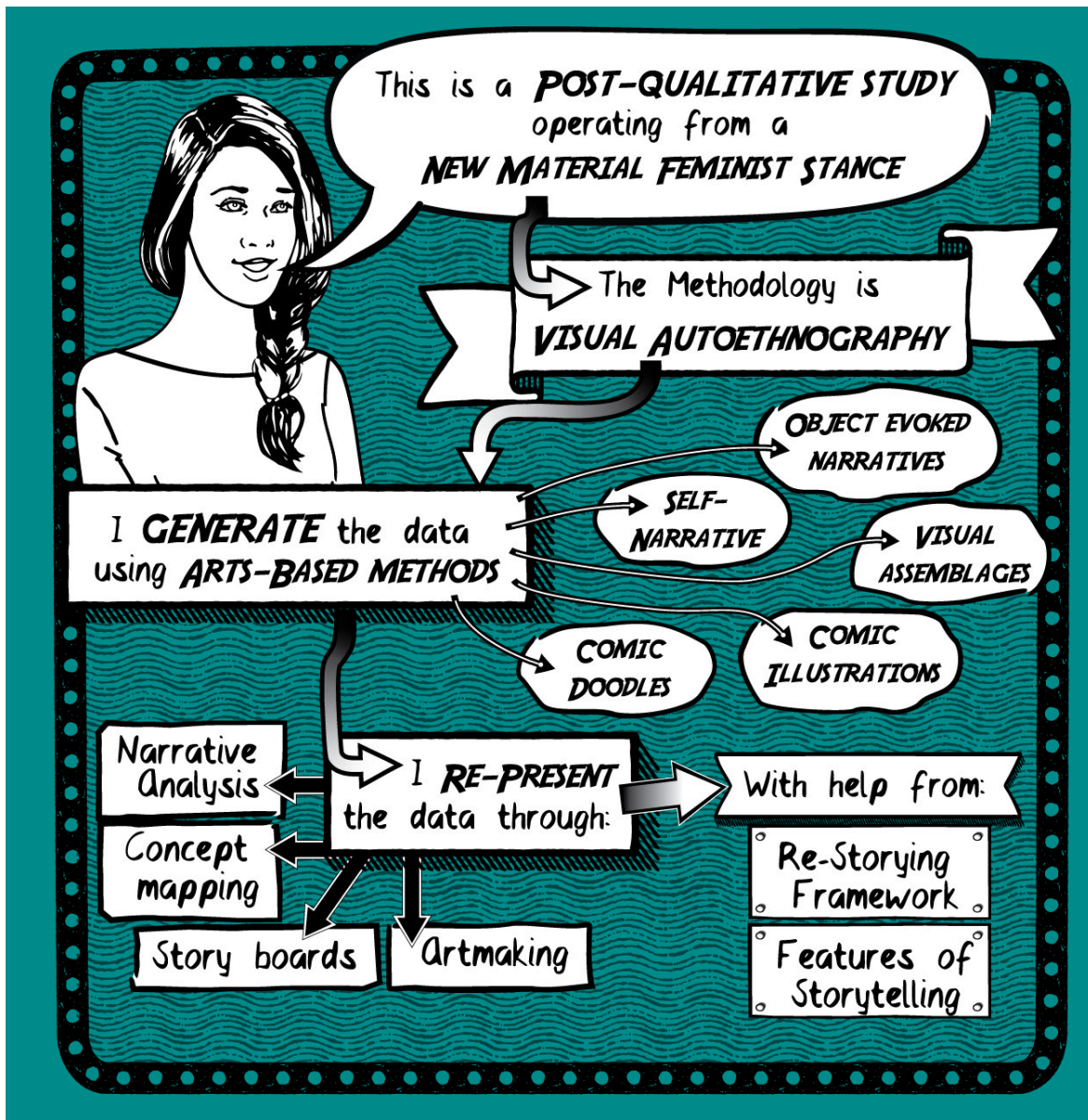
This chapter is organised around the ethico-onto-epistemological stance (Barad, 2007; St. Pierre et al., 2016) that underpins this research. Section A opens with my philosophical stance, reflecting on the post-qualitative turn and how feminist new materialism informs my inquiry. Section B traces the

principles and history of autoethnography and explains how I came to visual autoethnography as an approach. Section C delves into how I engage with arts-based methods, moving beyond conventional notions of ‘data generation’ to consider the material and reflexive processes involved. Section D reflects on how I have analysed and re-presented these assemblages, embracing the complexities and ambiguities inherent in my study. Finally, in Section E, I address the ethical considerations, challenges, and opportunities that have emerged, to highlight how this study pushes against traditional research boundaries.

Through this inquiry, I reposition myself not only as a researcher but as a learner within the autoethnographic process. As Pahl (2017, p. 31) suggests, to “think and write” in a materially situated way opens up creative possibilities for exploring the entangled relationships between self, practice, and context. This enables me to engage critically and reflexively with my be(com)ing as a fashion designer and academic within the unique cultural context of a University of Technology.

In Figure 3.1, I present a hand-drawn concept map illustrating the methodological and theoretical underpinnings of this research. The map depicts this study as post-qualitative, operating from a feminist new materialist stance and employing visual autoethnography as the method of inquiry. It outlines the arts-based methods I use for generating and engaging with ‘data’ – including self-narrative, object-inspired narratives, comic doodles, comic illustrations, and visual assemblages (explored in Section C). Additionally, the concept map highlights the creative and reflexive processes – such as storyboarding, concept mapping, and artmaking – that I use to make sense of these ‘data’ assemblages (discussed in Section D). These entangled elements are brought together as an assemblage of bespoke methods (MacLure, 2021), reflecting the relational, iterative, and materially situated nature of this inquiry.

Figure 3.1: Research design concept map



Note. Figure created by the author.

3.2. Section A – Philosophical stance

As I became more entangled with the human and non-human elements of my study, I found that traditional qualitative paradigms no longer aligned with the kind of visual, relational, and materially situated inquiry I was engaged in. It wasn't that these paradigms were 'wrong,' but, like St. Pierre (2024), I realised they didn't work with the complexities of my research. Decentring the human (Bhattacharya, 2021) allowed me to see how the non-human elements around me – culture, social expectations, the tools and objects I worked with, and even the buildings I inhabited – shaped so much of my being-becoming. Unravelling the threads of my inquiry, I was drawn into a stance that moves beyond traditional ontological and epistemological divisions (Magnusson, 2021). Rather than

grounding this work in a structured paradigm, which implies a fixed, rigid framework, I align with the post-qualitative view that knowledge, being, and ethics are deeply interwoven.

In this stance, the boundaries between methodology, theory, and practice blur. As St. Pierre (2018, p. 604) suggests, embracing a post-qualitative approach means that researchers “live the theories” and are enabled by a different ethico-onto-epistemology. The term “ethico-onto-epistemology” (St. Pierre et al., 2016, p. 99) expands on Barad’s (2007) concept of onto-epistemology, which underscores the inseparability of being (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology) in research. By positioning ethics as equally fundamental, this perspective challenges traditional distinctions, viewing ontology, epistemology, and ethics as a single, interconnected flow (St. Pierre et al., 2016). This resonates with my own experience of conducting this research, where the inquiry itself became a transformative practice, entangled with my be(com)ing as a fashion designer and lecturer.

3.2.1. Post-qualitative turn

The post-qualitative turn (St. Pierre, 2018) offers a philosophical shift that disrupts traditional ontological and epistemological foundations in qualitative research. This shift beyond (or post) qualitative research disrupts the linear, detached nature of traditional qualitative methodologies, instead positioning knowledge-making as an entangled, relational process where meaning is continuously (re)configured through material and discursive intra-actions (Magnusson, 2021). By rejecting binary thinking (Bozalek et al., 2020; MacLure, 2023), this stance allows for a nuanced exploration of how my professional and personal identities are co-constituted through material, cultural, and social intra-actions.

At the heart of the post-qualitative turn is a rethinking of human exceptionalism, a notion interrogated through posthumanism (Barad, 2003; MacLure, 2023). Posthumanism deconstructs the anthropocentric lens that has long positioned humans as distinct from and superior to the material world. Instead, it centres interconnected relationships between humans, non-humans, and the environments they inhabit. Carol Taylor (EERAedu, 2023) emphasises how this shift destabilises rigid dichotomies such as subject/object and mind/body, creating space for more fluid, entangled understandings of identities and existence. This lens invites a broader exploration of entanglement and relationality in identity formation (Bhattacharya, 2021; MacLure, 2021).

However, my study moves beyond posthumanism’s general dissatisfaction of anthropocentrism to embrace feminist new materialism as the primary philosophical stance (Barad, 2007; Truman, 2019). Feminist new materialism takes posthumanism’s critique further by specifically addressing the material-discursive entanglements that shape identities and societal norms, while also critically engaging with issues of race, gender, sexuality, class, and ability (Truman, 2019). This lens

emphasises that the material world is not passive or inert but actively participates in the co-constitution of reality, thus foregrounding the agency of non-human matter alongside human subjects (Barad, 2007).

3.2.2. Feminist new materialism: Entangled agencies and relational becoming

Feminist new materialism offers a philosophical framework that foregrounds the dynamic interplay between human and non-human forces in the processes of becoming. This perspective challenges anthropocentric and dualistic understandings of agency by situating materiality – objects, environments, bodies, and tools – as active participants in the co-constitution of reality (Barad, 2007; Mazzei & Jackson, 2012). Through this lens, agency is not a property of individual entities but an emergent quality of intra-actions within entangled assemblages (Truman, 2019).

Positioning this work within a new material feminist stance acknowledges that agency, traditionally attributed solely to human actors, is distributed across human and nonhuman forces, as articulated by Barad (2007) and echoed by Mazzei and Jackson (2012). Here, I view materiality – objects, bodies, environments – not as passive backdrops but as active participants in the process of becoming (Truman, 2019). This stance shapes how I approach my inquiry and research practices, allowing me to engage with concepts and theories as tools in the analytical process, rather than as fixed methods (Magnusson, 2021).

In this research, feminist new materialism provides a stance that resists fixed frameworks and celebrates the iterative, unfolding nature of inquiry. As Magnusson (2021) suggests, concepts and theories within this stance are not static tools but active collaborators in the research process, evolving in tandem with the phenomena under study. This philosophical orientation resonates with the methodological flexibility of my visual autoethnography, where meaning is generated through material-discursive practices rather than predetermined methods.

Central to feminist new materialism is its emphasis on relationality and interconnectivity. By positioning identity as an ongoing negotiation within these entanglements, this stance allows me to explore how my identities as a fashion designer and lecturer are shaped by social, cultural, and material forces. Barad's (2007) concept of intra-action and Truman's (2019) articulation of material agency challenge traditional binaries – such as subject/object and human/non-human – by highlighting how phenomena emerge through relational engagements.

For this study, feminist new materialism not only informs my philosophical stance but also underpins my methodological approach. Visual autoethnography becomes a site for engaging with the materiality of my lived experiences, where drawing, making, and storytelling are not merely

representational acts but active processes of inquiry. These practices align with the feminist new materialist commitment to disrupting rigid methodological boundaries and exploring the entangled nature of knowledge creation.

3.2.3. Key concepts in feminist new materialism: Materiality, intra-action, and diffraction

Operating from a feminist new materialism stance (Barad, 2007; Truman, 2019), I examine how identities are fluidly constructed and entangled with the material and discursive world. By thinking with scholars like Barad (2007), Butler (2002), and Gee (2008), I position my research within an ontology that foregrounds the dynamic interplay of social, cultural, and material factors. This theoretical lens helps illuminate the complexities of identity formation, allowing for deeper insight into my own being-becoming as a fashion design lecturer.

By adopting feminist new materialism, I centre the intra-active processes that challenge traditional binaries and demonstrate how agency is distributed across human and non-human entities (Barad, 2003, 2007). This allows me to focus on how material practices (such as my visual autoethnography) participate in the formation of identity, offering a more specific framework through which to examine the complex entanglements at play in my being-becoming as a fashion design lecturer.

Feminist new materialism is underpinned by several key concepts that guide both its philosophical orientation and methodological applications. These include materiality, intra-action, and diffraction, each of which offers distinct insights into the relational and emergent nature of reality.

Materiality: The agency of non-human forces

In feminist new materialism, materiality is not a passive backdrop to human action but an active participant in shaping the world. Barad (2007) emphasises that objects, bodies, and environments possess agency within relational networks, influencing and being influenced by the intra-actions in which they are entangled. For my research, materiality becomes central to understanding the processes through which identities are formed and re-formed. The material artefacts I engage with – fabric scissors, office keys, comic doodles, and visual assemblages – actively contribute to the narratives and meanings I construct, offering new insights into my being-becoming as a fashion design lecturer.

Intra-action: The mutual constitution of entities

Barad's (2003, 2007) concept of intra-action fundamentally rethinks how entities come into being. Unlike interaction, which assumes pre-existing, independent entities, intra-action posits that entities emerge through their relationships. This perspective dissolves the boundaries between the researcher,

the researched, and the material world, positioning all as co-constitutive elements within a shared phenomenon.

In this study, intra-action highlights how the material tools and creative practices I engage with shape not only the research outcomes but also my identities. The intra-active processes of drawing, writing, and making allow me to participate in the entangled web of meaning-making, where the materiality of my tools is as significant as my interpretive lens. This perspective enriches my visual autoethnography by foregrounding the mutual influences of human and non-human elements in the research process.

Diffraction: Attending to difference and emergence

Diffraction, another key concept in feminist new materialism, offers a methodological approach distinct from reflection. While reflection mirrors what is already known, diffraction focuses on the differences and new patterns that emerge when waves – or ideas – intra-act (Barad, 2007; Hancock, 2020; Truman, 2019). By reading ideas and materials through one another, diffraction opens up possibilities for understanding that transcend reductive binaries.

In my research, a diffractive inquiry allows me to explore the entangled and non-linear pathways of identity formation. By attending to the interference patterns created by overlapping Discourses, material artefacts, and embodied practices, I uncover new insights into how my professional and personal identities are co-constituted. For example, visual texts in my autoethnography act as diffractive surfaces where the material and discursive intra-actions of my practice generate new meanings and possibilities.

Beyond language: Expanding the scope of expression

Language, while essential to meaning-making, is recognised within feminist new materialism as limited in its capacity to fully capture the complexities of reality (MacLure, 2021; St. Pierre, 1997). This challenges traditional views of language as a transparent mirror of the world (St. Pierre et al., 2016) and encourages a turn toward non-linguistic forms of expression. In my research, visual texts and material artefacts actively participate in shaping understanding, offering alternative pathways for exploring the entangled dimensions of fashion design lecturer identities.

By integrating these concepts – materiality, intra-action, and diffraction – into my feminist new materialist stance, I move toward what MacLure (2021, p. 506) refers to as a “bespoke methodology.” This approach responds dynamically to the specificities of my research context, disrupting linear processes and recognising the co-constitutive nature of theory and data (Magnusson, 2021). Through

this lens, my inquiry becomes a space for engaging with the complexities of identity formation as an emergent, relational, and embodied process.

3.2.4. Contextualising my be(com)ing: Stories of the material world

To unravel my be(com)ing as a fashion design lecturer, I engage with scholars whose work provides theoretical tools for thinking through the entangled relationships between identity, culture, and materiality. These concepts allow me to articulate how my personal-professional identities are continually shaped by the interplay of sociocultural, material, and embodied forces.

Discourses as ways of being

Gee's (2008) concept of Big D Discourses offers a meta-theoretical lens for uncovering the socially established "ways of being" within specific cultural groups. Discourses, as Gee (2008) outlines, shape and regulate behaviours, beliefs, and practices, functioning as invisible forces that guide social interactions. For my research, this lens provides a way to trace how cultural norms and social interactions have shaped my identities as a fashion design lecturer.

Through the lens of feminist new materialism, Discourses extend beyond language to include the material and visual. The tools and artefacts I engage with – fabric scissors, comic doodles, and object-inspired narratives – become sites where Discourses are both embedded and performed. By visually representing these Discourses, I disrupt traditional textual analyses, highlighting how cultural norms are encoded in images, practices, and material artefacts. This approach not only expands Gee's (2008) framework but also adapts it for a feminist new materialist inquiry, where the material-discursive interplay becomes central to understanding identity formation.

Interconnected stories: Barkhuizen's multi-level narrative model

Barkhuizen's (2008) model of interconnected stories emphasises that narratives do not exist in isolation but are embedded within broader sociocultural and material contexts. This model distinguishes between the micro level of personal experiences, the meso level of social interactions, and the macro level of societal narratives, offering a multi-dimensional understanding of identity.

Through this scaffold, I see my professional and personal narratives as entangled with human and non-human forces. For example, the visual texts I create are not merely individual expressions but are shaped by the cultural histories of fashion design, institutional practices at a University of Technology (UoT), and societal expectations of gender, class, and race. These interconnected stories enable me to surface the erased or marginalised traces of my be(com)ing and reimagine the possibilities for being-becoming differently. By positioning cultures as material carriers of stories, I

explore how the material world participates in both stabilising and disrupting the narratives that define my professional self.

Performativity: Situated selves in practice

Reflecting on Butler's (2002) theory of performativity, I examine how identity is enacted through repeated stylised practices that conform or resist societal norms. My socialisation as a young girl instilled specific ideas about femininity, which I later performed as a woman, fashion designer, and lecturer. These performances, while often inadvertent, are deeply embedded in cultural expectations and prevailing Discourses.

Using visual assemblages in my research, I critically interrogate how I have come to embody these performances and consider where I challenge or conform to societal norms. For instance, my visual texts capture moments where I negotiate the tensions between my gendered identities and the professional expectations of a fashion design lecturer. This performative lens allows me to examine the histories and actions that constitute my being while opening possibilities for reimagining myself through alternative enactments.

Materiality and intra-action: Entangled agencies

Barad's (2003, 2007, 2018) concepts of materiality and intra-action further deepen my understanding of how identities are shaped through the entangled relations between human and non-human elements. Materiality is not passive but actively participates in the co-constitution of reality. For example, the objects and tools I use – scissors, fabrics, or keys – are not inert props in my narratives but active agents that influence how I think, feel, and act.

Intra-action, as Barad (2007) explains, challenges the idea of independent entities interacting. Instead, it posits that entities emerge through their relations. This perspective dissolves the boundary between the researcher and the researched, positioning me as part of the phenomena I study. My engagement with material artefacts and creative practices intra-actively shapes both my research outcomes and my professional identities. By acknowledging the agency of non-human elements, I frame fashion design education as a material-discursive intra-action of tools, bodies, and environments, all contributing to my ongoing becoming.

Assemblages of be(com)ing

Bringing these theoretical strands together – Discourses, interconnected stories, performativity, and materiality – I conceptualise my fashion design lecturer identities as an assemblage of relational forces. In this visual autoethnography, I explore how everyday realities are composed of complex entanglements between the social, cultural, historical, and material.

Through my visual texts, I engage with these assemblages, uncovering the traces erased by culture within my stories (Pahl, 2017; Said, 1994), the weight of societal expectations, and the vibrancy of material agency. This approach not only illuminates the relational nature of being-becoming but also offers a framework for rethinking how identities are constituted within the entangled spaces of professional and personal life.

3.3. Section B – How did thinking with materiality shape inquiry?

Having grounded my study in a feminist new materialist framework, reflecting the theories that shape my understanding, I now turn to consider a ‘methodology’ that will allow for an authentic exploration of my experiences. For this study, I have chosen visual autoethnography, a naturally self-reflexive approach that integrates visual components with textual narratives (Hunter, 2020). In this section, I make a case for using visual autoethnography through briefly tracing its history, discussing its core tenets and the qualities of effective autoethnographic work, and explaining why this approach is particularly well suited to my research aims.

3.3.1. Tracing the roots: A Brief history of autoethnography

Autoethnography has roots in ethnography and autobiography, where the culture (ethno) under study (graphy) is oneself (auto) (Chang, 2007; Ellis et al., 2011). Adams et al. (2017, p. 1) explain that the first formal usage of “autoethnography” as a term was in the 1970s. Originally, autoethnography simply made a distinction between insiders and outsiders of a culture (Hunter, 2020). As with many emerging methods, a variety of names and definitions were used as the field opened up to new researchers. These included “self-ethnography” (Goldschmidt, 1977) which acknowledged that in all ethnography the researcher’s perspective is inherently favoured, and “auto-ethnography” to describe cultural insiders giving account of the culture (Heider, 1975) or to describe researchers conducting ethnographic studies on their own peoples (Hayano, 1979). This marked a shift away from the traditional ethnographic stance of “objective outsider,” recognising that all research is shaped by the researcher’s positionality (Ellis et al., 2011).

By the 1990s, autoethnography had evolved into a well-established method for exploring identity, subjectivity, and culture. It offered a way to write against harmful ethnographic practices that “othered” subjects, empowering researchers to use their own stories to reflect on broader social issues (Adams et al., 2017). Autoethnography has been used historically to give voice to the “unheard voices” (Marx et al., 2017), as it allows those who are working through power dynamics in their lived experiences to regain power and autonomy over their own stories (Chang, 2007). Instead of the researcher enacting research *on* the subject, the autoethnographer *is* the researcher and subject. It is

this “cultural understanding of self” (Chang, 2007, p. 212) that defines the ‘ethno’ part of ‘autoethnography,’ and must be understood within one’s context.

This historic focus on giving voice to lived experiences calls for autoethnographic stories that are “meant to resonate with others” (Marx et al., 2017, p. 2). Here, I am reminded of Harmon’s (N.D.) argument that stories which resonate with others are stories that people care about. Without that ‘resonance’ people are left feeling apathetic. We tell stories that resonate with others to evoke responses in others, be it on a personal, emotional, or academic level (McDonnell, 2017). Stories matter because they are how we share ourselves with the rest of the world, but how they are told is equally important in bringing “the reader into the story” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 93) or creating “a sense of active participation” (McDonnell, 2017, p. 61).

However, the call for ‘resonance’ has created some debate in recent history among autoethnographic scholars (highlighted in Doloriert & Sambrook, 2009). The field seems to be divided on a spectrum between taking an analytic (see Anderson, 2006) or evocative (see Bochner & Ellis, 2016) slant. Anderson’s (2006) original article calling autoethnographers to avoid “self-absorption” and use more analytic methods in order to gain legitimacy has sparked widespread debate. Ellis, who argues for an evocative approach which celebrates the emotional, personal and messiness of our stories, has directly responded to Anderson’s article in Ellingson and Ellis (2008) where she expresses concern that his focus deemphasises “a focus on personal story, evocation, and narrative writing” but concludes that the article did introduce evocative autoethnography to a wider audience and create space for researchers to critically evaluate where they stood; and more recently in Gariglio (2018), where she explains that she “prefers to focus on the usefulness of stories and «story as theory» rather than categories and types” (p. 557) but that she sees Anderson’s more recent work as becoming more evocative, showing that analytic and evocative autoethnography do not have to be at odds. In fact, scholars like Dillow (2009) and McDonnell (2017) find themselves drawing from both, settling somewhere in-between.

I, too, feel in-between. I agree wholeheartedly with Ellis and Bochner’s call to be evocative in order to tell stories which resonate and have meaning to others. But I can understand Anderson’s call to use more analytic tools within autoethnography to conduct research which even staunch positivists could value. In this study, I use multiple perspectives to analyse and understand my stories, but to aim for resonance and to write my story as truthfully, evocatively, and vulnerably as I am able.

3.3.2. *Autoethnography: Can you research the self?*

In Chapter One, I positioned myself as the protagonist of my own storied life, aligning with McCloud’s (1994, p. 67) view that each person is a hero in their own mind. As an autoethnographer,

the “I” becomes both the subject and the lens through which research is conducted (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008, p. 448; Marx et al., 2017, p. 2). In autoethnography, the personal is understood as always embedded within broader social and cultural contexts (Chang, 2008; Hamilton et al., 2008; Marx et al., 2017). While the self is the focal point, the aim is not self-indulgence but to critically interrogate one’s own experiences in relation to societal norms, structures, and cultural discourses (Ellis, 2016; Marx et al., 2017).

This methodological approach resonates with my broader post-qualitative stance, where rigid boundaries between the personal and the scholarly are dissolved. Autoethnography encourages the researcher to reflexively engage with their own lived experiences, to “agitate and disrupt and contest views of the world” (Hamilton et al., 2008, p. 22), interrogating my ways of viewing the world, to find my false beliefs and to challenge them. As Adams et al. (2017) explain, autoethnography enables us to speak against dominant cultural scripts and provide alternative perspectives based on our personal experiences within a cultural context. This aligns to the post-qualitative call to challenge the traditional binary of objective researcher and researched subject (St. Pierre, 2018). In this sense, autoethnography becomes a means of exploring the entangled relationships between self, culture, and identity, much like the feminist new materialist lens I employ to examine the intra-actions between the material, social, and personal worlds (Barad, 2007).

3.3.3. Good autoethnography: What are the core tenets?

Autoethnography is fundamentally relational (Chang, 2008). To understand the self in relation to others, the core tenets of autoethnography require vulnerability, reflexivity, and empathy (Berry & Hodges, 2015). Vulnerability allows the researcher to explore difficult or uncomfortable truths (Ellis, 2004, 2007, 2016), exposing aspects of the self that might otherwise remain hidden (Hamilton et al., 2008; Rosenberg, 2016). Researchers like Rosenberg (2016, p. 36) warn us to avoid telling sanitised stories that are self-censored to avoid confronting the sensitive issues which make us uncomfortable – because it is only through making myself vulnerable that I can tell my true story.

Reflexivity involves a continuous process of examining one’s own positionality and biases, as the researcher shifts between the roles of subject and analyst (McDonnell, 2017). Myerhoff and Ruby (1982, p. 1) define reflexivity as “consciousness about being conscious; thinking about thinking.” This reflexivity helps balance the risk of “navel-gazing” by expanding the focus outward, linking individual experiences to broader social discourses (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). It is through this balance that autoethnography moves beyond the purely subjective, offering stories that are both deeply personal and socially relevant (McDonnell, 2017).

Ellingson and Ellis (2008, p. 448) argue that autoethnographers have “multiple layers of consciousness.” In autoethnography, reflexivity is a tool to question the world, taking nothing for granted. Reflexivity offers me a lens to look through to examine why I think the way I do *about* the way I think. The recursive reflexivity process reminds me of Ellis (2004, p. IXXX), as she toys with the pun of the ethnographic I/eye, the part that not only observes but is also observed, not just acts but is reacted to. Reflexivity is the voice of the autoethnographic I/eye, seeing the world through my eyes, but being able to see how that view is influenced by social, cultural, and historic filters of who I am. I use the autoethnographic lens to see the self that is hidden within culture, to see “the vulnerable self that is moved, refracted, and resisted during the process” (Hamilton et al., 2008, p. 24). This lens exposes the hidden self we often deny or overlook.

Empathy, meanwhile, calls for an ethic of care (Ellis, 2007), ensuring that the research does not simply dwell on the personal but connects with broader cultural and social narratives. To genuinely understand another individual’s story, empathy is vital, transcending the mere recounting of literal facts (Eisner, 1997, p. 8). Stories as data reflect human experience in ways traditional methods cannot (Dillow, 2009, p. 1345; Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 8). Adams et al. (2017) add that good autoethnography is not just about telling stories but about speaking back to dominant cultural narratives, revealing the power structures that shape our experiences. It is about recognising the researcher’s role in producing knowledge while also holding themselves accountable to the ethical demands of reflexivity and relationality (Ellis, 2016).

In this study, I draw upon these core tenets – vulnerability, reflexivity, and empathy (Berry & Hodges, 2015) - to explore how my identities as a fashion designer and lecturer has been shaped by the cultural, material, and discursive forces around me. By telling these stories whose meaningful content will resonate with others, I offer insights that move beyond the specificities of my experiences to address larger questions of identity, gender, and professional practice.

3.3.4. Thinking with art: Embodied ways of knowing in visual autoethnography

Artmaking has a role to play in research:

Working with artistic knowledge opens up different kinds of understandings. Art foregrounds the complexity of human experience and enables different kinds of meanings to be surfaced and understood. Artistic knowledge can be uncertain, emergent, and tentative; it is also located within lived experience and the body (Coessens, Crispin, & Douglas, 2009). It both creates culture but reflects cultures. As a lens for understanding human processes, it opens up spaces for things to happen. (Pahl 2017, p. 33)

“As writers and researchers, we just don’t know things; we feel them.” (Adams & Herrmann, 2023, p. 2). This quote embodies why I need to do this study as an autoethnography – because I cannot ignore the importance of feeling in being. Autoethnography provides both the structure and the freedom to delve into the intimate connection between knowledge and emotion.

I find myself grappling with the PhD’s demand to write and to cite as a scholar. Drawing on my tacit and experiential knowledge and the arts to communicate visually as a fashion designer, I came to “visual autoethnography,” a methodology that could entangle my identities as an artist and scholar. As Scarles (2010, p. 906) aptly writes: “Where words fail, I suggest visual autoethnography opens spaces of understanding; transcending the limitations of verbal discourse and opening spaces for creativity and appreciation.”

Adams and Herrmann (2023, p. 3) consider that autoethnography is “the art and science of representing one’s life in relation to cultural expectations, beliefs, and practices.” This sentiment expresses the tensions I’ve experienced between art and science, the practitioner and scholar. However, it simultaneously offers me a way to reflexively examine my being-becoming within my broader cultural, social, and historical contexts (Hunter, 2020, p. 313). It allows me to weave together the personal and the academic, embracing both introspection and critical analysis. By incorporating visual texts alongside narrative texts, visual autoethnography allows for creative and artistic forms of representation that deepen the study (Hunter, 2020; Scarles, 2010; Stephens-Griffin, 2019). This approach aligns with the theoretical perspectives I’ve outlined and supports a rich, nuanced exploration of my be(com)ing as a fashion designer and lecturer.

In this study, the use of visuals goes beyond illustration; it involves what Cross (1982) calls “designerly ways of knowing” – a framework that values tacit knowledge and interpretive depth. By weaving the visual and the narrative together, I engage a visual grammar that encourages alternative ways of seeing and understanding. Here, visuals invite multiple interpretations, reflecting not only my subjective experiences but also offering readers an interpretive framework to construct their own meanings from the visuals. This openness aligns with Hunter’s (2020, p. 314) assertion that visual autoethnographies are inherently less fixed than textual narratives, creating a dialogic space for reader engagement.

Stephens-Griffin (2019, p. 326) argues that visual autoethnography has the potential to disrupt conventional research expectations, offering a means of representation that captures the often messy and layered nature of real-life research. Scarles (2010) encourages broadening the scope of research beyond textual representation to include visual records that are able to capture the richness of lived experiences.

In this study, I draw on Cross's (1982) concept of "designerly ways of knowing" to foreground the tacit and interpretive dimensions of working visually. This approach values the interplay between intuition, materiality, and symbolic meaning, allowing visuals to function as active sites of inquiry rather than supplementary illustrations. For me, as a trained fashion designer, this way of knowing is deeply embedded in the process of making—shaped by encounters with materials, tools, and Discourses of design practice.

My use of visuals here weaves narrative and visual texts, encouraging alternative ways of seeing to “make the familiar strange” (Sousanis, 2015, p. 96). These methods allow me to navigate and reimagine the sociocultural forces shaping my being-becoming, creating a means to visualise complexity in ways that complement narrative methods. This designerly perspective interweaves the personal and the academic, entangling artistic and scholarly identities into an inquiry that resists static representation and embraces relational, embodied knowledge.

The decision to use visual autoethnography in this study felt instinctive. Understanding my identities and my being-becoming requires the detail and depth that only an approach like visual autoethnography can provide. Through interweaving visual and narrative forms, I navigate and communicate complex layers of identities, allowing the visual to stand as a critical component of inquiry itself. Visual autoethnography enables me to integrate my practitioner self into the research, creating an approach that is as multifaceted as the identities I explore.

As the visual components are open to multiple interpretations, visual autoethnographies are less fixed than textual narratives. Moreover, visual autoethnography can “provide an accessible way of representing the mess of a real research process” (Stephens-Griffin, 2019, p. 326).

3.4. Section C – Data generation methods

In this section, I delve into the fieldwork of my study, providing a detailed account of the methods I used to ‘generate’ my data. Drawing on MacLure's (2021) argument for bespoke methods fashioned “in the middle of things” (MacLure, 2023), I have crafted a unique approach that fits the specific needs of this visual autoethnography. As a fashion designer, I understand “bespoke” to mean ‘made-to-measure’ – a garment tailored to fit an individual perfectly. Similarly, I have stitched together methods that are tailor-made for my study, going through many iterations, much like fittings and mock-ups in garment production, adjusting and refining until they fit just right.

3.4.1. How did I generate my data? Arts-based methods

In autoethnography, data generation often begins with personal storytelling, but the process is rarely straightforward (Chang, 2008). Ellingson and Ellis (2008) emphasise that storytelling in

autoethnography is always contextualised, influenced by our relationships, emotions, and social positions, making it critical to select methods that reflect this complexity. I have embraced autoethnography as an approach because it promotes the flexible choice of methods and tools (Chang, 2008). Given this openness, I have chosen a bespoke collection (MacLure, 2021) of arts-based methods (Leavy, 2015) to generate data that externalises the tacit knowledge embedded in my personal-professional development.

Additionally, Müller (2020) suggests that playfulness pushes the boundaries of what research can achieve, offering a way to see and think differently. In this study, I embrace the idea of play to experiment with ‘methods’ that reveal untold stories and traces erased by culture (Said, 1994). By using art-based methods like comic drawing and hand-drawn paper doll assemblages, I was able to understand lived experiences as complex and entangled with human and beyond human relationalities. Through visual artmaking I am able to en flesh embodied and tacit knowledge – bringing texture and form to emotions and the materiality of being-becoming. Art-based methods allowed for risk-taking, ambiguity and imagination spaces to push my thinking beyond the constraints imposed by traditional methods (Leavy, 2015).

Arts-based methods can help me, a trained fashion designer, to challenge data as representational. Using arts-based methods creates new possibilities, not because of the art itself or the artist-researcher, but because of “what the artwork makes possible” (Müller, 2020, p. 51). The agency of artmaking lies in its ability to compel us to imagine, where thinking becomes doing and doing becomes thinking. Using arts-based methods allow me to explore the richness and messiness of reality of my fashion designer world and artistic practice. Drawing, according to Mitchell et al. (2011, pp. 19, italics in original), makes “parts of the self and/or levels of development *visible*.” And this making visible is exactly what I need to do as an autoethnographer trying to understand my own levels of development.

I take comfort in Chang’s (2007, p. 210) advice for autoethnographers to find their own ways to collect data that resonate with their studies. Works like *Unflattening* (Sousanis, 2015), *The Duck Pond* (Thiessen, 2019) and *Art teacher in progress* (Parker, 2017) are unconventional and revolutionary examples of arts-based research. These examples showed me that a PhD thesis didn’t need to follow traditional formats of blocks of text; instead, there were creative and visual ways to reveal who I am through autoethnography as a fashion designer, lecturer, and scholar. These works gave me permission to do things differently, to integrate my artist self and scholar self in becoming the autoethnographic protagonist.

I have chosen to use different arts-based methods that require me to draw myself – or an ‘avatar’ to represent myself. I do this in a comic style which suits my natural art ‘handwriting.’ Autobiographical comics – or comics about oneself – are inherently self-reflexive (Whitlock, 2006) in that the author-artist engages with their own avatar across the story. The comic format requires one to draw themselves a multitude of times from a multitude of angles, forcing “intense engagement with embodied aspects of identity” (El Refaie, 2012, p. 4). Drawing myself onto paper allows me to “step outside” of myself (Sousanis, 2015, p. 79), changing my perspective and encouraging reflexivity.

By combining artful methods like object-inspired narratives and comic doodles, I was able to generate data that can offer a much fuller view of the complexities of my personal and professional worlds as a fashion design lecturer. Like Müller (2020), I have found art and playfulness creates a joy in research and a way to resist. But in reflecting and becoming reflexive about the data generated through play, I am able to see the deeper social, cultural and historic meanings embedded in my being and becoming – only made visible through the uncensored process of play. Bhana (2005) argues that children enact their socialisations through play, trying on different identities and roles to learn who their sociocultural environment expects them to become. Similarly, Blaise (2014) highlights that play is how children police and reward behaviour that conforms to societal expectations of gender. These early experiences of play – whether it be playing house or dress-up – are often our first lessons in performing social roles (De Beer, 2012), laying the groundwork for how we come to understand identity later in life.

The following sections outline the specific tools I used, detailing how they contributed to a deeper understanding of my experiences as a fashion design lecturer.

3.4.2. Self-Narrative as storytelling

Despite the subjective nature of narratives, they are a way to understand the truth. Campbell (2004, p. XXI) argues that truths are disguised or hidden in religion and myths, and by learning to decipher the symbolic language, these teachings can be revealed. As an autoethnographer, I acknowledge that the truth is multilayered, faceted, or complex, and that personal experiences and sociocultural backgrounds fundamentally influence my interpretations (Dwyer & emerald, 2017; Ngunjiri et al., 2010). Schwartz (2014) poignantly reminds us that the act of researching ourselves instigates internal change. In the social sciences, we cannot disentangle ourselves from the research (Ngunjiri et al., 2010, p. 2) nor can we claim absolute objectivity (Dwyer & emerald, 2017, p. 5). All research is shared in a storied format, interpreted by the researcher, an innately human instrument (Williams & Vogt, 2011). In this visual autoethnography, I embrace a storied ontology (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and open myself to the multiplicity of interpretation, presenting my narratives for the reader and inviting them to form their own understandings alongside me.

In this thesis I draw on Chang's (2008) concept of 'self-narrative,' a reflective process of constructing the story of my lived experience. Others refer to this as 'personal narrative' (see for example Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Boylorn, 2016; Ellis, 2004; Jones et al., 2016). Telling my story began by creating an autobiographical timeline (Chang, 2008, p. 72), detailing the events and experiences that led to my becoming a fashion design lecturer. I tell my personal story in order to answer my first research question, "*Who am I as a fashion design lecturer at a University of Technology?*"

3.4.3. Comic doodles

I used comic doodles as a method of data generation in order to answer my second research question, "*What personal-professional experiences shaped my fashion design lecturer identities at a UoT?*" I was focusing solely on the personal experiences around my growing up as a girl in order to unpack how these encounters had shaped my being-becoming. By drawing these significant nodal moments (Allison & Ramirez, 2020; Tidwell & Fitzgerald, 2004; Tidwell & Manke, 2009), I could visually represent experiences that might otherwise be inaccessible. The act of drawing allowed me to recreate childhood places, emotions, and events which no longer exist, giving me new insights into my personal story. Comics offer a distinctive way to share human experiences through both visuals and words, weaving them to evoke a rich, detailed, and context-laden narrative (McCloud, 1994). El Refaie (2012, p. 7) asserts that comics enable new ways of telling stories and constructing identity, as they embody the sociocultural context of the author.

Chang (2008, pp. 84-85) suggests the use of "free drawing" as a visualisation strategy that uses doodles and drawings as a way to engage with memories. Although Chang suggests drawing places and buildings from childhood, I doodled my nodal moments. As a fashion designer and chronic doodler, I naturally gravitated toward this method. Drawing externalises thoughts (Tversky, 2011), allowing me to explore personal experiences with immediacy. The combination of visual and textual storytelling in comics made it possible to present my complex narrative in a concise format. As Whitlock (2006) notes, comics often evoke nostalgia, which further enhanced the ability of these doodles to vividly recall my childhood and personal experiences.

3.4.4. Comic illustrations: Researcher reflexivity through artmaking

In my thesis, comic illustrations serve as a method of externalising and ordering thoughts, emotions, and reflections, allowing for deeper interrogation, and understanding of my experiences. These illustrations fall into two categories: **response drawings** (e.g., "Unravel" in Chapter Seven) and **reflexive drawings** (such as the comic compositions in Chapters Six and Nine, and the main thesis illustration in Chapter Ten). The main thesis illustration in Chapter Ten, in particular, visually synthesises the central themes and findings of my study, representing the cumulative insights and complex interplay of identities that have emerged through my research journey. Through these

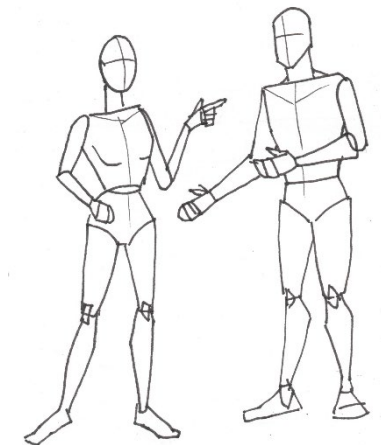
illustrations, I interweave art and research, creating a dialogue between visuals and text that generates new ways of thinking and interpreting data.

Response comic illustrations, such as “Unravel,” are often spontaneous, emerging in moments when I feel overwhelmed by the research process. In Chapter Seven, I was grappling with how to disentangle the different narratives linked to my second research question. It was during this period of feeling ‘stuck’ that I sketched “Unravel,” at the suggestion of a critical friend to “draw about it.” As an instinctive act of emotional release, the drawing captured how I felt tangled in the stories, visually depicting the sense of mental unravelling. Again, in Chapter Nine, I drew my discomfort in the form of a comic illustration to help me externalise and engage with difficult emotions I didn’t fully understand. By transferring these emotions onto paper, the comics became a way to process experiences that were difficult to express in words. Moreover, it allowed me to describe and explain my feelings to others more easily.

Reflexive drawings, like those found in Chapter Six, follow a more deliberate process. They begin with rough thumbnail sketches, followed by refinement and digital composition. For instance, in Chapter Six, I created a comic panel that visually narrates nodal moments from my professional experiences, drawing on the work of Tidwell and Manke (2009), to generate data in order to answer my second research question, “*What personal-professional experiences shaped my fashion design lecturer identities at a UoT?*” While the comic doodles in Chapter Five focused on the personal experiences, I used the comic illustration to foreground professional stories of being-becoming a fashion design lecturer. These illustrations are polished and accompanied by narrative descriptions, ensuring that the visual data is enriched by interpretative layers that clarify my intentions and insights (Leavy, 2015). The combination of text and imagery works in harmony to provide a more nuanced understanding of these moments in my professional journey.

An important recurring motif within my comic illustrations is the use of what I refer to as “anonibeans” (anonymous human beings). These are faceless characters, shown in Figure 3.2, that I draw to represent people without distracting the reader with specific identities. Drawing on my fashion design training, where fashion illustrations often depict faceless models to keep the focus on clothing, I adapted this technique in my comics. The anonibeans allow me to maintain anonymity and focus the reader’s attention on the action or theme being illustrated rather than on individual characteristics. By minimising detail in these characters, I offer a simplified representation of social interactions, ensuring that the emotional depth of the story comes through without interference from specific features. As McCloud (1994) argues, comic characters do not need to be drawn in perfect detail; they function symbolically, and through this abstraction, they become powerful tools for narrative exploration.

Figure 3.2: Anonibeau example



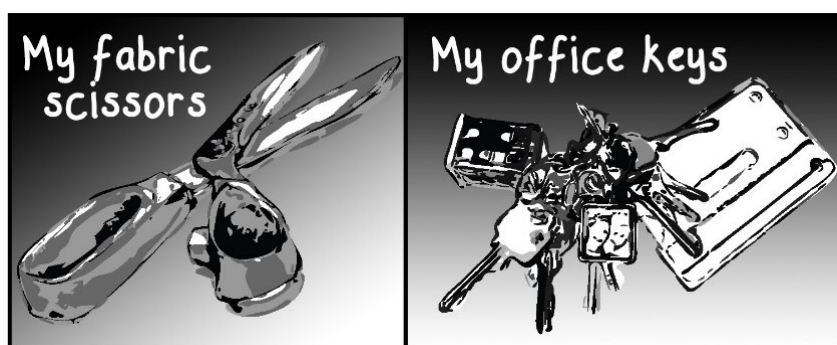
Note. Figure created by the author.

In using comic illustrations throughout my thesis, I embrace St. Pierre’s (1997) concept of “transgressive data” – data that is sensual, emotional, and often difficult to capture in traditional written formats. Comics, with their unique ability to make the invisible visible (McCloud, 1994), allow me to express these layers of data that might otherwise remain hidden. By weaving visuals with narrative explanations together, I create a research text that transcends language barriers and invites the reader into a more holistic understanding of my journey of becoming. In this way, comics help me to communicate both the visible and intangible aspects of my being-becoming process as a fashion design lecturer.

3.4.5. Object inspired narratives

I used objects as prompts to inspire narratives, reflecting the material-discursive nature of storytelling. Following Turkle’s (2007) understanding that evocative objects serve as prompts to help us recall important but forgotten or taken-for-granted stories (Pahl, 2017). I selected two evocative objects (Figure 3.3) - my fabric scissors and my office keys – that ‘speak’ (Mitchell, 2017) to me with ‘many different voices’ (Pahl, 2017, p. 29). These two objects help me generate data to answer my third research question, “*How did the cultural context of a UoT shape my be(com)ing a fashion design lecturer and my educational practices?*”

Figure 3.3: My chosen objects



Note. Figure created by the author.

Using object to evoke stories, in this sense, becomes a method for “thinking through things,” as Mitchell (2017, p. 15) suggests. This approach allows me to externalise complex personal phenomena and examine them “in a grounded manner” (Mitchell, 2017, p. 14). My fabric scissors represent my training and expertise as a fashion designer, while my office keys symbolise my transition into academia. Both objects are prompts, eliciting stories that reveal the cultural and personal Discourses shaping my being-becoming.

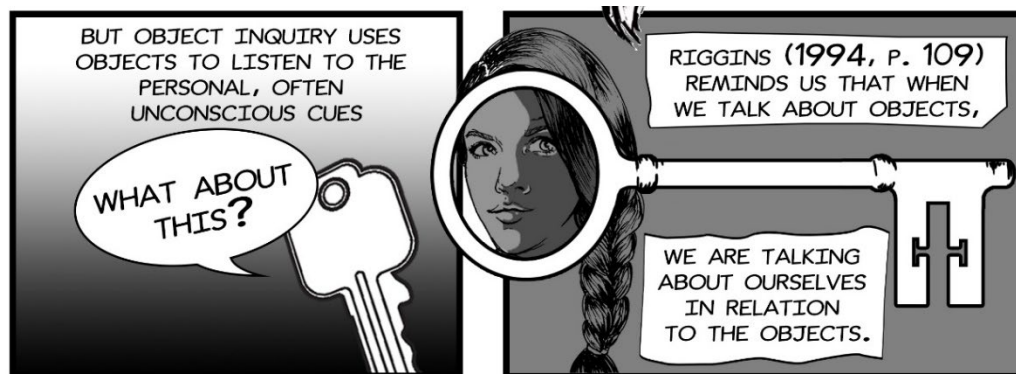
To generate my narratives around these objects, I adapted prompts from Samaras (2011), which guided me to reflect on the significance of each object, its cultural context, and the emotional resonance it holds in relation to my identity. As Riggins (1994, p. 110) points out, objects can change or become inaccessible over time, so I included photographs of each object to preserve their meanings, bring “the past into the present” (El Refaie, 2012, p. 163).

There is an “intimate link” between people and their objects, as Riggins (1994, p. 102) explains. When we talk about objects, we are simultaneously talking about ourselves in relation to them, and this connection often provides valuable insight into our personal narratives and relationships. My fabric scissors and office keys are more than mere tools; they are markers of my identity and the cultural environments in which I operate. Through object inquiry, I trace these connections, revealing how my training as a fashion designer and my transition to a lecturer at a University of Technology are deeply intertwined with the cultural and material contexts in which they unfolded.

Objects also acquire new meanings when removed from their original context, and through the process of giving them their own narrative, I contextualised them to preserve their significance (Riggins, 1994). Not only do objects tell us about ourselves, but also our relationships with others (Samaras, 2011). This method not only highlights the role of these objects in my personal journey

but also shows how they are part of broader social and cultural narratives. Through the lens of object inquiry, I reveal aspects of my identity that would have otherwise remained hidden.

Figure 3.4: Seeing through ‘things’



Note. Figure created by the author.

Mitchell (2017, p. 18) explains that using objects as prompts have the advantage of being simple and portable. Riggins (1994, p. 106) validates research using our own everyday objects as a source of data, saying that there is a “richness of information that can be read into or inferred from artifacts.” My personal connections to my objects and how I relate to them can give vivid clues about my own hidden beliefs, biases, and ways of being that are normally invisible (see Figure 3.4).

3.4.6. Visual metaphor assemblages

I use paper dolls as a visual metaphor assemblage to understand the non-hierarchical entanglement between my multiple selves, the material-discursive, the sociocultural, and non-human elements. I do this in order to answer my primary research question, “*What Discourses have underpinned my being-becoming a fashion design lecturer at a University of Technology?*”

The visual metaphor of paper dolls helps me to explore and visually represent the Discourses, and this is discussed in Chapter Nine. Visual metaphors offer an expressive way to articulate difficult concepts, as “the visual provides expression where words fail” (Sousanis, 2015, p. 59). The creation of these metaphor drawings allowed me to think abstractly, pulling out deeper, embedded meanings (Tidwell & Manke, 2009). Since the creation of metaphors is always “influenced by the lenses of class, gender, race, ethnicity and educational and life experiences” (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011, p. 265), they offer clues about our implicit ways of seeing the world. In this case, paper dolls became a vehicle for uncovering hidden aspects of my professional and personal identities, making complex ideas more tangible.

As a fashion designer, I see the world through the lens of clothing, which serves as a material-discursive practice that entangles identity and self-expression. Drawing on Butler's (2002) concept of performativity, I understand identity as fluid, relational, and contingent – like clothing, it can be “put on” and “taken off” in response to the shifting Discourses of different spaces and contexts. This perspective led me to use paper dolls to create three-dimensional visual assemblages, serving as a metaphor for the non-hierarchical and entangled nature of identity. Clothing, in this context, becomes an apt material-discursive tool, symbolising the mutable and intra-active processes of be(com)ing. These assemblages visually and tangibly explore how identities adapt and flow, offering a way to externalise the otherwise abstract and internal dynamics of identity formation (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011). Through this approach, I express my be(com)ing as a fashion design lecturer in a way that foregrounds materiality, movement, and the interconnected forces shaping professional and personal identities.

3.5. Section D – Data re-presentation

In this section, I explore the processes of re-presenting and interpreting the diverse forms of material-discursive elements generated through this visual autoethnography. As an autoethnographer, re-presentation is a deeply reflexive and iterative process (Chang, 2008) that requires continuous engagement with the entangled dimensions of my personal-professional experiences. The stories, objects, and visual texts I engage with reveal the sociocultural Discourses shaping my identities, illustrating the intra-active relationship between the self as researcher and the self as subject. This dynamic relationship disrupts traditional binaries, embracing the fluid and layered nature of post-qualitative inquiry.

By engaging narrative and visual strategies in tandem, I re-presented my experiences in ways that transcended conventional modes of inquiry. Narrative and visual imagery complement one another (Tidwell & Manke, 2009), offering unique opportunities to surface embodied, tacit, and socio-culturally situated dimensions of experience. While their interpretation is necessarily shaped by individual subjectivities and cultural entanglements (Mannay, 2015), this interpretative process becomes a site for dialogue with others (McDonnell, 2017; Pratt & Peat, 2014) and for reflexivity, enabling the interrogation of personal and cultural biases.

Artmaking emerged as both a methodological tool and a mode of inquiry, aligning with Schön and Wiggins' (1992) idea that drawing enables simultaneous discovery and doing, and Sousanis' (2015) argument that comics disrupt linear thinking, revealing the layered and non-linear nature of thought. Through creating and reflecting on these visual artefacts, I was able to surface unexpected insights, engaging more deeply with the complex entanglements of my being-becoming.

This section explores the strategies I used for narrative and visual re-presentation, and then discusses the theoretical lenses that have guided my interpretations. By engaging with these narrative and visual strategies, I aimed to move beyond representational approaches to explore the affective, material, and cultural entanglements shaping identity. This approach exemplifies the potential of visual autoethnography to disrupt and reimagine traditional inquiry practices, opening up new possibilities for engaging with the complexities of becoming.

3.5.1. Narrative re-presentation: Telling and re-telling stories

In this subsection, I reflect on the process of re-presenting my narratives as a way of exploring the complex entanglements of my being-becoming a fashion design lecturer. Drawing on a combination of Narrative Analysis and Analysis of Narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995), the Features of Storytelling (Bochner & Ellis, 2016), and re-storying frameworks (Nasheeda et al., 2019; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002), I engaged with fragmented field texts to create coherent, culturally situated stories that could be shared with an external audience.

Field texts as data

The personal narrative I constructed began with field texts, a term Clandinin (2016) and Clandinin and Connelly (2000) use to encompass artefacts, writings, photographs, and fieldnotes. These texts, often considered secondary or preliminary data (Thompson, 2014), became foundational to my narrative re-presentation process. By adopting a reflexive stance, I was able to elevate the importance of these field texts, transforming them from private reflections into meaningful, culturally embedded stories that highlighted my professional and personal growth.

Fieldnotes, photographs, and sketches not only documented my experiences but also served as prompts, revealing forgotten or tacit elements of my story. Following Riggins (1994), who argues that visual artefacts lend permanence to ephemeral memories, I integrated images into my self-narrative to deepen my reflexive engagement. This visual integration aligned with El Refaie's (2012) assertion that such artefacts enhance authenticity and enrich the storytelling process.

Narrative analysis and analysis of narratives

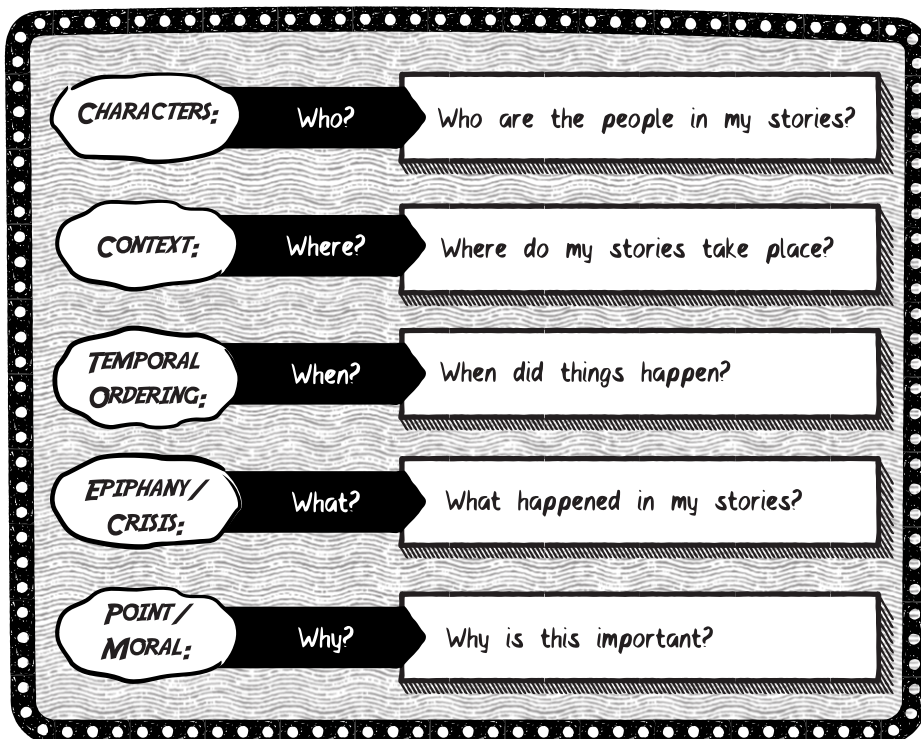
Polkinghorne's (1995) distinction between Narrative Analysis and Analysis of Narratives provided a multidimensional framework for engaging with my data. Narrative Analysis focuses on moving "from elements to stories" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 12), enabling me to weave fragmented texts into cohesive accounts. Using this approach, I identified key elements – time, place, plot, and scene (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002)–to shape my raw data into compelling narratives.

Conversely, Analysis of Narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995) allowed me to step back and interpret the broader patterns emerging from these individual stories. This multidimensional approach enabled me to navigate the tension between the specific and the universal, examining how my personal experiences interweave with broader sociocultural Discourses. For instance, my stories revealed how institutional norms, gendered expectations, and fashion design lecturer identities shaped my trajectory within the University of Technology (UoT).

Features of storytelling

Bochner and Ellis' (2016, p. 87) *Features of Storytelling* (see Figure 3.5) guided my efforts to identify key narrative elements. I looked for the characters, context, temporal ordering, epiphany/crisis, and the point or moral within my written account, to help me identify the key moments that shaped my personal-professional journey. These nodal moments (Tidwell & Manke, 2009) are crucial, as they reflect shifts in my understanding of self and my relationship with my professional environment. I attempted to write in chronological order, as advised by Bochner and Ellis (2016) and Polkinghorne (1995), but the messy and entangled nature of memory meant that things often overlapped or collided. Figure 3.2 illustrates how these features informed my storytelling, offering a structured yet flexible basis for crafting meaningful narratives.

Figure 3.5: Features of storytelling



Note. Figure created by the author (Adapted from Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 87)

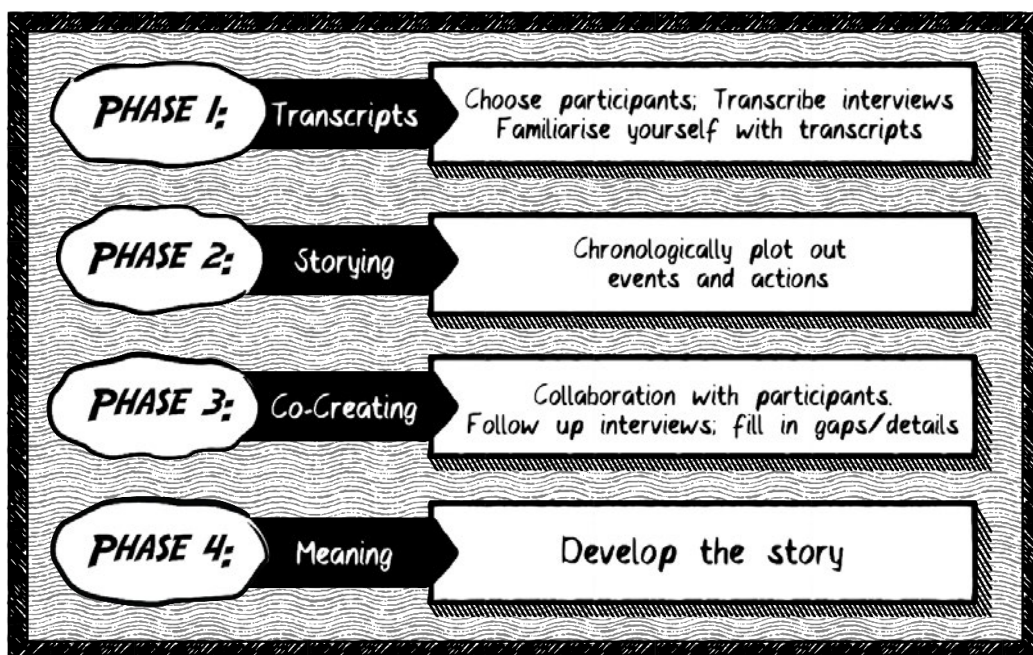
By grounding my narratives in culturally significant experiences (Chang, 2008), I ensured that my stories were not merely personal accounts but reflections of broader sociocultural and institutional Discourses. This approach aligns with Adams and Herrmann’s (2023) emphasis on autoethnography as a critically engaged methodology.

Re-storying Framework

Although Narrative Analysis and Analysis of Narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995) are very helpful tools, I found myself struggling with creating stories that felt cohesive and authentic from the different parts. Knowing what different parts of the story should be from the Features of Storytelling (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 87) didn’t help me understand how to string those together in a way that would be read as a *story*. I was having trouble “re-storying” my data.

The re-storying framework from Nasheeda et al. (2019) became particularly useful here to “transform the study transcripts into meaningful representations in the form of a story” (Nasheeda et al., 2019, p. 2). This framework (see Figure 3.6) provided a practical step-by-step that helped me understand the previously secretive steps involved in “just” telling a story. For example, when working with object narratives, I had amassed substantial reflections on each object, but they didn’t form coherent stories on their own. Using Nasheeda et al.’s (2019) framework, I was able to structure these reflections into complete, cohesive narratives, which I discuss in detail later in this section.

Figure 3.6: Re-storying framework



Note. Adapted from Nasheeda et al. (2019, p. 3)

From the Nasheeda et al. (2019) article, I found a helpful article by Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002), where the authors re-story raw transcription data from interviews they conducted into stories. They used two different narrative frameworks: the problem-solution narrative structure and the analytical approach. The problem-solution structure breaks down a story into five elements: character, setting, problem, actions, and resolution (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002, pp. 334 - 335). While this approach is clear, its focus on actions and outcomes did not allow enough space to explore the social and personal dimensions of identity.

In contrast, the analytical approach (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002, p. 339), rooted in Dewey's philosophy of experience, emphasises personal and social interactions. Drawing on Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional story space, the analytical approach (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002, p. 339) considers interaction (looking for personal and social interactions), continuity (looking for markers of time to indicate past experiences and memories, current thoughts and actions, and future experiences or potential actions), and situation (looking for the physical spaces or places). This framework allows for a deeper exploration of how past, present, and future experiences shape identity, alongside the physical and cultural contexts in which the narrative unfolds. I found this method particularly useful for capturing the complexity of my autoethnographic stories, providing a richer understanding of identity as an evolving interplay of experiences and interactions.

Reflexivity and collaboration

Throughout this process, collaboration with critical friends added an essential layer of reflexivity. Their feedback helped me navigate the inherent subjectivity of autoethnographic storytelling, ensuring that my narratives remained authentic while addressing potential blind spots. This iterative process of writing, sharing, and revising not only enriched my narratives but also deepened my understanding of the cultural and institutional forces shaping my identity.

By engaging with these narrative strategies, I was able to transform fragmented experiences into coherent stories that illuminate the entangled nature of identity formation within the sociocultural Discourses of the UoT. This iterative and reflexive approach underscores the value of narrative representation as a tool for exploring and understanding the complexities of professional and personal becoming.

Where possible, collaboration with critical friends provided an additional check, allowing me to receive feedback and mitigate the personal biases colouring the narratives. This helped me reduce the pitfall of imposing meaning where it wasn't present, ensuring that the structured stories accurately reflected my lived experiences as recorded in the field texts.

3.5.2. Visual strategies for re-presentation

This section considers on how visual strategies enabled me to explore, re-present, and diffract my experiences as a fashion design lecturer. These methods drew on my artistic practice and scholarly inquiry, weaving drawing, storyboarding, and conceptual mapping to engage with the complex, entangled nature of identity formation. Each strategy opened up possibilities for reflexive engagement, inviting an intra-active relationship between visuals, text, and meaning-making. Through these visual approaches, I was able to materialise the sociocultural and discursive forces shaping my being-becoming, creating spaces for layered interpretation and re-imagination.

Visual Literacy as relational practice

Visuals in this inquiry are dynamic, relational texts that intra-act with viewers to create meaning. Building on Schirato and Webb's (2004) and Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2020) work, visual literacy in this context is not about decoding fixed messages but about engaging with the material-discursive entanglements that shape and are shaped by these images. This process foregrounds interpretation as an embodied, situated act, emphasising how visuals invite multiple readings depending on the positionality and affective responses of the viewer.

Rather than applying Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2020) visual grammar as a rigid framework, I approach their metafunctions – representational, interactive, and compositional meanings – as dynamic and fluid tools that amplify the entangled nature of visual meaning-making:

- **Representational meaning** considers how visuals materialise lived experiences and conceptual relationships. The nodal moment drawings and concept maps, for example, do not merely depict but diffract my being-becoming, inviting the viewer to trace the entangled forces shaping these moments.
- **Interactive meaning** explores the affective and relational qualities of visuals. Elements like gaze, framing, and proximity work to draw viewers into moments of tension, discomfort, or connection, encouraging an intra-active relationship between the viewer and the visual text.
- **Compositional meaning** examines how visual elements intra-act within a composition to produce layered effects. In concept maps, for instance, the positioning and emphasis of certain nodes speak to the material-discursive entanglements shaping identity, inviting readers to navigate these relationships and uncover their resonances.

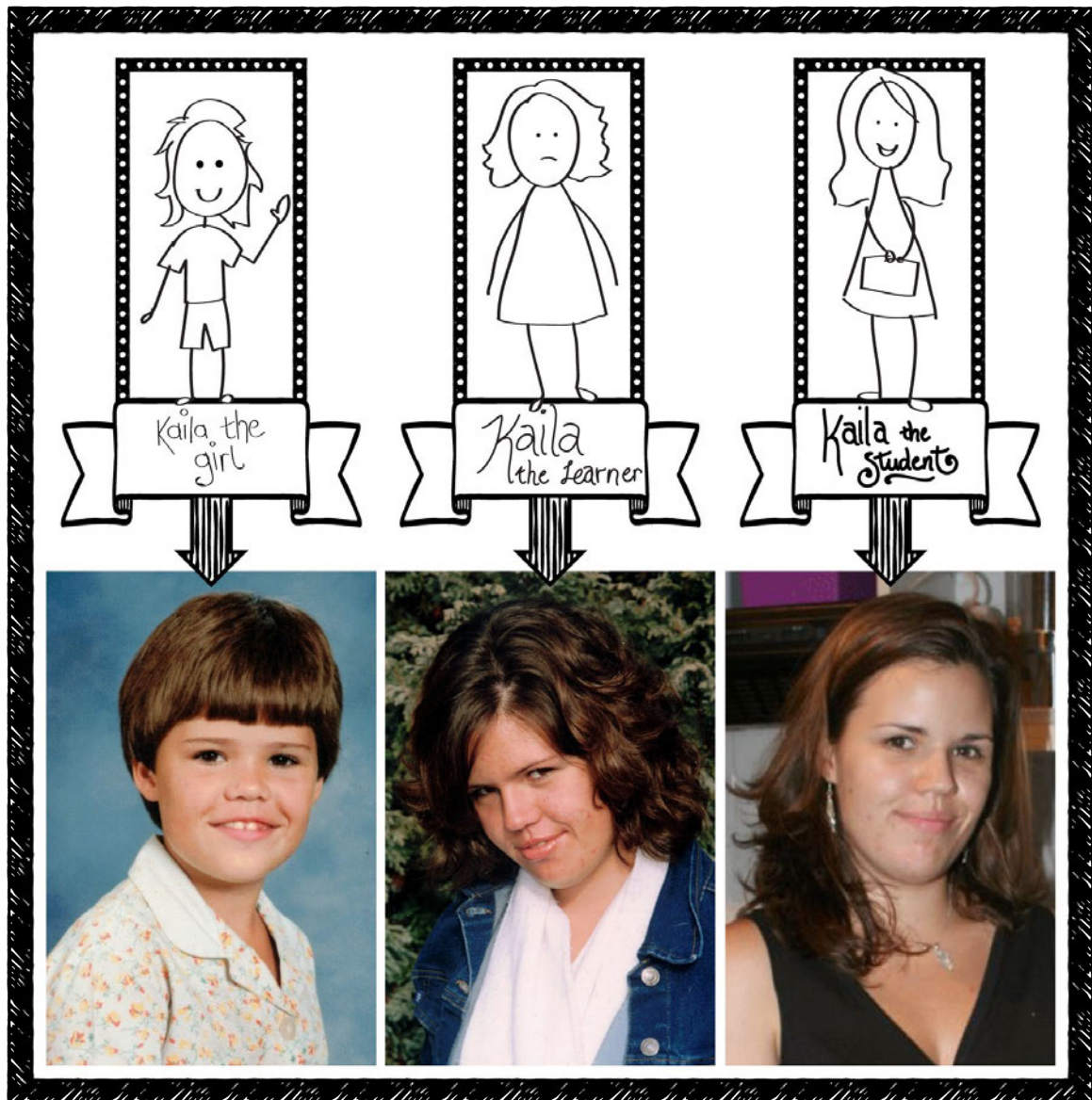
This diffractive approach to visual grammar resists fixed interpretations, emphasising how visuals and viewers co-constitute meaning through their relational dynamics. These strategies, informed by my designerly way of knowing, surface the tacit and affective dimensions of my inquiry, foregrounding the complexity and multiplicity inherent in visual methods.

Nodal moment drawings

My comic doodle (presented in Chapter Five) showcase how I used nodal moment drawings (Tidwell & Manke, 2009) to re-present my data. In order to extend and elicit unheard stories from my self-narrative, I chose to draw the nodal moments – or critical junctures in my life (Allison & Ramirez, 2020; Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001) that shaped my personal-professional journey. I represented these moments as free drawing sketches (Chang, 2008), each depicting a significant phase of my girlhood: childhood (Kaila-the-girl), high school (Kaila-the-learner), and my university years (Kaila-the-student), each offering culturally and narratively significant insights (Chang, 2008; Dwyer & emerald, 2017), which helped clarify how my identity as a fashion design lecturer emerged at the University of Technology.

As shown in Figure 3.7, these sketches juxtapose my self-drawn representations with photographs from the same periods, creating a dialogue between memory and material evidence.

Figure 3.7: Doodle Kailas growing up



Note. Figure created by the author. Photographs used with permission.

In developing my comic doodles, I was able to combine text and imagery to express the nuances of my everyday experiences. Speech and thought balloons in comics add paralinguistic information, such as tone, volume, or emotional state, through their size, shape, and the font used (El Refaie, 2012). This allowed me to present my thoughts and emotions at the time of the events depicted. I also took on the role of an autoethnographic narrator, which allowed me to reflect on these past versions of myself (Kaila-the-girl, Kaila-the-learner, and Kaila-the-student) while maintaining a critical distance from my current perspective.

After creating the comic doodles, I presented them to my cohort, including my critical friends and supervisor, in a Zoom meeting, on the 20th of January 2021. The dialogue that followed served as an

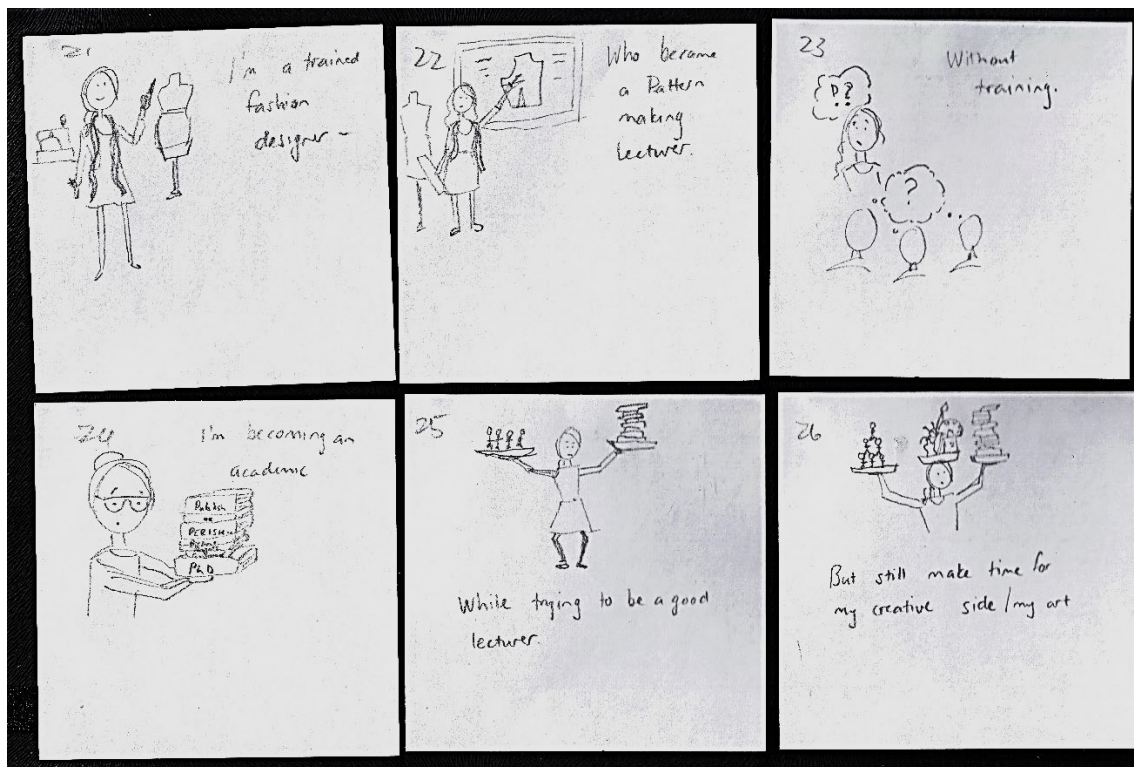
additional layer of reflexivity. The group's feedback highlighted areas where I had been unclear, parts that resonated with them, and places where further expansion was needed (Naicker et al., 2020). Their thought-provoking questions pushed me to explore deeper into the cultural and narrative threads that had been revealed through the visual representations.

The process of transcribing the discussion helped solidify these insights. By stepping back into the role of the autoethnographer observer, I could listen to the feedback from a distance and gain even more clarity on key issues and emerging ideas. This led to further insight, with highlighted sections of the transcription indicating important insights that I had initially overlooked. There was a definite perspective shift throughout this entire process, as I was doing a looking and looking back over, reflecting and re-reflecting (Mitchell, 2011). The final comic doodles are presented in Chapter Five.

Storyboarding as a visual thinking tool

Falling back on the visual culture of being a designer, I used drawing to help me solve the problem (Schön & Wiggins, 1992) of how to communicate my re-storied data to others. Inspired by the use of visual chrono charts as a means of visually organising data to make it more “accessible and compact” (Hiller, 2011, p. 1019), I saw story boards as an extension of this. Storyboarding is a technique borrowed from filmmaking that uses thumbnails to capture the essence of events (Naicker et al., 2020). I created rough storyboards (Naicker et al., 2020) of the small stories I needed to re-story, using doodled thumbnails. “Thumbnails” are the quick sketches and stick figure doodles I draw as preliminary visual planning. These thumbnails provide a way to think through drawing (Schön & Wiggins, 1992). I draw either on small squares of paper from a memo block, sticky notes, or onto a larger piece of paper, where each paper square or sketched block is a ‘thumbnail’ view of what will be a single panel or frame in the finished comic. I doodle rough indications of the image I will draw for the panel, and the words I will use (Figure 3.8 Shows some example thumbnails for what would eventually become the comic illustration in Chapter Six).

Figure 3.8: Story board thumbnail examples from comic illustration



Note. Figure created by the author.

Some of the thumbnails expressed small stories or memories, some feelings, or reflections. Once drawn out, I would loosely group them into a rough order that conveyed a story. The thumbnails were then stuck up with Prestick² to a larger piece of paper on the wall to create storyboards. I used Prestik so that I could move my thoughts around. I was able to chase thoughts down the rabbit hole (capturing them on the squares of paper) and return right back to where I left off. This was still only preliminary work – there was still freedom in how I chose to render the final drawing. Sometimes the image I thumbnailed is completely replaced, sometimes the single panel is split into two or more, sometimes combined, or even discarded. There is yet more freedom in composing the pages from my drawings. Because I compiled my comics digitally, I could change, tweak, revise, add or subtract at any point. As I worked through the flow of each page, I was able to see my thinking made visible, coherent and in a logical order. This helped me navigate some of the challenges that come with using visual autoethnography to share my findings.

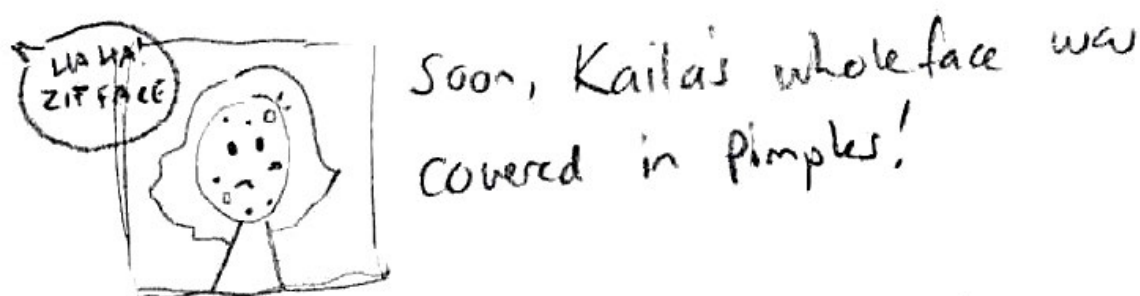
The storyboards formed my visual fieldnotes (Mitchell, 2011; Pillay et al., 2020). Visual field notes, unlike textual field notes or even field texts, offer a different experience in that they use the power of visuals to reveal unique insights that are data in their own right (Mitchell, 2011).

² The generic term for “Prestik” is mounting putty, and in the UK, it is called “Blu-Tack.”

Pillay et al. (2020, p. 265) argue for “creative thinking as materially situated through practice,” explaining that using visual field notes allows researchers to engage with and manifest their thinking visually, showing how this thinking is situated in context. While drawing can make thinking visible (Tversky, 2011), visual field notes can make the transgressive, emotional and sensory data (St. Pierre, 1997) visible by offering a site “to creatively engage with my emotions” (Pillay et al., 2020, p. 267). Like Simita (Pillay et al., 2020), I used drawings to engage with and reflect on my “untold stories” – the stories that shaped my being-becoming.

Some of these story boards have made it into the thesis, while others have been completely reworked. The comic doodles, however, were the happy accidental result of this storyboarding. As I was working through the process of drawing thumbnails for my story boards, I quite liked the naïve style that I had used for the sketches. The quick, rough stick-figure sketches captured the essence of naivety and innocence that wove through the stories of my growing up. Because this set of data specifically focused on the choices and personal experiences that led up to my being-becoming a fashion design lecturer, it felt more authentic to leave the drawings unpolished. Although I consider myself good at drawing, Tidwell and Manke (2009) remind us that the aesthetic quality of the drawings don’t matter nearly as much as the meanings we make from them. I decided to keep the doodle style (see figure 3.9: *Thumbnail extract* as an example), which had the added benefit of differentiating this data set from the rest of my more refined comic style.

Figure 3.9: Thumbnail extract



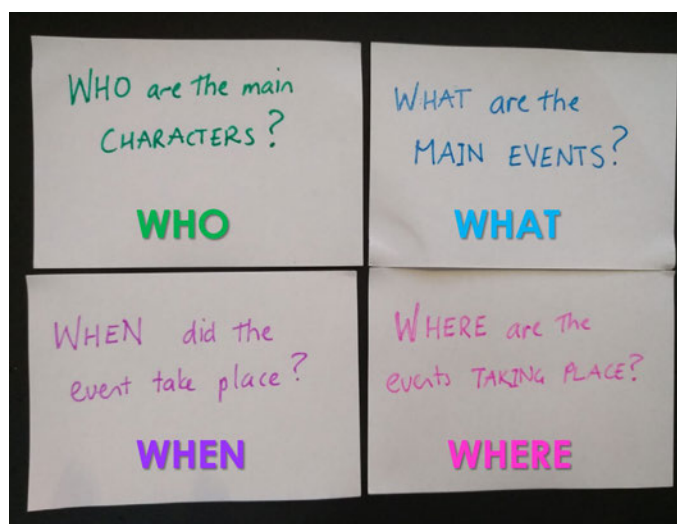
Note. Figure created by the author.

I used the visual field notes (rough storyboards) to digitally construct the finished comic doodles. I kept the style very close to my original visual field notes, but neater. Through the digital medium, I was able to include text, connecting lines, speech bubbles and other details.

Similarly, when working with my objects, I had trouble with re-storying the data. At the suggestion of a critical friend, I turned to the visual method of storyboarding to help me to think through drawing

(Schön & Wiggins, 1992). Building on Ollerenshaw and Creswell's (2002) analytical approach to re-storying, I adapted the re-storying framework from Nasheeda et al. (2019) (discussed in detail under the Re-storying Framework subheading in this section) to fit my autoethnographic study. Instead of conducting interviews with participants, I treated my field texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Thompson, 2014) as the primary data source. These included personal notes, photographs, drawings, transcriptions of myself speaking about my objects in terms of their connotative and denotative meanings (De Beer, 2018; Mitchell, 2011), and my reflections from following the object prompts laid out by Samaras (2011). I began Phase One (Nasheeda et al., 2019) with several rounds of reading, listening and note-taking to familiarise myself with the data.

Figure 3.10: Colour coding schema of the analytic approach



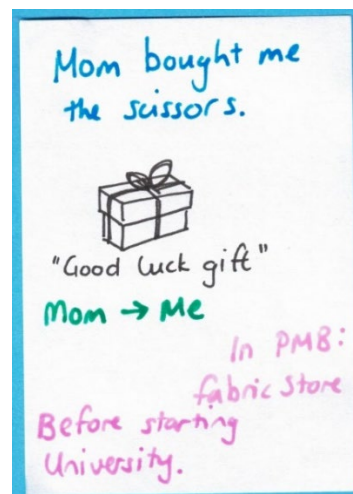
Note. Figure created by the author.

Phase Two involved plotting out the events and actions chronologically (Nasheeda et al., 2019). To do this, I created my thumbnails on A7 paper, as small sketches of key moments, emotions, and actions. I kept them flexible and repositionable, allowing me to rearrange and shuffle the events. This flexibility helped me handle the often non-linear and entangled timelines of my narratives. Additionally, I made use of a colour-coded schema (Figure 3.10). As suggested by Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002), I focused on understanding the “what,” “who,” “when,” and “where” of each narrative, using different colours to mark these elements. This visual and tactile method helped me engage with the data more intuitively.

Phase Three of the re-storying framework (Nasheeda et al., 2019) consisted of collaborating with participants. But since I didn't have participants, I followed Naicker et al.'s (2020) suggestion of engaging in dialogue with critical friends and peers to reduce subjectivity and ensure coherence.

Subjectivity and coherence are inherent limitations within autoethnography, as the study's personal nature can lead to overly subjective interpretations and fragmented narratives. Engaging with critical friends provided a way to counter these limitations by inviting critique and diverse perspectives. I arranged my thumbnails into a coherent sequence and presented the storyboards to my cohort, recording their responses and integrating feedback into the refinement process. Through this dialogic method, I identified gaps, clarified storylines, and ultimately grouped the events into thematic subplots (Figure 3.11), completing Phase Four (Nasheeda et al., 2019) of developing the stories. These re-storied narratives, enriched by feedback, are presented alongside the visual storyboards in Chapter Eight, integrating both my storytelling and research voices.

Figure 3.11: Example thumbnail showing colour schema



Note. Figure created by the author.

Concept mapping

Butler-Kisber and Poldma (2010, p. 6) explain that concept maps are a “visual means of expressing ideas held in the mind.” Concept mapping aims to create a map or diagram that visually represents the thinking on a topic (Morgan et al., 2010). It can be done by hand or digitally, made using collage techniques with photographs or found images (Carani, 2013). The three main strategies for developing concept maps are hierarchical mapping (a top down approach from the primary issue), directional mapping (a linear following of concepts arising from a starting point) or network mapping (a more freeform approach that does not prescribe an order or layout) (Morgan et al., 2010). Importantly, concept maps help to capture and communicate complex phenomena in a way that others can understand.

After completing a first level analysis (usually a Narrative Analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995)), I had core themes, cultural and narrative threads identified. But I needed a way to unpack what I had

actually found. Leaning into the visual aspect of this visual autoethnography, I used concept mapping as a way to visually connect the narrative and cultural threads that had emerged. As a tool for analysing my plethora of field texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Thompson, 2014), visual fieldnotes, transcriptions, and even my response data (St. Pierre, 1997), concept maps are particularly suited to documenting and mapping interpretations, themes and concepts as they emerge in visual ways (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2010). Using a network mapping strategy means that the concept map is not ‘fixed’; new concepts can be added, adding a line can show emerging connections between ideas, hierarchical headings can be added, demoted or promoted as the data shifts on the page (Morgan et al., 2010). The fluidity that concept mapping offers also prompts reflexivity as I work through the various sources and interpretations to map them out.

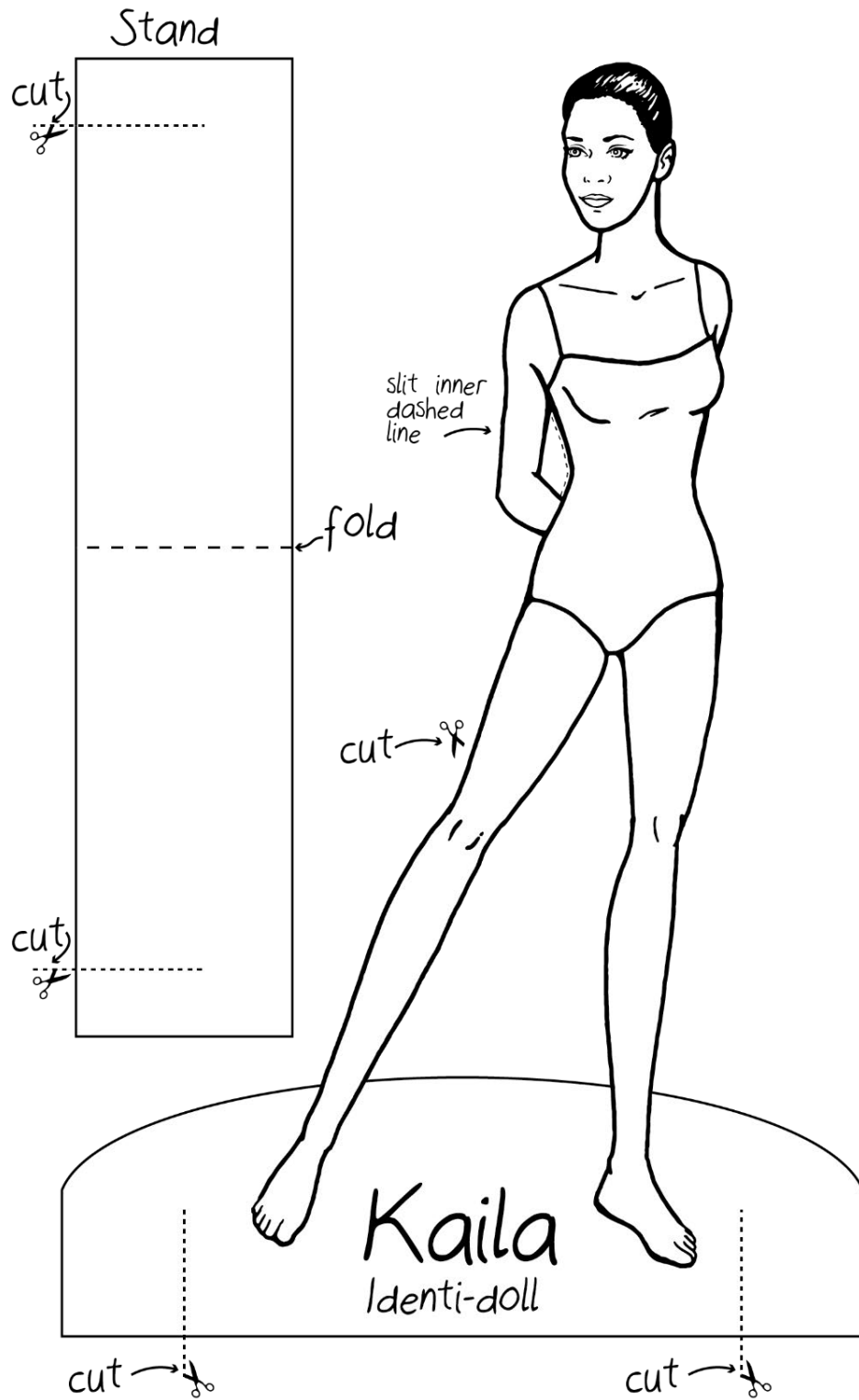
I decided to complete my concept maps digitally, as that would give me even more freedom in moving, connecting, and organising ideas. I immersed myself in my ‘raw data’ again and took note of the different themes and cultural threads. Trying to ensure that I was conducting an autoethnography and not an autobiography (Chang, 2008), I focused on the sociocultural and historic meanings, to ensure that my study is self-reflexive and critically examining the cultural context (Adams & Herrmann, 2023).

As Butler-Kisber and Poldma (2010) explore, concept mapping can be a useful tool in a variety of research activities – including data analysis, literature review planning, and brainstorming. In this thesis, I have used concept mapping in several ways. Most notably, I have used concept mapping as a way to refine and diffract the narratives my methods generated (as seen in Chapters Five and Six). But I have also used a loose version of concept mapping as a visual thinking tool to make thinking visible, such as the methodology concept map which introduces this chapter (Figure 3.1). These concept maps have been helpful as a way to not only process my thoughts, but also to communicate them to others, something that storyboarding (which is detailed in the next section) also aided.

Visual assemblages: The “identi-doll”

In creating these visual assemblages, I designed a base paper doll, what I call my “Identi-doll” (Figure 3.12) to represent myself in a neutral, demure pose, dressed in a simple body suit. This method, rooted in my childhood play with paper dolls, allowed me to symbolically explore how my identities shift and adapt across different contexts. The doll served as a neutral base onto which I layered different outfits representing the identities I embody in various social and professional settings. As Riggins (1994) suggests, objects and representations, even when simplified, contain deep personal and cultural meanings. The paper doll became a tool through which I could observe my identities as objects outside of myself, allowing me to step back and reflect critically.

Figure 3.12: Base identi-doll



Note. Figure created by the author.

3.5.3. *Theoretical lenses guiding analysis*

In this study, I draw on multiple theoretical and conceptual lenses to guide my analysis and provide insight into the formation and performance of my identities as a fashion design lecturer at a University of Technology (UoT). The core of this research explores the Discourses that underpin my being-becoming a lecturer, and the following analytical frameworks have been chosen to engage critically with the data and answer the research questions.

Gee's discourses

At the heart of my analytical framework is James Paul Gee's (2008) concept of big D Discourses, which examines how social practices, values, and interactions shape identities. This meta-theoretical lens highlights the sociocultural forces at play in my be(com)ing a fashion design lecturer, offering insights into how institutional contexts, gender, class, and race influence identity as a dynamic, fluid process.

Barkhuizen's model of interconnected stories

Barkhuizen's (2008) Model of Interconnected Stories to helps me map identity through three levels, to address the first research question, "*Who am I as a fashion design lecturer at a UoT?*":

Micro level: This level explores my personal and individual stories. These *small stories* are narratives about my experiences growing up, studying, and becoming a fashion design lecturer.

Meso level: At the meso level, I explore how I connect with others within my professional context, particularly focusing on my experiences with students and colleagues. These *medium stories* reveal how social inclusion, exclusion, and belonging impact my professional identities.

Macro level: The macro level addresses *Big STORIES*, or larger societal narratives, which frame my identities. These narratives are shaped by broader social, cultural, and historical Discourses, such as being a white, English-speaking, middle-class woman, and how these positionalities shape my experiences in the field of fashion design education at a UoT.

I have used Barkhuizen's (2008) Model to map the interconnected layers of culture within the UoT in Chapters Six and Seven. The interconnected levels of departmental, faculty and institutional cultures within the UoT each have different expectations and socialisations, and these are frequently at odds. The tensions this created for me as a novice academic is strengthened through understanding these interconnected cultural layers within Barkhuizen's (2008) Model.

Butler's performativity

To explore the second research question, "*What personal-professional experiences shaped my fashion design lecturer identities at a UoT?*" I draw on Judith Butler's (1988, 2002) concept of

performativity, which frames identity as enacted through repeated social behaviours and norms. This lens allows me to interrogate how gendered and professional norms shape my daily practices at the UoT, while also exploring how I resist and challenge these norms in my professional context.

Barad's materiality and intra-action

Finally, to address the third research question, "*How did the cultural context of a UoT shape my being-becoming a fashion design lecturer and my educational practices?*" Karen Barad's (2007) concepts of materiality and intra-action explore how engagement with the material world, such as tools and spaces, actively shapes identity. This framework aligns with my object inquiry method, emphasising how material objects prompt stories and uncover the entanglement of identity and practice.

Synthesising the frameworks

Together, these frameworks provide a rich, multi-dimensional approach to analysing the data. Gee's (2008) Discourses serve as the meta-theoretical lens, framing the broader cultural and social forces that shape my identity. Barkhuizen's (2008) model of interconnected stories allows me to break down my personal, relational, and societal narratives. Butler's (1988, 2002) performativity enables me to critically interrogate how I perform my identities, and Barad's (2007) materiality provides insight into the role of the material world in shaping my fashion design lecturer self.

These interconnected theories guide my analysis, helping me to engage deeply with the Discourses that underpin my being-becoming as a fashion design lecturer, thus answering the main research question: "*What Discourses have underpinned my being-becoming a fashion design lecturer at a UoT?*"

3.6. Section E – Reflections on trustworthiness

In this section, I discuss the challenges encountered in the 'field' and how I addressed them, acknowledging the overlaps and blurred boundaries between methods. I also reflect on the ethical considerations of conducting a study like this, acknowledging that there is no one size fits all (Ellis, 2007), and arguing for a post-qualitative understanding of validity and reliability in autoethnography. Finally, I recognise the significant contributions of significant others (Ellis, 2007), mentors (Chang, 2008) and critical friends (Samaras, 2010) who have helped shape this thesis.

3.6.1. What challenges did I experience?

Autoethnography, with its non-linear, reflexive nature (Chang, 2008), comes with inherent tensions that challenge traditional notions of 'objectivity' and 'distance.' Instead of viewing these as limitations, I approach them as productive constraints that unlock unique pathways to understanding

and representation. In this section, I explore the specific challenges and tensions I encountered while engaging with visual autoethnography as a fashion design lecturer.

Due to this entangled and messy autoethnographic process, generating data to answer my research questions through arts-based methods sparked different stories that fit better in other chapters than where they were intended to go. Additionally, conversations with critical friends prompted even deeper stories that enriched the answers to my research questions, but not necessarily where I had anticipated they would occur. I've had to make deliberate decisions about where the different stories should live within this thesis, concentrating on making sure I answer each research question in a way that is focused and clear. Even with the aid of retrospect, this has not been an easy or clear process. Below, I discuss some of the challenges I have dealt with in doing a visual autoethnography.

Difficulty re-storying my data

I have struggled in 'writing up' my data chapters as the boundaries between generating, collecting, and analysing blur, merge and entangle. Although Chang (2008, p. 131) advises that autoethnographers should begin 'analysing' their data as soon as it is collected and constantly move between collecting and analysing, she still refers to the two processes as distinct. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) advocate for the terms 'field text', 'interim text' and 'research texts' instead, precisely because narrative data is too entangled and messy to fit neatly into distinct phases of collection and analysis. Dwyer and Emerald (2017) explain that with narrative data, sometimes there is no distinction between analysis, collection, and presentation (or re-presentation) and argue that there is little value in trying to define or distinguish the "stages."

To mitigate this, I have made use of re-storying strategies (discussed in detail in Section D) like thumbnailing and storyboarding (Naicker et al., 2020), concept mapping (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2010) and free drawing (Chang, 2008) to distil the raw data into a more storied format that can be understood by others. I also use the multiple theories as a framework for analysing the data (discussed under Section D in this chapter).

Evocative versus solipsistic

This study makes use of different methods which produce narrative data. I have wrestled with finding a balance between being evocative through writing emotive, authentic, and vulnerable stories (see Ellis, 2004, 2007, 2016) and being solipsistic by writing autobiographically and not autoethnographically. To mitigate this, I keep the cultural thread at the front of mind, following Adams and Herrmann (2023) who argue that good autoethnography foregrounds cultural context and meanings, and is not just about sharing personal autobiographical stories. Additionally, I aim to preserve the three tenants of autoethnography outlined by Berry and Hodges (2015) – vulnerability,

empathy, and reflexivity - to produce work that is focused on the cultural understanding of the self, deeply interrogating my everyday experiences which I may take for granted.

Embracing vulnerability

I find myself feeling hesitant to share my personal stories. The warning of Doloriert and Sambrook (2009) echoes in my head – stories told cannot be untold. I can't know what the consequences of telling my story will be, but I need to be sure that I am willing and able to live with them. Once told, there is no going back. I draw courage from Doloriert and Sambrook (2009), Ellis (2016), Maseti (2018), McDonnell (2017), Noy (2003), Rosenberg (2016), and St. Pierre (1997), and countless others who have publicly shared their stories and embraced the discomfort in vulnerability.

When the 'field' is myself

I take comfort in reading Thompson (2014, p. 248): "I trouble conventional definitions of the field as a far-off place". The general assumption that the 'field' is a faraway exotic place seems to create distance between the research and real life. Because I am doing an autoethnography, there is no separation between my life and my research, as I am researching my life. This has bearing on how I conduct research, because for autoethnography, it is a continuous process, not an activity one does in a structured time. I am always researching, reflecting, and collecting data through my day-to-day living, conversations with others, and thoughts. "I am always constructing the research no matter where I am" (Thompson, 2014, p. 248), there is no specific field site, per se. My work starts and ends with me, constantly evolving through each experience and each encounter. This slippery, ill-defined 'field' has been difficult to navigate at times, but I can see the richness of it in the ways I am growing and changing through the PhD.

3.6.2. Ethical considerations

Despite focusing on the self as the object under study, ethical considerations in autoethnography are complex because it isn't possible "to leave others out of the story" (Ellis, 2016, p. 209). Sparkes (2024, p. 5) agrees, explaining that our stories are "never made in a social or psychological vacuum," and that autoethnography is ethically "contested" and requires a great deal of care and consideration in its execution. In telling my stories, I have to include others, but I do so from my own perspective. Although my stories are raw and honest, they may not leave others in the best light, they may be misremembered or misinterpreted, and they will be biased because I am a human instrument telling them. Memory is an unreliable witness, "both friend and foe of autoethnographers" (Chang, 2007, p. 210).

A key component of autoethnography is the vulnerability and honesty that comes through the telling of stories, despite inherent bias. But, as St. Pierre (1997, p. 177) reminds us, we are always "on the hook" to be ethically responsible throughout our research. Ellis (2016) writes extensively about

relational ethics (see also Thompson, 2014), explaining that there is no set of prescribed rules for an autoethnographic study. Sparkes (2024) warns against creating lists of how to conduct ethical autoethnographies, as these lists might become inflexible and absolute, causing conflict for researchers whose lived experiences of doing autoethnography do not match the neat lists. Because each autoethnography is as unique as the researcher who conducts it, ethical considerations cannot be pre-empted or predicted, nor can they be ‘tacked on’ after the fact.

Ellis (2016) warns us that those we write about may read our work, and we should be mindful of how we represent them (see also St. Pierre, 1997). Issues of abuse, family secrets, stigmatising events, illness (see Ellingson & Ellis, 2008; Ellis, 2007; Gingras, 2012) and even writing about trauma (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2009) is difficult because although one writes about themselves, they are including others in ways that are often uncomfortable (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008), even if it is the author’s truth. How then can we reconcile our desire to be truthful and authentic with the need to consider others and their feelings and perceptions (Ellis, 2007)? Autoethnographers cannot ensure anonymity because they write about themselves under their own names, making the significant characters potentially identifiable (Chang, 2007, p. 217; Sparkes, 2024). For Stephens-Griffin (2019, p. 332), the problem is “arguably irreconcilable” and each researcher must make the choice for themselves. Ellis (2016, p. 213) calls for us to “seek the good” and to do what we can, while Dwyer and emerald (2017) advise being transparent about the process as well as acknowledging the shortcomings.

I use Ellis’s (2016) suggestion to write as though the people in my stories will read them, and to make sure that I am happy with how I have presented them. Initially I had intended to member check with the people in my stories (Dwyer & emerald, 2017; Loh, 2013), but I have found as this study progressed that many of the people in my stories are “composite characters” (Ellis, 2016, p. 215) - amalgams of people, which do not represent a single person. My female lecturers, co-workers and mentors are representative of scores of important women in my life, no single one meant to be depicted individually but rather as archetypes of the different personalities. My fellow students are also amalgam characters.

However, I did ‘member check’ with my family members. Once I had finished generating my stories, I shared them with my immediate family members who were in the stories. This sparked conversations about whether they were happy with how they had been represented, and I asked for (and received) their consent to include these stories in the thesis. My family were mostly mildly interested in what I had to say about them but felt comfortable with what I had written. However, the sharing of the stories led to an interesting and productive conversation with my mother about how I had viewed teaching negatively as a child. She wanted to make sure that I knew that she loved

teaching despite the hard work that I saw. I adjusted based on her feedback to reflect that it was my perspective at the time, but that I got to see the joy in teaching as I got older. I also got written permission to use the photographs they had taken.

When talking about other characters in my story, I made use of anonymisation (see Ellis, 2016; Stephens-Griffin, 2019). Most of the characters I drew are nameless people with completely made-up appearances. This is especially important when I talk about painful experiences (the girls who called my sewing project ugly, my dad's friend who called me his 'son'). The stories of my growing up, in particular, touch on issues of bullying and not fitting in, but make no reference to particular individuals but rather to people as a group or composite characters. There was no point in giving pseudonyms to characters that were not referenced by name at all. However, I am clear where I have used pseudonyms – for example, my UoT, the campus I worked on, and the support units in the institution.

Fictionalisation is frequently used in narrative inquiry in order to protect participant's anonymity and to appease research ethics boards, but Caine et al. (2016, p. 215) argue that this is only fictionalisation's first use. It is also important in "creation of distance between ourselves and our experiences" and "a way to engage in imagination that enriches inquiry spaces and research understandings" (Caine et al., 2016, p. 215). In my work, there is also an element of semi-fiction or autobiographic fiction (Caine et al., 2016; Doloriert & Sambrook, 2009; Gingras, 2012; Netolicky, 2017). My memories of these experiences are real, but the details may occasionally be tweaked or amalgamated to protect the identity of others who may not appear in the best light. This fictionalisation is done as minimally as possible and only in the minutia so as not to change the meaning of the stories. After all, the foundation of any autoethnographic study is the meaning of the stories, which is something I have had to remain true to in writing up the present study.

How do we write about those who have passed on? Ellis (2016) troubles the notion of writing about those who cannot consent. In my own study, I spoke casually to my Gran and audio recorded with her verbal permission, but I never got to conducting a full interview with informed consent. That was the last time that I saw her before she passed on, and although she gave me verbal permission, I was never able to show her the completed stories or to share what I had written with her. However, I am confident that I'm presenting her memory respectfully and authentically and that she would not argue nor be upset with how I had represented her. I also shared these stories with my mother, who felt that my writing honoured her memory. I find that in this study, that is the best that I am able to do.

I've also tried to fact-check myself, and use physical evidence to corroborate events and timelines instead of relying only on my own memory (Chang, 2007, p. 217). Where possible I've included the

photographs or scans or images of the actual items to aid and authenticity as advised by both Riggins (1994, p. 110) and El Refaie (2012).

3.6.3. *How does trustworthiness apply to visual autoethnography?*

There has long been a debate among scholars about what counts as ‘real’ or ‘acceptable’ research. Scholars from positivist and post-positivist paradigms are highly critical of the value of qualitative research in general, asking how it is rigorous or replicable (and if it is not, what is the point?). Loh (2013) explains that this attitude is further perpetrated by political pressures, citing UK and US governmental reports calling for measurable research.

Although there is a need to have criteria or guidelines to help ensure trustworthiness, these might cause harm when they are “impossible or inappropriate to meet” (Denzin, 2009; Garratt and Hodgkinson, 1998 in Loh, 2013). Dwyer and emerald (2017) agree, arguing that there can be no standard formula for ensuring that qualitative studies are valid and rigorous. Indeed, they contend that positivist concepts like rigor and validity should not and cannot be applied to qualitative studies.

Loh (2013) maintains that ‘trustworthiness’ should be the aim instead and suggests overarching strategies such as looking for verisimilitude (whether the stories ring true), member checking (peer validation and audience validation), utility (relevance and usefulness to others) and thick description (rich contextual explanations). As an autoethnographer, I can use multiple sources of data to corroborate my stories - the memories of others or conversations with them, transcripts of interviews of casual conversations, photos and objects that help recall more of the semantic details. I accept that memories are fallible, but as Chang (2008) explains, they become building blocks for us to piece together a deeper more nuanced story. In telling my story I discover who I am, I am forced to confront my biases and therefore am able to be honest about my limitations.

In line with Loh’s (2013) conceptualisation of verisimilitude, Eisner (1997) calls for authenticity or being ‘real’. When we move away from generalisable statistics to the particular lives and experiences of individuals, we cannot generalise. But, in order for these small stories to matter, they must be ‘real’ and ‘authentic.’ To be “real” they must be critical. We can’t only tell the one story that makes us look good – we need to tell the true story, the one that makes us look real.

Samaras (2010, p. 81) argues that transparency in research should mean being “open, honest, and reflective about your work.” Dwyer and emerald (2017) acknowledge that there can be no objective reality with narratives but advocate transparency at every point. We should strive to be transparent to the people we include in our stories (allowing them to read, comment and make changes where possible and appropriate), transparent to our readers (acknowledging where we have biases, how we

have approached the collection and analysis of data, how we have written and if we have fictionalised stories), and transparent in our processes (reflecting continually) (Ellis, 2016).

3.6.4. *Critical friends and mentors*

I've made use of critical friends and have had many discussions about my work and my stories. These are audio recorded and transcribed with permission from each other in a reciprocal relationship. The contributions of these critical friends are mentioned throughout the study where they are relevant and have been shared with them during additional meetings. Critical friends are a form of peer checking for me, following Loh (2013), where my critical friends engage me in dialogue about ethical considerations or potential issues.

Samaras (2010) explains that critical friends provide feedback, ask difficult questions and give honest critique of the work in process. I use conversations with my critical friends as a form of “dialogical validity” (Samaras, 2011, p. 220), where my work is strengthened through sustained critical feedback in the form of an ongoing dialogue with my critical friends. Pratt and Peat (2014) argue that good research needs to engage in conversation and dialogue (whether written or oral). Often it is only in the talking that we are able to unpack and verbalise how we really feel. Writing in isolation does not make for authentic or revolutionary research – we need others.

Mentors can be included in autoethnography, as their perceptions can reflect important aspects of what I am to others, which may not always be obvious to me. Chang (2008) explains that mentors can be younger, older or of a similar age to the researcher, part of a vertical relationship (managers or subordinates) or horizontal (peers or colleagues). The defining characteristic of a mentor is to have taught you something valuable. I have mentors in all categories – colleagues who were once my lecturers, peers who are now colleagues, colleagues who were once students, friends, students, family, and many others. As we are entwined in our social contexts, all of these relationships are important in understanding my being-becoming as both a fashion designer and as a fashion design lecturer. I have used my casual conversations and interactions with the people in my life as a form of data and have acknowledged these throughout the thesis wherever they are quoted or referred to.

I have relied heavily on dialogue with others throughout this study. Having a conversation with others about my work is helpful, not only because I can share my stories and get feedback, but also because in the telling of the story and the retelling, I was able to see a new perspective (McDonnell, 2017). Additionally, the dialogue with others helped me to see my own stories from more of a distance as an autoethnographer, emotionally and intellectually allowing me to step back. My supervisor, critical friends and mentors point out things I've overlooked and ask pertinent questions that make me interrogate the cultural threads more deeply than I would have been able to on my own. I keep

reminding myself of the ‘ethno’ portion of autoethnography – I search for the cultural threads in order to produce ‘good’ autoethnography (Adams & Herrmann, 2023).

Sharing my work in progress at various stages required that I explained and retold my stories repeatedly. As I shared and spoke through the stories, I was reflecting anew in a form of reflexivity. There was a definite perspective shift throughout this entire process, as I was doing a looking and looking back over, reflecting and re-reflecting (Mitchell, 2011).

Dialogue with critical friends is particularly helpful when working with storyboards, as they can remind us of our focus and notice where subjectivity is changing the meaning (Naicker et al., 2020). I found that the response of the others helped me to know where I had not been clear enough, which parts had resonated strongly with them, and where I needed to expand. The discussion was a dialogue with the cohort prompted by the visuals I had shared, but extended and made richer by comments, thoughts and questions being sparked off of one another (McDonnell, 2017). The conversations with others were integral to the research process (Pratt & Peat, 2014).

3.7. Summary

In this chapter, I have woven together the intricate threads of my post-qualitative inquiry, acknowledging that each time a fragment is brought into focus, the larger tapestry shifts, revealing new patterns and connections. This chapter is necessarily situated in the “now” of its writing, a moment of reflection and re-presentation that can never fully capture the fluidity and multiplicity of my data.

Nonetheless, my aim has been to provide the reader with a coherent pathway into the complexities of my inquiry, offering insights into the strategies and theoretical lenses that shape my engagement with the data. This groundwork sets the stage for the chapters that follow, where I explore the unfolding of my being-becoming as a fashion design lecturer within the entangled contexts of my personal, professional, and institutional narratives.

4. (RE)PRESENTING THE FASHION DESIGN LECTURER NARRATIVE

4.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I address the first research question: “*Who am I as a fashion design lecturer at a University of Technology?*” As discussed in Chapter Three, I drew on a range of arts-based methods to recall and evoke narratives of critical and nodal moments using an autobiographical timeline (Chang, 2008, p. 72). The arts-inspired narratives offer glimpses of Kaila’s personal lived experiences as a complex entanglement with the human, non-human and beyond human. The interplay of photographs, drawings, and narrative offers a rich, layered portrayal of Kaila’s be(com)ing as a white, middle-class woman and fashion design lecturer within the University of Technology (UoT). This self-narrative (Chang, 2008, p. 31) and its artful methods assist me in turning my gaze as an autoethnographer onto the autobiographic fashion design lecturer.

In Section A, I retrace my journey from childhood to becoming a fashion designer and then transitioning to lecturing Fashion Design at a University of Technology. I map my personal experiences of growing up in a middle-class, white family in the early 90s interconnected with the critical historical, social, and cultural contextual settings in South Africa and its legacy of apartheid. This critical historical space that I grew up in and went to school as a middle-class white South African has shaped my being-becoming a fashion design lecturer.

Section B adopts an autoethnographic lens to address the first research question, focusing on the cultural (Chang, 2008) and narrative (Dwyer & emerald, 2017) threads that weave into, through and about my lived experiences. Material culture and visual artefacts hold stories that help me explore and make sense of my multifaceted and relational identities.

4.2. Section A – Self-narrative

In this section, I present my self-narrative, following Chang’s (2008) approach to autoethnography. These stories, infused with photographs, drawings, and other visual material, evoke the richness of lived experience, aligning with the autoethnographic intention to pay attention to the traces of the visual and cultural material and to step out to witness what has gone on before (Pahl, 2006) and to surface different voices – as part of my ethical stance in this research process. As detailed in Chapter Three, in constructing and re-presenting my personal story as the autoethnographer, I was conscious of articulating the history that helped to create where I was at present in order to address my main research question about becoming a fashion design lecturer at UoT. Beginning with my early childhood and tracing my journey up to the point of leaving South Africa and lecturing, this narrative provides the grounding from which the rest of the study unfolds.

4.2.1. *Growing up: Girlhood*

I was born in 1989 and grew up in a family of four with my mother, father, and older sister in the 90s to the early 2000s. Figure 4.1 shows me as a baby with my father and sister, while Figure 4.2 shows my mother holding me as a baby. We lived in a small town in the KwaZulu Natal midlands in a big house on a large plot of land. Both my parents nurtured the land, and we had a rose garden, vegetable garden, shade house, and plant nursery on the property. My parents ran landscaping and floral arrangement businesses, although my mother was primarily a teacher. I recall my mother working in these businesses, and there were periods when she was working full-time and not teaching.

My dad is a trained horticulturalist and set up all sorts of tunnels and structures for his plants. We always had at least one dog (usually two) and a cat. At various periods we kept guinea fowl, bantams and silkies. I remember my father whistling to the guinea fowl in the evenings to call them for food. I have fond memories of eating fresh strawberries straight from the garden, staining my hands and mouth with mulberries off our tree, and playing in the shade of an ancient willow tree that felt three houses high. I'm probably remembering everything as much bigger than it really was, but in my early childhood years, that was my world, and it was enormous.

Figure 4.1: My father, sister, and me (around 1989)

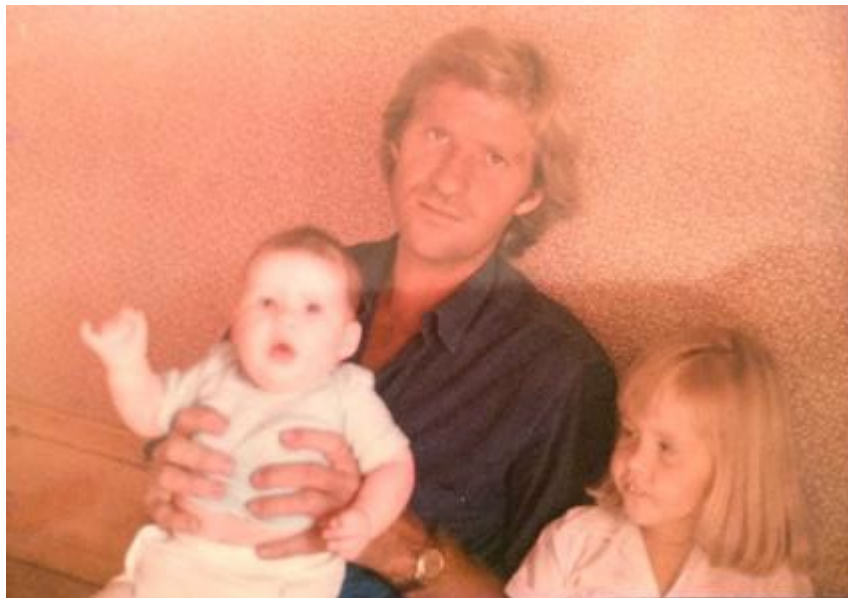


Figure 4.2: My mother and me (1989)



Note. Photographs used with permission

Being a tomboy

When I was a little girl, my hair was cut short. I hated it! I remember one day when we were out and about, one of my dad’s friends saw us and asked my dad if I was his son. I remember feeling bad, even though I couldn’t quite understand why that made me feel bad. That was one of many times growing up when I felt that I wasn’t what a ‘girl’ should be. I remember other adults mistaking me for a boy. It didn’t help that I usually dressed more like a tom boy, wearing shorts and t-shirts. The other girls at school, and even my older sister, were feminine. No one questioned if they were girls. I remember feeling like I didn’t “fit in.”

A creative little girl

I have always been interested in making and doing hand work. When I was young, I would usually be busy with arts and crafts. Figure 4.3 shows a drawing of mine my mom kept from when I was around four years old, judging by the date on the picture. I recognise my mother’s handwriting in the blue felt tip pen in the bottom right corner, saying “Kelly 4/12/1992.” At this age, I was called “Kelly” by everyone I knew, and not Michaela or Kaila. I don’t really remember why, but I don’t think I was able say Michaela easily. My dad still calls me by the nickname “Kels” even now.

Figure 4.3: An early drawing



Note. Figure created by the author (age four).

When I played with dolls and Barbies, I loved making clothes for them and creating new outfits out of scraps or even tissues. I loved drawing and would spend hours drawing designs for dresses and

outfits. I played with paper dolls and sometimes even tried to draw my own. Eventually, this spirit of and desire for creativity led me to learn how to knit, crochet and sew.

Reflecting now, I can see how influential my family was in my interest in fashion. My mother was an avid and talented sewist³ when her work allowed her the time. She would make many of my sister and my clothes when we were young, make quilts for our bedrooms, sew curtains and pillows for the home. She would make special outfits for my dolls for my birthday and Christmas presents, taking care to include all the details like pin tucks, buttons, and lace. I recall many school holidays where my mother, my sister and I would immerse ourselves in fun projects – tie dye, fabric painting, and sewing clothes. I used to love going to the fabric store with her to pick out fabrics. I would walk along the rows of fabric rolls and bolts, feeling each fabric as I went.

When I wanted to learn to knit, it was my sister and my grandmother who taught me. I was probably around eight years old, too young to really know how to sew, and being able to knit gave me the freedom to create things with my own two hands. I was also taught knitting and basic embroidery at school, but the women in my family taught me how to do my own thing, instead of following step-by-step instructions.

Starting at a new school

We left Pietermaritzburg when I was around 12 years old. My mother was offered a job in a small town at a private school. At the time, my family was facing financial difficulties, and my parents were forced to sell their businesses. My mother was working full time at a government school and my dad couldn't find a job. Things were tight and this was the way out. So, we moved. The timing worked out well for me, as I started at this new school as I was leaving my government primary school anyway. My sister, however, was entering into grade 11 in a new place and leaving behind all of her friends.

It was around this time that the family nick names first appeared. I think my sister started it, but we both used to call my mother "Mommy shoes." Eventually my father and even my sister's friends were calling my mother "Mommy Shoes." Over time, the nicknames evolved, and we all got our own variation of a "shoes" nickname (Daddy Shoes, Baby Shoes, Kaila Shoes, Kelly Shoes, or Kelly Head, or the generic version "Shoesy" for any of the family). But my mother's was the one that stuck the longest.

³ See Definitions/Glossary for the definition of this term.

To jump forward in time, I do not call my mother “mom” or “mum” and have not since I was a teenager. Her current and longstanding nickname is Pom Pom or Pom. Her name is Pam (Pamela), and she once had a French-speaking colleague who used to tease her by calling her Pom (an apple in French) instead of Pam. My sister and I found it absolutely hilarious for no apparent reason and began calling her Pommy. It worked on many levels – one because she is (P)am my M(om), and two because she eventually moved to England which is home of the “Poms” (what many South Africans call people from England). For authenticity’s sake (because it is what I call her) I will refer to her as Pom in this thesis.

We all struggled to adjust after the move. My sister was not happy and missed her old friends. Pom was struggling to keep her head above water while providing for us and give us access to a better education. My dad was still battling to find a job – made harder by being in a tiny town. I had difficulty fitting in with my peers, dealing with being bullied and the horrors of puberty. My parents got divorced when I was in grade nine, which made everyone (including my sister and me) a bit happier as there were less tensions within the house. I still saw my father regularly, and I became very close to my mother and sister.

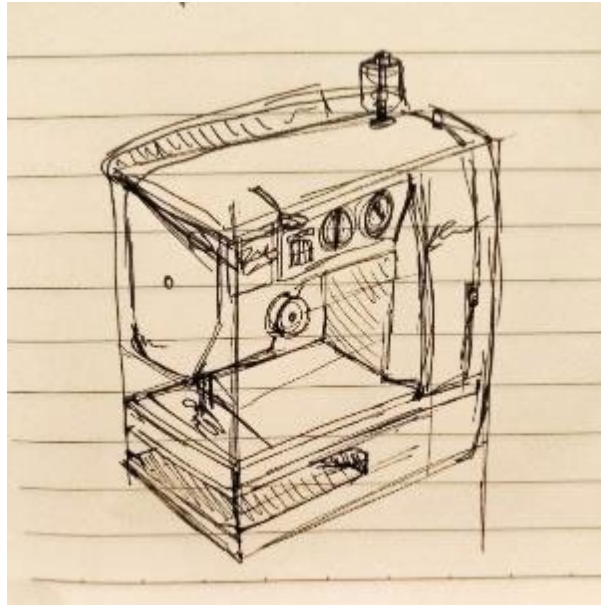
As I grew older, much to Pom’s horror, I would try creating new things out of her tablecloths and old curtains. Every time we had a “civvies day” at school⁴, I would try make my own outfit – often with disastrous results. But I needed to try anyway, no matter how badly it turned out. My fashion design attempts were not usually appreciated by my peers, who would dress in the latest and trendiest clothing, and thought my creations were ‘ugly.’ I didn’t let that deter me, though, and I kept sewing and making clothes.

Life changing sewing machine

When I was 16, Pom gave me her old sewing machine. At this stage, she had realised that I was sewing more often than she was and gave me my own machine to encourage me to master this skill (see figure 4.4). This was life changing for me. I was able to make clothes and to really get creative. I was able to practice and improve to the point where the clothes I made were actually wearable and not “ugly.” I still have and use this sewing machine now.

⁴ See Definitions/Glossary for the definition of this term.

Figure 4.4: A life changing sewing machine



Note. Figure created by the author.

Around this time, my aunt who is a devoted and skilled quilter invited me to her house for a weekend quilting boot-camp. She taught me how to cut the pieces accurately, piece them together on my own machine, add in the backing, and hand quilt the layers together. I ended that weekend with a finished lap quilt that I had made myself. I need to point out at this stage, I was still terrible at sewing! I was very messy and was so eager to make that I didn't always follow through the right steps and most of my projects were absolute flops. But I loved it so much that I kept at it. This was helped along by my aunt's generous donations of her scraps and fabric off-cuts. Fabric to practice with would have been something that was out of reach for a high school student.

My father's new partner was a prolific knitter, and when I stayed with my father and her as a teenager, we would sit together knitting while watching TV. My knitting skill improved dramatically through our shared interest. Around this time, a friend of hers took me under her wing and taught me how to crochet. My hand-skills were improving, and I began to realise how much I loved the act of crafting.

Choosing fashion design

By the time I had finished High School, I had decided that I wanted to study fashion to improve my skills and learn things that my family couldn't teach me. I never considered myself a 'fashionista,' as I didn't have the best clothes and wasn't concerned with being trendy. Unlike my high school peers, I didn't care about wearing designer brands or expensive clothing. We wouldn't have been able to afford it anyway). But I loved clothes; I revelled in the details and construction of different

garments. I wanted to do something where I could use my hands and exercise my creativity every day. I loved clothing, sewing, and making things. Fashion seemed the obvious choice.

My immediate family supported my decision to study fashion despite it only being a diploma and not a degree because they saw how passionate I was about making clothes and how much I enjoyed drawing and designing. They understood that I needed to have a career that allowed me to use my hands and be creative. I had friends and acquaintances whose families were not supportive and thought of fashion as frivolous and not ‘a real career’. Luckman (2013, p. 249) explains that today there is a turn against this kind of attitude, and a “return of credibility to previously disparaged women’s craft practices.” However, at the time, fashion was seen as ‘easy’ and of a lower value. I think that the support in my family was a result of the strong female perspective, where Pom (herself trained in Fine Art, another ‘useless’ skill to the mainstream) understood these “previously disparaged” skills as valuable and a worthy career.

In high school (from 2002 to 2005), I attended the well-resourced private school that my mother taught at. I was known as a ‘staff kid’ and I resented that label, and the type of person teachers and students expected me to be because of that label. After I had completed grade 10, to Pom’s dismay, I elected to do my matric⁵ through distance learning. This meant I spent a year on independent study, and through correspondence learning I could complete my matric without needing to do grade 11. It was a difficult year, and I needed to work very hard, but I enjoyed the independence and learning on my own.

I spent the year living with my father and his partner on a farm. I loved being away from the social pressures of school and other people. I loved having the space and freedom to just be. I became part of the small farming community, and I really enjoyed the lifestyle. We had fruit trees and a huge vegetable and herb garden. They kept pigs, and we would get fresh milk from other farmers. There was a river close to the house and I would feel comfortable and happy to walk there by myself, sometimes walking along its banks for ages. It was the most peaceful time of my life. Figure 4.5 is a photograph of me standing near the top of the waterfall within walking distance from the house.

I completed my matric exams at 16 and so my parents agreed that a gap year would be a good idea before going to university (so that I would turn 18 in my first year).

⁵ See Definitions/Glossary for the definition of this term.

Figure 4.5: Me standing in front of the waterfall



Note. Photograph used with permission.

A family of teachers

My family was also a family of teachers. Although Pom had started as a lecturer at a Technikon, she became a teacher after marrying my father. I had an aunt and uncle who were teachers. My grandfather was a university professor, and my grandmother a university lecturer. They all, but particularly my mother, influenced what I thought about teaching and what it means to be a teacher. Throughout my childhood, I never wanted to be a teacher because I saw how hard it was through Pom. My feelings about teaching were complicated. On one hand, I loved helping others learn and enjoyed mentoring. On the other hand, I saw the long thankless hours and difficulties that came from dealing with different students and parents.

To me, teaching is not the ‘banking model’ (Freire, 2018) but rather the process of guiding people to understand and contextualise information for themselves. While in school, I resented teachers who expected students to simply parrot information back to them. I found myself drawn to the teachers who would make their subjects come alive, inviting students to share in their excitement and learn for themselves. Reflecting now, I can see that this impacted on how I have fashioned my own identity as an educator.

Despite my mixed feeling on teaching, I was drawn to the mentoring side and spent my gap year as a private tutor for remedial reading. I worked one on one with young high school students who had difficulties reading or with homework. The main goal was to help them grow in confidence. I was not qualified for this, but a remedial specialist teacher friend of Pom’s mentored me on how to help the students I worked with. I discovered that I loved helping people to understand things and to learn.

4.2.2. Becoming a fashion design student

I had heard from friends and family that SAUT⁶ had the best fashion department in the country. As Pom was supporting my sister and I with very little financial help from my dad, I didn't want to go too far from home. Looking online at all the different fashion schools, SAUT offered an accredited diploma, good facilities, and because it wasn't a private institution, the fees were reasonable. It was only a few hours' drive away from Pom's house. It helped that I would be able to get a fee remission with my matric results. I didn't apply for any other courses, nor any other institutions.

Applying to the university

I had made up my mind about Fashion and about SAUT – I had to get in, there was no plan B. I prepared my portfolio for my interview (see Figures 4.6 – 4.11). I included drawings from my high school art classes (see Figure 4.10 for an example) and ones I did especially for the portfolio, my very badly proportioned 'fashion figures' and clothing designs (see Figure 4.8 and 4.9 for example), magazine collages and images (see Figure 4.6 and 4.7 for example), step-by-steps of how I made clothes (see Figure 4.11 for example) ... even an illustration I tried to do on computer (shown in Figure 4.8)! Keeping in mind how new that field was, I thought it would help my chances. In addition to this thick book, I took a few items I had sewn, crocheted, or made, a larger sketch portfolio and all the false bravado I could muster. I went to my entrance exam and had the interview on the same day. I must have impressed them despite my anxiety because I got my acceptance letter soon after. I didn't need a plan B after all.

⁶ SAUT – South African University of Technology is a pseudonym.

Figure 4.6 – 4.11

Pages from the portfolio I took with me for my entrance test.

Figure 4.6: Portfolio cover

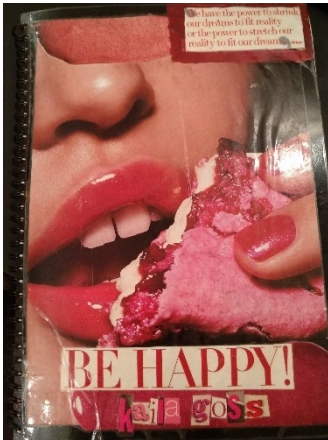


Figure 4.7: Portfolio intro

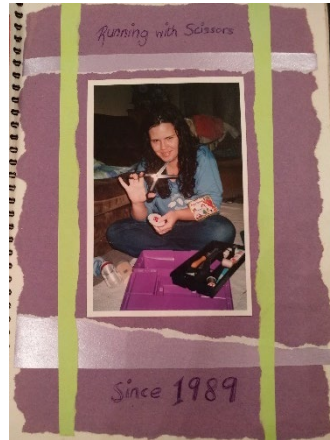


Figure 4.8: Digital illustration



Figure 4.6 – 4.11: Pages from the portfolio I took with me for my entrance test.

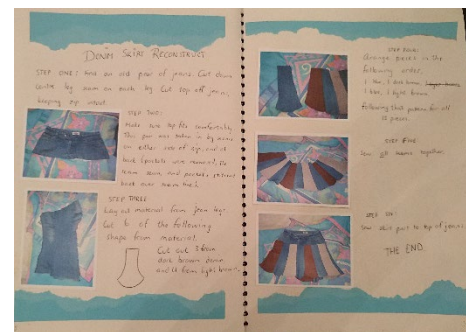
Figure 4.9: Fashion designs



Figure 4.10: Pencil sketch



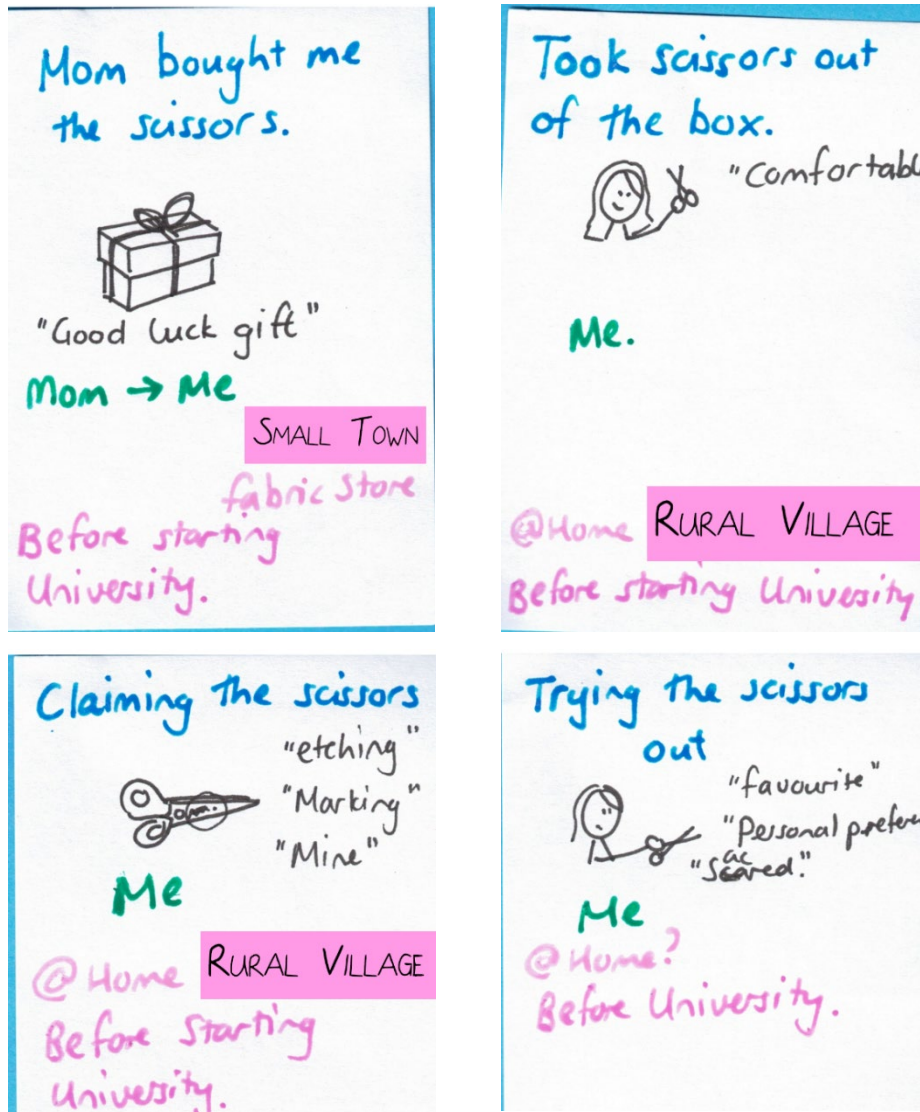
Figure 4.11: Sewing tutorial



Note. Figure created by the author.

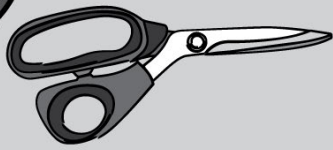
Pom, me, and the scissors

Figure 4.12: Pom, me, and the scissors storyboard



Note. Figure created by the author.

Figure 4.12 shows the storyboard for how I got my fabric scissors, and this is expanded in the narrative that follows. These fabric scissors are a significant object to me and have come to be a symbol in the thesis of my fashion designer self. I explore the entanglements I have with this object in depth in Chapter Eight.



My first memory of these scissors is my mom buying them for me. She got them for me as “a good luck gift” before I started university. She bought the scissors in Pietermaritzburg when we went there together to buy supplies for me at university. When we got home after purchasing the scissors, I took them out of the box. When I held them in my hand, they felt really comfortable, like they just fitted my hand.

Before I left for university, I claimed the scissors by scratching my name into the metal blades with an awl. I used a nail heated up in a flame to melt my surname into the plastic handles. Instead of just having a label or a permanent marker that could be wiped off or erased, this was a permanent etching or claiming of these scissors. I tested my permanently claimed scissors out before starting my fashion studies, growing more comfortable. I would keep using these scissors, throughout my career, my university days, in industry and as a lecturer and beyond. Over time, they became my favourite pair. They were my personal preference, something that I held sacred.

Finding my tribe

In early February 2007, on my first day as a student in the Fashion department on Button Lane⁷ campus, I remember feeling like I was finally home with like-minded people who were as passionate about making and clothing as I was. I wasn’t teased or bullied, and I felt accepted for the first time. The other students were wonderful, unique characters and the whole department felt like a family. They accepted everyone – people dressed eccentrically, had crazy hair, dressed however they wanted, and were embraced for the people they were.

Although I did well in class, I wasn’t the best or most talented. My peer group was full of incredible people – talented artists, skilled sewists, amazing designers. But that didn’t bother me. I chose to learn from these amazing people and be inspired to work harder and become better. And I did work hard! But I loved it, despite the stress, long hours, and exhaustion.

⁷ Button Lane is a pseudonym.

Being the wrong shape

While I was happy and accepted here, there were still times when I would get reminded that even though I felt at home, I didn't look like everyone else. I didn't quite fit in. When the senior students needed models, they would ask the tall, thin, and beautiful people in my year. When we had the opportunity to do fashion shows and showcases for events, I didn't even consider volunteering – I simply wouldn't have fitted into the outfits.

Calogero and Thompson (2010, p. 159) write about the “current standards of beauty” for women being “ultra thinness with large breasts” in 2010, reflecting on the standards that predominated when I was studying fashion and being exposed to these “unrealistic and unnatural attributes for feminine beauty.” The overarching cultural ideals were further emphasised in my classes, where I was taught to elongate and slim down my fashion illustrations. We were taught that the size 34 is the perfect sample size and that this is what the average woman should be. Throughout my studies, I was getting bombarded with these images of how a woman should be. But I didn't look like that.

I remember more than once when I would tell people that I was studying to be a fashion designer, their faces would go from perplexed to surprised. They seemed to think that I wasn't what a fashion designer looked like. But no one could really tell me why. Reflecting now, I feel that people expect fashion designers to be thin, well dressed and have the latest hairstyle... But in my experience, that's not what fashion designers look like every day. Most of the other students and lecturers that I had and all the fashion designers that I knew or knew about, weren't 'polished' all the time. They would only 'dress up' for fashion shows or special events. But when I would go into industry or designers' studios, the fashion designers looked like normal people. They don't all look like these fashion dolls that everyone expects them to be.

The fashion designers I admired as a student were diverse. My favourite designer was Vivienne Westwood, a crazy redhead woman who did not care what people thought about her and wore outlandish crazy outfits. But I also admired South African designers like Nkhensani Nkosi (of Stoned Cherrie), Amanda Laird Cherry, David Tlale, Jacques van der Watt (of Black Coffee), and Marianne Fassler (of Leopard Frock) – none of whom look anything like a 'fashion Barbie.' So, I had first-hand knowledge of what real designers looked like, and I knew that they came in all shapes and styles. My view of designers as just normal people was grounded in my personal experiences with real world designers.

Mentoring my peers

I was still adamant that I would never be a teacher because it was a thankless, exhausting job. Sometimes, however, life leads us in strange directions. During my time as a fashion student, I realised that I would end up helping my classmates. When the lecturers weren't around, often I would be the one that they would ask. I found that I was able to explain well and help them understand. I realised that not only did I enjoy helping them, but I was also good at it. We learnt from each other as much as from our lecturers. Through this process, we were becoming fashion designers. This sparked a love of teaching, but lecturing felt miles apart from what I had previously thought teaching was when I saw Pom. My becoming a fashion designer helped to change how I viewed teaching. By the time I was reaching the end of my second year, I had decided that I wanted to be a lecturer.

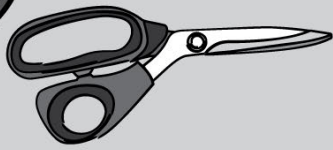
Feeling like a Designer

A standout moment for all of us was our third-year fashion show. This was our final project, the culmination of three years of studying and learning. We got to design a range of seven outfits, make the patterns and sew the garments ourselves. I will never forget the feeling of seeing clothes I had designed and made with my blood, sweat and tears come to life on a runway. Seeing the models walking down the ramp in my clothing was like seeing my craft being performed. This was a validating experience, and I felt like I finally was a designer, not just a design student. Figure 4.13 is a photograph of me with the models wearing my garments on the first night of our graduate fashion show.

Figure 4.13: My 3rd year fashion range on the night of the show



Note. Photograph used with permission.



The nervous energy backstage was almost intoxicating. We were all hyped up on the stress, pressure, and delusions of glamour. They called me to the front; it was my turn. The models lined up behind the curtain, perfectly turned out, ready in the outfits I had spent months crafting. It was strange seeing the clothes on a living body, instead of the rigid and lifeless mannequins I had been so used to. The models were much taller than me, they seemed larger than life.

The backstage coordinator put her fingers to her earpiece. She barked back a response. She put her hand on the first model's shoulder, urging him on stage. One by one, she sent them onto the ramp. The lights on stage were so bright from the other side of the curtain, it was hard to see. The models seemed to be swallowed up onto the stage. The stage manager motioned me to a TV screen. The live feed from the show was playing, and it was the first time I was able to actually see the clothes that I had made walking the ramp. The cadence of their walks in time to the music, the jackets almost swayed to the beat.

I felt elated. All my hard work for so long was finally over. My three years of studying had culminated in this one moment. But before I could even catch my breath it was over. Back to the mad rush of dressing and prepping models, making sure shoes were tied and buttons done up. It was... anticlimactic. I remember that night feeling exhausted and happy, but also a bit hollow. It was over. Nothing in my life again would ever give me the same experiences of such high highs and such low lows.

(From autobiography exercise 1st September 2018)

It was during my National Diploma in Fashion at the South African University of Technology that I was first exposed to fashion theory and the conceptual side of why and how people express themselves through fashion. I loved and excelled in the theory subjects, while still enjoying the practical side. I learnt how to sew well, and my projects stopped being disasters. I found myself practicing and making clothes in my spare time, trying to learn how to be a better designer. I spent hours in the library and online, getting inspiration from old textbooks and blogs on pattern-making and arcane and heirloom sewing techniques. All in order to push myself further and do better.

Figure 4.14: Examples of my artwork during my student days



Note. Figures created by author.

I really enjoyed the drawing and illustration subjects. I was not top of the class and had to work incredibly hard to be good. Figure 4.14 shows some examples of my third-year drawing and illustration pieces. But I took a great deal of pleasure in the process of artmaking, so the hard work came naturally. I kept trying to improve myself and grow my own talents instead of comparing myself to my peers who were incredibly talented.

An old friend

The following storyboard (Figure 4.15) shows my entanglement with these fabric scissors, further explained in the framed narrative that follows.

Figure 4.15: 'An old friend' storyboard



Note. Figure created by the author.



A very distinct memory about my fabric scissors is the day they were returned. One day during class, I'd lent my scissors to a classmate. We used to all share equipment with each other, but this time, I'd lent them to someone and forgotten. And so, I had left at the end of the day, without realising that my scissors had not been returned. The scissors were left on one of the tables. When I came back to university the next term, one of my classmates handed my fabric scissors to me. I've paraphrased what she said, "I saw these, I couldn't ignore your name etched everywhere. You permanently put it in there. I couldn't claim them. I couldn't give them away. They're very clearly yours. So, I'm returning them."

And they were returned to me because of that act of claiming them when I first held them.

Despite forgetting them at campus on occasion, I treated them well. I do believe that taking care of my scissors is what has made them last so long. The golden rule of fabric scissors is that you must only cut fabric with them, because if you cut paper or anything else, it dulls the blades. I was very careful with only cutting fabric, and this helped me to keep the blades honed and sharp. The scissors had a sacred aura about them.

Although the main characters in this story are me and my scissors, my husband, Matt, plays a supporting role. I teasingly threaten Matt that if he ever touches my scissors, there would be consequences. It has been a running joke since we first started dating that he's not allowed to use my scissors - at all, for anything, ever, no matter what. And I have many different pairs of scissors that are exclusively mine. But all the other scissors in the house are fine. However, he's at the point where he won't just pick up scissors and use them. He will ask, "Can I use these? Can I use these for paper? Can I use these to cut plastic?" We joke together, but there is something about scissors being sacred, since I was first given them by Pom, across the different times and locations they have travelled with me.

A taste of academics

Like in school, I was a good student, worked hard and did well. I excelled in the computer-based subjects, often helping my peers. But I was getting bored. Although the course was extremely hard work, it wasn't intellectually challenging. You had to work hard, but there were defined tasks to complete. You always knew what the next step was or where to go for help. It was extremely practical. I enjoyed the theory subjects as they challenged me to be more critical and conceptual, but they were by far the minority of the work.

After completing my three-year diploma, I continued to my Bachelor of Technology in fashion to learn more about fashion design through independent study and research. This year scratched the itch for academic research. The course was an intensive research project that combined practical and theory. It was like a mini thesis, with methodology, literature review, data collection and analysis. It was my first real taste of "academics." For most of the year, I studied at home independently. I would meet with my peers and my supervisor as needed, but most of the work was done alone. I struggled a bit with the isolation but managed to get a good result in the end.

BTech was my first taste of real writing for research. I had to learn how to structure a research proposal, argue for and use different methodologies, pull together all my research sources into a literature review that explained the position of the study, and learn to write academically. I drew on my high school history and art classes, where we were taught to support an argument in essays, to compare and contrast differing viewpoints and to draw a conclusion. But the process of research writing was almost mythical. It was an intangible skill that I couldn't quite see.

Coming from a very practical-heavy diploma, the jump into "academic research" was huge. I remember feeling that writing a research proposal and report was a process you needed to go through to understand what you had just done. It was only at the end that it began to make sense. We were not taught overtly how to write or what writing for research entailed.

There were very few students who went on to their BTechs, as the academic requirements were too much for many of the diploma students and the industry didn't require a BTech for employment. Most of the diploma students couldn't justify spending an extra year on study that didn't necessarily improve your chances of getting an industry job, especially when they had struggled with the small amounts of theory the diploma contained already. The points for entry into the diploma are low, and most of the students were not comfortable with theory subjects. This is in line with the commonly held myth that fashion is a practical - not an academic - pursuit (Bill, 2012; Harvey & Lucking, 2017). Undergraduate fashion education is focused on the development of practical skills and

professional practices (Smal & Lavelle, 2011), where scholarly research is tempered (Harvey & Lucking, 2017).

We had three months of theory lectures, and in these small classes we spent a lot of time in class discussions and presenting our work in progress. This helped us to see the process of research from different viewpoints and tried to show us what good and bad research looked like. Each student worked with their own supervisor to complete their research projects for the year. The lectures stopped once we had completed our research proposals, and we were left to figure out the main project with guidance from the supervisor.

Unlike in the diploma, the research process was iterative. Instead of working on a submission alone to hand in and be assessed on, each draft of the research project was given to the supervisor, critiqued, and handed back to be improved. This is how we were taught to “do research,” through gentle correction and critique, one-on-one meetings, and discussions with the supervisor. As this was the first sort of scholarly research I had done, it was difficult learning how to write academically. Within the BTech, there was no room for theoretical or conceptual frameworks, and we were taught about only a limited number of methodologies. The emphasis was on using research to inform the practical, where both practical and theoretical components were weighted equally.

4.2.3. Becoming a fashion designer

I completed my BTech in 2010 and began working in the industry. I got a job at a children’s wear supplier as a graphic artist, working primarily with computers to design licensed character clothes (like Barbie, Cars, and Spiderman). I enjoyed my work and was good at it. I was responsible for working with the licensing agents (Disney, Nickelodeon, etc.) to follow the approval processes of getting these branded character designs into stores. The work honed my administration and organisation skills, as it was a multi-process system that required follow up at each stage. I needed to interact with the silkscreen companies that printed the designs onto fabric, the retail buyers who were ordering the clothing, the in-house designers in charge of each account, the in-house pattern-makers, trims and fabric buyers, coordinators, sample machinists, and various administrative staff, in addition to dealing with the licensing agents for each character.

Breaking out of my shell

Being in industry forced me out of my shell, and I went from being shy and anxious to outspoken and confident. Working under a designer and merchandiser taught me a lot about the industry and about design. Eventually, one of the designers left and I was offered a promotion to their position. In this job, I now had more responsibility for each design (working with the factory production team directly, signing off on many aspects of the manufacture of the designs to go into stores). But I also

had to work more closely with the retail buyers. Buyers are in high paid positions that come with pressure and huge demands. The larger retailers we supplied (like Edgars, Mr. Price, Jet) are trained to negotiate and get the best deals from their suppliers (us). They are driven to get the best prices for items, select designs that will sell well in stores and do so with tight deadlines. Dealing directly with people who demanded these things provided me with education of a different type. I had to learn to be confident, as well as to negotiate and work with difficult people.

Something missing

When I was in the working environment, I began to miss the academic side of fashion that had perforated my studies. In my industry work there was no theory or understanding of why or how, only “what sells.” Often, my job was to recreate samples from overseas or slightly update last season’s designs. Although I was always thrilled to see a child ‘in the wild’ wearing something that I had designed, there was nothing that I could actually put my individual stamp on.

I still wanted to lecture, but I needed to wait for an opportunity to present itself. Perhaps by chance or by luck, I was at a farewell party for a fashion designer friend who was moving away when I met an acquaintance who was lecturing at the Fashion department in a UoT. We spoke about lecturing, and I told her my longing to get into it. Shortly afterwards, I don’t recall if it was weeks or months, she phoned me and said that she was moving away and there was an opening for a part time lecturer if I was interested. I jumped at the chance.

My boss in industry worked with me to come up with a plan. I would work in industry on a part-time basis for three and a half days a week, and the rest of the time I would lecture. I spent six months lecturing pattern-making on a part-time basis, while continuing at my industry job. It was very difficult doing both, but I loved lecturing and really wanted to see how far I could go. I worked in the fashion industry for two years before taking up a full-time lecturing post in the department of Fashion. It was a difficult decision because I loved my job, and I loved the people I worked with. I had learnt so much from them and grown up a lot while I was there. But lecturing was my dream job, and I had to take the opportunity that was presented to me.

This came at a time in my life when I had just become engaged to be married and was now juggling two demanding jobs while planning a wedding. I look back at that six months of my life and think I was crazy to try do it all. But somehow, I survived. I can thank my industry time for teaching me how to deal with difficult people, manage my time, stay organised, and keep my head down to get things done. My husband and I got married shortly after I left industry to pursue lecturing.

4.2.4. *Becoming a lecturer*

I began lecturing part time at the beginning of 2012 and left industry for a full-time contract lecturing by July of that year. Being in a classroom with fresh fashion designers in training was inspiring and gave me a sense of purpose that industry never could.

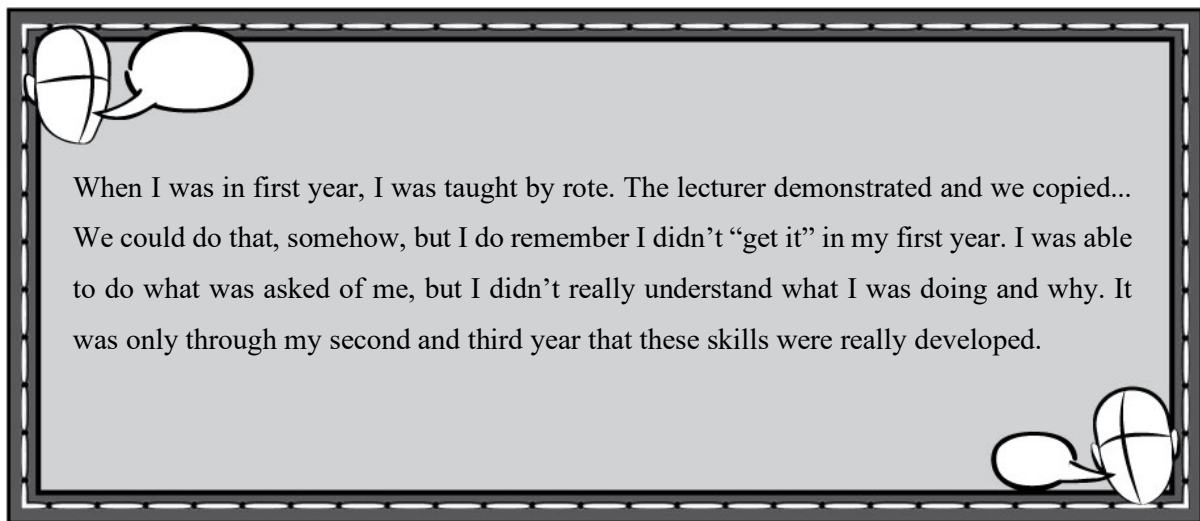
In the beginning, I followed the way that my predecessor had taught. I used her notes and briefs and taught as she had taught. We had both been taught by the same lecturers and so we both followed that way of teaching. With the notes and files of my predecessor to follow, it should have been easy. But I found that I had to ‘relearn’ a lot of the content knowledge to teach it. In the beginning I made a lot of mistakes because I took for granted that I knew everything. Some of the simple questions my students would ask would throw me and I would be unable to answer. Sometimes it was because I had forgotten the level of detail that teaching required, even though I “knew” the discipline content. Other times it was because they were asking why things were done in a certain way, and I honestly did not know because I had never questioned it myself. I felt ashamed and like an imposter.

By the end of my first-year lecturing, I could see that students were able to follow exactly what I demonstrated, but that they weren’t able to apply that knowledge to different cases. I knew from my industry experience that they needed to be able to think like fashion designers when graduating and I tried to find out how I could help them get there.

I didn’t get it in my first year

I thought back to my own experience as a first-year diploma student, and realised that although I had good marks, I didn’t understand what I was doing. I could copy what the lecturer did, but I wasn’t understanding the *how* and *why* of fashion design. By the time third year came, I had somehow managed to learn these, but they were never explicitly taught to me. Having to teach first years meant that I had to relearn the basics, and with the perspective of age or wisdom or possibly just space, I began to see more clearly why the rules I was taught to just accept existed in the first place.

In a meeting with my supervisor, I described this disconnect:



(M. Cavanagh, personal communication, July 11th, 2023.)

My first-year pattern-making lecturer was highly skilled, experienced, and knowledgeable. She would always give us little tricks and tips to get the best fit and make sure our patterns were perfect. However, it was all decontextualised knowledge specific to the particular project we were working on. When I needed to apply the knowledge to other contexts (different designs, for example) (Herrington et al., 2010; Stetsenko, 2010), I couldn't. I got very good marks for pattern-making, and I really enjoyed it. When I started to lecture, however, I realised that I had only 'clicked' towards the end of my third year as a student. Up until then, I had been able to repeat information parrot style but didn't have a deep understanding of why I was doing things.

I scribbled down the hints and tips from my pattern-making lecturer eagerly. But when it came to drafting my own patterns as I was just copying down what had been demonstrated, I faltered. Since these tips and tricks were abstract, not something that I had contextualised and related to my practice, it was inevitable that I would forget about them. Rereading my own first-year notes in preparation for teaching first years was like relearning. I saw the same thing happening to my students – they could copy me or follow a textbook, but they weren't critically thinking about why they were doing things. This was probably because I did not lead them in that direction. When they needed to create a pattern for their own design, they would get stuck. I knew how they felt having been there before myself.

I lectured at a University of Technology (UoT), which has different views to a traditional research university on what knowledge is valued and how knowledge should be taught. Often, students choose UoT as it's perceived as 'easier' with lower entry points, a legacy of the UoT's vocational and Technikon roots. Fashion, in particular, is seen as 'easy.' Students enter the course with preconceived

notions about studying fashion. Dall’Alba (2009, p. 5) suggests that even inexperienced students are influenced by their preconceived notions about what their profession entails. These students bring diverse social, personal, and cultural experiences to the fashion course. Over the years, many students have expressed surprise at the course’s difficulty and demands – in line with what Gale (2011) experienced. There’s a gap between students’ and my understanding and feelings about the course.

The students in my classroom

As I was a professional in the fashion design discipline, I was never taught how to teach. That made it difficult for me to adapt to my students’ needs. When I started lecturing, there wasn’t much help other than the lesson plans and curriculum. No one taught me how to teach. I followed my predecessor and modelled my teaching on how I had been taught, but something just wasn’t working. In my conversations with colleagues (many of whom had been my lecturers when I was a student), they were encountering the same problems. The teaching methods that they had been using for many years were no longer working with the types of students that were coming into the classroom. We realised that the education system had changed, and students coming out of high school were taught under the Outcomes Based Education (OBE) system. These students thought differently, remembered differently, and most importantly they learnt differently to how I had when I was a student. This meant that the way we taught needed to be adjusted.

Our students were diverse and came with their own sets of problems and issues. We had students who had never touched a computer before, and those who had their own laptops. Those who couldn’t afford to eat or pay for public transport to get to lectures, and those who drove their own cars. Those who had children at home or siblings or nieces and nephews they were responsible for, and those who were treated like children by their own parents. Those who spoke very little English or struggled with reading and comprehension, and those who were fluent. Most of our students came from rural and peri-rural areas and had little exposure to the technology through which we taught. They were also unfamiliar with the diversity of people in the classroom. Many came from underprivileged schools and struggled with the rigorous demands of the course. Students only needed 20 points from their matric⁸ results to get in – which is barely above a pass in all subjects.

Learning how to lecture

As there was no one in my department to teach me how to teach better, I began to do my own research. I attended non-compulsory workshops and training on e-learning. I read up in my own time about different teaching methods and about the type of student I was getting. I began to attend conferences

⁸ See Definitions/Glossary for the definition of this term.

hosted by the Institute for Exemplary Education⁹ and this is where I was first exposed to teaching theories. My interest led to me start presenting at these conferences and research my own practice. As I was eager to improve my practice and become a better lecturer, I was introduced to new philosophies and theories of teaching. I became more involved in self-study, reflective practice and action research projects and conferences within the academic sphere.

I began to revamp what I taught. Although the core curriculum stayed the same, I changed the way that I taught it. I focused on building skills and understanding, not just the ability to replicate what was done. I shifted the balance of knowledge – instead of being the knower and bestower of all knowledge, I designed activities that forced students to find knowledge, bring their own ideas, discuss critically what the correct answer could be.

I made videos and incorporated e-learning into my practical class. This allowed students to re-watch demonstrations as many times as they wanted to, but also put the responsibility into their hands. If they did not want to be prepared for class, they would not be spoon fed and mollycoddled. Students went from expecting to be given the answers to knowing that they would need to do a lot of the legwork themselves. The more I learnt about good teaching practice, the less I was actually teaching – I moved into the role of facilitator, helping students to use their own knowledge.

Throughout this time, I was attending conferences and workshops on teaching, publishing, and giving talks, engaging with special interest groups on teaching and learning. I was trying to become a better lecturer. But this informal study always seemed to reach a cap – it wasn't enough to explain how I had got there. While I've been lecturing, I have begun to better understand the needs of my students. But this superficial research has not been enough to give me a deep understanding. I needed to find a way to be more critical in order to continue to improve.

Researching my practice

While I was lecturing, I would research ways of improving my teaching practice. Through collaborating with the IEE department (Institute for Exemplary Education at SAUT), I was exposed to different pedagogies and assessment practices. Constructivist philosophies that I had always lived now had names and authors from whom I could learn. My interest in e-learning, blended learning and educational technology grew, driving me to attend training workshops, research and 'play around' with the technology available to me. Within a few years, my teaching practice had

⁹ A pseudonym

completely transformed. I realised that as a fashion professional, I had no real understanding of what it meant to be a teacher, let alone any knowledge of how to be a better teacher.

Each new student cohort was unique, and I needed to be able to adapt my teaching practice to that group. I needed to research my own practice as well as to better understand the sociocultural context my students were coming from. This was necessary if I wanted to better support their learning. Through research and experience, I began to reflect on my teaching and to see how my preconceived notions of who and what students should be and do were actively harming my teaching and my students. Operating from my own sociocultural context as a middle-class, white, English-first-language woman, I had to work at empathising and understanding my students' perspective. I needed to be more aware of who they were to understand how to teach them best.

I saw that the concept of “fairness” did not exist in black and white. Was it fair to expect a student to type an assignment when they barely had any experience on a computer? Was it fair to expect them to watch videos on their phones when some didn't have smart phones (or even cell phones at all, due to poverty or crime)? Even though the institution had tried to “level the playing field” by providing computer labs on campus and Wi-Fi access for all students, this didn't necessarily translate to equal opportunities.

Student success

I joined the student success special project team at my institution. We were tasked with finding out who the students at our institution were and what the university could do to help them succeed. We interviewed students and got firsthand accounts of the kinds of barriers they were experiencing, as well as how they defined success for themselves (see Xulu-Gama et al., 2018). It was eye-opening work, and it helped me to understand the part I had to play in my students' university life.

Creatively Numb

When I started lecturing, I began to feel creatively numb. All day, I got to see my students creating these wonderful things – drawings and clothing, accessories, and fabric prints... But I didn't have a creative outlet myself. Teaching was rewarding, but it didn't offer the hands-on, creative engagement I was used to from my industry experience. As a fashion design lecturer, it became clear that nurturing my own creativity was crucial not only for my well-being but also for staying connected to the creative pulse of the field. I started doodling in my meetings (which were becoming longer and more frequent). I found that it helped me to focus on what was being said. My notebooks are littered with quick pen sketches and doodles in between my notes. I have kept this up, even to this day (see Figure 4.16 for an example).

Figure 4.16: Meeting doodles in ballpoint pen.



Note. Figure created by the author.

A friend recommended a weekly figure drawing class as a way to reconnect with art more fully, and I decided to give it a try. Initially, it was scary being faced with a live – completely nude – model! But almost as soon as we started drawing, it was like my brain stopped talking and I was able to just be in the moment. It wasn't awkward or embarrassing – it was just a drawing class. I learnt so much about anatomy, shading, and how to work with different drawing materials like charcoal, graphite, and ink. I had also made some good friends in the process.

I got better in time, but more than that, I found a peace and tranquillity that I so sorely needed to balance out the stress and demands of lecturing and studying. This weekly artistic practice not only nurtured my neglected artist self but also renewed my passion for design, making me a more effective lecturer. In the weeks when I was overwhelmed with assessments that needed to be marked, lessons and resources I needed to prepare, or drowning in administrative work, I found these art lessons relaxing. I felt restored by engaging in art and better able to handle the demands of my job the next day. Figure 4.17 showcases an example of one of my drawings from class, done in charcoal and chalk pastel on card.

Figure 4.17: Examples of my figure drawings (charcoal and pastel on card)



Note. Figure created by the author.

After a few years of figure drawing, I wanted to do something more creative. I switched to a weekly painting class. Here, we would work on our own projects under the guidance of the teacher. I learnt how to use water colours and oil paints, as well as some interesting techniques. Painting was more enjoyable than figure drawing, which often felt rigid and stressful due to focus on precision and the live model only holding a pose for a specified time. In contrast, painting allowed for more creative freedom, letting me explore colours, textures, and techniques at my own pace. However, I found both worked the same way to switching my brain off for a bit. I began to refer to these classes as my therapy sessions – that I did painting for my own creative fulfilment and my mental wellbeing. By giving myself this space to ‘switch off,’ I found that I returned to my role as a lecturer feeling recharged, more patient, and less stressed. This creative outlet allowed me to approach my work with a refreshed sense of energy, positively influencing how I engaged with my students and navigated the demands of my teaching.

As an autoethnographer, though, this “therapy” needed to become more than a mental reprieve; I had to move beyond tolerating discomfort to actively interrogating it, critiquing where it stemmed from and understanding how to address it moving forward. Making time for a weekly class also brought a level of commitment. The regular timing, the external setting, and the involvement of others –

teachers and friends – turned it into part of my routine. This accountability kept me engaged for several years, only stopping when we moved overseas. Figure 4.18 shows one of the oil paintings that I completed during the weekly classes.

Figure 4.18: Lilacs – oil on canvas



Note. Photograph of painting (both by the author).

One of the paintings I worked on in these classes is a study of the Three Graces by Botticelli, this is shown in Figure 4.19. I chose to paint just the Three Graces from his *La Primavera (Spring)* painting, in oil on canvas. It was my first large oil painting (A0 in size). I love painting and drawing women because of the graceful curves, and I particularly enjoy rendering the beautiful fabrics and hair. Botticelli is one of my favourite artists, and I was captivated by the diaphanous fabrics and gorgeous curled hairstyles of the women. I spent weeks on it, working on it for approximately three hours every Thursday during our classes. I was able to see the slow progress as the women came to life on the canvas. I am immensely proud of this painting, and it feels like one of my best works. Even though now I can see all the flaws and mistakes, it captures a moment in my artistic career that feels very special and significant, the first time I was truly proud of what I had done.

The Three Graces painting serves as a visual testament to my evolving artist self, marking a significant step in my growing confidence as a fashion design lecturer. The discipline, patience, and

commitment I invested in this painting mirror the qualities I later brought to my academic life. Through autoethnography, I recognise this artwork not only as a milestone in my personal artistic growth but also as a foundational experience that shaped my teaching philosophy and my appreciation for the artistry within fashion design.

Figure 4.19: The Three Graces (oil on canvas)



Note. Photograph of painting (both by the author).

Finding my own study networks

I had completed a three-year National Diploma in Fashion design (2007 – 2009), followed immediately by my Bachelor of Technology (BTech) in 2010. But after completing my BTech, I went to work in the fashion industry and took a break from studying. I had begun to think about studying further when I started lecturing in 2012, but only started my Master of Technology degree in 2013. At the time, I was interested in sustainable fashion. I had attended institutional research workshops at the end of 2012 in order to prime my return to formal studies. Despite this, I was not prepared for the jump between BTech and MTech. My master's was my first real taste of scholarly and academic writing. Here, I needed to weave theory across my research and underpin my study with tangible arguments and sources. In the context of this autoethnographic study, these reflections on my academic journey form an important part of my story, marking significant shifts in my identity

from practitioner to scholar. Through recounting these stages, I continue to build a narrative of my becoming, showing how each academic phase shaped my current perspectives and approaches as a fashion design lecturer.

During my master's, I relied on a network of people to help me and support me. I attended workshops on research and academic writing, went to the Writing Centre for help with structuring my work, joined a study group with other master's students outside of my department, attended lectures and critique sessions with master's students within my department as well as another one outside my department, pulled friends and family in to be critical readers, had sessions with people who had experience with data to help me with the structure and analysis of my data... anything I could think of to get the support I felt I did not have during my studies for BTech. Shortly after completing my proposal, my supervisor told me she was retiring and needed to hand me over. I was only assigned a new supervisory team at the end of the year, and without a supervisor on top of everything, I completely stalled.

Fortunately, with my new supervisors, my research started up again. I felt that BTech had not prepared me for the level that master's degree required, but by surrounding myself with the support network I had, I was able to get to grips with it. As my master's was in fashion design within the Faculty of Arts, it was skewed to more conceptual and practical knowledge than to theoretical and scholarly understanding. I was exposed to many more kinds of methodologies, theories, and data collection methods than I had been in my BTech. I discovered a thrill while researching and finding journal articles that helped me to build my arguments.

I was working full time during the day and coming home to work on my master's degree at night. Again, looking back now, I have no idea how I managed to follow such a demanding programme for three years. At the same time, I was slowly immersing myself in the teaching and learning research community at my institution. I was committing to workshops, conferences, presentations, and papers in addition to my work and study. I was becoming known in the e-learning communities of my institution, and I had been asked to help with training staff to use e-learning to improve their teaching.

Eventually, in 2015 I submitted my dissertation for examination. It took months to get feedback from the examiners, but I was set to graduate in September. As luck would have it, I missed my own master's graduation because I was in Cape Town presenting at my first major conference on e-learning.

Although I felt burnt out after finishing my master's, it left a hole in my life. Suddenly, I had this free time and extra space, and I didn't know what to do with it. I also missed studying. I missed

researching formally. I missed the sustained project over a longer period. I had been involved in a few research projects that were over a few months or for the scope of one article, but there is something about extended, large research projects that I missed. I knew I wanted to get my PhD eventually, and so I began to think about what I would do from as early as 2015.

4.2.5. *Becoming a PhD scholar*

I took a break after I completed my master's degree before I began to shop around for a PhD 'home.' I knew that I wanted to do my PhD in a new space – with a different department or a different university. I had been told that having all your qualifications from a single institution can lead to a narrowed and limited view of the world. I wanted to expand my horizons, not narrow them. I also knew that I was spending most of my spare time researching educational practice, and so wanted to get my PhD in an education related field. I started putting out feelers for the kinds of programmes I could do and where I could do them.

Finding a PhD home

A friend and colleague invited me to come with her to a research workshop. At the workshop, I met with many new people who had fresh perspectives. I learnt about object and narrative inquiry – something that my department had never exposed me to. I remember thinking, “Wow, so research can be creative?!” It was eye opening to see that not only could research be more than the stuffy data collection instruments and traditional methods, but that it could be creative and inspiring.

At this time, I was looking for a PhD home but had decided that I wanted to research student success. This lined up with the research I had been doing with my institution's student success team on understanding how student success was related to access and engagement and what the institution could do to improve this. But, despite my resistance to it, my topic began to shift. I began to look at who I was as a lecturer and how I had become one. Identity, belonging, and art began to take over what I was doing. By the time I had met Prof Daisy Pillay, and she had agreed to supervise me, the seeds of being-becoming had already been planted.

Switching disciplines

In 2017, Prof Pillay invited me to attend the PhD cohort sessions at UKZN informally a year before registering. Here, I would get to interact with other PhD students at the various stages of their work. This would help me develop my ideas and see where I was going. I would also present at these sessions. I started attending these PhD meetings, feeling like an imposter among students fluent in educational theories. When I asked questions, the others gave me helpful explanations, but I still felt like an outsider who didn't belong and who did not speak their language. I have written more about this in Cavanagh (2019).

In 2018 I registered with UKZN for my PhD and began to work on my proposal. It was difficult trying to engage with this new discipline of Education. The emphasis on scholarly and theoretical knowledge was completely foreign to me, and it took me a long time to catch up. Seminal readings in education that most people completed in undergraduate degrees, I had missed. I genuinely felt stupid. I didn't belong here; I was an outsider.

I had so much reading to catch up on for my PhD, and so much writing to do. I was still struggling to make sense of what my topic should be. I wanted to research student success, but the topic kept bringing itself back around to my own identity. Who was I and what role did I play in all of this? I was attending monthly cohort meetings, but progress was slow. I was exhausted.

The process of completing my proposal was like drawing blood from a stone. Every line was a fight – either with the new theories and ways of thinking, the conflicting topics I wanted to research, my obligations and desires, and my utter and sheer exhaustion. But eventually, somehow, it was finished. It took a year instead of six months.

But submitting the written proposal was just the first step. I then needed to defend my proposal – itself a baptism by fire. For my master's, there was no oral defence. My master's started with a departmental review committee meeting. The committee had read the proposal in advance, and then in the meeting each member would raise concerns, discuss potential issues, etc. But I was not given the opportunity to 'present' – my written work needed to speak for itself. Once passed by the department review committee, the proposal would be presented to the faculty review committee. The supervisor would be asked to leave for the committee to discuss whether the proposal passed or failed and what changes needed to be made. There was no room or opportunity for discussion with the student.

Coming into UKZN where I was to present my proposed study to a panel who could then ask me questions (which felt like an interrogation) was completely foreign. Luckily, having lectured for so long, I was very comfortable presenting and public speaking. I was also aided by my experiences of presenting at conferences. But it was still nerve wracking because I didn't know what to expect or how the panel would react or what they would expect from me.

Looking for balance, finding only struggles

I was struggling to balance everything. My job as a lecturer became more demanding with each week, pressures to report, follow up paperwork, pressures to attend conferences and compulsory workshops, pressures to publish and research and pressures to be performant all seemed to contradict

the drivers and imperative to teach well and care about students. The institution shifted more and more administrative tasks onto lecturers, cutting back the amount of time spent teaching and in preparation for teaching. I was still under pressure in my department to research and publish (outside the scope of my PhD). I began to say no to other projects, pulling out from my e-learning training responsibilities, recusing myself from task teams and special interest groups. But I kept being forced back into work I didn't want to do; work I didn't have time for.

Staff members across the institution were leaving. Good friends and colleagues sought respite from their struggles to keep afloat. My own department lost good people, and the gaps they left needed to be filled by the staff still standing. New institution rulings meant that we could not hire lecturers who did not already have a master's degree. In the small fashion community, if you had a master's and were a qualified fashion designer, you were probably already lecturing. There was no benefit to having a master's degree in the fashion industry – you would be considered overqualified. The only reason to get a master's was to lecture, and those who had wanted to do that had already done so. There were qualified practitioners with years of experience that could have helped the department, but they were not even considered by management because they didn't have the qualifications. While trying to push students to finish their master's degrees quickly to gain employment, the remaining lecturers had to pick up the slack.

Around this time, I was aiming to take a semester for study leave. I had secured funding and was being pressured to spend it. But I could not find any one to replace me for the semester because no one who was interested had a master's degree and could teach pattern-making. I tried for six months to find a replacement. With each passing week I grew more and more disillusioned and exhausted.

Eventually, I made the heart-breaking decision to resign from my lecturing job. I had been there for seven and a half years. My husband had been interviewing for a job in the UK, and we knew that he might get it. I wasn't happy and I wasn't coping where I was– my physical and mental health were at an all-time low. I wasn't allowed to take study leave without a replacement, and I couldn't go on for another semester like that. All of those things factored into my decision. Within a few weeks, we got confirmation that my husband had been offered the job, and we began the process of uprooting our lives and starting again.

4.2.6. Becoming a legacy

In Chapter One, I spoke about my grandmother's influence on my life and my path to lecturing, and Pom's (my mom's) influence on my creativity and path to fashion design. Both these strong women made unconventional and at times difficult choices that shaped who they are. Both these women were

lecturers, who shared a love of learning and intellectual curiosity. Although not a conscious choice, I have followed in their footsteps to take up the intergenerational legacy of becoming a lecturer.

I never had the chance to meet my paternal grandmother, as she passed away long before I was born. My only experience of grandmother has been my mother's mother – the only “Granny” I've ever had. We always had a strong bond, but through my PhD journey, our relationship deepened as we bonded over the shared experiences of the doctorate and academia. She would reminisce about her own PhD days, the countless hours spent in the library, and her academic journey. These conversations brought us closer and made her an integral part of my thesis. She has had a profound influence on my life.

Figure 4.20: Gran and me at the reception for her 2nd wedding.



Note. Photograph used with permission.

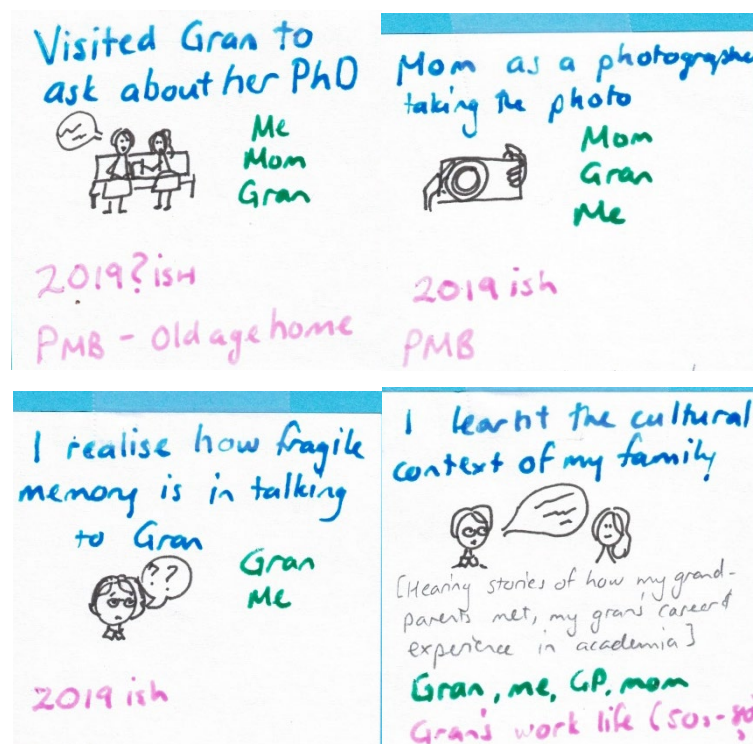
When my Gran and Pom were reaching adulthood, societal norms dictated that women should focus on domestic duties (being a wife, having children, keeping house) rather than pursue academics or a career. But in my family, it was never the cultural norm that was adhered to. It was always a choice. That defiance of societal expectations is the story I want to tell about the women in my family. Figure

4.20 shows me as a young girl (around four or five years old) with my Gran at the reception of her second wedding.

The freedom to choose an academic career over domestic life, to challenge and subvert societal norms, is a privilege I enjoy today. In contrast, my Gran and to some extent, Pom's generation, had limited choices as women and felt the pressures of conforming to traditional expectations of marriage and family. My Gran taught me that it was possible to choose, to be free. She showed me that there was no need for shame or embarrassment in my desire to learn and to be an academic. These two important women have inspired me - my Gran academically, and Pom artistically. From Pom, I inherited my creative and artistic sense of design, while from my Gran, I gained a deep-seated intellectual curiosity.

Reflecting on these intergenerational threads of resilience and choice, I visited my Gran in 2019, just a few years before her passing, to hear her stories firsthand. Through this experience, I saw how the values she instilled in me were echoed across generations. Our conversation that day became a way for me to witness how her story and journey continue to shape my own, reaffirming her role in my journey of becoming.

Figure 4.21: Intergenerational threads story board



Note. Figure created by the author.

As part of my autoethnographic approach, I created a storyboard to visually capture and organise the memories and reflections from this meaningful visit with my Gran (shown in Figure 4.21). Storyboarding allowed me to arrange the fragments of our conversation and shared moments, giving shape to her story in a way that would resonate visually and narratively. This method helped me piece together the legacy she passed down, as well as our deep connection, into a form that both preserves her memory and expresses its lasting influence on my own journey.



This story speaks about when I went to visit her in 2019. I went to ask her about her thesis and to audio record it. I wanted to spend time and take the opportunity to hear her story in her own voice.

My mom and I went to Gran's old age home in Pietermaritzburg. We had driven up together from Durban to see her. The photograph, discussed in Chapter Ten (refer to Figure 1.2), of my Gran and myself sitting on the bench was taken by my mother on that day. Because my mom took the photo, through that photo I can actually literally see through my mom's eyes to what she was seeing as a photographer. I found that quite a poignant moment.

In talking to my Gran, it made me really realise how fragile her memory had become. She could tell me exactly who her professor was in the 70s, and remember the name of the man who was meant to lecture in the department that she ended up lecturing in. She remembered very specific details from her life when she was younger and could recall in almost perfect detail as a 90-year-old. But she couldn't remember that she had asked to burn her thesis, and she couldn't remember giving me a copy. All of the other things that happened later seemed to have less prominence in her life and her memory of those events was very unreliable.

Through the conversations we had that day, I learnt more about the cultural context of my family. I heard the story about how my grandparents had met, which I'd never heard before. She told me stories about her career and experiences. I'd always known that she had her PhD growing up. But I didn't really understand when she had done it, and why she had chosen to do it. I'd always assumed she'd done it because she lectured but finding out that they were actually about 15 years apart was a revelation to me. She'd lectured in the 1960s, but then done her PhD towards the end of the 1970s. These stories let me learn more about her life and her experience. Through her talking, I was able to see the parallels between her love of learning and how that had fed into my mom's life, and how that had then got all the way to me. It was really interesting to see the intergenerational ties coming through. Because her story is part of my story.

The difficulty for me in this is, what has the story of my gran got to do with me? And why is it in the thesis? I see the value because I see these connections and I think it explains a lot about the context

of my family, these strong women making unconventional choices, these women choosing to prioritise learning and teaching over societal norms and expectations. I can see how that affects my story. But I wasn't sure if I have the right to put her story into my thesis.

4.3. Section B – Responding to “who am I?”

In this section, I adopt an autoethnographic gaze, intentionally stepping into a reflexive stance to critically examine the intersections of race, gender, and class that have shaped my becoming as a fashion designer and lecturer. While my self-narrative has revealed the many identities I have performed throughout my life, here I focus specifically on those identities most relevant to my position as a fashion design lecturer. Identity development is inherently complex and entangled (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009); many of the identities that emerged during my youth can be seen as foundational threads woven into the fabric of the person I am today. For instance, the identity I developed as a learner – shaped by being a teacher's daughter in a family that valued education – laid the groundwork for the academic identity I now perform. Through this reflexive lens, I also came to recognise that incorporating my grandmother's story into this thesis was not only valid but vital in understanding my own becoming.

To further unpack the “who/what I am,” I draw on Gee (2008) to distinguish between my Lifeworld Discourse (who I am as a white, middle-class woman shaped by enduring cultural practices in my home and community during childhood) and my secondary Discourses (the identities I have mastered through apprenticeship into specific sociocultural communities). This analytical approach allows me to consider how these layered Discourses have shaped my personal and professional identities, enabling a deeper engagement with my becoming as a fashion design lecturer.

I also use Butler's (1988, 2002) notion of performativity to understand how these identities played out in social settings, following the idea that gender identity is not stable, but performed in a public setting through the repetition of stylised acts. I extend this to understand my multiple identities as constituted through “performative acts” (Butler, 1988, p. 155). Because identity is “constructed within social relations and used by individuals as an interactional resource” (Day et al., 2006, p. 608), I cannot understand my identities in isolation – they must be understood within the context in which they are performed (Thomas, 2015). Butler helps me to see how I am choosing to perform my identities for others.

In the following sections, I analyse the different identities that have shaped my being-becoming a fashion design lecturer to answer my first research question, which is, “*Who am I as a fashion design lecturer at a UoT?*” I think with Gee (2008) and Butler (1988, 2002) to see how these identities

shape me and how I perform my multiple selves in context. I end this section by looking at the tensions that emerge as who I am trying to perform conflicts with societal expectations and norms.

During a cohort meeting (19th April 2024), I presented the analysis of my self-narrative. As I was speaking, I queried the distinctions I was attempting to make with the different facets of my identities. The questions I asked proved to be useful starting points for interrogating the messy, entangled knots of my becoming. My critical friends asked how I had come to create the divisions in my own thinking, prompting me to be reflexive about my resistance and complicity to the dominant Discourses. I have used and extended my wondering out loud during the cohort as the sub-headings of this section, to structure my path through the tangled mess of my identities.

4.3.1. Growing up as a privileged white girl

Gee (2008) refers to the Primary Discourse as who you are as an everyday person. We are indoctrinated into our Primary Discourse through the family home and our immediate community. For me, this is where I learnt the home ‘culture’: growing up as white, English-speaking, and middle class. My family valued education and creativity, and both were emphasised in the home. I was validated for my academic performance, reinforcing the notion that as an everyday person, I should be intellectually curious, hardworking and love learning.

In my family, and in the immediate community around me, women were strong and made unconventional choices. Subconsciously, I internalised the idea that I could subvert the dominant cultural expectations *just like the women in my family did*. I was accepted at home for the way I dressed and even encouraged to cut my hair short, but this began to cause inner tensions with the expectations of the immediate community outside my nuclear family unit.

Primary Discourses (childhood experiences) can evolve into Lifeworld Discourses – who I am as “an everyday person” in the fashion design world. Gee (2008, p. 157) explains that the primary Discourse a person starts out with may transform, adjust, or disintegrate to accommodate a new Lifeworld Discourse. The Lifeworld Discourse, or way of being “an everyday person,” is culturally specific, as every sociocultural context has a unique interpretation of what it means to be an ‘everyday’ person. We are socialised into this “everyday person” identity beyond the childhood home, through the different communities and social groups we interact with.

In my case, the aspects of the middle-class home and dominant cultural ways of being which aligned with each other remained part of my Lifeworld Discourse – doing crafts, making art, mentored by gran and mum who were professionals and validated me for my creativity and academic performance, More perniciously, I inherently adopted some level of internalised biases and prejudices around being

born into privilege, in a country that advantaged Western hegemony and Western knowledges. I now recognise feelings of white guilt and white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011), internalised misogyny, ignorance of my own cultural capital (Banks, 2014), and even the advantage of teaching and learning in my mother tongue, English and use of technology. Growing up, I was not aware of my own privilege, and it is primarily through this PhD that I have been able to critique it.

As I engaged with more communities outside of the home, the tensions grew between the Primary Discourse that my family had inducted me into and the new Discourses my larger social circle expected me to assume. My fashion design practice Lifeworld is the product of those tensions. In some cases, I kept the family ways of being, such as being a strong woman valuing education and creativity. In other cases, I took on new ways of being the larger sociocultural context inducted me into - performing my gender more ‘femininely,’ believing the importance of how I looked and what it means to be in a UoT and a fashion design lecturer.

4.3.2. Is ‘creative’ the same as ‘artistic’?

While presenting my findings to my cohort group, I asked if creative was the same as artistic and whether there was a difference between the two. I am still not sure. My story highlights many different examples of being creative or artistic, but the border between them is blurry. One needs to be creative to create art and be artistic, but creativity can and is used in many different ways. I have chosen to re-present my Creative identity as the overarching, broader category under which my art and design-based identities are all knotted together, seeping into each other.

My creative identity was nurtured from childhood. My family mentored me in learning different handcrafts, and Pom encouraged my love of art and drawing. Growing up in a creative household also made performing being a creative person natural to me, as I had seen it modelled repeatedly by my immediate family. Creativity was valued and reinforced further in my tertiary education as a fashion student, where I performed being the creative designer in becoming.

As a creative person, I then went into different creative fields. I didn’t just become a fashion designer, I draw, paint, craft and do other creative things, all of which were seeded in my childhood practice of enjoying arts and crafts.

Artistic identity: What’s the difference between art and craft?

Once again, I am unable to answer my own question – what is the difference between art and craft? From a sociocultural historic perspective, there has always been a border between art and craft. “Art” is generally given a higher status, seen as performed by skilled (usually male) artists, and is culturally elevated (Luckman, 2013). “Craft,” however, is work women and othered people do – disparaged,

relegated to curios and practical items. Indigenous and traditional crafts tend to be perceived as less than art, too, even when created by men (Kokko, 2009).

But there is an increasing resistance to these pervasive perceptions (Winge & Stalp, 2013). Men are beginning to enjoy “women’s crafts” like sewing, crochet, and embroidery (Levine, 2010). Women and othered people are putting themselves into the public eye as artists in their own right. There is also a movement to reclaim craft as a feminist activity (Bain, 2016). For some, craft is no longer a societal expectation “associated with female subjugation” but a conscious choice (Winge & Stalp, 2013, p. 75) The division between art and craft is blurred more now than when I was growing up, as craft can be elevated to art.

In this section, I am choosing to live in the blurriness. Meskin and Van Der Walt (2018) discuss how “artistic talent” is seen as an intangible and unquantifiable thing, that cannot be taught nor measured. I feel that is true for craft as well, and more so for attempting to distinguish between the two. Throughout this thesis I have struggled against the label of “artist,” and perhaps this signals my own blurriness about what – who - an artist is. My insecurity around calling myself an artist did not diminish my love of art, and I kept performing being an artist in social settings even if I did not name it (doodling in meetings, attending art classes, confidently sketching designs for others).

My confidence came from my abilities in craft and design. Somehow, they seemed more quantifiable than ‘artist.’ As a self-assured crafter (knitting, DIY, general ‘making’) and designer (fashion, graphics, storyboards, technical drawings), I performed this identity from early childhood. There is an ease with which I work in this space, a comfort and naturalness that seems to get me into a flow state. Almost certainly, this ease is the result of hours of intentional practice and action, a muscle memory rather than a conscious act. But the artistic identity bleeds into and from my fashion designer identity.

Fashion designer identity: Is fashion an art?

My fashion designer identity, too, was seeded in early childhood, as I fell in love with handcrafts and sewing. I took an active interest in clothes. Mentored by Pom and the women of my family, I improved and began to see myself as a sewist like them. This identity evolved when I became a fashion design student, formally learning how to be a fashion designer at a professional level.

Entering the fashion industry workforce as a graphic artist and being promoted to designer served to solidify my mastery of the fashion design Discourse, even when I did not look the part. When I began to lecture, I had to draw on my professional practice as a fashion designer. I leaned on my fashion design discipline knowledge and ability to demonstrate and teach fashion design to others as a set of

skills to be learnt and patterns to be followed. This instrumentalist approach left little room for creativity, standing in sharp contrast to the “romantic vision” (Schmidt & Zarestky, 2021, p. 3) of fashion design I had previously held.

4.3.3. What’s the difference? Academic, lecturer, researcher?

At the cohort presentation, I asked if being an academic is different to a lecturer or researcher. During one of the cohort meetings, I articulated my perceptions that academic work happened outside of the classroom, while lecturing was what I performed in a classroom to my students. This sparked an interesting discussion as each person had their own views on the distinction. Again, I need to live in the blurriness and acknowledge how entangled are these identities. Trautwein (2018, p. 996) argues that “academics’ teacher identity is only a sub-identity of their professional identity” and other sub-identities may include a researcher identity and a discipline expert identity. This fits with how I have come to understand my academic identity as the overarching, broader category into which my lecturer and researcher identities fed into.

Formally, my job description was “academic staff” and my duties included lecturing, assessment, research, publications and administrative work. Rosewell and Ashwin (2019, p. [2347]) discuss that literature on the work of academics tends to focus on the “predefined and separate roles of teacher, researcher, academic, professional and manager”. However, as individuals, academics defined their work differently (Ennals et al., 2016) and emphasised different aspects depending on their particular contexts (Rosewell & Ashwin, 2019).

My critical friends probed why I had made a distinction between my academic self (outside the classroom) and my lecturer and researcher selves (in the classroom). Reflecting now, I can see how I had internalised the practitioner mindset of my own lecturers and now colleagues, where academic work and research is separate from teaching as technician and instrumental. The shift from discipline specialist with a strong practitioner identity to becoming an academic is more complex than for those who followed a traditional academic path, and the re-development of an academic identity from a practical one can lead to negative emotions (Ennals et al., 2016). Furthermore, when I started lecturing, my department lacked a sense of sharing and creative collaboration around ideas and a community of practice for researching, akin to the design department case study in Jawitz (2009), where research outputs were not valued in the larger industry.

As Wood (2016) experienced, many of my colleagues considered research extra work, on top of an already heavy teaching load, separate from the work of a lecturer. However, following Barkhuizen (2008) and Stetsenko (2010), I had always viewed research as important in improving my teaching practice and my discipline knowledge. Additionally, I had whole-heartedly agreed with Davids and

Waghid (2017) that theory was inherently connected with practice, as I attempted to theorise my teaching, while imbuing my teaching with theory. So, why, then, did I view academic work as distinct from lecturing? It is only through dialogue with others that I learnt this about myself, that I was guilty of buying into the dominant Technikon Discourses of what academics and lecturers should do and be.

Is a lecturer a teacher?

Again, I live in the messiness of a question I cannot answer – what is the difference between a teacher and a lecturer? Elsewhere in this thesis, I have explained that a lecturer teaches students whilst a teacher teaches learners, at least in my South African Higher education context. But both teach, so is the distinction important? Higher education literature also uses the term educator as a synonym for teacher and lecturer. According to Biggs (2014), teaching at universities has traditionally been teacher-centred, focused on the teacher imparting the information rather than on the student learning it. This brings to mind the image of lecturers speaking *to* crowds of eager students, oblivious to whether the students understand.

Being a teacher-lecturer was seeded in the conflicting views of the thankless teaching as a career my mother modelled and the inspiring mentoring I received from the women in my family (including Pom) around handcraft and sewing. Teaching wove through my family as an intergenerational disposition, forming part of the family's 'ways of being.' Although I had no desire to become a teacher, I was naturally interested in mentoring and teaching others, and it gave me joy to help others learn.

The joy I found in teaching grew into my desire to lecture on fashion design. By becoming a lecturer, I drew on my joyful experiences of sharing and making different things and being 'mentored' by my grandmother and Pom. As a lecturer, I tried to transform my teaching practice to be more in line with the type of mentoring and "good" teaching that I had been exposed to myself. My lecturer identity grew to be defined by my passion for my subjects and my sense of purpose in teaching the hows and whys to my students.

As the participants in the Ennals et al. (2016, p. 441) study experienced, "teaching tasks expanded to fill whatever space they were allowed". I found myself working long, thankless hours doing the work of teaching (preparing, teaching, assessment, and administration), once again following in the footsteps of my mother. I was performing the teacher identity that I had struggled against my whole life, seemingly trapped by this intergenerational disposition. Once again, it was only through the autoethnographer lens that I was able to realise the irony of becoming the overworked teacher I had sworn to avoid.

Desire to be a researcher: Why do I love learning/unlearning/relearning?

Prior to analysing my story, I had considered myself to have a separate scholarly identity and PhD identity. However, the self-narrative written up for this autoethnographic study opened up a Researcher's identity. The thirst for different ideas, creative knowledge that is materially situated (Pahl, 2017), and processes of doing (Ingold, 2013) creative thinking are what drive me as an educational researcher.

But my researcher self is not just about academia. I've always been driven by the desire to learn. Coming from a family culture that valued making and creating stuff, crafts, and garments as hobbies, my intellectual curiosity, and creative ways of thinking about the world were encouraged in me as a girlchild. Being surrounded by and working alongside powerful women role models and professionals who shared their stories with me profoundly influenced how I understand and envision women—who they are and what they can achieve. My researcher identity was also seeded in my private school experiences, where I was validated for my academic performance, especially within subjects like history and biology, which required me to research and write essays. Even in my practical fashion design diploma, I relished researching concepts and design ideas and would bury myself in all manner of textbooks and reference books because I found it interesting. My affinity for self-inquiry and connecting heart and head with theories that strengthened by my practiced-based understanding developed during my BTech and MTech studies.

As a novice lecturer, I turned to research and theories of knowledge that might recognise my embodied and tacit ways make and create to help me in my Fashion Design teaching practice when the ways of lecturing as a transmitting of skills (that had been modelled for me) did not work for the students that I had. I researched how to be a better teacher and engaged the literature around fashion pedagogy. As a lecturer and academic, I was also validated for my research work. Attending conferences, giving presentations, and publishing in accredited journals were all acknowledged and encouraged by my departmental head, faculty management, and even across the institution. I won awards for my research, further strengthening my resolve to be a researcher (even when this conflicted with the commitments I had due to the rest of my work).

The material world can provide a situated lens (Pahl, 2017, p. 31) to research my Fashion Design practice. Understanding the material nature of fashion design education and being a lecturer might enable a fuller view of the worlds of fashion/fashioning, and this has put me on the path to this doctoral study. It was born from a desire to be a better lecturer to my students and how I support their creative learning in a materially situated and embodied way. I am interested in researching fashion design as a discipline and knowledge theories that can recognise the tacit and embodied knowledges

in a practical, creative way. This is what I want to do differently in order for pedagogical practises of lecturing fashion design to become imagination spaces to do creative thinking.

4.3.4. What does being a woman have to do with it?

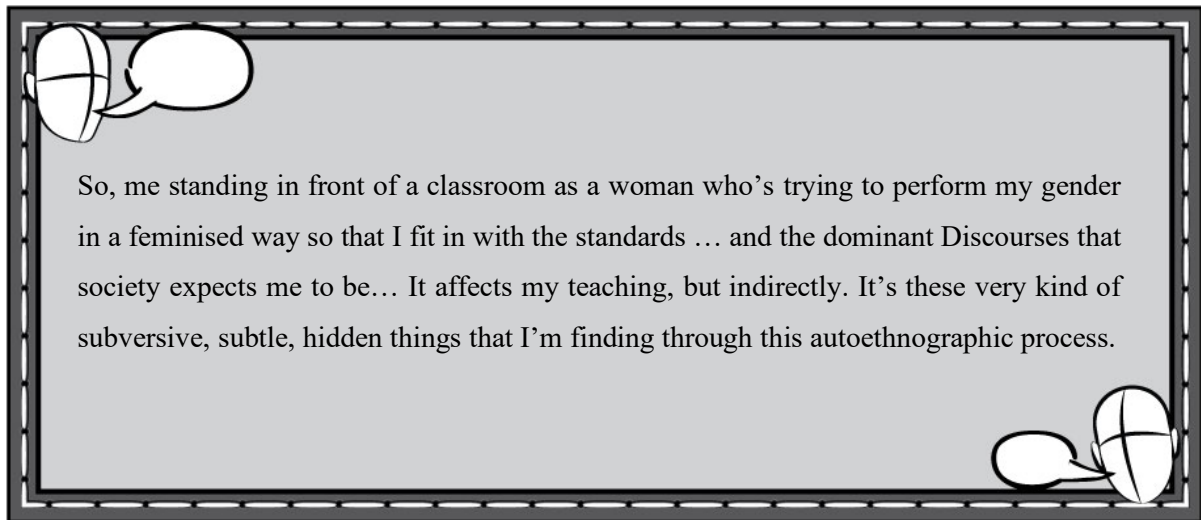
Throughout my self-narrative, there is a very strong thread of gender identity construction and gender expression. While I was born a woman and have always felt like a woman, my story highlights tensions around how I was not performing my gendered identity as a traditional, stereotypical girl. During my early childhood, I often dressed in boyish clothing, had my hair cut short, and did not care about pretty clothes, jewellery, or makeup. This outward tomboy appearance was not modelled on anyone in particular – without brothers, nearby male cousins, or ‘boy’ role models in my life – but rather emerged from my own preference for comfortable, practical clothing that suited playing outside. These early expressions of girlhood felt natural to me but created inner tensions in social spaces and particular relationships. I had not fully acknowledged that I now tend towards a hyper-feminine expression of my gender as an adult woman, keeping my hair long, wearing girly clothes and jewellery, painting my nails, and wearing makeup.

My gendered identity has been continuously evolving as I negotiated how to perform being a girl at different points in my life. Beginning as a tomboy did not conform to the prevailing sociocultural norms. As I grew older, my gendered ways of being and expression were increasingly policed by my peers (through bullying, comments, and isolation). How I perform being a woman today has been shaped by these experiences, where I gravitate towards overly feminine clothing and styling to counteract the inherently masculine characteristics of PCOS (polycystic ovarian syndrome).

The performance of my identity is complex, and it is partly through conducting this PhD study that I have brought to the forefront some of the internalised misogyny that shaped and limited my beliefs. I had unintentionally bought into a cultural template of how women should look, act and what they should do – first as a young girl, then as a university student. Now as a mature woman, I am beginning to question this. I felt like I was failing for not measuring up to the gendered norms and feminine ways. My training as a fashion designer only served to intensify my feelings of inadequacy and misfit; I was trained to distort fashion figures to make them more ‘appealing’ and coached in what the “ideal” sample size was, all while being shown unnaturally thin models and told they were the desired standard.

But what do my gendered ways of being and doing have to do with who I am as a Fashion design lecturer? Operating from a feminist new material stance (Barad, 2007; Truman, 2019), I believe that I experience the world through and with my material body., Therefore, I cannot ignore the role that my body plays in and on my being and becoming. Barad (2003) argues that the body’s materiality

itself (its physical constitution) and how it is acted on by other material forces are important in understanding the fuller picture of the world we come to know and how we live. I expanded on this when presenting at a cohort meeting with my supervisor and three other PhD students:



(M. Cavanagh, personal communication, April 19th, 2024.)

Being a woman differently has everything to do with who I am as a lecturer because I cannot separate my embodied material self from my lecturer self. I cannot avoid bringing my limited beliefs and values into the classroom when I teach (Barkhuizen, 2008; Gee, 2008; Richards, 2011), likewise I cannot avoid bringing my material body in with me.

Am I a 'real' feminist?

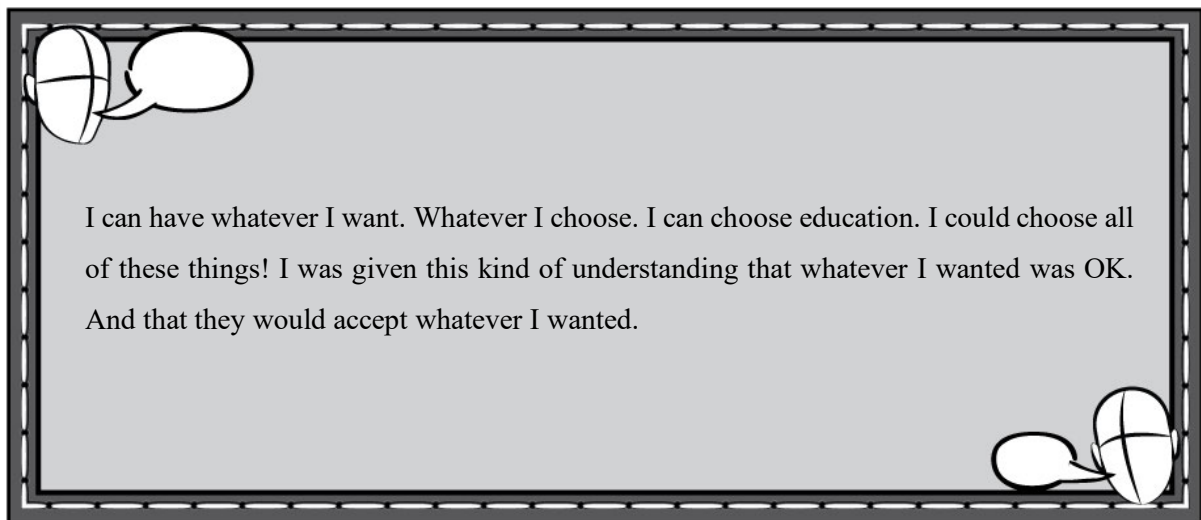
Prior to the PhD, I did not consider myself a "real" feminist. While I held feminist beliefs like valuing equal rights, equal pay, and autonomy, I avoided labelling myself as a "feminist." Looking back, I can see how my biases shaped my perception of what "feminists" should be and do. Through autoethnography, I have begun to unravel some of the stereotypes that I had unintentionally bought into and believed in. These stereotypes shaped my perspectives and positioning as a feminist and emerging scholar. as well as recognised joy I felt in the traditionally 'girly' pursuits like fashion, makeup, sewing, and crafts somehow contradicted a 'real' feminist identity.

During this PhD, reading scholars like Bain (2016) and Winge and Stalp (2013) allowed me to see that being a feminist was not about rejecting femininity but rather that it was about reclaiming femininity in my own way. I learnt that my engagement with girly interests did not undermine my beliefs; rather, they provided a way to challenge and reshape traditional notions of femininity. This realisation was a turning point. My path to becoming an active feminist unfolded unexpectedly, developing naturally as I immersed myself in the research. It was not a step I had anticipated or planned, but one that evolved alongside my study. I now feel confident in saying that I am a new

material feminist (Barad, 2007; Truman, 2019), while knowing that the ‘brand’ of feminism does not matter as much as its core values of equity, inclusivity, and challenging gender norms (Bain, 2016).

On reflection, I can see that the seeds of my feminist identity were sown early in childhood through the idea that *I could choose*. Growing up in a family of strong women who made counter-cultural choices and prioritised education over domestic duties modelled the power of choosing to me as a young girl. I could be anything I choose and not only what society expected of me.

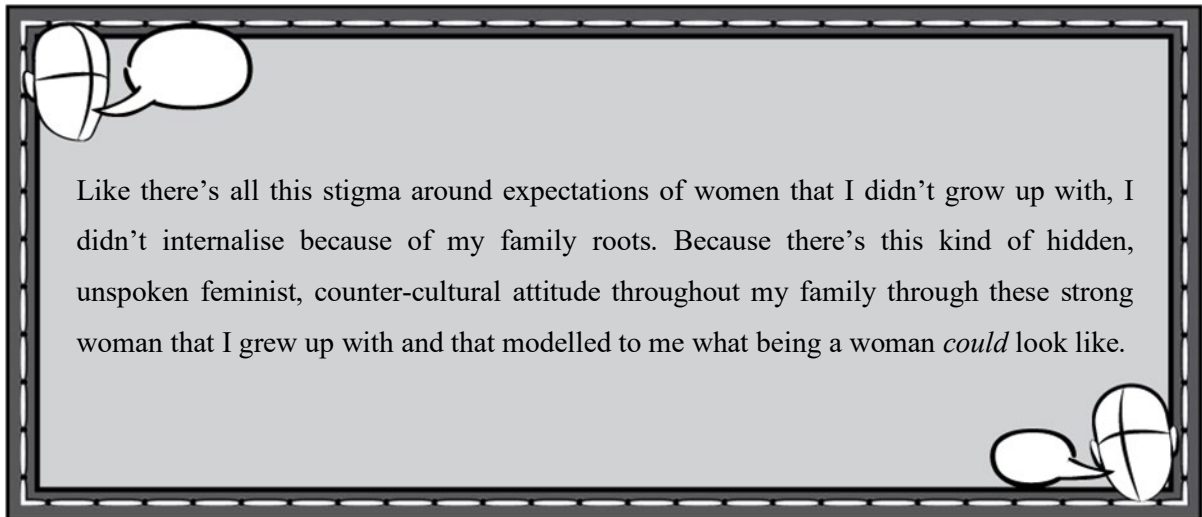
At the cohort meeting with my supervisor and three other PhD students, I spoke about the lessons I learnt from Pom and my grandmother:



(M. Cavanagh, personal communication, April 19th, 2024.)

My upbringing in this family showed me not only that I had the ability to choose, but also that I would be supported and accepted in my choices. My grandmother’s choice to be a lecturer in a male-dominated profession and then to pursue further education when she had children was still supported by the larger family network. Her choices were honoured even when they went against the cultural narrative of the time. Pom chose to pursue Fine Art at Technikon despite being able to get a full fee remission at a traditional university through her professor’s father, and her family supported her in this choice. However, both went against the dominant narrative by getting divorced. And so, as I was growing up, I was shown that the cultural expectations were merely a guideline that I could ignore. I expanded on this at the same cohort meeting. Each of their small stories filters down into my story, showing me that I had the right to choose.

I expanded on this at the same cohort meeting:



Like there's all this stigma around expectations of women that I didn't grow up with, I didn't internalise because of my family roots. Because there's this kind of hidden, unspoken feminist, counter-cultural attitude throughout my family through these strong woman that I grew up with and that modelled to me what being a woman *could* look like.

(M. Cavanagh, personal communication, April 19th, 2024.)

As a happily married, child-free woman in her 30s, I do not feel pressure from my family to adhere to any of the cultural narratives. It is completely my choice. And that ability to choose is feminism to me and wanting that right for others is what makes me a feminist.

The threads of positive resistance

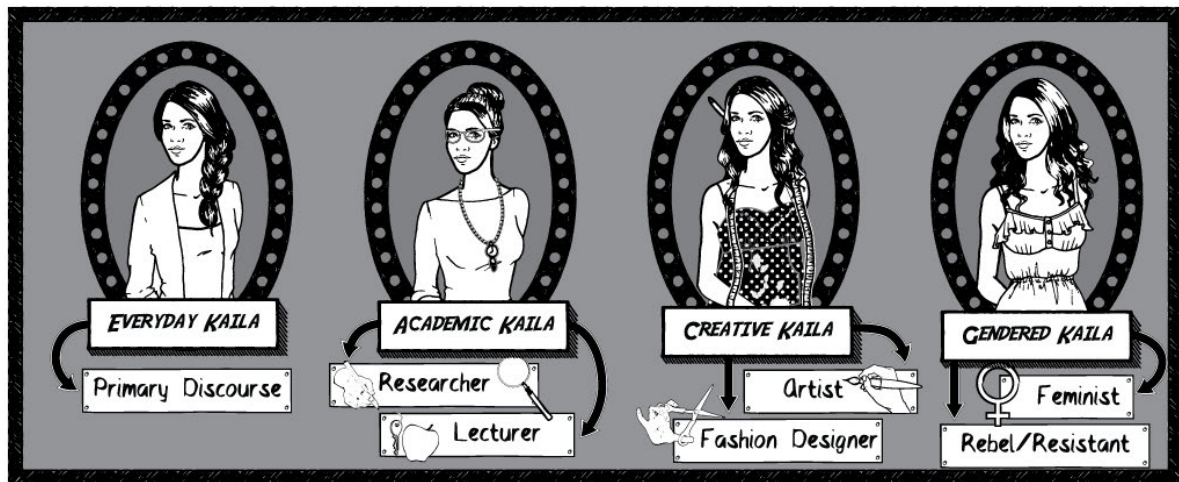
The self-narrative opened up a space to articulate my discomfort and the enduring ways and things I came to practice daily. While I have always considered myself to be a “good girl” who follows the rules, my story has revealed that I am always questioning and critiquing the history that helped to create where I am presently and simultaneously pointing to what I might become - differently. The self-narrative has shown me that this resistance is part of my ethical work and feminist positioning. I am constantly questioning why it must be that way, and who said, anyway? Like a dress that does not sit right, is too tight or too loose, rides up or gapes – the dominant Discourses did not ‘fit’ me.

And yet, resisting and questioning the dominant Discourses that did not fit right did not stop me from experiencing tensions and negative emotions. As a young girl, I felt the tensions resulting from not fitting into the girlhood template. Although I resisted being made to fit the template, my peers and immediate community policed my behaviour. As a tween and later teen, I was bullied by my peers for my non-conformity, causing me to withdraw from them and try to make myself fit better. As a young adult, I had built myself a new community, one that accepted me and did not force me to fit an impossible template. However, the psychological scars (Maseti, 2018) were still there, and I had inadvertently absorbed ways of thinking and performing that fitted better into the templates of my sociocultural context.

My self-narrative traces back this entangled knot of resistance-compliance, critiquing-absorbing back and forth. In this chapter I have begun to unravel this tangle, but I still need to live in the messiness of it.

4.4. So, who do I think I am?

Figure 4.22: Identity self portraits



Note. Figure created by the author.

Figure 4.22 shows comic self-portraits depicting who I am presently as a fashion design lecturer. The self-portraits further show how who I am is entangled in and across them.

4.5. Summary

These self-portraits are a visual summarising of foregrounding the history that has created the way I have to be and think. Surfacing these identities that have been uncovered from articulating my self-narrative question offers me the autoethnography to close off the history shaped by limited ways of categorising humans and the dominant discourses that narrate us and to picture something else.

Section A of this chapter presented my self-narrative (Chang, 2008), rich in visual and evocative detail to lend authenticity and verisimilitude to my story. Section B then took on the lens of the autoethnographer, reflexively looking and looking back (Mitchell, 2011) at my story to see anew. Through the lens of the autoethnographic space, I looked for the cultural (Chang, 2008) and narrative (Dwyer & Davis, 2016) threads within my self-narrative, focusing on those which spoke to who I am as a fashion design lecturer in order to answer my first research question. The awareness and acknowledgement I have come to here in this moment and as a basis for my sensemaking in the next chapter, which explores my second research question: How did my personal and professional experiences shape who I am as a fashion design lecturer?

Crucially in this chapter, my initial analysis was deepened through conversations with my critical friends. Not only did they ask probing questions, but the process of sharing and explaining my understanding of their questions and feedback helped me to make new connections. The sharing and feedback also assisted me in recognising the importance of drawing on others as funds of knowledge to close up history and the material culture that narrated my life and limited my beliefs. The potential for different perspectives and relationalities entangled in the sociocultural contexts enhanced becoming a Fashion Design Lecturer differently.

This chapter has focused on articulating my history to show how I came to be. However, through an autoethnographic lens I could critique that history and open alternative possibilities for moving forward with intentionality. The thread of resistance is evident in every part of my story, where I questioned and defied sociocultural expectations and dominant Discourses. Throughout my story, the struggles and discomfort I endured trying to make myself fit were unsustainable, and I ultimately rebelled. Reflexively, I see this thread of resistance as the feminist strand that weaves through this study – always questioning what was taken for granted, asking why such a situation existed and ‘says who?’ attempting to find the authority for such a position. The rebellious tomboy has become a feminist and emerging scholar, and it happened ‘in the middle of things’ (MacLure, 2023). In the next chapter, I explore what encounters shaped the identities unpacked here, focusing on the personal experiences that are core to my becoming a lecturer.

5. PERSONAL STORIES AS THE SITE FOR (UN)LEARNING

5.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I presented my self-narrative and addressed the first research question, “*Who am I as a fashion design lecturer at a UoT?*” I build on the findings of that chapter here as I explore how I draw on my limited beliefs and perspectives on race, class, and gender to expand and open them up using object stories, conversations with critical friends and visual art in the form of comic doodles. All this is held against the relevant theories and references I have unearthed.

Autoethnography offers a creative and reflexive space (Gannon, 2018) to explore and come to know the self through culture, and it is essential that I start to unravel these cultural threads. By taking on the perspective of an autoethnography, I position myself as both the subject and object of study, examining these beliefs and enduring ways to ask, “Am I comfortable with those routine enduring ways of thinking and knowing?” The visual or artistic engagements in this chapter serve as vital tools for pushing thoughts to the limits and surfacing an “inventory of traces” that culture may have erased (Pahl, 2017; Said, 1994).

Eisner (1997, p. 4) described “alternative forms of data representation” as “cutting edge” over two decades ago, pointing to the challenge of making subjective, embodied knowledge accessible to others. Yet, despite the passage of time, we still face the same problem today—researchers continue to grapple with how to convey the nuances of human experience beyond the limitations of language. Eisner’s point recognised that language cannot always serve as the exclusive vehicle for meaning (St. Pierre, 1997). For complex, abstract, and tacit knowledge, alternative methods, such as visual and artistic forms of representation, are necessary to convey what words cannot adequately express.

McCloud (1994, p. 41) argues that artists can use realism to “portray the world without – and through the cartoon, the world within.” This chapter uses comic doodles and crudely drawn story boards (essentially cartoons) to explore that inner world, sharing my consciousness publicly (Eisner, 1997). Through visuals, I conjure pictorial representations of places that are no longer reachable or in existence, people and events that are only accessible through memories, and emotions and experiences that have long been buried. By telling my stories of growing up through the comic medium, I am able to show the passing of time inscribed in the spaces between the panels (McCloud, 1994; Sousanis, 2015), and show my and others’ emotional responses visually (McCloud, 1994), but made tangible. I am able to use the power of art (Pratt & Peat, 2014) to step outside of my memories and singular perspective (Mannay, 2015; Sousanis, 2015) and become the autoethnographer, looking critically at the struggles and complexities to which my experiences speak. The act of drawing allows

me to “see things in new ways” (Schön & Wiggins, 1992, p. 155), create the space for deeper reflection (Guyotte et al., 2018) and have a conversation with myself (Tversky, 2011).

In Section A, I take on the autoethnographic gaze to represent Kaila’s lived and told experiences using comic doodles. Comic doodles, as symbolic representations of Kaila’s life as experienced, are plugged into an assemblage of different and unrelated things and elements. As the visual autoethnography, this ethical stance to pay attention to specific frames and the traces that culture may have erased (Pahl, 2017) are prompted by the storyboards, object-inspired stories, extracts of Zoom meeting transcriptions, and reflective passages from my self-narrative. By zooming in on these frames, I delve into the complex sensations, emotions and materiality that invoke vibrant mattering enriching the narratives that unfold and entangle as I reflect on the learnings of my re-presentations and the limits of what I know and how I live.

I have selected key nodal moments from my self-narrative that I represent in this chapter as comic doodles. These comic doodles encapsulate the nodal moments which shaped me into becoming a fashion design lecturer. I follow the explanation of ‘nodal moments’ by Allison and Ramirez (2020) and Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) as defining and critical experiences. I use the comic format to share my stories as visual narratives which convey the nuance and richness of my experiences (El Refaie, 2012; McCloud, 1994) as well as the transgressive and emotional data (St. Pierre, 1997). The additional stories woven into this chapter between the comic doodles present a coherent account of how my upbringing shaped who I am and how becoming a fashion design lecturer at a UoT. I have selected extracts from my self-narrative and from transcripts of cohort and supervision meetings to provide supporting evidence to the stories, presented below.

In Section B, I discuss issues using the data generated as object stories, conversations with critical friends and visual art to address the second research question, “*What personal and professional experiences shape my fashion design lecturer identities at a University of Technology?*” The personal and professional lived experiences are inextricably linked (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Day et al., 2006; Richie & Wilson, 2000) and entangled with the social-cultural context. For the purpose of the study and the scholarly depth necessary, in this chapter, I have chosen to highlight my personal experiences using visual comic doodles and storyboards in Chapter Five and my professional experiences in Chapter Six.

5.2. Section A – Stories of girlhood

As Driscoll (2008) explains, “girlhood” is a social and cultural construct rather than a fixed category. Broadly speaking, “girlhood” encompasses a girlchild’s life from early childhood to adolescence.

This chapter discusses my own girlhood situated in the sociocultural context and how it has shaped my early childhood, tween, teen, and adolescence experiences (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2005).

I begin with the stories of my girlhood, as they provide foundational traces for my becoming a fashion design lecturer. The sociocultural and historical context in which I was raised has implicitly shaped not only my beliefs but also my ways of seeing, knowing, and understanding the world. These categories of identity are presented here in chronological stages, reflecting the development of self over time, but they are not fixed or confined within rigid boundaries – they merge, seep across, and entangle with one another, reflecting the fluid nature of identity. By presenting these categories separately, I aim to enhance readability while recognising that, in reality, they are deeply interwoven and influence each other dynamically.

5.2.1. Childhood

This section represents my childhood, the early years of my growing up. Rodríguez-Pascual and Morales-Marente (2013, p. 76) explain that the concept of childhood lacks “consensus as to its chronological age limits”. What constitutes ‘childhood’ differs varies across societies, reflecting differing cultural norms, values, and expectations placed on young individuals (Rodríguez-Pascual & Morales-Marente, 2013; Wells, 2021). In this chapter, I have delineated my girlhood into the different age ranges of childhood, tweenhood, teenager, and adolescence. Because the age range of childhood is contested (Rodríguez-Pascual & Morales-Marente, 2013), I use it here to represent my early childhood, prior to the tween years discussed in the next section.

The comic doodles in Figure 5.1 offer a window to see and know ‘Kaila’ in the family space, showing the cultural ways and habits through which I came to know the world is expressed and studied. This is the cultural context that I was constituted through and from in my formative years. Some of this is referenced in Chapter Four above. My nodal moments here highlight the gender norms I was socialised into and start to seed my resistance to the status quo. These early years cover my life from roughly the ages of six to eleven years old.

Figure 5.1: Kaila-the-girl comic doodle



Note. Figure created by the author.

Growing up with women

The comic doodles highlight the significant influence of the women in my early life. I cherish memories of handicrafts like knitting, crocheting, sewing, and embroidery with the women in my family and friends, both individually and collectively. Like the Finnish women in Kokko's (2009, p. 726) study, I was taught handicrafts informally as part of my upbringing, which connected me to the feminine lineage in my family. I was surrounded by the strong, talented, supportive women of my own family, and as a young girl, I looked to them and learnt from them. The following stories highlight how Kaila-the-girl was shaped by growing up in a home led by strong women.

I lived with my mother, father, and older sister, but the women in our family tended to 'rule the roost' at home. My maternal grandmother, who lived nearby, was a significant influence throughout my childhood, and Pom, sister, and gran each had strong, assertive personalities. By contrast, I was more reserved, naturally leaning towards introversion. In some ways, I felt overshadowed, yet this introverted space gave me room to observe and absorb. It allowed me to develop my own connection to creativity, often in quieter ways.

I have always been interested in making and doing hand work. When I was young, I would usually be busy with arts and crafts. When I played with dolls and Barbies, I loved making clothes for them and creating new outfits out of scraps or even tissues. I loved drawing and would spend hours drawing designs for dresses and outfits. I played with paper dolls and sometimes even tried to draw my own.

(Extract from Chapter Four: Self-Narrative)

In this environment, creativity became my personal outlet and a way to express myself in a household where strong personalities often filled the space. The introverted side of me found comfort in quiet, hands-on activities, where I could shape my own world and nurture my emerging interests in fashion and design.

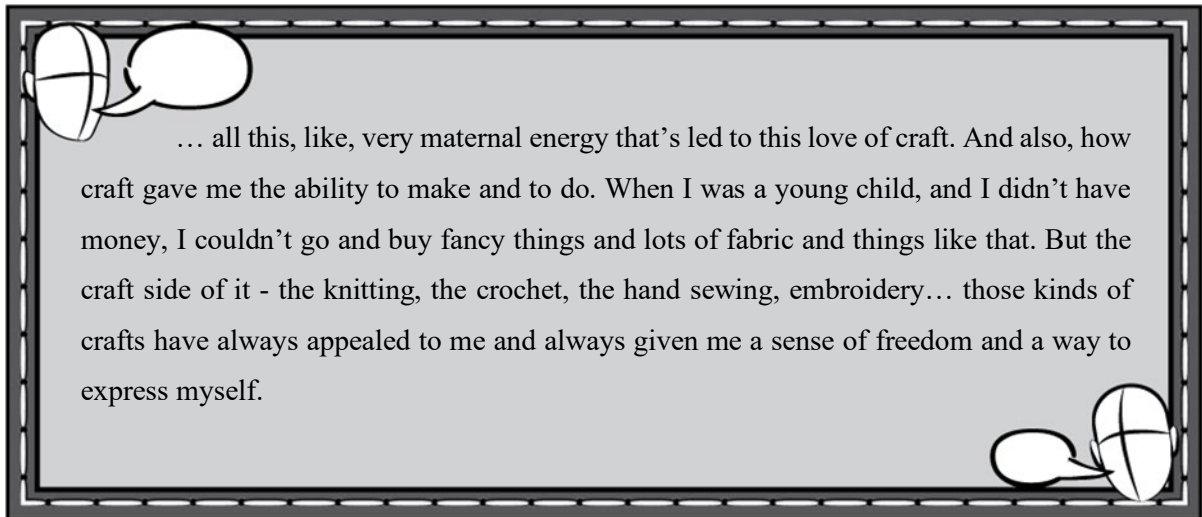
In Estés's foreword of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Campbell, 2004), she writes about how women once gathered together and strengthened their bond over shared stories while washing clothes at the local river. Modernisation replaced communal clothes washing with lonely laundry sinks, yet these women "found other ways to 'dig' psychic rivers wherever they are, so that the stories can still flow on" (Estés in Campbell, 2004, p. XXXIV). My own "psychic river" emerged in my early childhood through the communal practice of handicrafts (knitting, sewing, quilting) (Gordon, 2009) with different women in my life. We would sit together with our hands occupied by the movements of craft while our mouths chatted away, sharing stories. Typically considered the domain of women, traditional handicrafts are taught informally at home by the women of the family (Kokko, 2009, p.

726), and this is how I learnt as a young girl. Through these practices, I felt both connected and safe, finding a space where my quieter nature could thrive and grow into its own form of creativity.

I learnt knitting over time from my sister, grandmother, my father's partner, and a family friend (who also taught me how to crochet). The handcrafts that I learnt were through informal lessons, usually because I had asked to be shown or expressed interest. Handwork, like knitting and crocheting, was often practised during idle chats or while watching TV. Sewing, in particular, is traditionally taught at home or taught to women by other women (Gordon, 2009, p. 76). I learnt sewing from my mother (on her sewing machine at home) and quilting and other techniques from my aunts, who were skilled in quilting and costume-making. Learning to sew was more project-based, with Pom guiding my sister and me through agreed-upon projects. This shared interest strengthened our bond. As I matured, I began sewing independently, but the early years were spent crafting alongside my mother and sister.

Kokko (2009, p. 725) argues that there is a persistent gender-based division of crafts, with men and women being expected to participate in different handcrafts. The women of my family taught me traditionally feminine skills and crafts. The shared crafts allowed us to have then a shared interest that created opportunities to sit together while working (Gordon, 2009), creating opportunities for conversations that I might not have naturally sought out as an introverted child. The act of crafting and making together gave me a sense of belonging and inclusion (Kokko, 2009), gently encouraging me to engage more socially within a comfortable, supportive environment. Coming together to craft is "a form of social interaction" (Winge & Stalp, 2013, p. 80) and a way of fostering a sense of community with others. Bain (2016, p. 62) remarks that online and digital dressmaking communities tend to be inclusive, positive, and empowering spaces for women. I found the all-women craft circles I was part of to follow suit.

I shared memories of crafting with the women in my family during a supervision meeting, which helped me reflect on the way I am 'piecing together' my autoethnography in a similar, layered fashion:



... all this, like, very maternal energy that's led to this love of craft. And also, how craft gave me the ability to make and to do. When I was a young child, and I didn't have money, I couldn't go and buy fancy things and lots of fabric and things like that. But the craft side of it - the knitting, the crochet, the hand sewing, embroidery... those kinds of crafts have always appealed to me and always given me a sense of freedom and a way to express myself.

(M. Cavanagh, personal communication, October 24th, 2023.)

As the extract above indicates, the ability to create things with my own hands became a powerful means for me to express myself (Gordon, 2009, p. 52). I could create anything I could imagine with very little knowledge, a few donated tools, and supplies (also usually given warmly by the women of the family to encourage me). During the times when I felt like I was not fitting in with my peers at school, I turned to art and craft as a space where I felt reconnected with myself and others.

Ultimately, the different relationships with women in my life and the sharing of the joy of crafts influenced my love of fashion and making stuff. Throughout my childhood, different hand skills were taught to me by the women in my life, and this nurtured my love of making and doing and coming to know myself as a creator/maker.

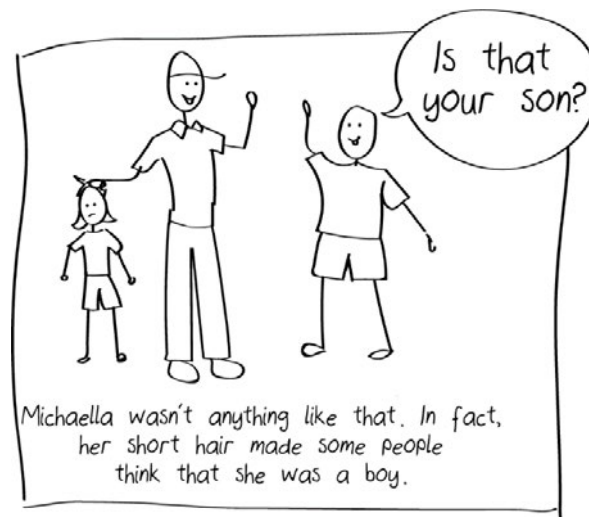
Is that your son?

Halim et al. (2018) argue that although young children's choice of clothing may be limited to what adults provide for them, these children still display a strong sense of autonomy in what they choose to wear. In a study by Halim et al. (2014), researchers found that parents rarely tried to influence children's outfit choices to be more or less gender-conforming, showing that even young children express agency in how they dress a young girl, I gravitated to more "tomboy" clothing like shorts and t-shirts, even though I had feminine options available in my wardrobe. Although Pom let me decide how I wanted my hair cut, each choice was a longer-term commitment.

When I was a little girl, my hair was cut short. I hated it! I remember one day when we were out and about, one of my dad's friends saw us and asked my dad if I was his son. I remember feeling bad, even though I couldn't quite understand why that made me feel bad. That was one of many times growing up when I felt that I wasn't what a 'girl' should be. I remember

other adults mistaking me for a boy. It didn't help that I usually dressed more like a tom boy, wearing shorts and t-shirts. The other girls at school, and even my older sister, were feminine. No one questioned if they were girls. I remember feeling like I didn't "fit in."
(Extract from Chapter Four: Self-Narrative)

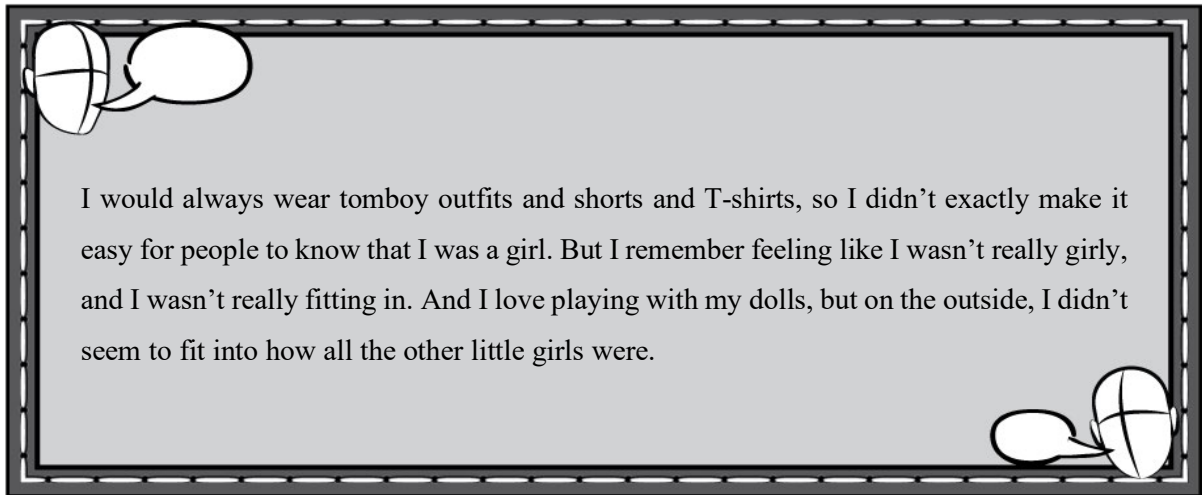
Figure 5.2: Extract from Kaila-the-girl comic doodle



Note. Figure created by the author.

In the comic doodles, I have illustrated a nodal moment from my self-narrative (see Figure 5.2 for this extract), where one of my dad's friends mistook me for a boy. I must have been somewhere between six and ten years old – long before puberty, when secondary sex characteristics generally develop. This is one of my earliest memories of feeling like I did not fit the girlhood template that the sociocultural context around me expected me to be. I understood this template through how others treated me, correcting and policing my hair and clothes, for example (see Bhana, 2005; Blaise, 2014).

I discussed these feelings about my childhood gender expression in a cohort meeting:



(M. Cavanagh, personal communication, January 20th, 2021.)

Barnard (2013) explains that how we choose to dress expresses our individuality, but that dress is also a way of conforming and fitting in with those around us, giving us a sense of belonging. Dress is also a powerful signifier of belonging, identity, and culture (Shi, 2023). As a child, I was conscious of expressing my individuality through my choice of dress and hairstyle, but I had not quite understood that this came at the cost of “belonging” and fitting in with my peers.

Bhana (2005, p. 164) argues that childhood play is how we “learn to become gendered” and start to build our meanings of “what girls (and women) can and should do.” Butler (2002) explains that expressions of gender identity are performed and reinforced through societal expectations and norms, where children begin to ‘perform’ gender by reenacting stereotypical gender norms. Gender is one of the first “social categories that children learn” (Rogers, 2020, p. 179), and often their first experiences of inequality, as the established status quo tends to rank men above women (Rogers, 2020, p. 180).

Even as a little girl, I came to know what and how I should be as a woman and live in the world. I was building an internalised girlhood template of what I should be.. Halim et al. (2014, p. 1092) explain the concept of “appearance rigidity,” where a person conforms “to gender norms in one’s appearance through gender-stereotypical dress.” In my case, I was not conforming to gender appearance rigidity, yet I was engaging in traditionally ‘girly’ activities like playing with dolls, playing dress up, and doing traditionally feminine crafts. Within the family home, I was comfortable and felt like I was what a girl should be. I had supportive women in my family that I connected with (Pom, my sister, grandmother, and aunts). I was beginning to experience tensions around what culture was telling me girls should look like and what they should do versus what I looked like and

did. The gender norms were reinforced by my interactions with others outside of the home, seeing how girls that fitted into the template were treated differently from how I was treated.

5.2.2. *Tweenhood*

This section offers me, as a researcher, the space to recall my experiences of the liminal, transitional time from the onset of puberty in my last years at primary school to the start of my high school experience. This attempt attempts to cover some parts of my life from around eleven until age seventeen. The nodal moments depicted in Figure 5.3 represent the social context beyond my nuclear family unit, interacting with different people outside of the family home. The main cultural thread weaving through my tween experiences is around my constructions of gender. I explore how my experiences during puberty further reinforced the cultural gender norms and stereotypes discussed in the previous section and the womanhood template I was beginning to internalise.

Figure 5.3: Kaila-the-learner part one comic doodle



Note. Figure created by the author.

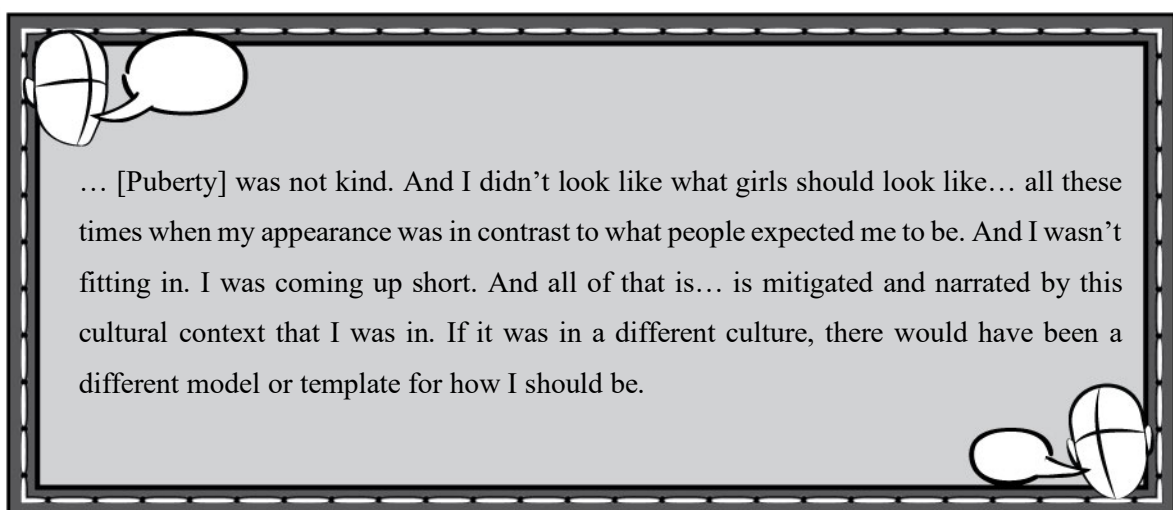
The category “tween” is derived from the word “*between*” and is used to describe the transitional stage of development between childhood and adolescence (Driscoll, 2008, p. 24). Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2005) classify “twens” as usually between eight to twelve years old, although scholars vary. The tween stage is slippery in that it is more defined by what a girl is not than by clear guidelines (Driscoll, 2005, p. 224) – a girl who is no longer an infant but not yet a teenager. Twens undergo changes in their own constructions of gender and social identities in this liminal space (Driscoll, 2005).

Driscoll (2008) and Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2005) emphasise the opposing drivers tween girls experience as they want to grow up but desire the security of childhood. My experiences of tweenhood, as I transitioned from pre-pubescent tomboy to hormonal teenager, were fraught with tensions as I was pulled between being a child and becoming an adolescent.

What girls should look like

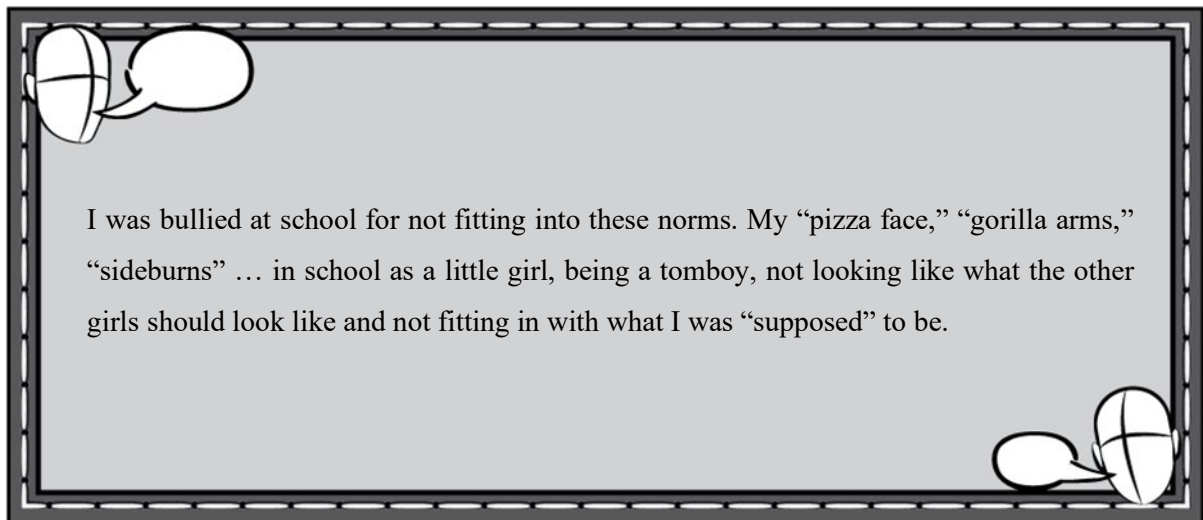
In The Kaila-the-Learner Comic Doodle (Figure 5.3), I tell the story of when I hit puberty and all the awful changes that ‘the hormone monster’ brought. Puberty was not an easy time for me, as the hormonal changes that my body was undergoing were completely out of my control. The physical changes puberty brings are often pushing girls away from the culturally dominant “thin ideal” (Calogero & Thompson, 2010, p. 169) and can foster increased negative body image, as girls are confronted with the tensions between what they *do* look like and what they have been taught they *should* look like.

The transformations puberty caused were not easily changed or hidden. And unlike choosing to be a tomboy by having short hair and dressing ‘like a boy,’ I could not escape from nor hide from my acne, weight gain, or hair growth. I discussed this in a meeting with my supervisor:



(M. Cavanagh, personal communication, October 24th, 2023.)

Blaise (2014) discusses how children enact and reinforce prevailing cultural understandings of what it means to be a boy or a girl through social interactions. Further, young children have been observed ‘silencing’ or shunning non-conformist cross-gender displays in others, “policing” the borders of gender (Blaise, 2014, p. 116). As Kaila-the-learner, I felt that I wasn’t conforming to the girlhood template that society expected me to be, and my peers made me aware of this. I explored this in a meeting with my supervisor:



(M. Cavanagh, personal communication, October 24th, 2023.)

Figure 5.4: Extract from Kaila-the-learner comic doodle



Note. Figure created by the author.

As a very young child, the way I chose to dress and wear my hair led to others thinking I was a boy and ‘accidentally’ reminding me that I did not fit in. However, it was never in a malicious or deliberate way. Now, as a tween stepping over the border from young child to teenager, I was being policed by my peer group for not conforming through cruel words and constant taunts. The comic doodles gloss over the bullying I was subjected to, where the other children would comment on and

tease me about my body hair and sideburns, acne, frizzy hair, and weight. Although I did have good friends at each stage of my life, I was bullied at each stage (usually by other girls). The bullying led to more isolation as I was constantly made to feel that I did not belong and did not look the part, exemplified by Figure 5.4. Bullying is a way for individuals to stigmatise others who are deemed to be outside of socially acceptable norms by shaming and judging them (Berry, 2016). Berry (2016, p. 8) clarifies that bullying goes beyond words and play, as it is “a process through which one’s personhood is symbolically shaped and reshaped.”

Thorpe et al. (2019) explored how women with polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS) represent their experiences through drawing, revealing the deep emotional toll the condition takes on their sense of femininity. PCOS, characterised by hormonal imbalances and symptoms like excessive body hair, hair loss, acne, and weight gain, disrupts societal norms of femininity, leaving many women feeling unfeminine and disconnected from their bodies. Participants’ drawings poignantly depicted these struggles, including feelings of shame and loss, especially related to fertility challenges and miscarriages. This resonated with my own experiences of PCOS, which, undiagnosed during my teenage years, left me feeling “broken” amidst acne, weight gain, and depression. Even now, with a better understanding of my condition, I continue to grapple with the visible symptoms and the societal judgments they invite, echoing the profound sense of vulnerability and loss of femininity expressed in the study.

Calogero and Thompson (2010, p. 156) unpack the concept of “body shame” as “the negative feelings that occur when people evaluate themselves against internalised cultural ideals for appearance and find that they fall short of these ideals.” As a girl on the verge of becoming a woman, I was already feeling body shame from not matching up to my internalised ‘girl template’ of what girls should look like. Through an autoethnographic lens, I pull on the cultural threads that defined this internalised template for me, first, in my own middle-class, English-speaking, white family as a young child, and now as a girl in multicultural schools with peers from all classes, races and cultural backgrounds. In both cases, I was falling short.

I loved to draw

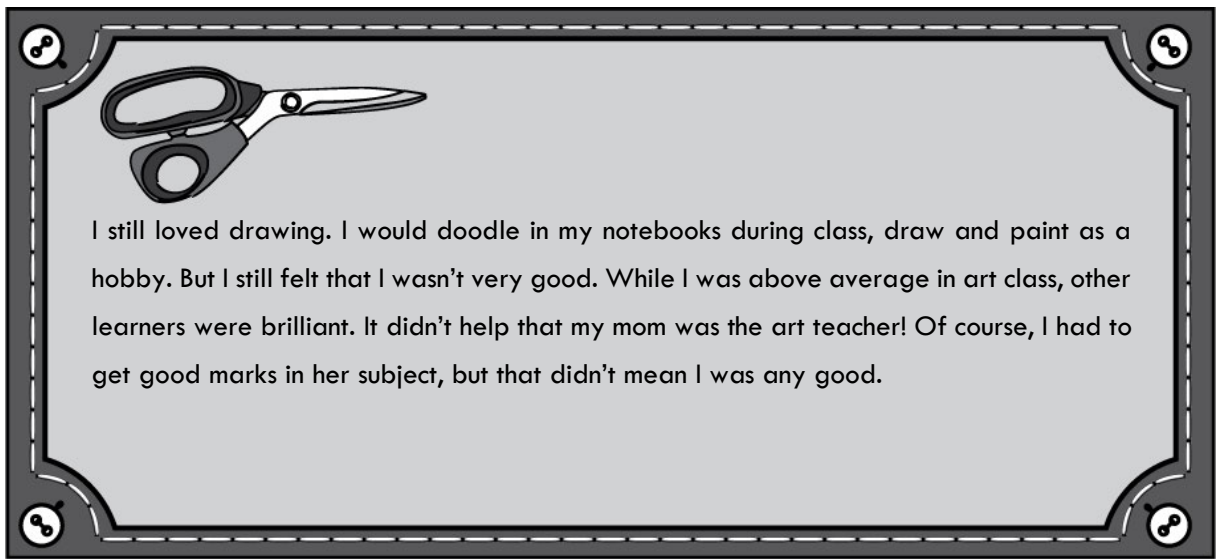
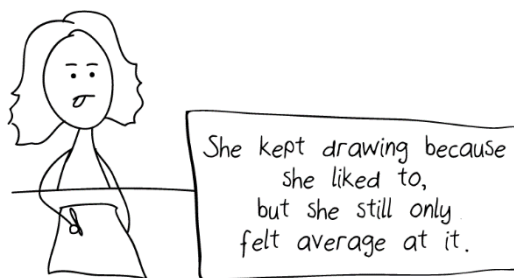


Figure 5.5: Extract from Kaila-the-learner part one comic doodle



Note. Figure created by the author.

I have struggled with the label “artist” my whole life (this comes under further scrutiny in the remaining chapters). I have never felt like I was good enough, talented enough, or exceptional enough to dare call myself an “artist” (see Figure 5.5). As a child, I internalised the idea that only really exceptionally talented people who could make a living from art could call themselves artists. My observations of my mother only served to perpetuate this false notion: She was a very talented artist who studied fine art and did ‘real art’ (acrylic paintings and chalk pastels were her preference) but still had to have a ‘day job’ as a teacher to make a living. How could I possibly hope to be good enough to be in the category of artist?

5.2.3. Teenage years

In this section, I recount my experiences of early adolescence as a high school learner. This discusses my life around thirteen until age seventeen. The comic doodles in Figure 5.3 showcase my struggles as an outsider and my complicated relationship with teaching. The main cultural threads woven across these nodal moments are my sense of not fitting in and my sensemaking of what I was learning. In the first thread, I explore how my experiences reinforced the idea that I did not fit in, nor did I

belong. In the second thread, my conflicting experiences of teaching and learning are signposted, as I faced both positive and negative encounters.

Driscoll (2008) explains that the notion of “teenager” (as differentiated from young girl and woman) only entered mainstream usage after World War One. I found my teenage years particularly difficult as I struggled with the physical changes to my body and the hormonal mood swings and emotional and social changes concurrently. Being made to feel like an outsider by my peers at a time when I craved acceptance, in particular, left me feeling isolated.

Patchwork jeans

Figure 5.6: Extract from Kaila-the-learner part one comic doodle

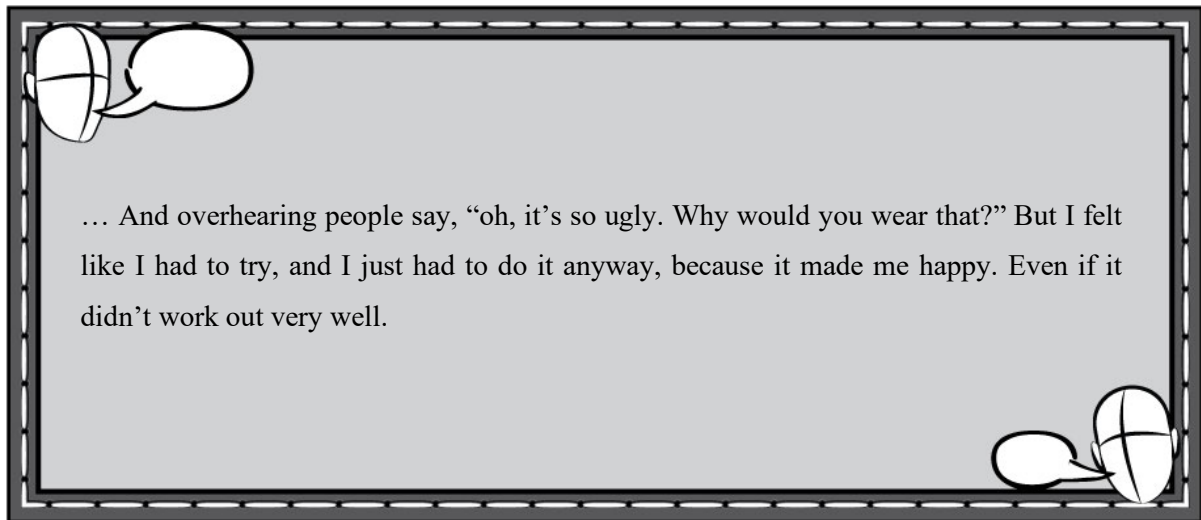


Note. Figure created by the author.

Figure 5.6 shows the nodal moment of my patchwork jeans. This memory represents a time I stayed up all night to make a pair of jeans to wear especially for civvies¹⁰ day in high school. For me, civvies days were an excuse to make something unique and interesting. I didn't have money to buy fabric, and we lived in the middle of nowhere, so I saved up old pairs of jeans and all my scraps. I sewed all these different colour denim squares into a patchwork fabric. I remember I used some tie-dyed purple denim with different dark and light blue denims all sewn up in a grid. I used this fabric to make a

¹⁰ See Definitions/Glossary for the definition of this term.

pair of wide-leg trousers. I was so proud of myself. At lunch time, I overheard some girls from a different grade talking about me, saying how ugly my trousers were. I was absolutely devastated. I spoke briefly about this at a cohort meeting with my supervisor and three critical friends:



(M. Cavanagh, personal communication, January 20th, 2021.)

This nodal moment exemplifies a time when the things that I liked and was passionate about were not accepted by my peers. For example, when I was a girlchild and a tween, my peers were policing my appearance and showing me that I did not conform (Blaise, 2014). Sadly, this individual style and love of clothing that made me such an outsider in my school days is exactly what makes me a good fashion designer as a young woman and now. The predominant norms and girl culture that I was experiencing were not accepting of any the individuality that I expressed at home, supported by my mother, father, and sister.

The story of the patchwork jeans offers additional insight into being from a different financial background to those around me. As the daughter of a teacher (see the next section, “I was the ‘staff kid,’” for details), I attended an expensive private school without paying school fees. My peers were predominantly from wealthy families who could afford expensive and trendy clothing. I was an outsider because I didn’t wear the name brands and designer clothing my peers did, couldn’t go on expensive trips and holidays, and my family did not drive an expensive car or live in an expensive house. In this private school culture, I was “poor.”

I am very aware of the privilege that I was born into compared to the vast majority of South Africa. I never went hungry and always had clothes, a warm and comfortable home, access to education, entertainment, and opportunities for personal growth. We were not impoverished. My parents owned a car, and even if it was previously owned and old, it worked reliably. We had electricity, clean water, modern appliances. But in comparison to the other learners in high school, I was seen as poor.

South Africa's socio-economic landscape is deeply rooted in its colonial and apartheid history, which continues to shape educational access and quality across various social strata (Ruiters, 2021). The structural inequalities resulting from apartheid policies have left enduring legacies in education, with significant disparity in resources, infrastructure, and opportunities available to learners from different backgrounds (Badat, 2010). During apartheid, educational resources were systematically divided along racial lines, reinforcing a cycle of economic exclusion for non-white communities, and resulting in what Ruiters (2021) describes as a "neo-apartheid" state where the Black majority remains economically disadvantaged despite formal equality.

In this context, socioeconomic privilege and class in South Africa remain deeply intertwined, as access to elite institutions continues to be limited by historical racial inequalities. The country's education system mirrors these disparities, with private schools catering to wealthier families while public schools in disadvantaged areas struggle with underfunding and resource scarcity (Manik, 2015). These structural inequalities mean that schooling becomes a powerful determinant of socio-economic trajectory, heavily influenced by class boundaries set by South Africa's historical inequities.

While I was positioned as a 'staff kid' within an elite private school, my experience underscored these socio-economic disparities. I was exposed to a world of privilege, where peers displayed the financial means to afford luxuries beyond my family's reach. However, I am aware of the privilege embedded in my own experience compared to most South Africans who attend under-resourced schools, often lacking basic necessities such as reliable transportation, electricity, or access to a computer. This economic and cultural disparity remains a dominant discourse in South African education, perpetuating a class divide that influences educational outcomes, career opportunities, and social mobility (Xulu-Gama et al., 2018).

These distinctions in students' financial and cultural backgrounds shape their sense of belonging and identity, which can have long-lasting effects on their personal and professional trajectories. This divide was especially salient in my experience, where my family's relative lack of material wealth marked me as an outsider among wealthier peers, despite the stability and comfort of my upbringing compared to many South Africans facing structural economic challenges (Lewin & Mowoyo, 2014).

Figure 5.7: Kaila-the-learner part 2 comic doodle



Note. Figure created by the author.

Like my feelings about art, my feelings about teaching are complex. This complexity is visualised in the comic doodle shown in Figure 5.7. Growing up, I observed the emotional toll and challenges my mother faced as a high school teacher – the long, often thankless hours and the difficulties in managing different student needs. As a child, my primary impression of teaching was that it was a demanding job with few visible rewards. On one hand, I found joy in supporting others’ learning and mentoring, experiencing a sense of satisfaction in helping others grow. However, this emerging appreciation was complicated by the daunting realities I saw in my mother’s work, shaping a love-hate relationship with teaching that would evolve as I gained more direct experience in education.

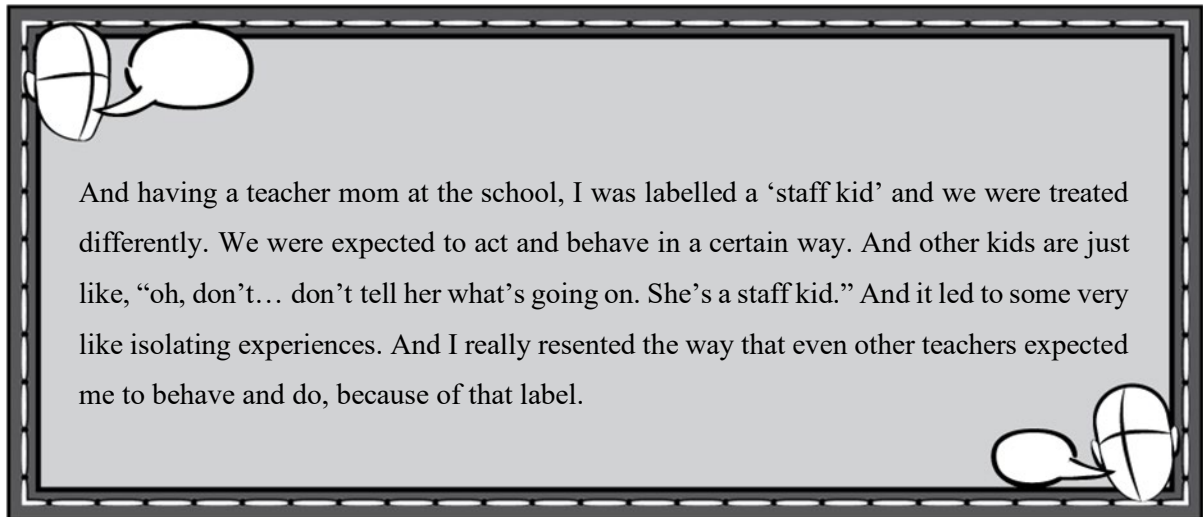
I was the ‘staff kid’

Figure 5.8: Extract from Kaila-the-learner part 2 comic doodle



Note. Figure created by the author.

Pom taught at the high school I attended, which made me one of the “staff kids.” As Figure 5.8 shows, it felt like I was being put into a box with this label. Like many of the other teachers’ families, we lived on the school grounds. It was a religious school, so the staff and school community were very conservative. The school had small classes and low numbers and was isolated in a tiny town in the countryside, everybody knew everybody else’s business. My sister, father and I called it “the fishbowl” because we felt like goldfish in a small, see-through tank – everybody watching what everyone else was doing because they had nothing else to look at or do. I spoke about being a staff kid at a cohort meeting with my supervisor and three critical friends:



(M. Cavanagh, personal communication, January 20th, 2021.)

I disliked being labelled a ‘staff kid,’ which carried specific expectations for how I should behave and what I could do. This label created a sense of being under constant watch by both my teachers – who were also my mother’s friends and colleagues – and my peers. Knowing that I could be observed at any moment created a feeling of visibility even when I was not being watched (Foucault, 1977/2008). I felt like I had to be careful with every action, wanting to avoid any behaviour that could reflect poorly on my family. This awareness gradually deepened into a sense of self-surveillance (Sharmin, 2023; Vaz & Bruno, 2003), where I monitored and disciplined myself to conform to the expectations imposed on me. Though the consequences of stepping out of line included social exclusion or teasing, the fear of disappointing my family was the strongest motivator for keeping myself ‘in line.’

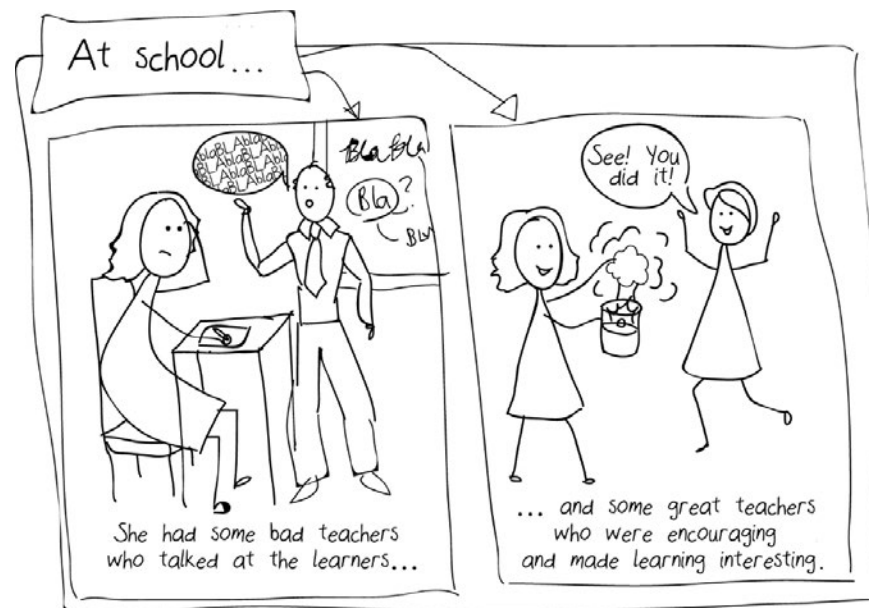
All the surveillance led me to feel like an outsider forced into a box of what I was allowed to be. As a hormonal teenager, I felt tension with Pom. I was deeply unhappy being forced into a mould of model staff kid, constantly compared to the other staff children. She wanted me to play the part and fit in, but I resented being forced to act in a way that fitted the template. The constant feeling of surveillance and restriction weighed heavily on me, and I withdrew more and more into myself to escape being judged. At this time, I was also struggling with being an outsider in my peer group at school because I did not fit into that mould either. Retrospectively, I can see that I was beginning to experience what I now recognise as episodes of depression.

How I viewed teaching

I view teaching as an active, participatory process – one that moves beyond Freire’s (2018) ‘banking model’ to encourage students in making meaning and situating knowledge within their own contexts. In my comic doodle, I have depicted the contrast between what I thought of as good and bad teaching

(see Figure 5.9: Extract from Kaila-the-Learner part two Comic Doodle). I resented teachers who expected students to simply parrot information back to them, but I found myself drawn to the teachers who would make their subjects come alive, inviting students to share in their excitement and learn for themselves. Reflecting now, I can see that this impacted on how I have fashioned my own identity as an educator.

Figure 5.9: Extract from Kaila-the-learner part two comic doodle



Note. Figure created by the author.

Inadvertently I was already beginning to see the difference between teachers who were the 'sage on the stage' and those who embraced the role of facilitator, guiding learners to the knowledge instead of cramming it down their throats. Those I thought of as good teachers have left lifelong impressions on me, and I have retained not only more of the information they taught me but also a love of those subjects. I can now recognise that the "good teachers" were fostering environments that encouraged authentic learning (Herrington et al., 2010), while the "bad" teachers were practising a banking model (Freire, 2018), viewing learners as empty vessels into which they must deposit knowledge (Stetsenko, 2010).

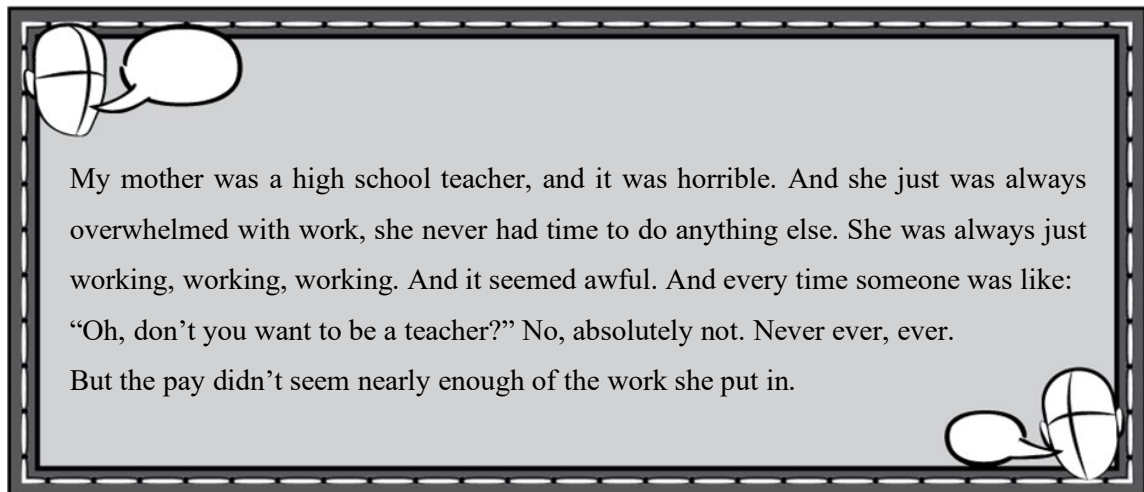
Teaching as all consuming

Figure 5.10: Extract from Kaila-the-learner part two comic doodle



Note. Figure created by the author.

Having grown up with Pom as a teacher, I had seen first-hand how much hard work it was I had no desire to ever become a teacher – as depicted in Figure 5.10 above. I spoke about this at a supervision meeting with Daisy:

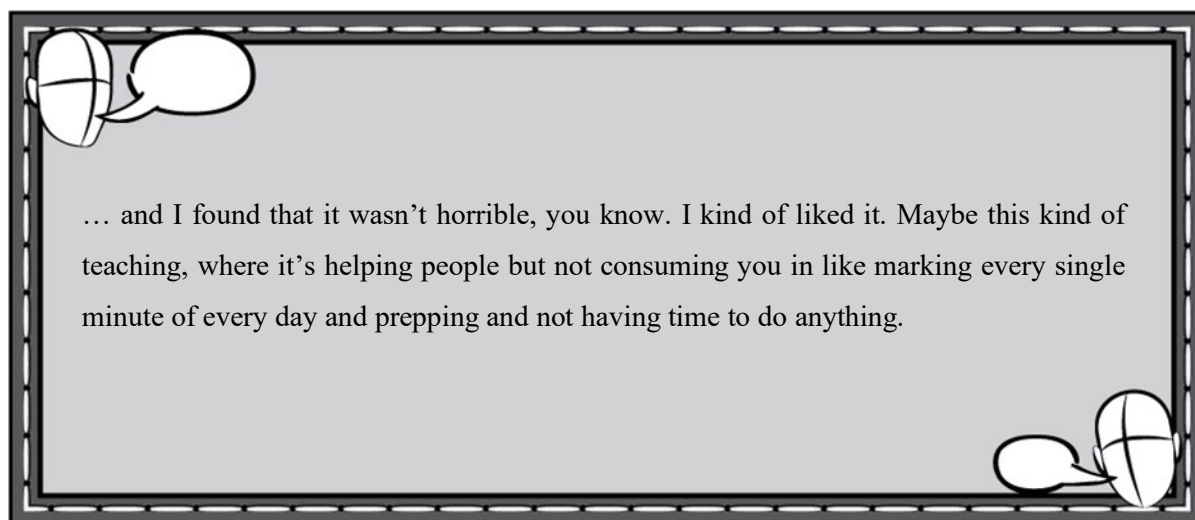


(M. Cavanagh, personal communication, October 24th, 2023.)

Head versus heart

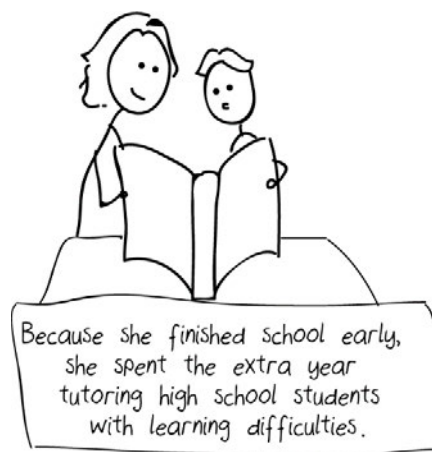
Despite my aversion to teaching as a career, I was pulled towards the work of teaching. The fact that I came from a family of teachers made it part of my cultural context. Is the heart of a teacher (Palmer, 1997) hereditary? Passed down through the generations to become the family “home practices and

discourses” (Rowse & Pahl, 2007, p. 395) into which I was inducted unintentionally, these practices led me into mentoring others at different stages of my life. Informal mentors and mentoring allowed me to see teaching in a new way. Instead of only seeing the exhausting teaching my mother did, I saw mentoring as rewarding and enjoyable. This love of mentoring and helping others was really cemented by the year I spent tutoring, which I spoke about at a cohort meeting:



(M. Cavanagh, personal communication, January 20th, 2021.)

Figure 5.11: Extract from Kaila-the-learner part two comic doodle

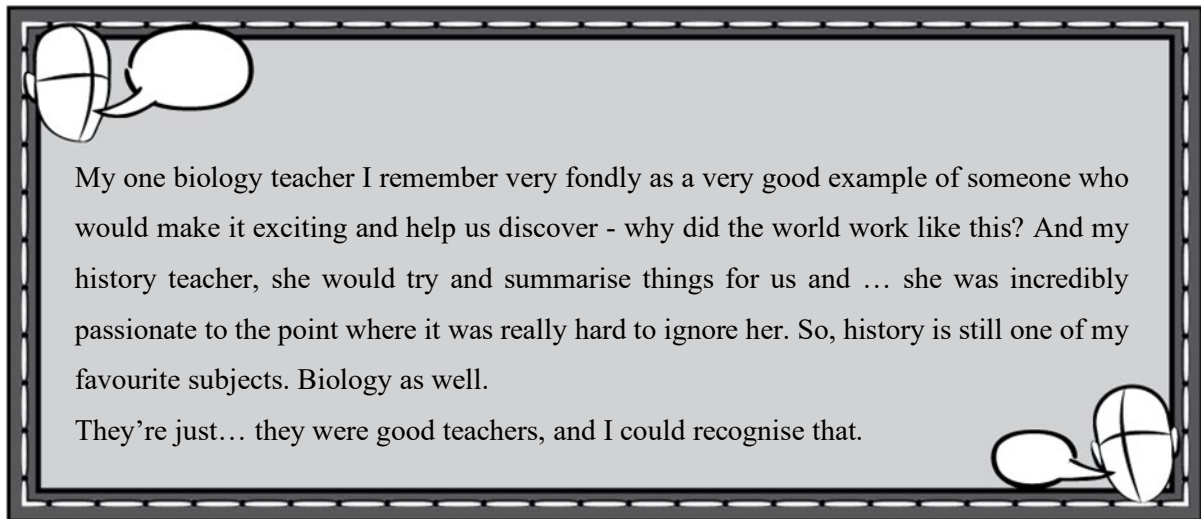


Note. Figure created by the author.

In a way, tutoring was the beginning of me learning to be a teacher differently and planted the seeds for my lecturing career. Tutoring showed the rewarding side of teaching that was invisible from the outside looking in. It felt good to help others reach the answers on their own instead of telling them the answers. Tutoring was much closer to authentic learning (Herrington et al., 2010) than the banking model (Freire, 2018) many of my least favourite teachers had demonstrated. I began to see why Pom loved teaching and why she worked so hard for her students.

I was the good student

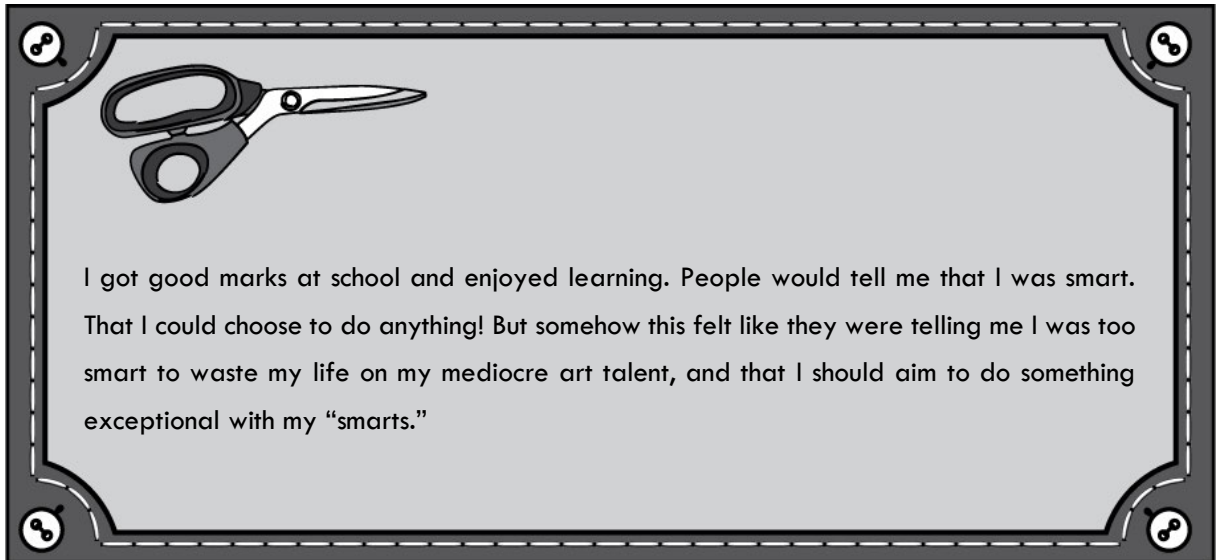
I was always a good student regardless of whether I liked the teacher. Being the ‘Teacher’s kid’ put pressure on me to play the “good student” because I was under constant surveillance (Foucault, 1977/2008). I was always well behaved, did my homework on time, paid attention in class and studied hard. I did well at school and got good grades, and I also enjoyed it. I really loved writing argumentative essays and researching. My favourite subjects were History, Biology, Geography and English, and I was good at them. I spoke about this at a supervision meeting:



(M. Cavanagh, personal communication, October 24th, 2023.)

I was good at Art, too, but it was my mother’s subject. I really hated being in her class because I felt even more under surveillance (Foucault, 1977/2008). I felt like I was under a microscope, and every move I made was judged by my peers, the other teachers, and everyone else. In my school, art was split, so half the grade was for art history, and the other half was for art practice. Since I loved History already, I excelled at the theory side. I also felt it easier to accept my success because theory is easier to objectively assess than practical art – I didn’t have to feel like I was getting good marks because of my mother, I could ‘prove’ that I deserved it. When it came to practical art, although I got good marks, it was hard to feel good about them. I didn’t feel good enough and it took away my enjoyment of the subject.

The classroom was where I was acknowledged most. My parents would tell me they were proud of me because of my marks and would ‘brag’ about how well I did in school to others. Teachers gave me praise and affirmed my abilities. I felt like I belonged; I was fitting into the template of a ‘good learner.’ I was curious, with a love of learning and creativity that my family culture nurtured and valued.



My school days were filled with this tension of belonging and not belonging. In the classroom, I was thriving. In the academic realm, it did not matter what I looked like. My grades were not a reflection of my body but of my mind. My report cards discussed who I was as a learner and my achievements but said nothing about the social spaces in which I did not fit. When my peers bullied me for not looking the part, I withdrew to spaces where I felt safer, to academics and art where I was not judged.

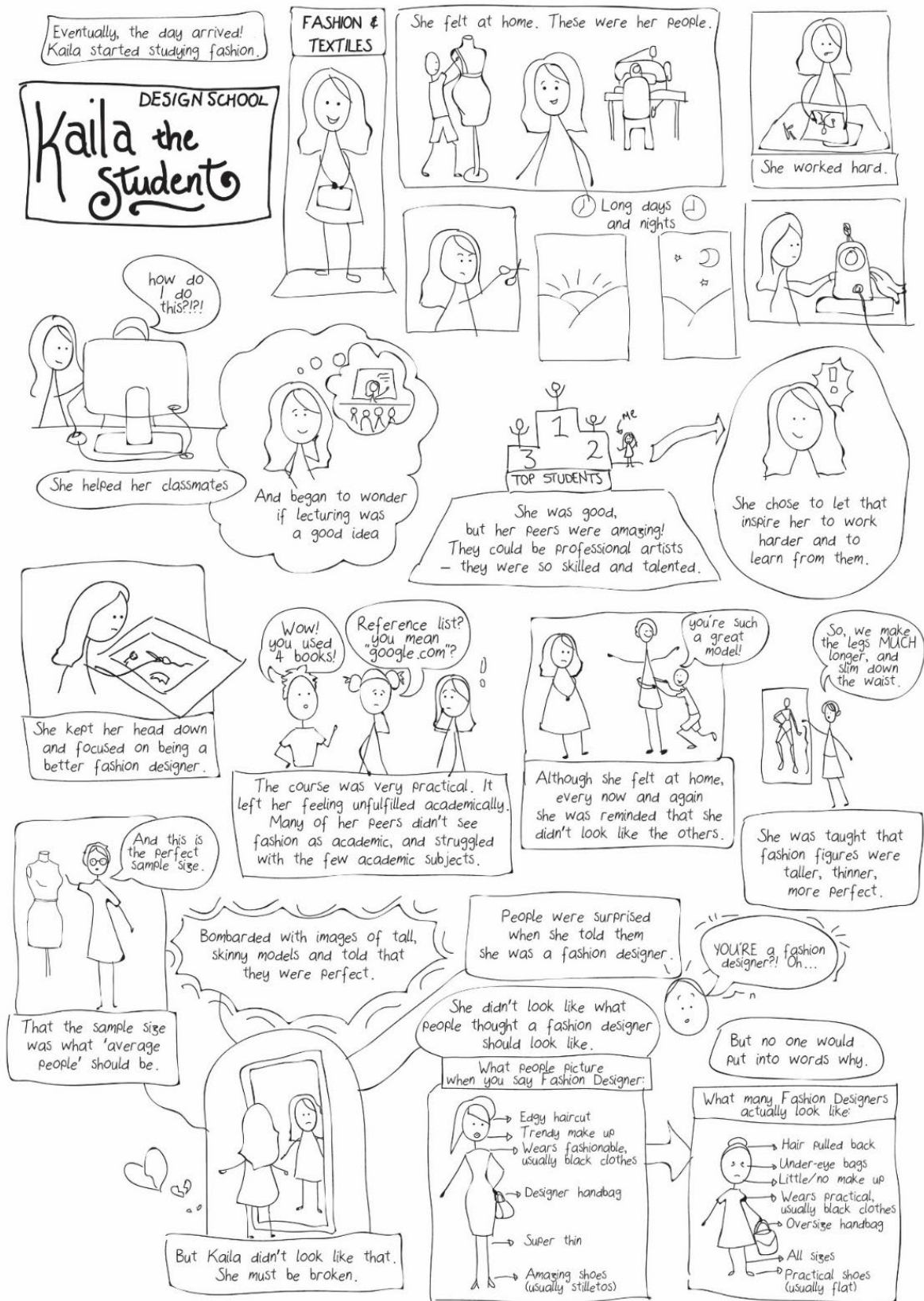
My personal experiences primarily centred on the contrast between shaming and status. I was shamed for being different, policed by my peers and reminded that I did not fit the template. In contrast, where I had status – as the good student, the teacher’s daughter, the creative and artistic girl – I was included and not shamed. I withdrew more into the spaces of status because they were safer and more welcoming. Reflecting now, the status of being “the good student” has followed me throughout my life.

5.2.4. Adolescence

Like girlhood, “adolescence” is difficult to define. Generally, literature agrees that adolescents are those who have moved beyond childhood but have not quite reached full maturity. As a university student, I was legally an adult in South Africa, able to drink alcohol, drive a car, and be independent of my parents.

This comic doodle (see Figure 5.12) explains my adolescence at university as a fashion design student. I turned eighteen the year that I started at university, completed my diploma at twenty and went on to my BTech (Bachelor of Technology) at twenty-one. My experiences at university highlight the new and different culture I was exposed to with a diverse group of students and lecturers, as well as the university system. This section gives me the space to explore the overarching cultural threads of finding a sense of belonging and adapting the ways of being a fashion designer.

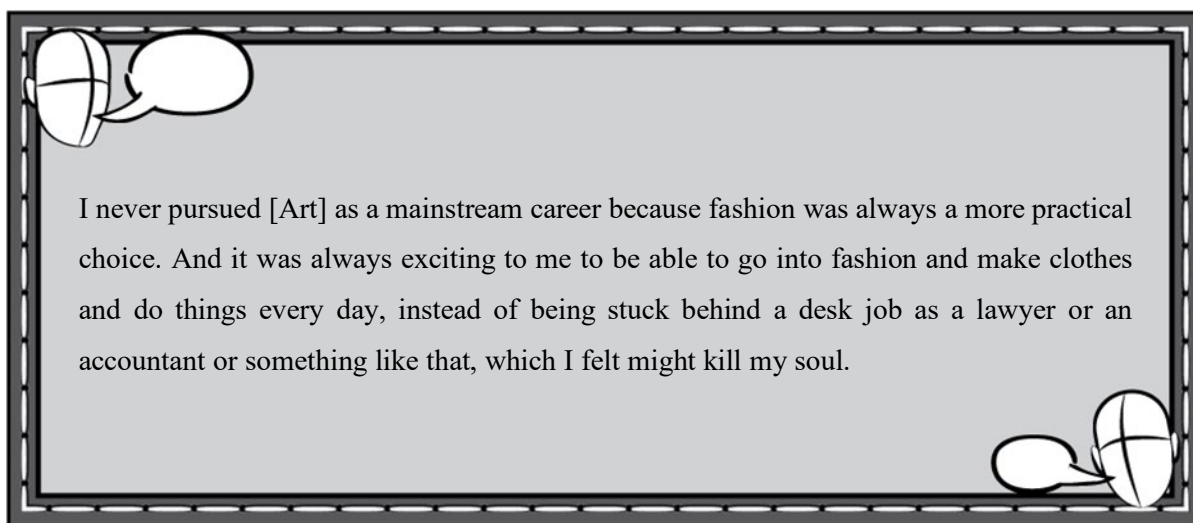
Figure 5.12: Kaila-the-student comic doodle



Note. Figure created by the author.

Becoming a fashion design student

By the time I finished high school, I had decided that I wanted to study fashion to draw on, improve my embodied and tacit knowledge and skills, and learn things that my family could not teach me. I never considered myself a ‘fashionista,’ and I was not concerned with being trendy or wearing designer labels like the other kids. Moreover, as the *Patchwork Jeans* extract (see section 5.2.3) showcases, my aesthetic tastes were not ‘mainstream,’ and I had been made to feel that I was not particularly fashionable or good at design. But I wanted to do something where I could use my hands and exercise my creative thinking in a situated material way. I loved clothing, sewing, and making things. Fashion seemed the obvious choice. I discussed this choice in a supervision meeting with Prof Pillay:



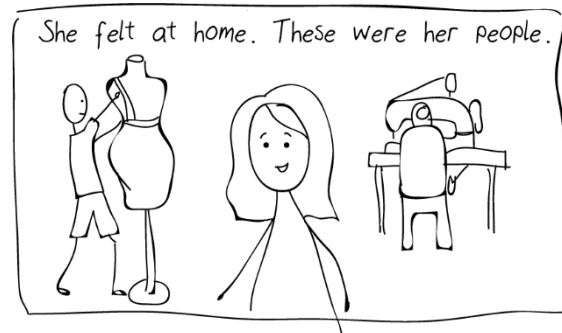
(M. Cavanagh, personal communication, October 24th, 2023.)

My family supported my decision to study fashion despite it only being a Diploma and not a degree because they saw how passionate I was about making clothes and how much I enjoyed drawing and designing. They understood that I needed to have a career that allowed me to use my hands and be creative. I had friends and acquaintances whose families were not supportive and thought of fashion as frivolous and not ‘a real career’. Luckman (2013, p. 249) explains that today there is a turn against this kind of attitude, and a “return of credibility to previously disparaged women’s craft practices.” However, at the time, fashion was seen as ‘easy’ and of a lower value. I think that the support in my family was a result of the strong female perspective, where my mother (herself trained in Fine Art, another ‘useless’ skill to the mainstream) understood these “previously disparaged” skills as valuable and a worthy career.

My path to fashion design resulted from several threads weaving together to form a passion for fashion design and the joy in creating and making myself a designer. It was not only my enjoyment of sewing (or even that I already knew how to sew) that made fashion design a good choice, but all these other threads woven together that made it the best choice for me personally.

Finding my tribe

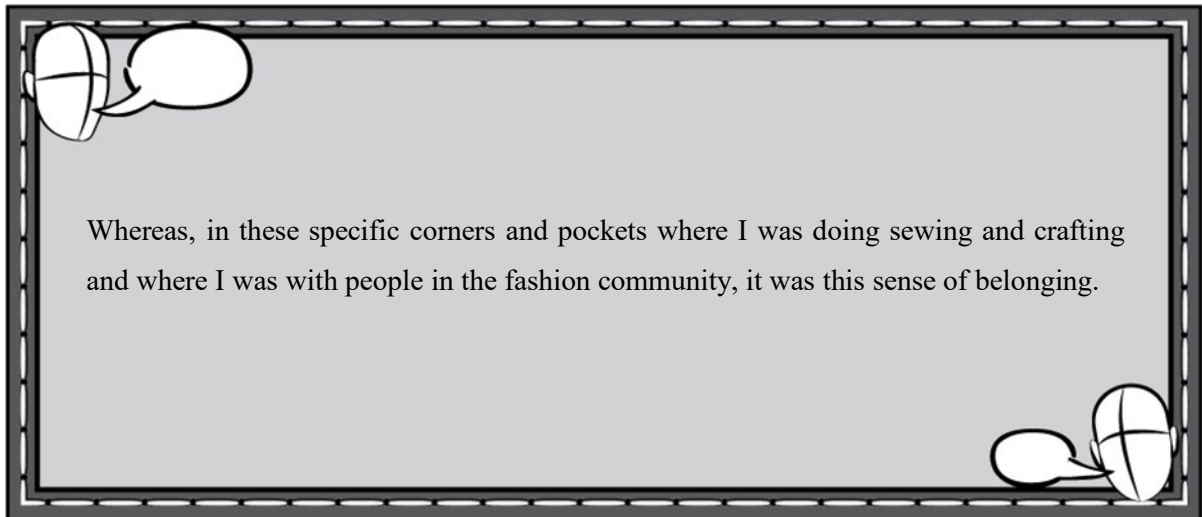
Figure 5.13: Extract from Kaila-the-student comic doodle



Note. Figure created by the author.

The most demonstrative example of belonging in the comic doodles is when I started as a fashion design student. In expressing my time there in the Self-Narrative (Chapter Four), I have used strong phrases like “feeling at home,” “my tribe,” and “my people” (also shown in the comic extract Figure 5.13 above). In contrast to my school experiences of isolation, the university was welcoming and felt like a safe space for me. Even when I was being bullied at school, I still had at least a few good friends who were my ‘people.’ However, coming to the fashion design campus was like stepping into an alternate reality. For the first time in my life, I felt like I had found my tribe.

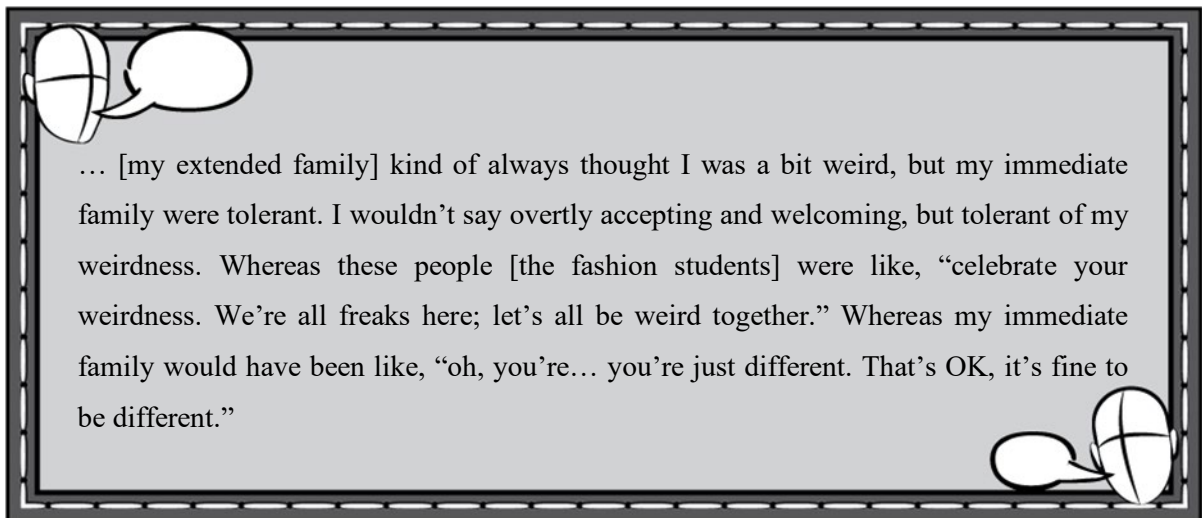
My university days felt incredibly accepting and welcoming. It was a small campus, and everyone knew each other, but unlike my ‘bitchy’ and ‘bratty’ high school peers, the overall fashion campus atmosphere was supportive and encouraging. Everyone was totally different, and the fashion course attracted some unique individuals, but for the most part, everyone just got on with things. I spoke about this at a cohort meeting with my supervisor and some critical friends:



(M. Cavanagh, personal communication, January 20th, 2021.)

I felt very at home on the fashion campus, like a member of the in-group. As students, we were all learning to be fashion designers together. The pressure and difficulty of the course forged strong bonds as we spent long hours working alongside each other. That isn't to say that everybody got along all the time, and there were people I did not like (and those who did not like me). But there was an underlying mutual respect that meant everyone still treated each other fairly and politely. I never experienced any bullying while there, but instead was given lots of support and encouragement from my peers and lecturers alike.

In presenting my comic doodles to the cohort, a critical friend pointed out how I spoke about the fashion campus as being perhaps more accepting of my "weirdness" than my own family. She probed why I felt more accepted by my peers and how this related to my family. This probing made me realise something:

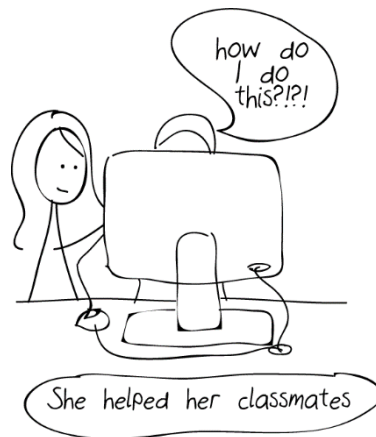


(M. Cavanagh, personal communication, January 20th, 2021.)

Perhaps that is the core of why I felt so ‘at home’ with my fashion peers – because for the first time in my life I had found a group of kindred spirits, akin to the “self-made clans” that Estés discusses in her foreword to Cambell’s (2004, p. XXXVII) *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* – I was drawn to the weirdness and creativity of these wonderful people who *were like me*. I belonged.

Learning from each other

Figure 5.14: Extract from Kaila-the-student comic doodle



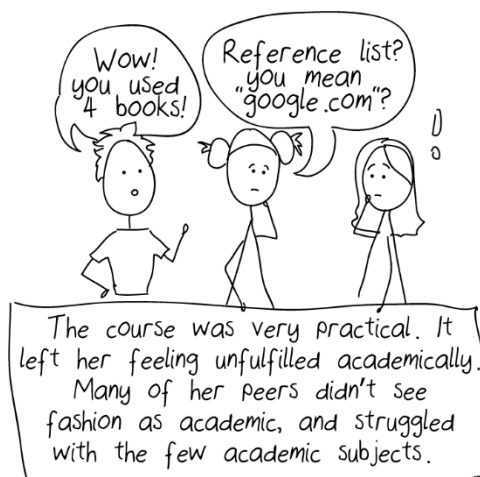
Note. Figure created by the author.

During my time as a fashion student, I realised that I would end up helping my classmates (Figure 5.14). When the lecturers weren’t around, I would often be the one that they would ask (especially about computer-based subjects). I found that I was able to explain well and help them understand. I realised that not only did I enjoy helping them, but I was also good at it. We learnt as much from each other as from our lecturers. Through this process, we practised becoming fashion designers as a creative, shared, and embodied experience. This sparked a love of teaching, but lecturing felt miles apart from what I had previously thought teaching was when I saw my mother.

Academically unfulfilled

I loved studying fashion because I could be creative and draw on my artistic skills while improving my practical abilities. I learnt how to sew neatly and professionally, make my own sewing patterns, and design creatively and at technically high standards. However, the undergraduate diploma was academically unfulfilling. As I said in the self-narrative in Chapter Four, “I was getting bored. Although the course was extremely hard work, it was not intellectually challenging.”

Figure 5.15: Extract from Kaila-the-student comic doodle

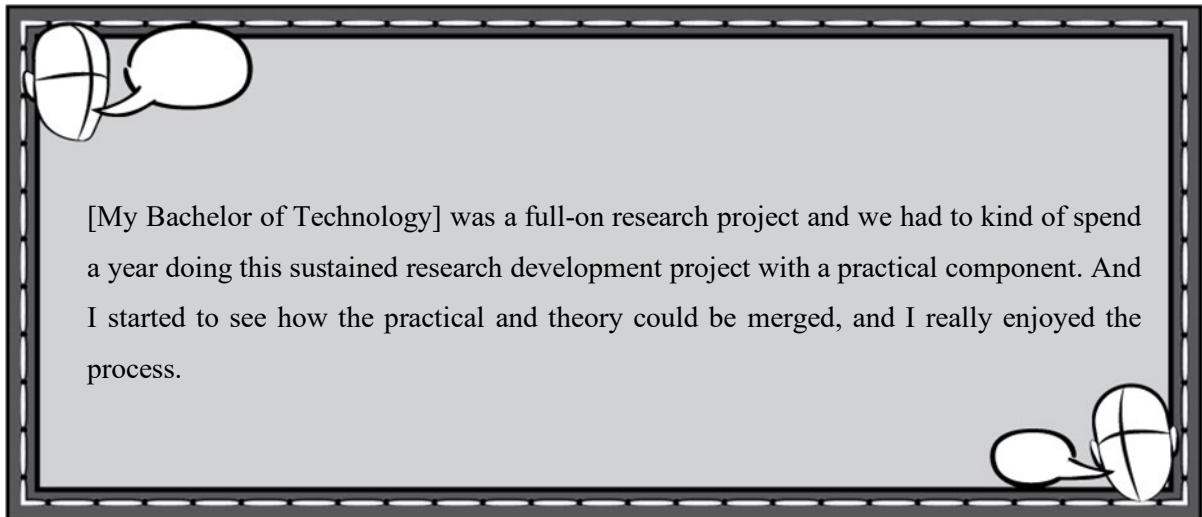


Note. Figure created by the author.

When I was a student, fashion education in South Africa only began to shift away from vocation to professional discipline as Technikons became universities (see Du Pre et al. (2004) and Du Pré (2009) for context). Many fashion programmes were aimed at diploma students with low points for entry, focusing on teaching practical skills and professional practices (Smal & Lavelle, 2011) that would make graduates employable. Fashion education was pitched as practical, not academic or theoretical (Bill, 2012; Harvey & Lucking, 2017). Furthermore, my university was a former Technikon. Because the core principles of fashion design had not changed, much of the teaching had not changed either and focused on an apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 2020) – learning by replicating.

We had minor theory subjects, but most of the work (and most of my time) was spent on the practical majors. I enjoyed the practical, but I missed the kind of research and writing central to my favourite high school subjects. In the limited theory projects that I did, I enjoyed the work and excelled. Once again, I was drawn to mentoring and helping my peers – this time in the theory subjects (shown in Figure 5.15).

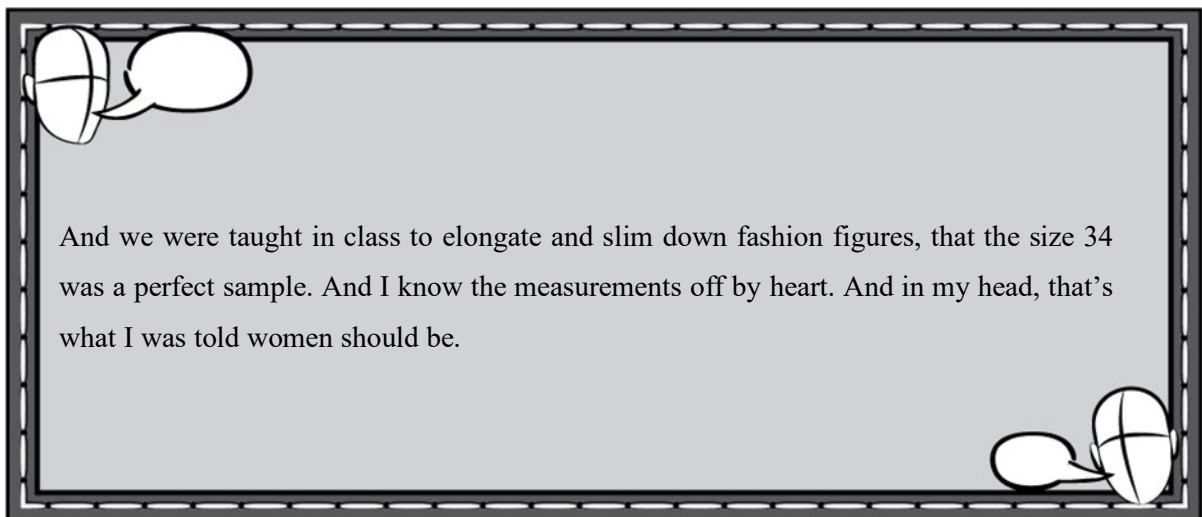
After completing my diploma, I went on to study for my BTech. This part practical, part theory program involved a mini dissertation with a research proposal, a full research design, data collection and analysis, and an accompanying practical component. I was exposed to fashion theory and the love for research and the creative dimension of thinking and writing. I described my BTech experience in a meeting with my supervisor:



(M. Cavanagh, personal communication, October 24th, 2023.)

I know the measurements off by heart

In that same meeting, I reflected on how my fashion education had shaped my beliefs and perceptions about the womanhood template:



(M. Cavanagh, personal communication, October 24th, 2023.)

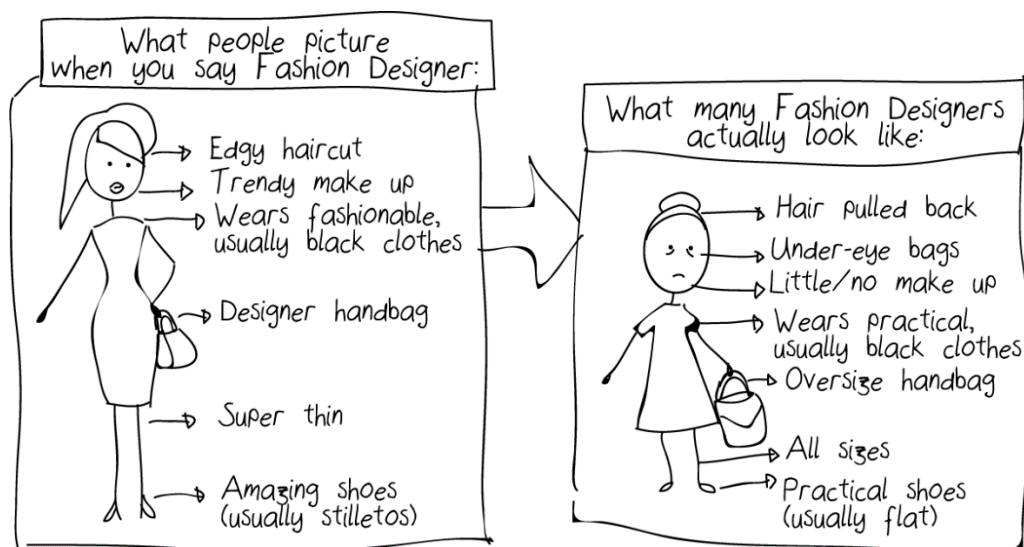
Calogero and Thompson (2010, p. 159) write about the “current standards of beauty” for women as being “ultra thinness with large breasts,” reflecting on the standards that predominated when I was studying fashion and being exposed to these “unrealistic and unnatural attributes for feminine beauty.” The overarching cultural ideals were further emphasised in my classes, where I was taught to elongate and slim down my fashion illustrations.

We were taught that the size 34 is the perfect sample size. Throughout my studies, I was getting bombarded with images of how women should be. But I didn't look like that. Drawing these comics highlighted for me key moments when I wasn't the same and wasn't what other people expected me

to be. I had inadvertently internalised these sociocultural beliefs and used them as a metric to judge myself. Against this metric, I would always come up short. I didn't fit in.

While I felt accepted and like I belonged for the first time, I was still experiencing marginalisation because I simply didn't look the part. The older students wouldn't ask me to model because I would not have fitted into the clothes. I knew the measurements for a size 34 off my heart – bust, waist, hip, etc – but I wasn't anywhere close to them myself. I could design and make beautiful garments for a size 34, but not for myself. It was another reminder that I wasn't what a girl should look like. I expressed this during a supervision meeting, saying "It's a kind of unconscious reaction that I didn't look the part. So again, I'm always measuring myself against this metric and I'm always coming up short" (M. Cavanagh, personal communication, October 24th, 2023).

Figure 5.16: Extract from Kaila-the-student comic doodle



Note. Figure created by the author.

In the comic doodles, I tell the story of how people would be surprised when I told them that I was a fashion designer. There was an unspoken idea of what fashion designers should look like, and again, I did not look the part. The extract (Figure 5.16) shows the contrast between what people seem to imagine fashion designers should look like (thin, trendy, fashionable) and what my personal experience of how real fashion designers were (diverse, but above all practical).

Perhaps it hurt so much not to live up to other people's perceptions of what fashion designers should look like because *I* knew it wasn't true. I had met many different fashion designers, watched videos, interviews, documentaries, runway shows, read biographies of fashion designers, read magazine

articles, and seen them on various social media... I knew that fashion designers came in every shape, size, colour, and flavour imaginable. But the people I was interacting with had their own internalised ideas of what a designer looks like, and it definitely wasn't me.

5.3. Section B – Synthesis

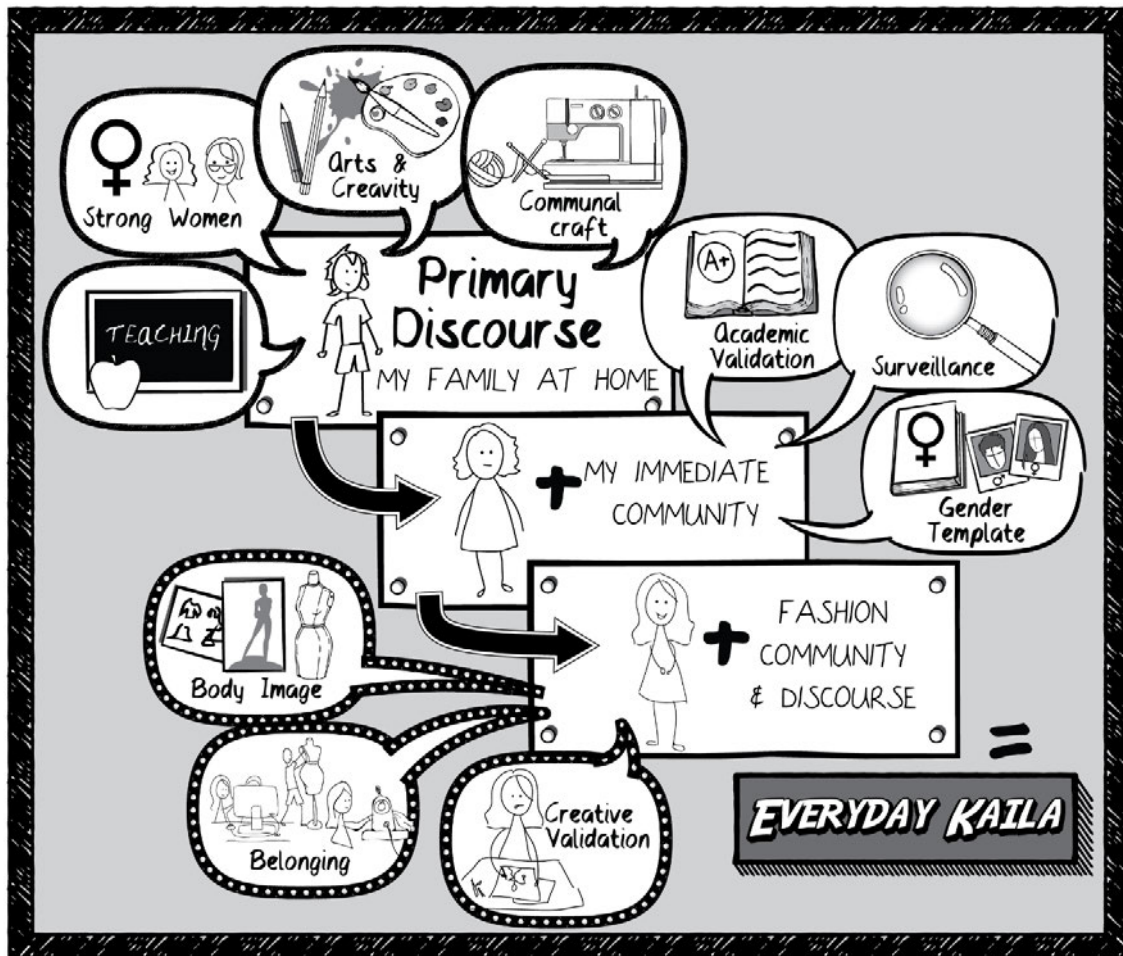
The stories in Section A of this chapter expand on the self-narrative offered in the previous chapter, zooming into the material culture and visual material that carry stories that often go unnoticed. The visual engagements in the form of comic doodles provided a place where “things can be told and, sometimes, untold stories can be articulated” (Pahl, 2017, p. 31) through this artful practice. Together, the visual and material provide a rich, complex entanglement of familial bonds, dominant societal norms, systems, creative thinking, and tensions and sensations.

Woven through the stories presented in Section A, the threads of who I am and how I know and live in the world become knotted, tangled, and moving in those stories. Now, in Section B, I pick up the intersectional identities as the autoethnographer to address the second research question, “*What personal-professional experiences have shaped my fashion design lecturer identities at a UoT?*”

5.3.1. *Everyday Kaila*

Figure 5.17 offers a visual concept map that traces the entangled assemblage of human and non-human elements that have shaped my everyday fashion design lecturer identities.

Figure 5.17: Everyday Kaila personal concept map



Note. Figure created by the author.

As a young girl, I was raised in a particular cultural context and that context inscribed certain ways of being onto me. A primary Discourse is a way of being a non-specialised “everyday person” which is shaped by the family culture growing up (Gee, 2008). My family cultural context embedded “usually taken for granted and tacit set of ‘theories’ about what counts as a ‘normal’ person and the ‘right’ ways to think, feel, and behave” (Gee, 2008, p. 4). In this chapter, I have begun to pull on some of these tacit threads to see what might unravel about how my personal experiences shaped me.

Growing up with strong women showed me a different way to be a woman that conflicted with the dominant social expectations outside of the home. The normalised communal practice of handcrafting with women in my family created a “psychic river” of shared stories and experiences that contributed to my sense of belonging. Now as an everyday person, I seek out community through craft, and art is where I find a sense of belonging.

My family culture included the intergenerational dispositions (Rowse & Pahl, 2007) which shaped what was valued by my family. My upbringing in a creative family meant that my desire to pursue

fashion as a career was nurtured and supported wholeheartedly. Through Pom, I was also inducted unwittingly into a general design Discourse, where I learnt the visual language of art and design, colour, balance, and spatial awareness. The focus on arts and crafts in my family gave me the opportunity to practice becoming creative and artistic frequently, eventually becoming part of who I am as an everyday person. Additionally, the informal transmission of skills shaped bonded me to these women while teaching me how to craft. This was also where began my own apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 2020) – learning to mentor and teach through being mentored in this way.

My experiences of being mistaken for a boy in my tomboy phase had profound influence on my self-perception and internalised beliefs of how girls should be. My experiences of being bullied and excluded for not conforming to this gender template during puberty further reinforced my belief that girls should look and behave in certain ways. Although I resisted the societal pressures, I did internalise the cultural expectations of femininity.

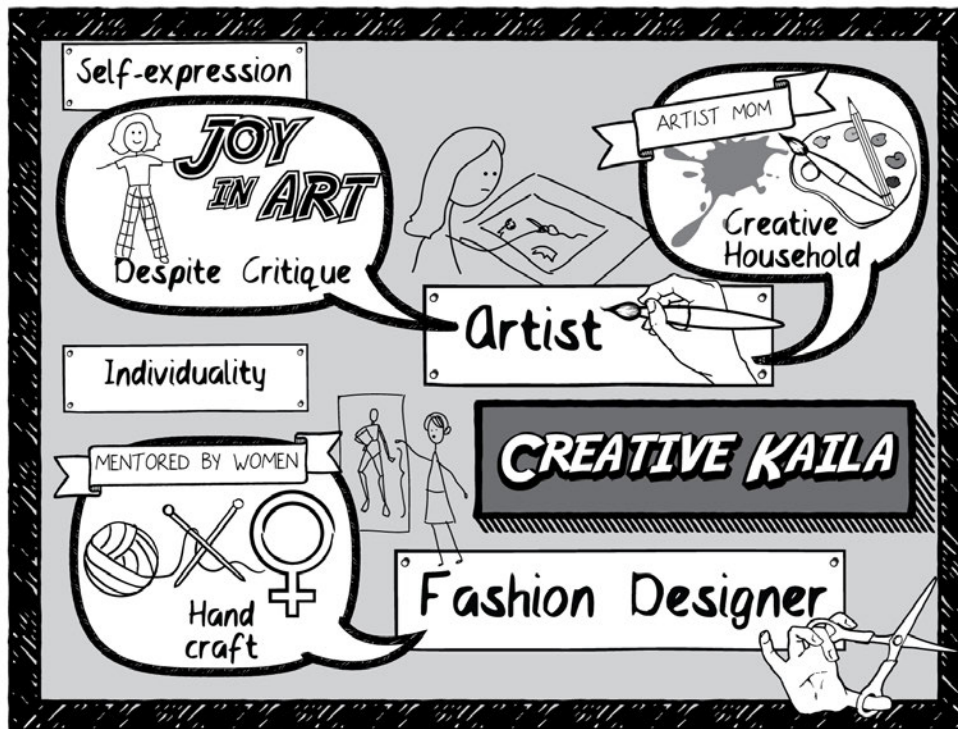
As a ‘staff kid’ I was pressured to conform to certain behaviours through a constant feeling of surveillance. I have internalised this into my lifeworld Discourse, where I practice implicit self-surveillance, believing that I must perform in certain ways to be valuable and acknowledged.

The acceptance and sense of belonging I found at the fashion campus, contrasting with the tolerance from my family, highlights the importance of community in shaping my Lifeworld. Not just my nuclear family, but also the influence of the immediate community around me. As I got older, the influential network expanded.

5.3.2. *Creative Kaila*

Figure 5.18 presents a concept map that highlights how art and fashion have entangled through intra-actions with materials, cultural, and personal histories, shaping my creative identities as a fashion design lecturer.

Figure 5.18: Creative Kaila personal concept map



Note. Figure created by the author.

My creative identity has been shaped from a young age, influenced by my artist mother and the women who taught me handcrafts. My engagement with art and craft and the joy that I found in them shows a creative identity that expresses itself through making and doing. Sewing, knitting, and drawing were a creative outlet and a means of self-expression for me.

Growing up in this creative artistic family also produced a unique cultural context: art supplies and materials were always available to play with, experimentation and self-expression were encouraged and modelled, and I was mentored in many different arts and crafts. I learnt not to be afraid to jump in and try. Tidwell and Fitzgerald (2004, p. 71) speak about the “normalcy” of art and how being surrounded by artistic people shaped how they perceived themselves. Like them, having an interest in art was normalised in my family and creativity was taken for granted. It was only when I have been exposed to other families that I have learnt my family context was unusual in this regard.

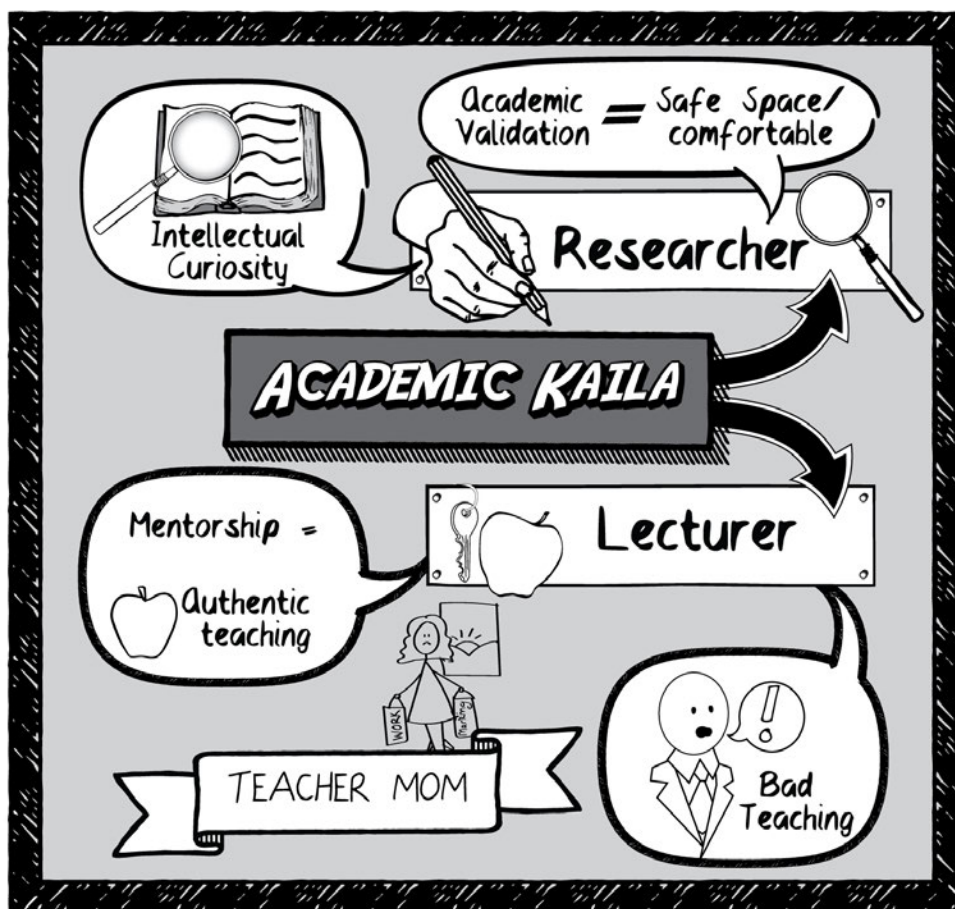
My nodal moments show how despite feeling overshadowed by others’ talents and struggling with the label “artist,” I continued to be passionate about drawing and crafting. My ability to create with my hands, despite limited resources, reflects my resilience and ingenuity, which later influenced my love of fashion and making. The patchwork jeans story, in particular, illustrates my creative spirit and the personal satisfaction I derive from making something unique. Despite the criticism of my peers, my creative identity remained resilient, and my love of art and craft only grew as I got older.

However, the criticism I faced from others about the things I made did make me insecure about my work. Because art is such a personal and subjective thing, it was natural for a young Kaila to believe others who told her that her work was not good enough. As the autoethnographer, I can see the link between my artistic insecurity and the pushback against the label “artist.” This pushback has played a significant part in my choice to study fashion, which was a career I felt balanced my desire to be creative and artistic in an objective way with my practical need to earn a living. Further, the patchwork jeans incident, while initially devastating, ultimately underscores my individuality and creativity, which later became integral to my identity as a fashion designer.

5.3.3. Academic Kaila

Figure 5.19 visualises the interplay between institutional expectations, vocational Discourses, and personal aspirations, mapping the assemblage of forces shaping my academic identities within the UoT context.

Figure 5.19: Academic Kaila personal concept map



Note. Figure created by the author.

My academic identity was shaped by my early experiences of learning art and craft informally through mentorship from women in my family and project-based sewing projects with Pom. Although not formal learning, these mentoring experiences began to shape how I viewed good teaching and encouraged a curiosity and love of learning that are central to my academic identity now. Watching Pom's struggles as a teacher and my own experiences as a 'staff kid' contribute to an academic Discourse that values authentic learning over rote memorisation. My fascination with subjects like History and Biology, where teachers encouraged exploration, further emphasises this academic identity.

My family and immediate culture reinforced the expectation that women participate in traditionally feminine skills like sewing and knitting. My own intellectual curiosity while I was learning these skills drove me to research further, reading books and magazines to try learning more. This influenced my academic interest in and later pursuit of fashion.

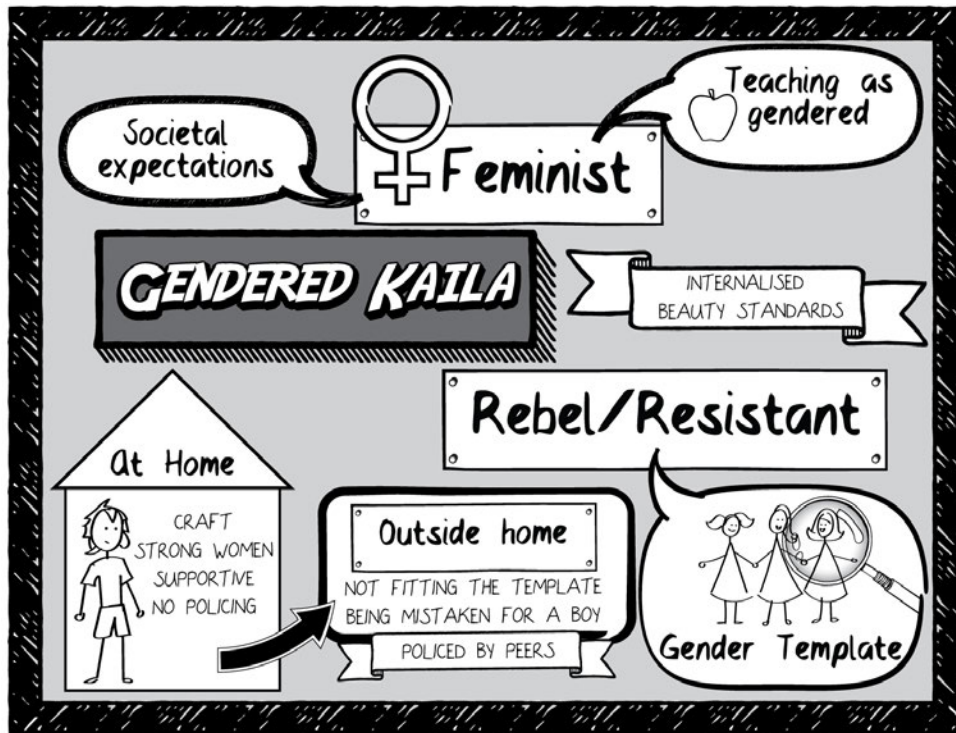
My family showed me that it valued learning and education by praising me for doing well at school and encouraging me in my studies. I believe this propelled my consistent interest in academic right up to my studies towards the present PhD. There was an emphasis on academic achievement over any other areas. Throughout my childhood, schooling, tertiary education and work life, academics is always something that I have returned to as a safe space where I can shine. This chapter has highlighted the times in which I have been recognised and praised for my academic achievements. It became an affirming space for me, where I felt I was good enough to earn recognition. In many other aspects of my life, I was made to feel that I didn't fit the template. But in this academic realm, I was judged on merits, not appearance.

My desire for intellectual challenge and engagement beyond practical skills as an undergraduate student and again as a working fashion designer exemplify my drive to learn. Perhaps, it also points to the insecurity I felt in doing practical work where I did not excel as much as I did in the academic realm. In becoming a lecturer, I allowed myself to find fulfilment in merging the practical skills which brought me joy with the academic research which also provided validation and security.

5.3.4. Gendered Kaila

Figure 5.20 explores the entanglement of gendered norms, societal expectations, and personal experiences, representing how these intra-act to inform my identities as a woman and lecturer in a gendered profession.

Figure 5.20: Gendered Kaila personal concept map



Note. Figure created by the author.

My stories reflect a gendered Discourse where traditional feminine skills are passed down through generations, perpetuating the cultural norms I grew up in and adapted to. In engaging in traditionally feminine activities within the supportive environment of my family I was able to contrast these with the stricter gender discourses outside the home. This contributed to my understanding of gender norms and my place within them. My experiences highlight the societal expectations of gender roles and the tension between individual identity and cultural norms.

My experiences illustrate how the gendered Discourse has shaped my self-perception of who I should be as a woman. My discomfort with being mistaken for a boy and my struggle to conform to societal expectations of girlhood impacted my self-image. The bullying and isolation I faced for not fitting into traditional gender norms during my tween and teen years underscore dominant cultural narratives. My narrative captures the tension between expressing my individuality and the societal policing of gender conformity. The tension between my personal preferences in dress and appearance

and the cultural expectations of what a girl should look like has been a significant factor in shaping my gendered identity.

On reflection, as I grew into an adolescent, I made deliberate attempts to align more closely to the womanhood template I'd been given through a sort of "hyper feminisation." How I chose to dress and style my hair reflected an increasingly 'girly' aesthetic, leaving behind my tomboy childhood. My attempts at hyper-feminisation did coincide with the end of the bullying, but it is impossible to know whether this was related or coincidental. Halim et al. (2014) explain that girls show more gender rigidity than boys (dressing in socio-culturally stereotypical gender norms) and offer that this aligns with girls showing more intergroup bias, where they favour their own group (other girls who conform to gender norms) over those who do not. This might help explain why I was bullied predominantly by other little girls – because I didn't 'conform' to the group.

My inadvertent shift to more of a 'girly-girl' reflects my complicity in perpetuating a sociocultural template of womanhood. I had bought into the idea that women should be feminine and that I needed to make myself appear more feminine to compensate for not fitting in. Having PCOS gave me physical symptoms that, like others in a study by Thorpe et al. (2019), felt like a humiliating failure and loss of femininity. I was already experiencing what Calogero and Thompson (2010, p. 156) term "body shame" for failing to meet "internalized cultural ideals for appearance." Calogero and Thompson (2010) explain that women tend to have more of a fragmented view of their own bodies as disparate parts and often discuss them from an externalised perspective. I, too, tend to talk about my material body in terms of its negative features or the parts that I am unhappy with, rather than as the whole entity through which I live, work, and experience the world. These subtle difference between how men and women perceive and discuss their bodies are shaped by cultural norms, but significant in how I have come to construct my gendered identities.

My reflections on teaching and mentoring suggest an awareness of gender roles within educational and familial settings. I internalised societal beauty standards, and my fashion education emphasised certain body measurements as the ideal for women, reflecting a gendered Discourse within the fashion industry. The realization that fashion designers come in all shapes and sizes, contrary to societal expectations, highlights the dissonance between personal identity and gendered cultural norms. My experiences of marginalisation due to not fitting these standards, despite feeling accepted in other aspects, highlight the pervasive nature of gendered expectations and the influence they have on self-perception and identity.

Foucault's (1977/2008) theory of surveillance reveals how individuals internalise societal norms through self-surveillance, and this dynamic is particularly relevant to gender policing during puberty. The changes to the body in puberty moves boys closer to the masculine muscular ideal, while pushing girls further from the thin feminine ideal (Calogero & Thompson, 2010). For girls, the gaze is often focused on their bodies, appearances, and behaviour, leading to conformity with ideals of beauty, modesty, and submissiveness (Sharmin, 2023). These enforced stereotypes create different pressures, with boys and girls regulating themselves to fit into distinct gender roles, illustrating the power of surveillance in shaping identity.

5.4. Key learnings from personal experiences

Dominant discourses around dress and body left me feeling isolated and like an outsider. As a little girl who did not look the part, I was reminded that I was different from and not conforming with the other children (Bhana, 2005; Blaise, 2014). Being a 'staff kid' who was not part of the in-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) meant exclusion by my peer learners and being held to certain standards of behaviour by the teachers and staff. As a sewist, any deviation from the aesthetic tastes of my peers marked me as "different." Each of these nodal moments underscored how I didn't fit in because I deviated from what the various Discourses expected me to be, do, say, and how to appear. Conversely, I felt a sense of belonging when I found a sense of self growing up as a girl with woman doing, making, and learning hand skills and crafts. The Discourses of making, doing, and crafting by woman seamlessly integrated with my creative self and practical activities that were playful and brought joy.

Calogero and Thompson (2010, p. 154) argue that an individual's body image is not fixed but the product of "a dynamic relationship between the individual, the body, and the social environment." This perspective underscores the influence of the cultural and social context on how an individual views or feels about their body. Indeed, when I felt like I fit in, it was in groups where I didn't look like the social norm. In contrast to this, my days as a fashion student offered a more diverse and accepting social and cultural environment, leading to a greater sense of belonging.

5.5. Summary

My use of naïve doodles started because the thumbnails and storyboards, which I considered to be rough work – not to be included in the final piece – turned out to be highly sophisticated ways of depicting the hidden cultural, social, and historical contexts of my life. Drawing my stories allowed me to put them outside of my head, giving me a different perspective. I could step into the autoethnographer stance and ethically respond to my stories, using comic doodle sharing and getting feedback from my supervisor and critical friends. The sharing and drawing on others as funds of

knowledge and pushed thoughts and prompted valuable insights into my limited beliefs and ways of thinking.

The embodied drawing of my emotions and feelings facilitated a ‘stepping back,’ creating a distance from which I could observe my own stories. I have taken a third-person stance, further helping to distance the personal from the researcher. Now, when I look back on the history that helped to create where I am now, these creative imagination spaces push my thoughts and ideas and assist me in moving beyond and seeing the enduring things that I have been comfortable with. The comic doodles offer a space for doing healing (Guyotte et al., 2018).

The messiness and entangled nature of autoethnography means that I am retrospectively understanding what I did and revealing the theories that inherently underpinned everything that I did. I can see how my ways of being were shaped by the Discourses (Gee, 2008) I was inducted into: The primary Discourses of my family and the cultural context I was born into as a white, middle-class, English-speaking woman. The Discourse of fashion designer which I was trained, learning not just the discipline knowledge but embodied ways of thinking, acting and doing, which to this day shape my identities (Dall’Alba, 2009; Stetsenko, 2010). The Discourse of womanhood – my gender identity and expression – have been shaped by the dominant cultural beliefs and stereotypes that I was policed into conforming to by my immediate community. My induction into the academic discourse began as a child raised in a family of scholars and teachers. It was further shaped by my experiences of teaching and learning as a school learner and then as a fashion student learning by rote.

The doodles and the recursive process have made visible some very important cultural strands that shaped who I am and how I came to be that way. I make note of the uncomfortable tensions I feel about calling myself an artist, my painfully internalised meanings of what women ‘should’ be, and my complicated relationship with teaching. It was the recursive process of collecting and analysing the data in this chapter that ultimately deepened the answer to the personal aspects of the second research question: “*What personal-professional experiences shaped my fashion design lecturer identities?*”

This chapter has traced the deeply cultural threads that shaped me and narrated who I am and how I came to be a lecturer in the first place. The feminine influence in my love of clothing and crafting, my rebellion against what women ‘should’ be and do, my tensions around artistic versus an artist, and my complicated feelings about what teaching meant for me... all of these moments entangle and plug into the assemblage of becoming a lecturer, and what lies beyond.

6. PROFESSIONAL STORIES AS A SITE FOR (UN)LEARNING

6.1. Introduction

This chapter builds on Chapter Five, shifting focus to the professional aspects of my second critical question, “*What personal-professional experiences shaped my fashion design lecturer identities?*” While acknowledging the personal and professional as inextricably connected (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Day et al., 2006; Richie & Wilson, 2000), I addressed them in separate chapters to support clarity and readability. Chapter Five ends with Kaila, the student, completing her diploma and BTech in fashion design.

Focusing on my transition from industry to academia within the career-oriented setting of a University of Technology (UoT), this chapter explores how institutional Discourses shape my becoming a fashion design lecturer. Section A, presents comic illustrations, preserving the narrative flow, before focusing on specific frames to reveal key nodal moments in my professional journey. Through these visual elements, I analyse moments of tension, adaptation, and transformation, using Lauriala & Kukkonen’s (2005) concept of the self and Gee’s (2008) Discourse framework to illuminate my evolving identity.

Section B continues the analysis through visual concept maps, which provide additional insights into the complexities of transitioning from designer to academic. By tracing cultural threads and institutional Discourses, this chapter contributes to understanding how these professional experiences shape my role as a lecturer at a UoT.

6.2. Section A – Stories of being-becoming a professional

In this section, I explore the professional dimension of being a fashion design lecturer, reflecting on the transition from industry to academia through the lens of the self as a multi-dimensional construct (Lauriala & Kukkonen, 2005). The concept of self is relational and entangled with the social and cultural contexts. This relational material view of self surfaces the tensions and interconnections with different entities, systems, and objects.

I left the fashion industry in 2012 to become a fashion design lecturer at UoT, returning to the same institution where I had been trained as a fashion designer. The familiarity of the campus and the presence of my former lecturers as colleagues gave me a sense of comfort and continuity. I had returned to the place where I had felt accepted as a student to take up my “dream job.” However, this return also highlighted the tensions I was now embodying – as the practitioner that I had cultivated in the industry and the emerging academic identity I was expected to develop.

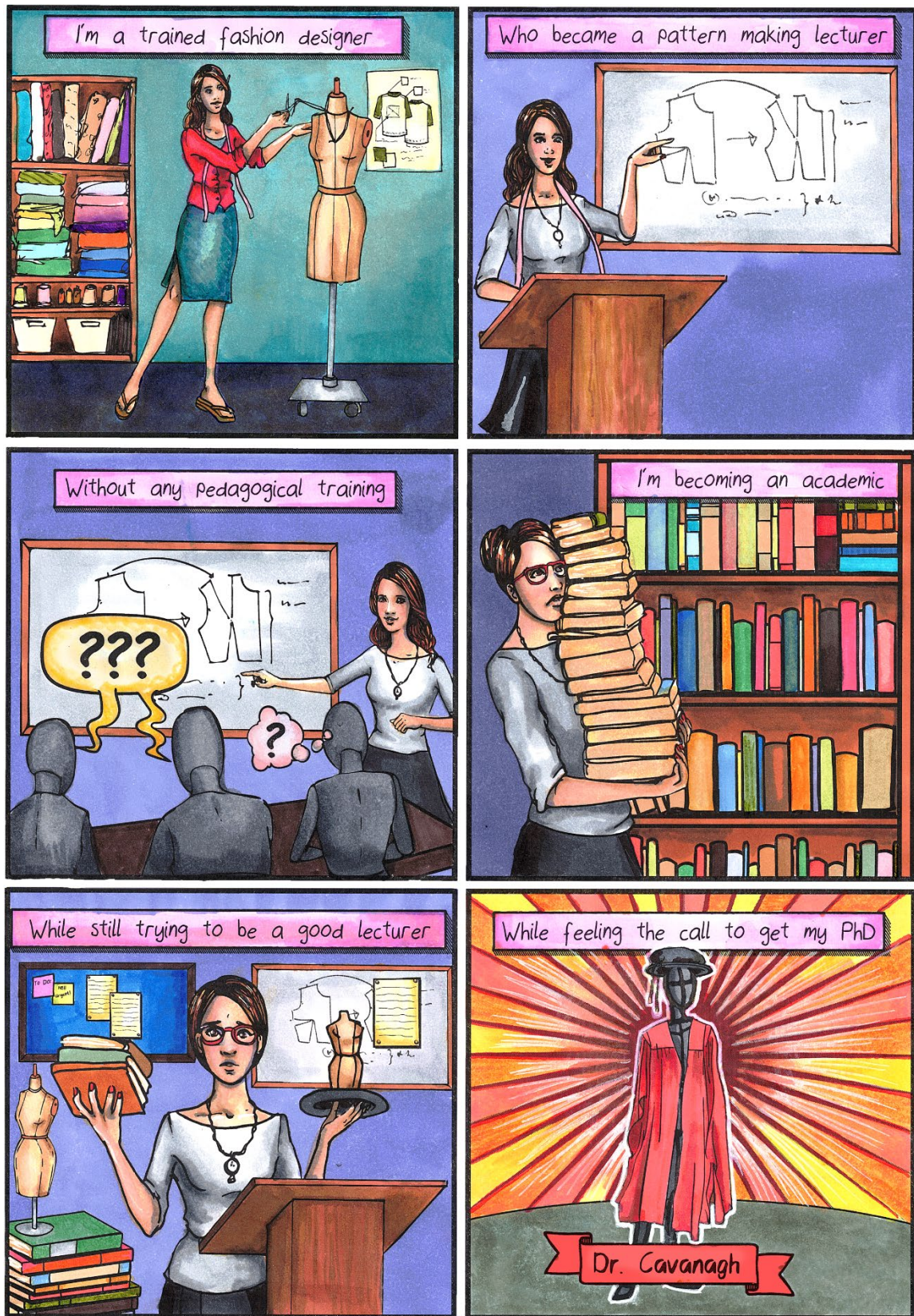
In transitioning from industry to academia, I encountered tensions between the fashion industry world as a fashion designer and the world of academia and being a lecturer at the University of Technology (UoT). Within this institutional space, “career-oriented education” is foregrounded, aiming to produce skilled workers by emphasising practical and vocational training (Kokt, 2010, p. 17). This mission-oriented environment has shaped both the professional expectations of me and my evolving self-concept as an educator. Gee’s (2008) “Big D” Discourse framework helps to situate these tensions by acknowledging the broader social and cultural narratives that inform identities, as well as the personal negotiations they demand.

The UoT setting brings its own dominant Discourses, which often placed me in situations where I felt compelled to either accommodate or resist (Rogers, 2020) its routinised, formulaic practices. I found the repetitious, structured norms of the department challenging, as these seemed to limit the creative freedoms I associated with being a designer. This autoethnographic space offered a “safe space” for unpacking these tensions, where I could bring a researcher/scholarly lens to view my experiences (Ellis, 2004), particularly those that are difficult to voice within institutional settings.

The comic illustration presented here (Figure 6.1: Professional Be(com)ing Comic Illustration) visually represents my journeying into academia, including the fashion designer, the novice lecturer, and the novice academic. The visual material enabled me to present a fuller view of fashion design education practice. I then zoom in on specific frames that capture nodal moments of tension, adaptation, and transformation. The visual approach enables me to explore the stories, emotions, discourses, and tensions entangled with myself, allowing readers to trace the ways in which my past as a designer intersects with my current role as a lecturer.

Through these select frames, I delve into specific experiences that highlight the contrasts between my industry background and the expectations within academia., The visual and narrative elements enable me to assemble the unlikely complex interplay of things between/in-between, aligning with the autoethnographic emphasis on cultural and narrative context (Chang, 2007, 2008; Ellis, 2004). Assembled together, they offer embodied and entangled stories of lived experiences of becoming a fashion design lecturer within a UoT.

Figure 6.1: Professional be(com)ing comic illustration



Note. Figure created by the author.

6.2.1. *Becoming a fashion designer: My transition from industry to academia*

Studying my personal-professional experiences of becoming a fashion designer is complex and entangled. In this section, I look into the stories of Kaila-the-fashion-designer, working in the fashion industry and revisit the meanings the stories carry to reflect critically on how they shaped my thinking and fashion design lecturer.

Figure 6.2: Extract from Professional be(com)ing comic illustration



Note. Figure created by the author.

Figure 6.2 shows me in the role of a fashion designer, engaging in activities typically associated with fashion design. I've drawn myself working with a fashion mannequin, holding a pair of scissors aloft as if to cut, while a tape measure is draped around my neck. This is the kind of activity that stereotypically depicts the activities of fashion design. In the background, a shelf houses piles of neatly folded fabrics, spools of thread, boxes with unknown contents and a few paper folders which indicate sewing patterns. The shelf holds the raw materials of fashion design, ready to be used in the process of creating garments. On the right-hand side of the image, a poster on the wall depicts a technical drawing or fashion flat. The poster shows the very technical, detail-oriented work of a fashion designer. The comic panel starts to hint at the procedural, technical culture within the fashion industry.

My dream job

After completing my BTech, I entered the fashion design industry, which is a “complex structure with a blend of economic, material and cultural flows” (Aspers & Skov, 2006, p. 804). In this environment, the designer's role often centres on mediating between stakeholders rather than ‘designing’ from an artistic or creative standpoint. My experience as a graphic artist and designer

involved translating buyer requirements into CADs (Computer Aided Designs¹¹) and coordinating with factory teams to produce final garments (much like the poster of the t-shirt shown in Figure 6.2). My work aligned with the industry's collective, process-driven nature (Peirson-Smith & Peirson-Smith, 2020, p. 275).

Bill (2012, p. 49) describes creative workers as part of a new 'precariat'- a term combining 'precarious' and 'proletariat' (McKeown, 2022; Rao et al., 2021) – because of how unstable employment in creative fields like fashion can be. Novice fashion designers often become “victims of a vampire-like fashion apparatus” (Bill, 2012, p. 53), commodifying themselves as assets whose value is based on their productivity and creative output.

Rather than embodying the romanticised image of a fashion designer creating groundbreaking designs (Peirson-Smith & Peirson-Smith, 2020), my work was deeply entrenched in the production and consumption systems. Peirson-Smith and Peirson-Smith (2020) critique the glorification of individual designers, highlighting the industry's reliance on collective efforts. This resonates with my experience, where collaboration and market-driven processes defined the creative work. My role, characterised by repetitive and formulaic design tasks, illustrated how the industry often prioritises structured, collaborative production over individual creativity.

When I was in the working environment, I began to miss the academic side of fashion that had perforated my studies. In my industry work there was no theory or understanding of why or how, only “what sells.” Often, my job was to recreate samples from overseas or slightly update last season’s designs. Although I was always thrilled to see a child ‘in the wild’ wearing something that I had designed, there was nothing that I could actually put my individual stamp on.

(Extract from Chapter Four: Self-Narrative)

This excerpt highlights the comfort I found in the routine of my work, but it also reveals a deeper longing for the academic and creative spaces I had previously enjoyed. The absence of academic engagement in my industry role, where the focus was solely on “what sells,” made the work feel disengaging. My position as a “designer” was largely about executing technical tasks within the mass production process, a role Aspers and Skov (2006, p. 806) describe as “design technicians for commercial labels” rather than creative designers.

¹¹ See Definitions/Glossary for the definition of this term.

The lack of space for creativity and originality led me to reconsider my path. I realised that I was just another cog in the factory production line, contributing to an endless supply of commercial garments with little real “design” involved. This disconnection from creativity and scholarly thinking drove me to pursue a master’s degree to fill the academic void in my life and rekindle my excitement in fashion not only as an intellectual but also as a creative pursuit.

The love of learning: In search of new ways of thinking

A casual meeting with fashion industry friends at the end of 2011 led to an unexpected opportunity to lecture part-time at the UoT where I had trained at until 2010. This was more than a job offer; it was a chance to test out my desire to teach in a formal higher education space. I wanted to find out if lecturing was different to the kind of teaching Pom had modelled. For six months, I was forced to negotiate two different worlds – the fast-paced, pragmatic environment of the fashion industry and the more theoretical, structured space of academia.

I worked in the fashion industry for two years before taking up a full-time lecturing post in the department of Fashion. It was a difficult decision because I loved my job, and I loved the people I worked with. I had learnt so much from them and grown up a lot while I was there. But lecturing was my dream job, and I had to take the opportunity to try.
(Extract from Chapter Four: Self-Narrative)

In the fashion industry, I interacted with diverse, talented professionals who shaped my identity as a designer. I had to adapt quickly, developing technical skills and learning the intricacies of production processes and interpersonal dynamics within the factory setting. When I say I “had grown up a lot,” it reflects how I transitioned from a shy graduate to a confident designer, capable of navigating the demands of the industry. This professional maturity, rooted in discipline and teamwork, became an integral part of my identity and was something I carried into my academic career.

However, the transition to academia was not without tension. My role in the industry was defined by technical execution, with limited creative autonomy (Aspers & Skov, 2006) - a stark contrast to the intellectual freedom I discovered as a part-time lecturer. While the industry required precision and adherence to client specifications (Aspers & Skov, 2006; Peirson-Smith & Peirson-Smith, 2020), academia offered the autonomy to teach in a way that reflected my love for fashion. This newfound freedom was both exhilarating and intimidating. I relished the opportunity to inspire students, but the responsibility of training future fashion designers for industry also brought a new kind of pressure.

Steadman (2021) emphasises that “transitioning” involves a significant emotional journey, as one redefines one’s identity within a new professional context. My transition from industry to academia was marked by a series of internal conflicts. I had to reconcile my practical, industry-based skills

with the more abstract demands of teaching in higher education. As Beijaard (2019, p. 1) notes, “learning to teach is an identity-making process,” and for me, this process was fraught with uncertainty. The stability I had found in the industry was replaced by a sense of vulnerability as I navigated the academic landscape, where my established beliefs and practices were constantly challenged.

The contrast between the regimented structure of the fashion industry and the intellectual autonomy of academia forced me to continually redefine my identity as a lecturer. While my industry experience equipped me with a practical, disciplined approach, academia demanded a different kind of creativity and flexibility. This duality, balancing the technical with the theoretical, became a central tension in my development as a lecturer. It shaped not only how I approached teaching but also how I viewed my evolving professional identity.

Beijaard (2019, p. 3) highlights that forming a teacher’s identity is “complex and dynamic,” often involving the destabilisation of previously held beliefs. My journey reflects this complexity. The emotional and professional shifts I experienced during this period were profound, as I learnt to navigate the unique demands of academia while staying true to my roots in the fashion industry.

6.2.2. On the other side of the lectern as a novice lecturer

Higher education institutions across the country have been swept over by pervasive neoliberal practices. McKeown (2022) explains this phenomenon as one which is characterised by strict managerialism that undermines professional autonomy through performance targets, criteria, and standardised assessment systems. In a neoliberal university, higher education values are shaped by financial and market forces, prioritising individual exceptionalism and financial viability (Parfitt et al., 2021). These shifts were evident in my faculty and department, reflecting what Shore and Wright (2020) describe as “audit culture.” This culture, as Marginson (2013) elaborates, emphasises accountability through quantifiable metrics and compliance, often creating a bureaucratic environment that stifles creativity and critical thinking.

The legacy of vocational training

Historically, UoTs have been more focused on practical knowledge, with deep roots in vocational education (Kokt, 2010). As a fashion designer, I have always considered myself a practitioner, someone who thrives on the tangible and the applied aspects of the craft. However, transitioning to a traditional university environment - where there is a strong emphasis on philosophy, theory, and abstract concepts – posed significant challenges. It has been (and continues to be) very difficult for me to adjust. I have written about my experiences reconciling theory and practice in Cavanagh

(2019), where I explore the tension between these two ways of being and how it affects my identities as both a designer and an academic.

While the neo-liberal institutional culture emphasised scholarly research and performance metrics (Netolicky, 2017), the fashion design department that I inhabited as a fashion design lecturer continued to prioritise practical skills and vocational training. This department, unlike many others within the university, valued the practical expertise of its staff, employing individuals who had extensive industry experience and the hands-on skills necessary for the vocation (Dittrich, 2006), but who often lacked the theoretical background and pedagogical training that traditional academia typically demands (Chitanand, 2015; Faerm, 2015). This divergence in expectations created a unique set of challenges. On one hand, I was expected to align with the university's broader institutional agendas and research-oriented goals; on the other, I was part of a department that remained firmly rooted in the practical and applied nature of fashion design (Enright et al., 2017).

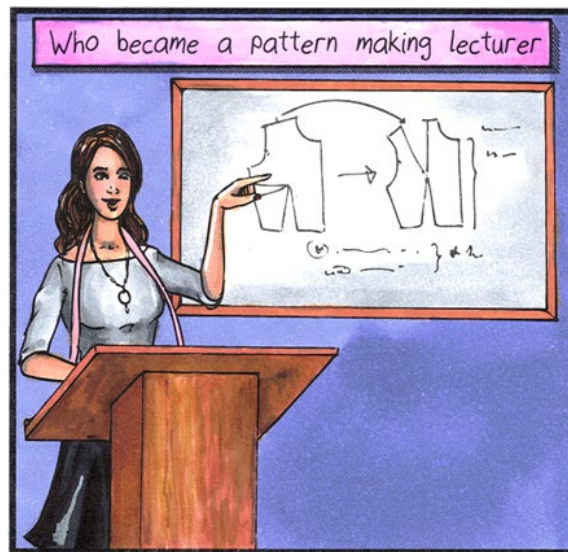
This tension between the research and scholarship imperatives of the university and the vocational focus of the fashion design department profoundly influenced my teaching approach as a fashion design lecturer. It was not just about adjusting to a new set of expectations; it was about navigating and negotiating these contradictory demands. Beijaard (2019) explains that developing a teacher identity is the product of a complex interplay of personal and contextual aspects, which may cause tensions – or “frictions” – as identities are challenged and evolve.

In my case, while I valued the practice-based approach and theories of knowledge that defined my career in fashion, I was now being asked to embrace a disembodied, theory driven perspective of fashion design education. This transition was not seamless, and it continues to be a source of professional and emotional conflict as I strive to integrate these differing aspects of my professional identities.

Conflict and conflicting identities

Learning to teach in a university classroom is a complex process and involves multiple relationalities with different entities, systems and environments (Afalla & Fabelico, 2020). This complexity can be particularly overwhelming for a fashion design lecturer transitioning from industry to academia. Fataar (2010) explains that one's “teacherly becoming” emerges from multifaceted contexts, where individuals transition from students to teachers, encountering various challenges along the way. This transition is not simply about adopting a new role; it involves a profound reconfiguration of one's professional identity, often marked by internal conflict and tension (Steadman, 2021, p. 2).

Figure 6.3: Extract from professional be(com)ing comic illustration



Note. Figure created by the author.

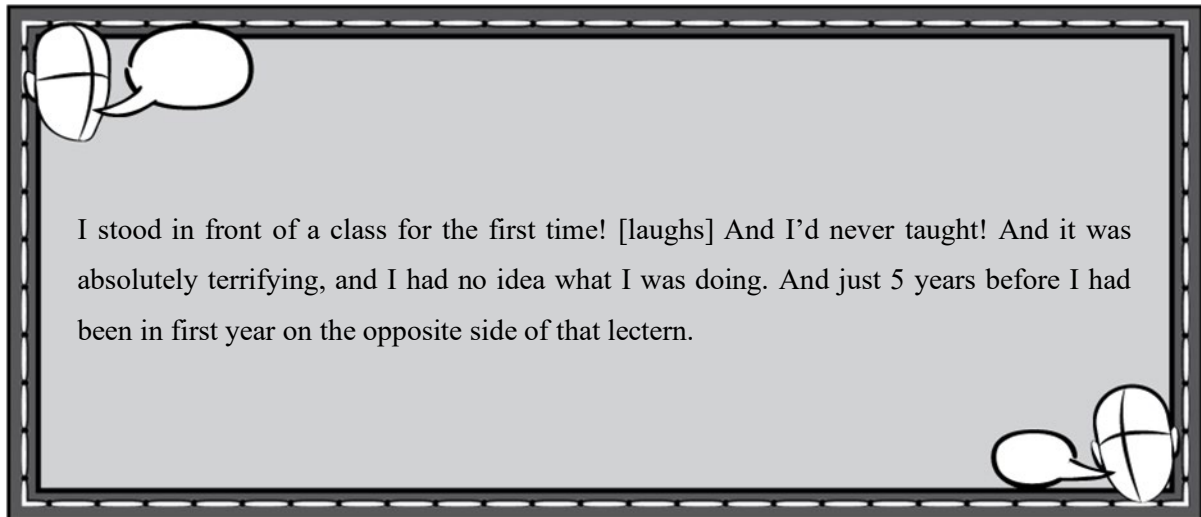
On my first day teaching, I stood before my students with only a few hours of instruction from my predecessor, a stack of notes, and a deep sense of unease. I tried to replicate what I remembered from my own education, relying on the materials and methods handed down to me. The comic illustration (Figure 6.4) captures this experience, depicting me as a novice lecturer attempting to convey information to students who, as indicated by their speech bubbles, did not understand what I was trying to teach. The image clearly shows the physical and metaphorical divide created by the desk between myself and my students, reinforcing the “sage on the stage” approach I had unwittingly adopted. This divide is also evident in Figure 6.3, where I stand behind a lectern, lecturing *at* my students like my own lecturers had done for me.

The diagram on the board is one I’ve drawn hundreds of times – a basic front bodice meant to fit a woman’s size 34 mannequin. This was the first lesson I taught as a new lecturer. One of the first lessons I taught as a new lecturer was how to draft a front bodice to fit a size 34 mannequin. At the time, I didn’t question how this practice reinforced industry norms and excluded diverse body types – it was simply how I had been taught.

Teaching pattern-making, a practical subject that is foundational in the first-year fashion design curriculum, placed me in a position where I had to navigate these conflicting identities. Pattern-making is critical in vocationally focused fashion education (Schmidt & Zarestky, 2021) as it equips students with the professional skills needed to draft sewing patterns for garment construction (Almond & Power, 2018). Although pattern-making is taught less frequently in more conceptual fashion courses (Laughlin & Kean, 1995), it forms part of the technically focused curriculum

favoured by many “prestigious fashion schools” (Lam et al., 2022, p. 416). As depicted in Figure 6.3, as I stood behind the lectern in front of the class, demonstrating on a whiteboard how to draft patterns, I was enacting the teaching that was modelled for me by my own lecturers, the vocational lecturer I “ought” to conform to (Lauriala and Kukkonen (2005). This visual represented the traditional, top-down skill-focused teaching approach that had been instilled in me during my vocational training.

I described my first day teaching in a meeting with my supervisor:

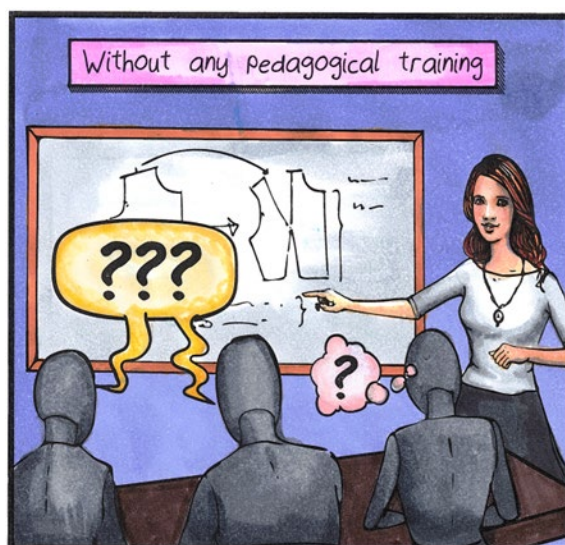


(M. Cavanagh, personal communication, July 11th, 2023.)

In my early days as a novice lecturer, I was performing from the perspective of a qualified fashion designer coming straight from the fashion industry with no formal training in teaching, and I was influenced by the practices and expectations I had internalised as a fashion design student. This led me to adopt the teaching methods I had experienced during my own education, methods that were teacher-centred and focused on delivering content from behind a lectern.

Lasky (2005, p. 901) notes that a teacher’s professional identity is shaped by how they define themselves in relation to their knowledge, skills, and values. However, I was caught between the desire to be a good lecturer and the reality of my lack of pedagogical training.

Figure 6.4: Extract from professional be(com)ing comic illustration



Note. Figure created by the author.

In the beginning, I followed the way that my predecessor had taught. I used her notes and briefs and taught as she had taught. We had both been taught by the same lecturers and so we both followed that way of teaching.

(Extract from Chapter Four: Self-Narrative)

This method of teaching was not unique to me; it was a common approach among professionals of a discipline who became lecturers at the newly constituted UoT. Like many of my colleagues, I lacked formal pedagogical training (Chitanand, 2015; Ennals et al., 2016) and fell back on the traditional, vocationally focused curriculum that had defined my own education (Smal & Lavelle, 2011, p. 197). deeply influenced by these inherited historical practices. Yet, this approach was at odds with the university's evolving educational standards, which were shifting towards more conceptual and theoretically driven models of teaching.

My students struggled to apply the pattern-making principles I taught them beyond the specific examples I demonstrated. Reflecting on my own first-year experience, I recognised that I, too, had difficulty applying the knowledge outside of the classroom context. This was because I lacked a deep understanding of the “material nature of education and how thinking is materially situated.” (Pahl, 2017, p.31).

Learning content as decontextualised and value-free led to only a surface-level understanding. Limiting learning to “tips and tricks” made teaching content a technical and disconnecting experience. Critically reflecting on my experiential knowledge as an early-career academic and

fashion design lecturer was risk-taking and vulnerable (Berry & Hodges, 2015). The institution's legacy of vocational training, rooted in its *Technikon* origins (Du Pré, 2009; Du Pre et al., 2004; Kock, 2010), had shaped a teaching approach that prioritised practical skills over theoretical and conceptual understanding (Dall'Alba, 2009).

As I navigated these conflicting identities, I began to realise the limitations of simply doing things the way they had always been done. The challenge was not just in teaching the content but making sense of the complexity of my lived experiences as a lecturer now and exploring what is possible beyond.

However, the broader institutional context - shaped by neoliberal imperatives and practices (Enright et al., 2017) created tensions characterised by strict managerialism and performance metrics (McKeown, 2022), which often conflicted with the history of vocational education that had defined the Faculty of Art and Design. As the institution transitioned from a *Technikon* to a University of Technology, the focus shifted towards a more conceptual and theoretical model of teaching professional disciplines, moving away from purely vocational training that emphasised decontextualised skills (Ennals et al., 2016; Kock, 2010).

This shift was particularly challenging for disciplines like fashion design, where the practical application of skills is central to the profession (Faerm, 2015). The pressure to align with the institution's neoliberal agenda, which prioritised financial viability and academic performance (Parfitt et al., 2021), created a conflict initially between my practitioner identity and being an academic. I struggled to understand the connection and was limited by my traditional understanding of the theory-practice binary. This conflict was not unique to me as Hernández et al. (2010) note, the transformation of higher education institutions has deeply affected university staff, requiring them to adapt to new roles and expectations that often contradict their comfort with the routine and formulaic practices – often driven by the behaviourist model and instrumentalist in approach.

These conflicting pressures were a sense of professional dissonance and disconnect. I struggled to reconcile the practical, skill-oriented approach to teaching that I had inherited as a fashion design student with the theory-driven, rational view of the academic environment. This tension, reflective of the broader shifts in higher education towards neoliberal practices (Enright et al., 2017), underscores the complexity of academics transitioning from vocational backgrounds (Ennals et al., 2016). Without any formal teaching experience or pedagogical knowledge, I found myself relying heavily on my past experiences as a child, school learner and fashion design student. This reliance was rooted in what Lortie (2020) describes as the “apprenticeship of observation,” where new teachers often mimic the teaching practices they observed during their own education.

It is within this conflictual space that the concept of becoming was birthed and an ethical response to and cast an autoethnographic gaze on the self as a fashion design lecturer. From this ethical stance, I could consider how the pathways of self-inquiry will push open the limited beliefs and perspectives of what it means to be the maker of knowledge and what self-knowledge is engendered through arts-based research scholarship. Drawing on Pillay (2020), I recognised how the visual and narrative art forms open up imaginative spaces for ambiguity and multiple relationalities with objects and things that challenge hierarchical ways of thinking about theory/practice; lecturer/student, etc.

Closing of the history and picturing something different

According to Pahl (2017, p. 31), “Drawing on theories of knowledge production that enhance and recognise tacit and embodied knowledge, from the arts and from a material and practice-based understandings, [fashion design] pedagogy [might] look quite different.” in higher education.

I became a university student at a time when South African secondary education was going through significant changes. The tertiary educational landscape and the massification of higher education in South Africa aimed to expand participation for previously disadvantaged learners (Badat, 2010; Hlalele, 2010). However, this increased access led to diverse student populations with varying academic, social, economic, and cultural backgrounds many of whom are considered “under-prepared” (Badat, 2010, p. 7). And without adequate structures in place to support these new kinds of students, first-year dropout rates were high (Hlalele, 2010). Badat (2010) speaks about the conflicting goal of broadening student access while still maintaining quality within educational outputs.

The lecture room that I now inhabited as a lecturer was markedly different from the one that I experienced as a student. While both my own cohort and the students I taught came from diverse racial, cultural, and economic backgrounds, the educational backgrounds of my students differed significantly from my own. A larger proportion of my students were “under-prepared” (Badat, 2010, p. 7) or “poorly-prepared” (Hlalele, 2010, p. 98). This lack of university readiness reflected the inequities of an unjust education system, as Waghid (2009, p. 79) observed, to which they had been subjected through no fault of their own. My classroom was diverse, yet it aligned with the findings of Xulu-Gama et al. (2018), with the majority of students coming from peri-rural and rural areas, previously disadvantaged schools, speaking English as a second or additional language, and often being the first in their families to attend university.

I had been taught how to make patterns by rote, following the example of the lecturer as they demonstrated. Now as the teacher, I was modelling by rote learning (Hiralaal, 2018), demonstrating to my students what and how to follow.

With the notes and files of my predecessor to follow, it should have been easy. But I found that I had to ‘relearn’ a lot of the content knowledge to teach it. In the beginning I made a lot of mistakes because I took for granted that I knew everything. Some of the simple questions my students would ask would throw me off and I would be unable to answer. Sometimes, it was because I had forgotten the level of detail and situated nature of the teaching. I “knew” the discipline content. Other times it was because they were asking why things were done in a certain way, and I honestly did not know because I had never questioned it myself. I felt ashamed and like an imposter. My students could not connect with the content.

(Extract from Chapter Four: Self-Narrative)

My department and institution were entrenched in the Technikon legacy – instrumentalist and focused on the behavioural model. In a supervision meeting, I lamented the resistance to change: “... because that is what my colleagues used to say, ‘but this is how we have always done it’” (M. Cavanagh, personal communication, July 11th, 2023). Through the restructuring of HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) in South Africa, the fashion design core curriculum stayed the same – focused on vocational training and practical skills (De Wet, 2017). The majors of Design, Pattern-making and Sewing (now called Creative Design, Pattern Technology and Garment Technology) covered the same core concepts. This allowed things to continue in the same manner – the Technikon-now-University lecturers kept the same rote teaching methods.

I encountered resistance when I questioned things, and like Wood (2016, p. 118), I was told, “That is not the way things are done around here.” Often it was more of a ‘do what you want, but I am sticking with what I know’ attitude. I found this frustrating because those same colleagues would lament about how students were not prepared for university, and literature supported this notion (Hlalele, 2010, p. 99). However, these colleagues believed that their teaching should not change. Now, I was faced with the tension between maintaining the status quo of how things have always been done and trying new things that might actually open up and expose different perspectives different voices and diverse experiences. I recognised that the material world can offer a situated lens with which to view educational practice and from an understanding that thinking is materially situated (Pahl, 2017). In this way, I can “reposition the way our learners think and [create]” (Pahl, 2017, p. 31).

6.2.3. *Unlearning as a site for becoming a novice academic*

I didn't "get it" in my first year

During my training as a fashion designer, I was being taught by practitioners who focused heavily on practical skills. This vocational, hands-on approach emphasised learning through observation and replication, similar to an apprenticeship model (De Wet, 2017). We were shown what to do and asked to replicate it. The theoretical underpinnings of fashion were not overtly discussed (Harvey & Lucking, 2017). We were expected to gain mastery of the skills, not the theoretical concepts.

The vocational legacy in my department meant that lecturers were training students in skills, not teaching students to become fashion designers and how to think in materially situated ways. Dall'Alba (2009) reminds us that obtaining skills and knowledge is not enough for students to transform into professionals of the discipline. Training for professional disciplines tends to focus on skill acquisition without explaining the reasons behind the rules, what Christie et al. (2007) refer to as the "whys" of the profession.

Critiquing my white, middle-class, English-speaking beliefs and values

Becoming a lecturer in the University of Technology as a young, white, English-first language woman, in a classroom with predominantly black students from different backgrounds and diverse experiences provoked me to draw on the material world as a situated lens to view fashion design education practice (Pahl, 2017). The majority of the students at my institution were the first generation in their family to attend university, from rural and peri-rural areas, and English as an additional language (Xulu-Gama et al., 2018). This is in stark contrast to my privileged upbringing with access to good education and a family legacy of higher education.

I brought my own cultural biases, expectations and understanding, narrated by my white, English-speaking, middle-class background into the classroom with me. Even the vocabulary I used day-to-day seeped into my privileged education as a first-language English speaker., and this was made clear to me every time a student was brave enough to ask what a word meant. Seemingly simple things that I took for granted were thrown into question – students came to us without ever having used a computer and had no experience typing or browsing the internet. I needed to rethink how I was approaching teaching and assessment and the use of technology and digital tools.

I saw that the concept of "fairness" did not exist in black and white. Was it fair to expect a student to type an assignment when they barely had any experience on a computer? Was it fair to expect them to watch videos on their phones when some did not have smart phones (or even phones at all, as crime was rife, and many students had been robbed or mugged)? Even though the institution had tried to "level the playing field" by providing computer labs

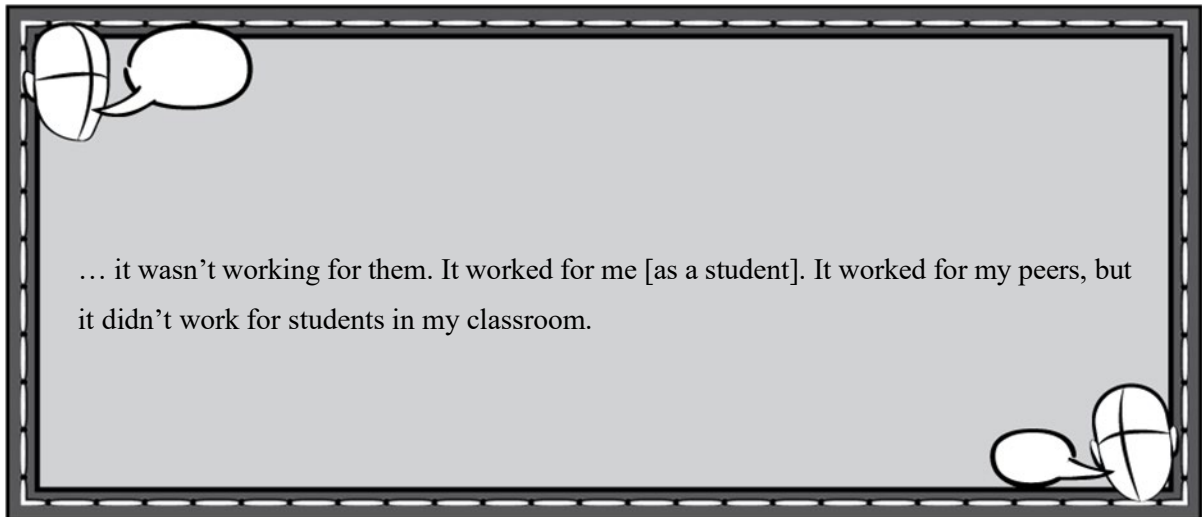
on campus and Wi-Fi access for all students, this did not necessarily translate to equal opportunities.

(Extract from Chapter Four: Self-Narrative)

The concept of Epistemological access (Morrow, 2009) haunted me – more than just accepting and enrolling students, the institution had an obligation to help students adapt to the systems and structures of a university. My subjective experiences, influenced by my own educational journey, informed the singular approach I adopted in my daily encounters, shaping my view of the educational world. I later realised that this approach made me complicit in limiting creative thinking and embodied learning experiences (hooks, 2015). I recognised the need to revisit not only the limits of my perspectives as a lecturer but also the beliefs that shaped my thinking about the disconnection between my disciplinary content and its relevance to the everyday lives of my students.

As a lecturer, I had influence over my students' epistemological access beyond teaching them the discipline content. But when I followed the way of lecturing that had been modelled for me - the focus on skill acquisition over deep learning (Herrington et al., 2010) – I may have inadvertently limited students' ability to critically engage with the knowledge they were acquiring (Shay, 2012). In doing so, I became complicit in perpetuating a teaching style prioritising replication over fostering creative, critical thinking. For instance, when I taught pattern-making by rote, I was stifling their creative potential. This realisation aligns with critiques of traditional vocational education, which often prioritises technical skills over the development of critical and reflective thinking (Barnett, 1994).

Similar to Hiralaal (in Pillay et al., 2019), I initially penalised my students for work that was not presented in the exact way I demonstrated. This represented a weakness on my part as a lecturer. Over time, I began to notice that I was judging my students on unfair metrics – if a project was typed, printed on nice paper, etc, I would give higher marks for “neatness.” I was expecting my students to be like me when I was a student. Expecting them to type and print work, do research online at home, or read fashion magazines for inspiration were examples of how my own privileged upbringing (and its effect on my lecturer being) was invisible to me – many of these students did not have the cultural capital or financial means (Xulu-Gama et al., 2018), technological fluency or “the sorts of shared knowledge, often referred to as cultural capital” (Tinto, 2012, p. 57) to do the things I did as a student. I explained in a supervision meeting:



(M. Cavanagh, personal communication, July 11th, 2023.)

Teaching is not neutral (Gee, 2008; Richards, 2011), and I started trying to look at this critically to see how I was being complicit in perpetuating these unfair biases against my students. As Dall’Alba (2009, p. 8) reminds us, “an individual does not become a professional in isolation.” I was already teaching the hidden ways of being a fashion designer, but I myself was not aware of what they were and how I was teaching them. Clarence and McKenna (2017, p. 39) explain that these hidden practices “are never neutral but reflect particular social contexts and values.” I needed to make these practices and their contexts overt for myself and my students.

6.2.4. *Being academic as a scholarly space:*

This section discusses the complexity of being an academic at a UoT with the curiosity to ‘unlearn’ my teacher-self using visual art as materially situated spaces to imaginatively practicing what it means to become a better lecturer. I needed to rethink what my “home discipline” of fashion design meant to me in a newly adopted UoT identity (Hunter, 2020). Balancing my practitioner-based approach with theories of knowledge production as an educational researcher nudged me to consider a different understanding of fashion design pedagogy – one that is to open to different tacit and embodied knowledges, artefacts, elements, and objects.

In the absence of academic mentors in my department, I needed to push my thinking beyond the enduring practices embedded in the department to see what lay beyond. The comic illustration of Figure 6.5 depicts this heavy burden in the form of books, representing the different kinds of knowledge and research scholars I now needed to engage with as a novice academic – beyond my routine and what I came to be and know.

Figure 6.5: Extract from professional be(com)ing comic illustration



Note. Figure created by the author.

Seeking collegial support

The Department of Fashion had its own culture. Being a satellite campus meant the department was siloed and relatively isolated. If I wanted to interact with other departments or faculties, I would need to travel to different campuses. There were many benefits to being on our own, as our small campus fostered a very caring environment where we could get to know the students and staff members well. However, this also meant that the dissemination of new ideas was limited. Many of the lecturers had been there for decades and began as Technikon lecturers. Professional disciplines, like fashion, are socially constructed with their own values, traditions and rituals (Dall’Alba, 2009), which is essential to consider when designing teaching methodologies at any UoT. In my department, the status quo for many decades had been fashion as a skills-based vocation. This shaped the departmental culture even after the shift away from vocational training.

I needed ideas from outside my department. I started attending institutional seminars, conferences, and workshops to learn how to be a better lecturer. I learnt about blended learning, different pedagogical theories, and assessment methods. In these informal settings, I was encouraged to start researching and presenting on my lecturing practice, attending institutionally run workshops and symposia.

Professional networking: Scholarly spaces for learning to be academic

Like many novice academics, I was on a contract and not a permanent employee – falling into the aptly named academic precariat (a portmanteau of precarious and proletariat) class (McKeown, 2022; Rao et al., 2021). As a result, I was not given the opportunity to attend any form of induction training.

After lecturing for a few years, at our request, I and some of my other precariat colleagues were allowed to attend the formal induction programme for new academics. It proved interesting and helpful; however, it was probably more useful to me at that stage than it would have been as a brand new academic because I was able to apply what we were learning to what I was practising at the time.

Formal and postgraduate study

While I was studying for my master's, I had needed to cultivate my own networks for support. I built new networks outside of my department with passionate researchers across the institution. The same group of people tended to attend the conferences and workshops, and inevitably I got to know them and work with them.

During my master's, I relied on a network of people to help me and support me. I attended workshops on research and academic writing, went to the writing centre for help with structuring my work, joined a study group with other master's students outside of my department, attended lectures and critique sessions with master's students within my department as well as another one outside my department, pulled friends and family in to be critical readers, had sessions with data minded people to help me with the structure and analysis of my data... anything I could think of to get the support I felt I did not have in BTech.

(Extract from Chapter Four: Self-Narrative)

The new ideas and concepts were inspiring and invigorating. I felt like I was being given new tools to think with and that I could actually make a difference to my students. I was becoming an active researcher in my department, and it was changing not only how I taught but also who I was and the kind of lecturer that I wanted to become. It changed how I thought about teaching.

I began to revamp what I taught. Although the core curriculum stayed the same, I changed the way that I taught it. I focused on building skills and understanding, not just the ability to replicate what was done. I shifted the balance of knowledge – instead of being the knower and bestower of all knowledge, I designed activities that forced students to find knowledge, bring their own ideas, discuss critically what the correct answer could be.

(Extract from Chapter Four: Self-Narrative)

I started to see results with my students. It seemed like they were beginning to have a grip on the whys of fashion design and were starting to think like designers. I was earning their respect, and the respect of my colleagues who were starting to see that these new ways of teaching were working for me. My educational practice moved further away from the rote learning, banking model (Freire, 2018) and more and more towards an authentic, deep learning environment.

Supportive colleagues

My Head of Department (HoD) was supportive and encouraged me to attend all of the workshops, conferences, and training sessions I wanted. She worked with me to fit things around my teaching obligations, allowed me to work from home or meet with my co-researchers off campus, and took an active interest in my research. She gave me all the resources and support that she could to pursue research because she understood its value. Upper management also recognised and supported my research work.

However, going outside of my department was not without consequences. While my HoD was supportive, and many of my colleagues were encouraging and understanding, other colleagues and students would make cutting remarks. They would say things like “*Oh, you’re back now*” if I came to campus after attending a workshop, or “*Are you leaving early?*” when I rushed off to a meeting or training. Some of my students would complain that I was “never” there when I was off campus.

Emotions and becoming academic self

The process of becoming an academic has been deeply emotional for me, intertwined with the tensions between my personal and professional lives as well as the sociocultural context in which I live (Day et al., 2006). As Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) consider, the formation of an academic identity is not only complex but also emotionally charged, as individuals navigate the tensions between their personal and professional selves. This process involves reconciling one’s internal sense of self (actual self) with the external expectations placed upon them (ought self) in a rapidly changing academic landscape (Steadman, 2021). The emotional challenges of this transition can create significant internal conflicts, as academics struggle to balance their evolving roles with their core identities (Beijaard, 2019). Understanding these emotional dimensions is crucial, as they profoundly shape the ongoing development of an academic identity (Castells, 2011; Ennals et al., 2016).

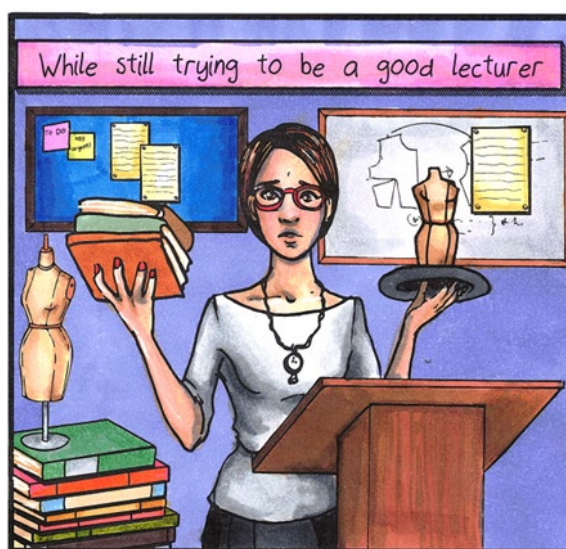
In search of collegial, caring, and supportive spaces

I found the comments from my colleagues and students hurtful and frustrating because I knew that I was working longer hours than most of my colleagues. I was often the last to leave in the evenings. I often came in on weekends and public holidays. The security staff knew how much time I spent on campus, and I knew how much time I spent working at home or engaging in off-campus research activities. But this work was invisible to the colleagues and students making the hurtful comments. My students didn’t know or care when I published articles or presented at conferences. And the colleagues making underhanded comments were not the ones engaging in research. I felt in tension between what upper management wanted me (us!) to do and what the department and students expected from me (Ennals et al., 2016).

Despite the stinging comments I was getting and complaints from my students, I persisted. I continued to build my network, learn more about teaching and learning, and spend time with passionate teachers and researchers who taught me so much. As I described in Chapter Four, I joined a special interest team at my institution to research student success which was inspiring. Most of my research had been in an isolated silo, and the most I could hope for would be that other academics read my paper or listened to my talk and found some value in it. But the student success team had a direct line to institutional management. The people who could make changes were actually listening! I found myself surrounded by dozens of enthusiastic academics who not only wanted to help students but had the ability to actually do something. In the more stressful periods of my lecturing times, this network gave me hope and energised me in ways that can't be measured.

Tensions between institutional mandates and on the ground demands

Figure 6.6: Extract from professional be(com)ing comic illustration



Note. Figure created by the author.

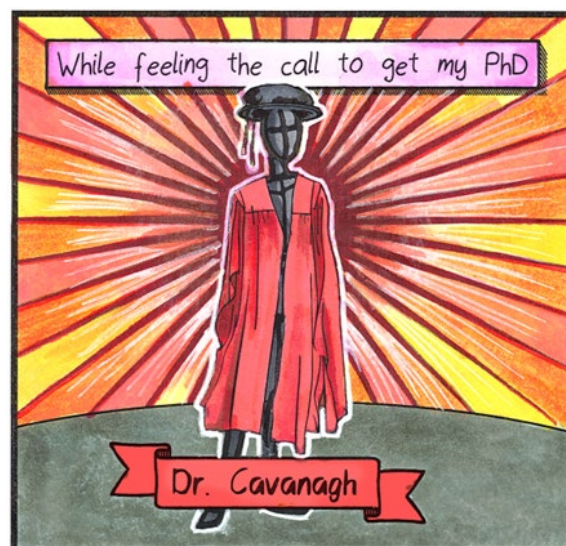
Like Ennals et al. (2016), I entered academia as a professional without pedagogical training and also struggled to understand ‘the rules’ of the game, as it were. As a novice academic I was torn between what the institution expected from me (researching, community engagement, attending conferences and presenting) and the overwhelming workload being placed on me as a lecturer (teaching, planning, assessing, reporting, administration, supervision). I was struggling emotionally and unable to see fashion design education as a site, storied and full of entanglements and relationalities in material, non-hierarchical way.

Figure 6.6 shows me trying to balance my students with my research obligations as separate entities. The humanist position limited how I could reconcile my ‘home discipline’ identity as a fashion designer to fashion design education in higher education (Hunter, 2020). I struggled to negotiate being a practitioner-lecturer in my home discipline of fashion design while trying to conform to the UoT’s expectations of what an academic and scholar should be. How could I respond to my dilemmas in an ethically meaningful way?

6.2.5. *Becoming a PhD scholar: An autoethnographic lens*

The comic illustration of Figure 6.7 shows my own construction of the ideal self (Lauriala & Kukkonen, 2005) through the doctoral robes which indicate having completed my PhD. This comic panel is showing the self I want to be.

Figure 6.7: Extract from professional be(com)ing comic illustration



Note. Figure created by the author.

Crossing borders

As I explained in the Self-Narrative in Chapter Four, I wanted to pursue my PhD in a new environment, ideally in an education-related field, to broaden my perspective beyond the confines of a single institution. But when I started the PhD, I struggled to make the change between disciplines (fashion to education) because the invisible ways of being were totally new to me. I had not done my undergraduate or master’s in education, and my fashion design background focused on practical rather than scholarly research (Harvey & Lucking, 2017; Smal & Lavelle, 2011). It required me to start thinking in a totally different way (Netolicky, 2017) and the shift was difficult and somewhat painful (Mezirow, 2009).

More than just the discipline content, what was valued, and the inherent practices were foreign to me. Even years later, I was still head butting against the fact that I simply didn't know what the structures and practices of this kind of research were, because they are just so different to what I was exposed to and taught in my fashion design education.

I was an outsider, and I was reminded of it constantly: in meetings, I wouldn't know what the acronyms and initialisations stood for, I'd never heard of let alone read many of the scholars my peers were discussing animatedly, things that the others took for granted as base knowledge were new and different to me. The feeling of being marginalised was not because I did not look the part or fit the template, it was because I had not mastered the Discourse of the School of Education, where I was registered as a doctoral candidate. I would say the wrong thing and it would mark me as an imposter. Like Maseti (2018), I participated less in the cohort meetings and workshops in case I don't use the 'right' English register – despite my mother-tongue privilege, the wrong English in my case came from not knowing how to speak like a scholar.

Feeling like an outsider: not academic enough

I attended the cohorts and continued to feel inadequate and stupid for years. I didn't know what the other PhD candidates were talking about; the philosophers and theorists they spoke about like friends, were foreign to me. I didn't feel like I could contribute to the discussions because I just didn't get it.

During PhD cohort meetings, I felt like an outsider. The other students had studied education in their undergraduate and master's degrees. They dropped the names of long-dead theorists, spoke philosophically about the meaning of truth (socially constructed realities and positivist understandings of what it means to "know") and referred to theories like old friends (often by their nick names – what on earth was "SIT" (Social Identity Theory) anyway?). I attended these sessions mostly confused. I felt like I didn't belong.

(Cavanagh, 2019, pp. 2-3)

The PhD has humbled me and made me aware of the limits of my own abilities. Despite how much I have struggled with the PhD in general, at some point, there was an indiscernible shift in my thinking. The more I read the recommended papers and engaged with discussion, the more I understood that theory was a tool that could help me think (Cavanagh, 2019). I was able to find scholars who were practitioners like me, and it gave me a foothold in understanding how I could see my practitioner and scholarly self as interconnected and as different forms of relations that were not at odds with each other. From a material understanding, unusual things, concepts, and entities can be plugged into an assemblage to make sense of becoming. I also acknowledge that the concept of becoming also shifts and changes as situations and spaces change.

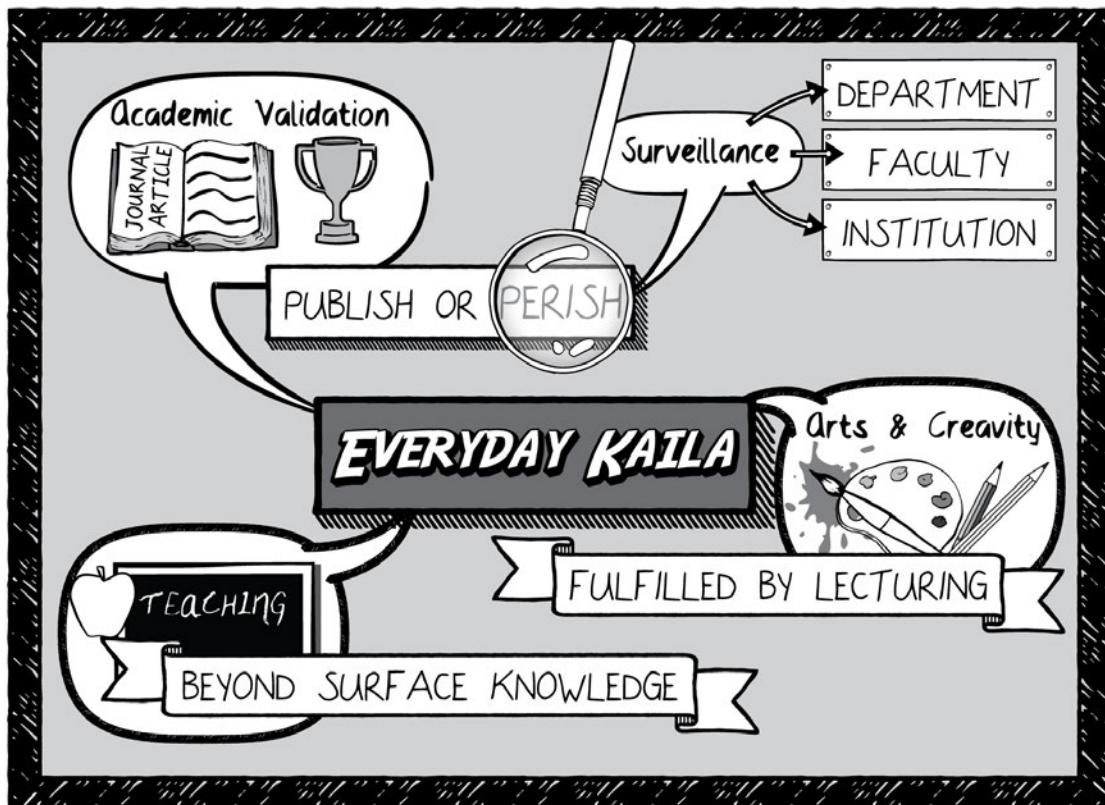
6.3. Section B – Becoming a fashion design lecturer: Professional discourses in the context of UoT and fashion design education

In section A of this chapter, I have focused on the stories of the professional experiences that have shaped my becoming fashion design lecturer at a UoT. The stories provide rich insights into lived experiences as intertwined and complex, entangled with the culture, systems, and structures of becoming a fashion design lecturer. Here, below in Section B of this chapter, I focus on particular professional discourses as containers to assemble my diverse professional experiences as a fashion design lecturer and highlight how it opened up spaces for alternate and relational understandings of gender, creativity academic and scholar. Like in Chapter Five, I do this to answer my second research question, but this time I do so with a focus on the professional practices as well as to foreground the potential for pointing to something different.

6.3.1. *Everyday fashion design lecturer Kaila*

In this discussion, I have chosen to highlight selected professional experiences and issues that represent what it means to be a professional at a University of Technology (UoT) that has evolved from a Technikon. Figure 6.8 illustrates the interplay between these core professional experiences and the development of my professional identities within the UoT context.

Figure 6.8: Everyday Kaila professional concept map



Note. Figure created by the author.

In the position of fashion design lecturer, I saw this space as an opportunity to cement my love of teaching, creative knowledge and my passion for mentoring and working together. I could move beyond the rote learning that had been modelled for me as a university student and shift to material, embodied ways of teaching. This passion for being a lifelong learner and my love of creative thinking and making as a way to know nudged me to improve my own teaching practice.

As an academic working in a UoT, I was validated for my academic performance. This went some way in reinforcing my belief that I needed to achieve academic excellence in order to be valued and to be valuable. This was played out in the neoliberal (Parfitt et al., 2021) university context, where I was pressured to publish and to research. This pressure to perform academically sometimes came at the cost of my teaching practice. However, because of my internalised need for academic validation, I prioritised research and publishing in spite of the risk of burnout.

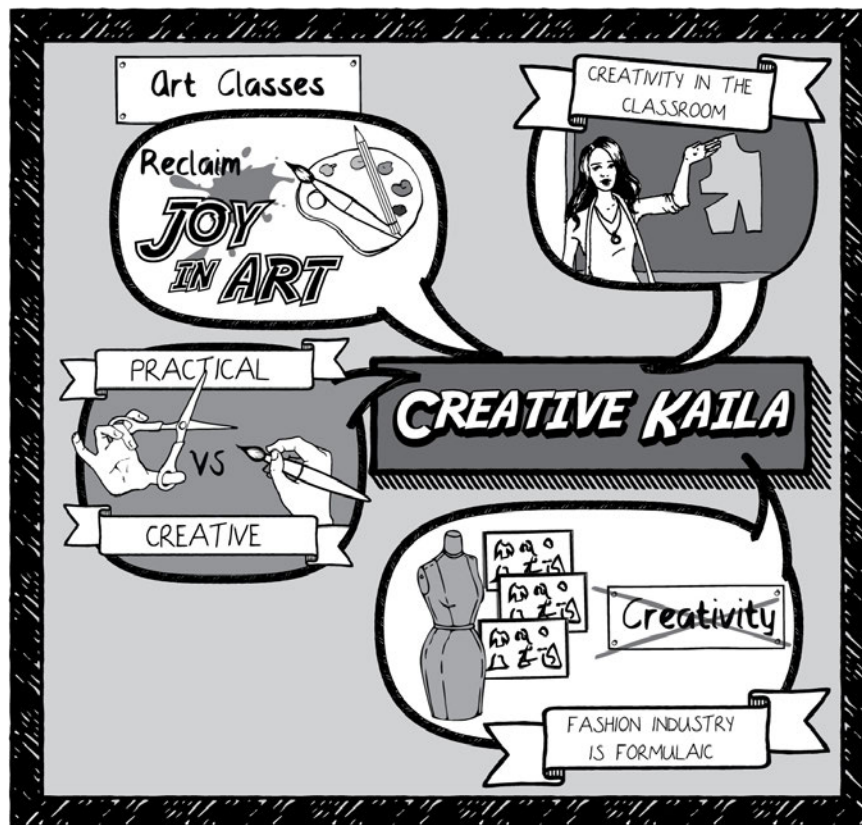
The need for academic validation also came with a sense of surveillance. Much like growing up as a staff kid feeling like I was constantly being watched, as an academic, I was constantly being watched and judged on different metrics. In some cases, it was my institution asking for performance reports, timesheets, conference reports, and what papers I had published. Sometimes, it was the faculty asking for student reports, what I was doing to address complex issues of student performance, decolonisation, e-learning, community engagement or entrepreneurship (whatever the latest buzzword was at the time). At other times, it was my colleagues and students making comments about my presence on campus.

My experience of finally teaching fashion design meant that I could engage with art, design, and craft every day. I could practice my craft as a fashion designer. Since I was now teaching the disciplinary content, I began to understand it at a much deeper level than I had as a university student or even as an industry professional. This cemented my knowledge of fashion design and theory into my everyday practice. Being - thinking, acting and being a designer became second nature. It also allowed me to enjoy my job and enjoy what I did through the passion that I had for clothing and fashion. Unlike in my industry work, where I was bored and feeling unfulfilled creatively and academically, lecturing allowed me to fulfil both those needs. As an academic, I was challenged to do research and creatively think and engage with new ideas and learning. As a creative fashion designer, I was able to improve my practice as a practitioner and create and enjoy art on a regular basis.

6.3.2. Fashion design creativity and creative Kaila

Being able to practice fashion design in both my fashion industry and academic work gave me the opportunity to enact practices that gave meaning to my Creative identity. Creative Kaila was seeded deeply in my childhood experiences. In this section I focus on the professional experiences and my creative thinking aspects, depicted in the concept map shown in Figure 6.9.

Figure 6.9: Creative Kaila professional concept map



Note. Figure created by the author.

My stories show the tension I felt between the creative and practical in the fashion industry. And while I enjoyed my industry work, becoming a lecturer would offer me different creative outlets. Transitioning into academia allowed me to explore my creativity in new and different ways. Not only was I now teaching fashion and engaging in the practice of fashion on a day-to-day basis, but I was also able to bring creativity into my classroom. Through researching and networking with others, I was able to see new and different ways to change my teaching. Over time, my teaching practice became more creative as I introduced new innovative projects, methods, and exciting things to engage my students.

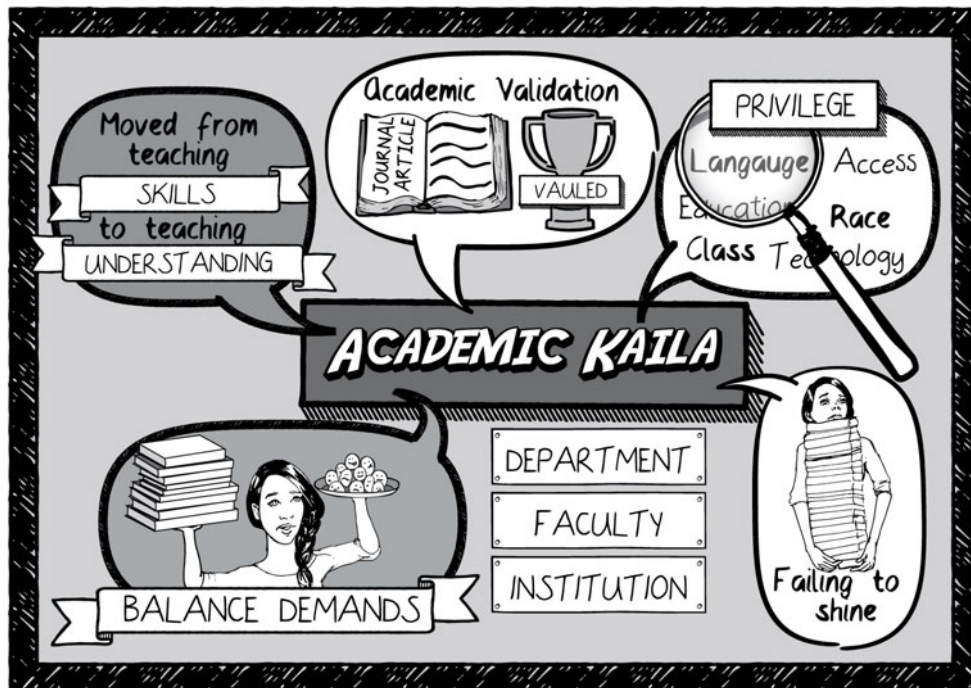
However, lecturing did not bring me the joy in art that I experienced as a child engaging in arts and crafts. As much as I still enjoyed making clothes, sewing, and crafting, I found that a major part of

my work as a lecturer was facilitating students' creativity and not my own. Joining an external art class gave me an outlet to be artistic regularly, reinvigorating my joy in art. The classes gave me the self-expression outlet that I had previously found in craft as a child.

6.3.3. Fashion design education and academic Kaila

Academic Kaila encompasses my lecturer and researcher selves. The site of my being-becoming a fashion design lecturer was the specific fashion department, in the specific Faculty, in the particular UoT where I was trained and where I began my lecturing career. In analysing how my experiences within this professional context shaped those identities, I returned to the specific context in which I performed my academic identities to understand them in situ. The professional experiences which shaped my Academic identities are depicted in Figure 6.10.

Figure 6.10: Academic Kaila professional concept map



Note. Figure created by the author.

Transitioning to becoming an academic and lecturing allowed me to embrace research, learning and creative thinking, engaging my intellectual curiosity, evoked by my childhood memories. Initially, I faced challenges due to my lack of pedagogical knowledge and the difficulty of adapting to a material view of the educational practice. However, I viewed this as an opportunity to explore and expand my practice, exposing new perspectives and stories that helped me become a better lecturer. By reflecting on my own experiences as a learner and student, I shared the kind of academic I aspired to become beyond just being a fashion design lecturer at a UoT.

As with many novice academics, I struggled with balancing my academic duties. I felt the pressure to publish and research, while teaching and fulfilling the ever-increasing administrative load of a lecturer. To help, I actively sought out professional development and began to engage with my own networks to enhance my practice. These communities of practice became essential spaces for me. I found them inspiring and invigorating, and they helped me to retain my passion at times when I was exhausted and overworked. Against the background of my own department, I was dealing with hurtful comments and workload pressures. But I persisted, supported by my HoD and some of my colleagues. I have grappled with conflicting expectations between department, faculty, and institutional management. Finding a balance was a constant challenge and one that I am not sure I managed to master. The PhD has highlighted the irony that despite never wanting to become an overburdened, overworked teacher, I had become an overburdened, overworked lecturer. I had followed in the family's footsteps unwittingly.

My transition into teaching uncovered cultural biases and assumptions that I had internalised. I had to navigate language differences, where the fashion jargon and vocabulary that I used marked out my privilege in ways that disadvantaged my students. I had to reflect seriously to recognise my own biases and perceptions in order to create a more inclusive learning environment. This was helped by my research and engagement with other projects such as the Student Success Project and the outside networks that I had created over my time.

My pursuit of a PhD in education marked another transformation in my academic identity, where I had to grapple with the disciplinary shifts between practitioner and scholar. I moved into a new institution with unfamiliar structures and found myself feeling like an outsider once more. Where I had previously been validated for my academic work, I now faced the jarring experience of not being "smart" enough in this new PhD home. I felt very humbled by the experience. Like Müller (2020), I felt like a foreigner to the field of education (coming from a fashion background). However, she explains that "not knowing helped me know differently" (Müller, 2020, p. 43). Eventually, my journey allowed me to reconcile my theoretical and practitioner academic selves, but getting to that point was difficult and painful, shaped by my many humbling and frustrating experiences.

6.3.4. Fashion design education and gendered Kaila

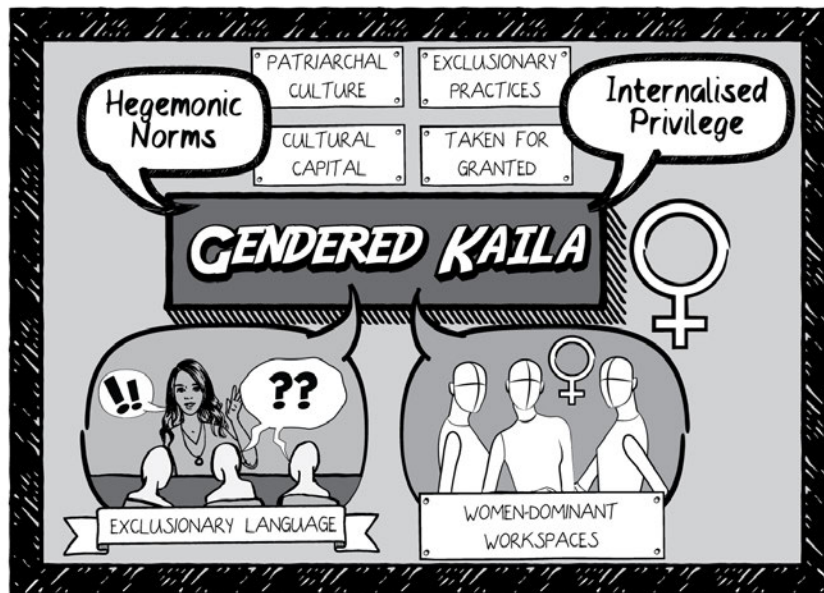
In my professional context, gender played a subtle yet significant role in shaping my identity as a lecturer. While I worked in the predominantly female field of fashion, which offered a sense of solidarity and support, I was also navigating the broader institutional culture where traditional gender norms often influenced expectations. As a lecturer, my way of being was shaped not only by the vocational demands of my department but also by societal expectations of women in academia. This created inner tension and a moral dilemma. My ethical stance to view fashion design education as an

opportunity for creating collaborative, women-dominated spaces positioned me as a feminist committed to critiquing the historical narratives of what women should look like, and whose voices should be heard and how. My commitment to challenging inequities and advocating for a more inclusive fashion design educational environment is real.

Below, I elaborate on this transformational assemblage that unfolds.

The discussion that follows picks up on the two strands of Kaila (discussed in Chapter Four), who I am as a woman and who I am as a feminist, exploring how my professional experiences shaped my identity as a woman engaging in the world through my material, female body, and how my inherent feminist attitude was shaped by my experiences in a University of Technology context steeped in post-colonial, hegemonic, patriarchal and insidiously prejudiced spaces. This is depicted in Figure 6.11.

Figure 6.11: Marginalised feminist Kaila professional concept map



Note. Figure created by the author.

I was in a predominantly female fashion industry, both as a designer and a lecturer. Most of the people that I worked with were women. Like when I was growing up, my mentors and supervisors were mostly women. This enabled me to see women in positions of power and authority as the norm. As a woman in academia, I navigated both supportive and judgmental attitudes from both men and women.

In Chapter Four, I've discussed how the distinction between what is considered craft and what is deemed art is often influenced by factors such as gender, race and Western hegemonical privilege (Bain, 2016; Levine, 2010; Luckman, 2013; Winge & Stalp, 2013). The making of clothes is often

seen as lesser “women’s work”, and fashion is often viewed as “an inferior endeavour” or “purely [women’s] concerns and therefore less important” (Peirson-Smith & Peirson-Smith, 2020, p. 276). I felt that this came through in my fashion design career where both in industry and academia, it was a gendered space. In that regard, I was granted some immunity from the issues and problems that many women experience in different industries. I hold a certain privilege being a woman in a predominantly women-based space. I did not personally have to experience many issues of misogyny, gendered power dynamics, or gender-based prejudices.

However, my experiences as a young, white, English-first language woman teaching predominantly black students from diverse backgrounds highlights subtle gendered dynamics. Some of my students came from deeply patriarchal cultural and societal systems and structures. I was not aware of the cultural capital that I freely enjoyed and instinctively drew on, but which my students did not have access to. I consider this to be the feminist identity coming through, where feminism is about equity and meeting people where they are. My experiences with my students helped to shape my feminist identity as I saw the injustice in how I was treating my students, even unwittingly. Choosing to critique and question these dominating structures and power systems is what makes me a feminist. My feminist stance was an ethical one and questioning my enduring ways and things I took for granted was ethical work.

Over time I was made aware how even the words that I was using could be exclusionary to students who are not first language English speakers and did not have the same educational background that I did. This was also true for my technological privilege. Recognising my inherent biases and privileges overtime helped me to become a better lecturer. By being critical, I began to question the status quo and questioned the fairness of how I was teaching. I realised that what worked for me might not work for my students and teaching became a conscious act. I tried to acknowledge the hidden ways of being a fashion designer tied into the social context that I was in and tried to relate this back to my own students and their experience.

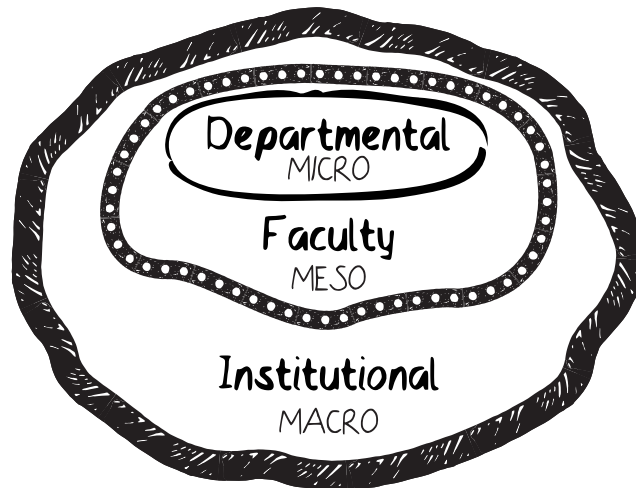
6.4. Insights from (un)learning professional experiences

My discussion with my supervisor revealed that there were three levels of interconnected but often conflicting cultural contexts at play, much like Barkhuizen’s (2008) model of interconnected stories.

Figure 6.12 shows how these often-conflicting cultures are interconnected. At a micro level, my departmental culture was shaped by a vocational education legacy which wanted to maintain “this is how we’ve always done it.” At a Meso level, the Faculty Culture was caught between the creative and skills-driven teaching model and the imperative to move towards professional disciplines grounded in theory and scholarship. At a macro level, the institutional culture was narrated by the

need to live up to the name of university and distance itself from its Technikon origins. Importantly, I was entangled with and through these cultures and in this flat ontology all are moving, juggling, and interconnecting as vibrant materiality sparking off pathways for thinking differently.

Figure 6.12: Interconnected cultural contexts



Note. Figure created by the author, inspired by the Interconnected Stories model from Barkhuizen (2008).

6.5. Summary

This chapter has explored the interplay of the professional fashion design lecturer experiences, tensions, vocationally focused fashion department, academic expectations and UoT – they highlight the complexities and entanglements of transitioning and becoming an early-career fashion design lecturer in the department of fashion design at a University of Technology, At a UoT, the institutional culture is shaped by its history as a Technikon, where the focus was primarily on vocational training (Kokt, 2010). Although it has transitioned into a university, the remnants of this vocational culture s continue to influence the expectations and practices within the institutional culture (Mafenya, 2013). Cultures can erase these traces. The use of visual material and material culture carry stories that are crucial for understanding the emotions, tensions, and stories of experience as a fashion design lecturer. These tensions were not only personal but also a product of the institutional culture at a UoT, where there is an ongoing negotiation between vocational expertise and academic scholarship (Barnett, 1994). The invisible meanings and enduring practices embedded in the material body – as a white, female fashion design lecturer – often came into conflict with the institutional expectations, further amplifying the importance of understanding the material nature of fashion design education for a fuller view of the worlds of fashion design practice and making sense of becoming a lecturer differently.

In the next chapter, I will explore further how the personal and professional seep into each other, shaping my becoming differently as a fashion design lecturer entangled with affect in this complex institutional assemblage.

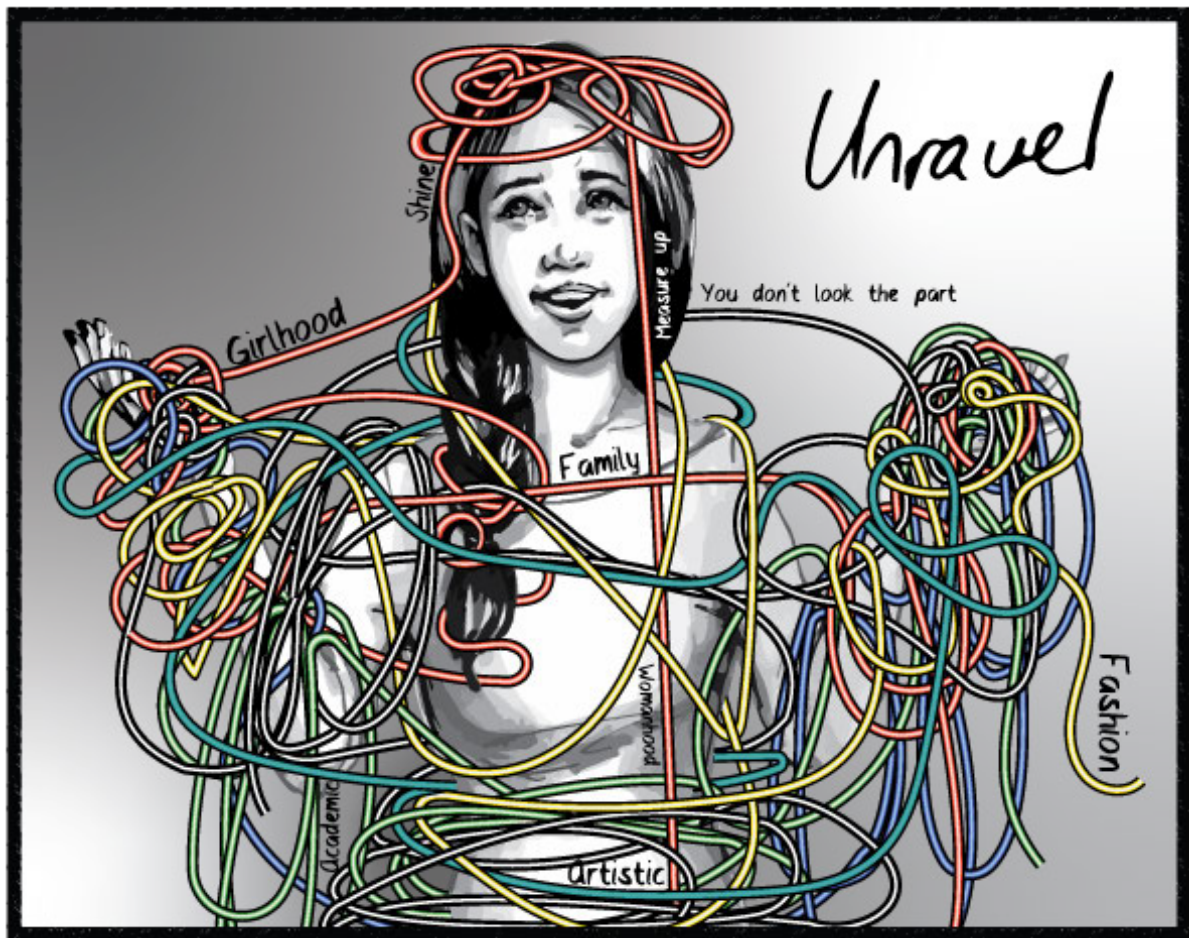
7. TANGLED THREADS: INTERWEAVING PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL

7.1. Introduction

In Chapters Five and Six, the autoethnographic space provided a container for exploring the intersections of my personal and professional experiences as a fashion design lecturer. These reflections examined how my identity has been shaped by the historical and cultural forces of the UoT context. This chapter builds on that exploration by critiquing the history that has shaped Kaila-the-lecturer's current position as an academic at a UoT and considers the potential for alternate ways of be(com)ing. Moving beyond the entanglements of the personal and professional, this chapter explores the assemblage of being-becoming a fashion design lecturer. These intersections are framed as sites where identities, practices, and material-discursive forces intra-act, positioning the lecturer not as an isolated figure but as part of a dynamic, evolving network shaped by cultural, institutional, and pedagogical forces.

Figure 7.1, titled *Unravel*, visually represents the entangled assemblages of being-becoming within the autoethnographic space. The interplay of threads and colours symbolises the dynamic intra-actions of material, social, and discursive forces shaping this process. Through the diffractive lens of visual autoethnography, I have been able to interrogate and disrupt the taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions that have shaped my existence as a white, privileged woman within the world of fashion design. This assemblage, both visual and conceptual, opens pathways for reimagining and becoming otherwise within this context.

Figure 7.1: Unravel



Note. Figure created by the author.

The autoethnographic space invites me to explore the potentialities of what I might become, engaging with the entangled assemblages of my past, present, and imagined futures. To navigate these intersections, I draw on the intra-actions of scholarly insights, critical friends, theoretical concepts, and artistic practices. These elements work together to diffract my thinking, pushing it to the edges and opening new pathways for reimagining and becoming otherwise.

7.2. Section A - Unravelling singular stories of self in recreating fashion design lecturer differently

The discussions in the previous two chapters highlighted how dominant and sometimes dominating discourses of race, class, and gender, along with notions of dress, body, play, handcrafts, fashion, teaching, and learning, plug into different assemblages of becoming fashion design lecturer. Through the creative processes of visual autoethnography, I have been able to disrupt fixed notions of the self, embracing relational and intra-active perspectives that move beyond human-centred and hierarchical frameworks.

7.2.1. *Everyday Kaila: Exploring my middle-class, imaginative self*

The concept of ‘Everyday Kaila,’ introduced in Chapter Four, represents an aspect of my identities that is rooted in the routine, normative practices shaped by my middle-class, white upbringing. As I reflect on the intersection of my personal and professional identities, ‘Everyday Kaila’ becomes a lens through which I can explore how habitual patterns and values influence my educational practices, offering a starting point for rethinking and reshaping my teaching philosophy.

Growing up in a matriarchal home surrounded by strong women who defied conventional gender roles and societal norms offered me alternative ways of imagining womanhood and my being-becoming as a fashion design lecturer. The models of womanhood I observed at home often clashed with conservative societal expectations, yet they created a space for me to explore and define what I wanted to become – not only as a girl but also in the context of my career and place in the world.

Drawing on theories of knowledge production that recognised my embodied visual art practices from a material practice-based understanding enabled a different conception of fashion design pedagogy. This grasp of pedagogy emphasised the joy and meaning found in the act of making and doing the craft of cutting and sewing as a sensory and bodily practice that allowed for deep creative connection and self-expression. It was through this lens that I began to define the kind of fashion designer I wanted to be: one who values the creative process and craftsmanship over the pursuit of trends. This approach offers a positive resistance to my experience in the fashion industry, where designers prioritise aesthetics and commercial success above all else. Now, I view fashion as a sense-making practice, a way to connect creatively with others, and the world around me through sensory and embodied experiences. This perspective not only informs my work as a designer but also shapes my identities and approach as a fashion design lecturer at a University of Technology.

Negotiating race, gender, and class in the practice of fashion design at a UoT

Gendered Discourses, which have traditionally framed sewing as a cornerstone of ‘true womanhood’ (Gordon, 2009), have both shaped and constrained my experiences. While the prevailing gendered Discourses positioned sewing within a narrowly defined femininity, they also opened avenues for creatively material and emotionally embodied expressions. By engaging with sewing as a feminist practice, I was able to resist societal pressures and reimagine it as a site of agency and empowerment (Bain, 2016).

While traditional gender roles often position sewing as a domestic duty, for “many women, sewing served as a creative outlet and a tool for self-definition” (Gordon, 2009, p. 52). When I was growing up, sewing meant exactly this to me. Throughout my girlhood and adolescence, I felt marginalised and like an outsider. I simply did not fit into the girlhood template in school, and as a result, I was

bullied and excluded for being different. Through this difficult time, sewing provided a means of self-expression and empowerment, and it gave me the gift of art and making things. This has been a cornerstone of my creative and emotional experiences. When societal expectations and personal insecurities made me feel like I didn't belong, I turned to art and craft as nurturing spaces. These creative practices helped me resist the dominant Discourses that left me feeling as though I did not measure up to conventional standards of femininity.

As a lecturer, I drew on these experiences to inform my teaching practices. Reflecting on the role of sewing and creativity in fostering resilience and self-expression, I recognised the importance of ensuring that my students also have access to spaces where they can explore their identities and develop their skills without constraint. However, I also recognise that my experiences were shaped by my middle-class upbringing, which gave me access to appropriate resources and informal mentorship that may not be available to everyone (Patel & Dudrah, 2022). This awareness motivated me to adapt my assessments and seek alternatives to make my teaching methods more accessible and inclusive. I provided resources where I could, accepted handwritten and typed work, and demonstrated free or low-cost options for completing assignments.

Race Discourses, particularly those tied to white, middle-class values, also shaped my approach to fashion design. As a white woman, the models of craft and creativity that I was exposed to were largely rooted in Eurocentric traditions, emphasising Western aesthetics and favouring fashion designers and trends from the global North (Harvey & Lucking, 2017; Roos & Harvey, 2024). These influences shaped how I understood and taught fashion, often inherently centring Eurocentric perspectives in my teaching. This bias was reinforced by the predominantly Eurocentric curriculum I was tasked with delivering. However, this approach often created a disconnect with students from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, whose experiences with craft and fashion were informed by different Discourses and role models. I needed to critically reflect on how white, Western traditions had shaped the dominant standards I perpetuated. Through this reflection, I consciously worked to adapt my teaching to better include and value diverse experiences and approaches to creative making.

Performing vs becoming academic

Moving beyond rote learning to create authentic, meaningful learning experiences for my diverse grouping of students was a challenge. This approach was rooted in my early experiences of informal learning and mentorship, where practice-based understanding through making was encouraged, and collaborative creation fostered supportive, caring spaces. However, working in a pedagogical setting at a university required me to align with standardised curricula, assessment metrics, and institutional expectations that often prioritised an instrumentalist approach, where theoretical knowledge was prioritised over practical skills (Lo, 2018; Marginson, 2013). This environment often focuses on

individual achievement over collaboration, creating a working environment that is fast-paced, and where the pressures of research, publishing, and teaching can become overwhelming (Enright et al., 2017; McKeown, 2022). The emotional and psychological trauma I experienced as an early-career academic led to stress and burnout.

The neo-liberal agenda and audit culture (Shore & Wright, 2020) foster an increasing need to be seen as competitive, individualistic and productive which can undermine well-being and stifle creativity, care, sharing and collaboration. Academics are ‘stretched thin’ (Netolicky, 2017). The tension between the institutional values of productivity and my personal values of collaboration and creative practice exacerbated my stress, ultimately impacting my mental health and effectiveness as an educator.

Finding supportive spaces to realign personal values

Navigating these multi-level cultural contexts required me to negotiate between maintaining my commitment to practical, creative learning and conforming to institutional pressures prioritising theoretical knowledge. This negotiation prompted me to critically reflect on how historical divisions between practical and intellectual labour shaped both academia and the fashion industry. By aligning myself with communities of practice outside of my department that shared my commitment to creative teaching, I found supportive spaces to realign my personal values with my professional practice, merging my practitioner and researcher selves (Leavy, 2015). Using my different selves together helped me cope with the burden of being an academic, even as the university exerted pressures through an increasing audit culture (Shore & Wright, 2020).

The cultural conflicts between maker practices and academic norms compelled me to critically examine my identities as a maker, artist, lecturer, and academic. Navigating this terrain has been transformative, prompting me to go beyond the notion of fixed to different forms of relations that are complementary. This position enabled me to align my personal values with professional response abilities in affirmative ways. While the fashion campus nurtured my maker identity, I realised that embracing my academic self could enhance my teaching through the research of my practice (Barkhuizen, 2008; Dall’Alba, 2009). Drawing from my background of strong female role models and creative engagement, I sought to integrate practical skills with theoretical insights. This fusion allowed me to develop innovative teaching methods that complement the craft of fashion design while fostering critical thinking.

By reimagining the relationship between practitioner and academic, I moved beyond the pressure to conform to traditional academic metrics. Focusing on authenticity and well-being, I created inclusive learning environments that support students’ becoming fashion designers. This integrated

perspective enriched my professional identities, enabling me to contribute uniquely to both creative and scholarly communities. Embracing my multiple selves led to a more balanced and fulfilling path. Staying true to my passion for making while engaging with academic Discourse fostered continuous personal and professional growth within the evolving landscape of higher education. Finding supportive spaces allowed me to realign my personal values with my professional practice, ensuring that both selves thrive.

7.2.2. *Creative Kaila: Artful knowing in my personal and professional journey*

Creative Kaila emerges as a vital thread in the tapestry of my identities, connecting the personal joy of artistic expression with the professional demands of fashion design education. This section explores how artful knowing and creative practices have become central to my being-becoming a fashion design lecturer, enabling me to navigate and challenge the constraints of traditional academic and industry paradigms.

Navigating creativity amid professional constraints

My experience in the fashion industry was characterised by a constant tension between creative aspirations and practical constraints. While I honed practical skills and learnt about commercial applications, I often felt creatively stifled and limited in my originality. This emphasis on practicality over creativity continued into my academic career, where initially, I adhered to the traditional teaching methods of my predecessors. However, recognising the inherent connection between my personal creativity and professional practice, I embraced artful knowing (van Meer, 2016) and thinking with art in my teaching. This approach brings the personal and professional into dialogue in be(com)ing a fashion design lecturer at a UoT, allowing me to weave my creative self into my educational practice.

Joining external art classes provided a necessary outlet for my personal artistic expression, reinvigorating my joy in art, and balancing the demands of being a fashion design academic. This external artistic engagement played a crucial role in maintaining my creative well-being. It provided a counterbalance to the structured and often restrictive nature of both the fashion industry and academic settings. By participating in these classes, I was able to cultivate a personal space where creativity could flourish without the pressures of practicality or performance.

Integrating personal creativity with professional practice

The cultural context of my upbringing, rich with artistic influence and creative freedom, provided a solid foundation for my identity as “Creative Kaila.” By adopting artful knowing (van Meer, 2016), I engaged with students to foster an environment where creativity and critical thinking coexist. Thinking with art enables me to encourage students to explore deeper meanings and personal

expressions in their work, entangling individual creativity and academic objectives. Despite this, much of my creative energy was channelled into facilitating my students' creativity rather than my own.

Early mentorship, resourcefulness, and navigating societal labels are deeply intertwined with my professional journey. Engaging these varied relationships through creative and artful approaches fosters inventive ways of knowing and thinking, even within constraints.

7.2.3. Academic Kaila: Shaping my teaching and learning practice

Academic Kaila's development was driven by a love of learning and intellectual curiosity, deeply rooted in the informal mentorship I received from family members. This foundation was further enriched by my professional experiences that emphasised critical thinking and authentic learning. Despite the challenges of balancing teaching, research, and administrative duties, my commitment to academic excellence and the cultivation of meaningful learning experiences has remained unwavering.

Personal experiences influencing academic identities

My inherent intellectual curiosity drove me to explore subjects deeply and pursue further education, solidifying my academic identity. While the love of learning was instilled in me through my family culture, my learning style and academic self-concept were also shaped by the teachers and schools I attended. The teachers I considered 'good' aligned with the educational practices I believe in and now model – authentic learning (Herrington et al., 2010), contextualisation of knowledge, and making learning practical and useful (Dall'Alba, 2009; Davids & Waghid, 2017). These teachers made knowledge exciting and memorable, with a staying power beyond exams (Zhang & Gee, 2023, p. 2).

Interconnected academic narratives

The informal early learning experiences and family emphasis on education laid a strong foundation for becoming an academic centred on intellectual curiosity. This personal background influenced my professional approach to teaching, where I strive to create meaningful and engaging learning experiences for my students.

By engaging in autoethnographic exploration (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2016), I have become reflexive about my educational practices, continuously adapting my teaching by integrating personal values with professional expectations. This reflexivity within the autoethnographic space highlights the importance of finding spaces between personal academic interests and professional responsibilities, enabling me to navigate the demands of academia, which recognise and enhance embodied and

ethical ways of thinking and working. Recognising and negotiating these tensions through self-reflexivity has been a transformative process (Steadman, 2021), allowing me to align my personal values with professional expectations in innovative ways.

7.2.4. Gendered Kaila: Reimagining fashion norms

Gendered Kaila's identity emerged from the tension between my personal non-conformity and societal gender expectations. Growing up, I often felt at odds with traditional notions of femininity, which influenced how I navigated both personal and professional spaces. Working in the predominantly female fashion industry and academic department provided unique perspectives on gender dynamics. Many of my mentors and colleagues were women, creating supportive environments that valued collaboration and mutual growth. At the time, I did not fully realise how these experiences were shaped by broader societal constructs of gender.

However, interacting with students from diverse backgrounds highlighted my own cultural biases and privileges. Recognising these biases became integral to my teaching practices. Embracing a feminist stance allowed me to critically examine how societal expectations and power structures influenced my perceptions and actions. This process enabled me to question dominant Discourses (Gee, 2008) surrounding gender and strive for equity and inclusivity in my teaching.

Through my PhD research, I have come to engage deeply with Butler's (2002) concept of gender performativity, which frames gender not as an inherent quality but as a dynamic process enacted through iterative acts shaped by sociocultural norms. Reflecting on my experiences through this lens, I can see how my resistance to conventional femininity was not merely oppositional but a form of (re)imagining gender performances in my own life. This has allowed me to better understand the tensions I felt with societal expectations and their ongoing influence on the entanglements of my personal-professional identities.

Similarly, Barad's (2007) exploration of material-discursive entanglements has reframed my understanding of fashion as an active site of identity-making. While I wasn't explicitly applying these theories in the past, I now see how the materiality of fashion – the tactile interplay of fabric, tools, and crafted forms – acts as a participant in the assemblage of identity. This perspective enables me to reflect on how my fashion design teaching practices were always already intra-acting with these material-discursive dynamics, even if I had not consciously articulated it at the time.

Interacting with students from diverse backgrounds highlighted my own cultural biases and privileges. Recognising and addressing these issues became an integral part of my teaching practice. Through my current research, I understand how dominant Discourses (Gee, 2008) surrounding

gender and culture can shape interactions in the classroom. This awareness has prompted me to critically reflect on my teaching methods and strive towards creating a more inclusive and equitable learning environment.

Confronting and addressing cultural biases reflects an ongoing ethical commitment to equity. By acknowledging the multiple, fluid, and relational nature of identities (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009), I have become more attuned to the diverse experiences of my students. Engaging in reflexive autoethnographic practice (Adams & Herrmann, 2023) during my PhD journey has been transformative, enabling me to align my personal values with professional expectations in new ways.

7.2.5. Reflecting on the stories of self

This section has engaged with the entangled and multifaceted aspects of my identities through the lenses of Everyday Kaila, Creative Kaila, Academic Kaila, and Gendered Kaila. My personal and professional experiences are deeply interconnected (Beijaard, 2019), intra-acting to reveal a dynamic process of becoming that resists fixed boundaries and linear progression. The autoethnographic space has provided a diffractive lens that has enabled me to become vulnerable (Adams & Herrmann, 2023), and to explore how foundational personal experiences are embodied and reinforced in professional contexts, creating a cohesive yet complex narrative of growth and self-awareness.

The constant negotiation between personal values, societal expectations, and professional demands underscores the dynamic and multifaceted nature of my be(com)ing as a fashion design lecturer. Integrating theoretical perspectives such as Gee's (2008) concept of big D Discourses, Butler's (2002) notion of gender performativity, and Barad's (2007) idea of materiality has provided deeper insights into how these identities are constructed and enacted. This process has been transformative, helping me to align my personal values with professional expectations in innovative ways. Reflecting on these stories of self underscores the importance of embracing the interconnectedness of personal and professional identities (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011).

7.3. Section B – Seepages between the personal and professional

In this section, I reflect on how personal experiences have seeped into my professional practice, shaping my identities as a fashion design lecturer at a University of Technology (UoT). Through the lens of autoethnography, I examine the interplay between personal history, societal expectations, and professional responsibilities, exploring how these elements have influenced my teaching practice and sense of self.

7.3.1. Not looking the part

Throughout my education and early career, I was formally trained into the fashion design Discourse (Gee, 2008), internalising industry standards of what a woman’s body “should” look like. I thrived on the practical aspects of the course, honing my vocational skills and becoming fluent in design, pattern-making, and sewing. Yet, beneath this success, I wrestled with an uncomfortable tension: I was designing for an idealised form that did not reflect my own body.

I often felt like an outsider in a field that emphasised a narrow standard of beauty. Not fitting the size 34 mannequin – whose curves I knew intimately – left me feeling inadequate. It was hurtful when people expressed surprise at my choice to study fashion, as if my appearance disqualified me from belonging in the industry. The dissonance between my embodiment and the industry’s expectations highlighted the performative nature of gender and identity (Butler, 2002). I did not “look the part” of a fashion designer. These experiences highlighted the powerful influence of dominant Discourses and made me question my place within the fashion world.

Reflecting through a feminist new materialist lens (Barad, 2007; Truman, 2019), assists me in understanding that my body and material engagements are entangled in the co-construction of identity and meaning. My experiences illustrate how materiality and embodiment intersect with cultural expectations, affecting both identity and practice. The disconnect between my abilities and how others perceived me was a source of inner conflict. It has taken time and self-reflection to understand that my worth as a designer and educator is not determined by conforming to external expectations.

7.3.2. Reimagining femininity: Navigating gendered expectations

Womanhood culture extends beyond appearance, encompassing societal and historical expectations of what women should do and be. Home sewing, traditionally viewed as a feminine domain (Gordon, 2009), was a skill passed down through generations of women in my family. My mother, aunts, and grandmother all engaged in sewing – some with joy, others out of a sense of duty – perpetuating notions of “true womanhood” (Gordon, 2009).

These familial Discourses influenced my understanding of femininity and performing my gender. Despite not conforming to traditional feminine aesthetics, I embraced traditionally feminine skills, engaging in the performative acts that constitute gender (Butler, 2002). By styling myself as “hyper-feminine” and immersing myself in feminine crafts, I navigated and reimagined the womanhood template imposed upon me.

As I grew older, I reclaimed these feminine crafts and hobbies as an “intentional engagement with feminism” (Bain, 2016, p. 58), where my performance of gender involved supportive communities of practice with other women and the demonstration of my ability to choose for myself. Through this process, I was resisting and redefining gendered expectations, aligning with feminist new materialist perspectives that emphasise agency and the dynamic interplay of identities through material-discursive practices (Barad, 2007).

7.3.3. Recreating white, middle-class Kaila

As a white, English-speaking lecturer in a predominantly isiZulu classroom, I initially experienced a profound sense of otherness. My middle-class background contrasted sharply with the realities faced by many of my students, who grappled with technological illiteracy, limited English proficiency, and financial constraints. This role reversal – from feeling “poor” during my high school years to recognising my privilege in the university setting – was a significant cultural shock. Despite my own feelings of inadequacy growing up, I now realised that I had been sheltered from many struggles that my students faced daily. This realisation was humbling and unsettling. I felt like an outsider, unsure of how to bridge the gap between my experiences and theirs.

My initial attempts to innovate with new teaching methods were met with resistance from both students and colleagues, highlighting my outsider status as someone challenging established norms and expectations. This prompted me to question whether I was imposing my own values and assumptions without fully engaging with my students’ needs, or if I was unintentionally disregarding the legacy my colleagues and predecessors sought to preserve.

These challenges forced me to reflect deeply on my assumptions and biases. I began to see the importance of listening, learning, and adapting my approach to be more inclusive and supportive. It wasn’t easy, and I made mistakes along the way, but these experiences have taught me the value of empathy and the necessity of meeting students where they are.

7.3.4. Finding community amidst isolation

Novice academics should learn teaching theories, but as van den Bos and Brouwer (2014) clarify, these theories must be implicitly linked to their own teaching experiences and contexts. They stress that the social context of learning to teach is crucial in that discussing and reflecting with peers and colleagues allows teachers to develop and improve their teaching practice. Likewise, McMillan and Gordon (2017) speak about novice academics cultivating networks and communities of practice to help develop themselves as academics and good teachers.

Despite often feeling like an outsider, I found comfort and belonging within professional communities, particularly in fashion design education. Returning to Button Lane campus as a lecturer after working in the fashion industry felt like coming home. This was the place where I had first studied fashion design – a space where I was understood and valued by my peers. Yet, even within this ‘safe’ community, I occasionally felt out of place. My ideas and approaches to teaching and fashion design education didn’t always align with established norms, and I worried about being perceived as too different, or seen as challenging those I admired. These insecurities have been a constant presence, but they have also driven me to grow, adapt, and seek spaces where I can be my most authentic self.

Mbatha (2017) highlights the scarcity of academic and research skills in South African fashion education, noting that 93% of staff do not hold a doctoral qualification, compared to 53% across the country. This reflects my own experiences as a novice academic, where there were often long periods without any PhD-qualified staff in my department, or at best, only one. With limited capacity for academic mentoring within the department, I sought guidance from colleagues in other departments and faculties. Attending conferences and connecting with passionate academics outside my immediate context provided me with a much-needed sense of belonging and support.

7.4. Summary

Reflecting across the three chapters, I have come to see the boundaries between the personal and professional as porous and constructed. Engaging with visual thinking has allowed me to confront vulnerabilities and envision more empathetic and inclusive possibilities within my classroom environment. Engaging in visual autoethnography has enabled me to critically examine the entanglements between my personal history and professional practice, moving beyond hierarchical structures to consider relationalities with other entities. In exploring “*What personal-professional experiences shaped my fashion design lecturer identities at a UoT?*” I have come to view the intersections of the personal and professional as sites of possibility – spaces where dominant paradigms in fashion design education can be reimagined and disrupted. By challenging colonial ways of knowing that position the lecturer as the sole arbiter of meaning, I can explore new ways of engaging with teaching and learning. Theoretical insights, such as Butler’s (2002) notion of gender performativity and Barad’s (2007) concept of materiality, have offered critical tools for navigating these complexities.

In the next chapter, I delve into the broader cultural and institutional context of the UoT as a pedagogical environment. By exploring the interconnectedness across departments, faculty, and institutions, I unpack the material-discursive forces shaping the assemblage of being-becoming a fashion design lecturer.

8. CULTURE, EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES AND BE(COM)ING

8.1. Introduction

This chapter addresses my third research question: “*How did the cultural context of a UoT shape my be(com)ing a fashion design lecturer and my educational practices?*” In the previous chapters, I explored the cultural threads that weave through my constructions of self and how I came to be a fashion design lecturer. Autoethnography provided the space (Jones et al., 2016) to trace the history that shaped and reproduced enduring practices and ways of thinking as a white middle-class woman and early-career academic at a UoT. It enabled me to question the dominant Discourses that narrated my being-becoming. Moreover, through recursive reflexive processes with the self and others, it “opens up spaces for things to happen” (Pahl, 2017, p. 33), and new ways to understand and make sense of these experiences.

In this chapter, I further unravel the institutional culture pervading the UoT and explore the possibilities for becoming different. Here, I engage with Barad’s (2007) concept of diffractive readings to view myself as a fashion design lecturer entangled with both human and non-human entities from an embodied material perspective. I use objects in this chapter to help me “*think through things*” (Mitchell, 2017), engaging with them to explore the entanglements of cultural context and teaching practices. Building on earlier discussions of diffraction, I make use of Hancock’s (2020) perspective, which moves beyond reflection on the object itself to examine the intra-action of different ‘waves’ of experience. This diffractive approach opens up alternative ways of making sense of how cultural threads shape and inform my teaching, offering a renewed lens through which to view these entangled practices.

Drawing on object-inspired narratives of two evocative objects (Turtle, 2007), I examine how the culture, practices, and materialities within a fashion department housed in a Faculty of Design, have both shaped my experiences as a lecturer and contributed to the erasure of cultural traces. Said (1994) argues that institutional practices can obscure or marginalise histories and identities, and this chapter interrogates how these dynamics intersect with my professional and personal becoming. Section A re-presents the object narratives, focusing on the stories of self that each object evoked and the traces of identity they reveal. Section B shifts to a broader examination of the department’s cultural norms, exploring how these have influenced my teaching practices while evoking emotions of vulnerability, disconnection, and resilience. The visual autoethnographic space has provided a framework to reflect on these relationalities and to imagine more ethically grounded and creative approaches to my academic and scholarly practices.

8.2. Section A – Object inspired stories of self

This section presents personal narratives evoked through two significant evocative objects – my fabric scissors and keys. These objects serve as windows into my enduring practices as a fashion design lecturer. By narrating stories of self that were inspired by these objects, I reflect on how the culture of a fashion department, as well as the wider faculty and institutional structures, assemble and interconnect with the objects, stories, concepts, and affective flows to shape my becoming a lecturer.

Exploring my relationality with objects has enabled me to uncover how various levels of institutional culture interact and intra-act, shaping my everyday practices as a fashion design lecturer. I re-story my life and work, using the objects of scissors and keys as tools to “tell stories about myself to myself” (De Beer, 2018, p. 95). Mitchell (2017) argues that memory and objects are profoundly linked and that objects can be useful thinking tools. I have used objects to evoke stories, but what do they tell me about the self, using an autoethnographic gaze? As an autoethnographer, I am able to reflect on the material-discursive entanglements (Barad, 2007) that have shaped my journey within the department and the wider institutional culture of the UoT.

To help the reader navigate the interconnected relationships within this narrative, I have used visual frames to distinguish the different stories of self, narrated by my practitioner self – Kaila-the-lecturer. These narratives are presented in distinctive frames, adorned with stitches, buttons, and a pair of scissors, symbolising the interconnected practices and relationships of a fashion designer at work, from material engagements to professional and creative collaborations. Within this frame, the narratives are written in a distinct font to visually remind the reader that this is a different voice from the rest of the thesis. These narratives live within the thesis, nestled between the voice of the autoethnographer self who steps in to offer reflexive, theoretical insights, connecting the stories to the broader cultural context that shaped my being-becoming. These visual cues are not only functional; they reflect the traces of the stories that lie at the heart of autoethnography, where experience and analysis are always in dialogue with one another.

8.2.1. An extension of my hand (scissors)

Objects have the “potential to tell new stories” (Pahl, 2017, p. 33). In this section, I focus on my fabric scissors as an evocative object to provoke stories, following Turkle’s (2007, p. 6) notion that objects become “companions to our emotional lives and provocations to thought”. These scissors, a practical tool used regularly in my work, hold layers of meaning that are both personal and professional. While Riggins (1994) examines how objects in domestic spaces reflect broader cultural narratives, Mitchell (2017) extends this idea by exploring how our objects are deeply embedded in

personal and cultural practices, revealing the intertwined meanings individuals and societies construct with, about, and around them.

The stories of self that follow in this section enable me to illustrate how these scissors are not just tools of my trade (Riggins, 1994) but markers of my be(com)ing as a fashion design lecturer. The culture of a fashion department within a UoT, steeped in vocational and technical educational practices, is uncovered through the stories these scissors evoke. Through this object, I reflect on the complex ways my learning and teaching practices were shaped by my material environment and how they reflect the micro context of the departmental cultural Discourses within the UoT setting (as discussed in previous chapters). As Riggins (1994) notes, objects can act as cultural artefacts, reflecting the practices, beliefs, and relationships that we carry through our lives. Mitchell (2017) expands this by showing how objects are deeply embedded in both personal and cultural practices, helping to construct the stories we tell about ourselves.

The scissors and me

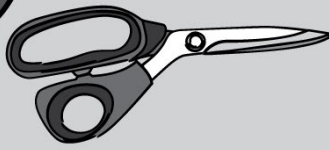
As I reflect on my fabric scissors (Figure 8.1), they come to represent more than just a functional object; they encapsulate my journey of becoming a fashion designer and lecturer. Turkle's (2007) notion of evocative objects underscores this idea, emphasising how certain tools can carry emotional and intellectual weight. These scissors symbolise both my personal and professional transformations, showing how objects shape the way we learn, practice, and teach. By unpacking the stories connected to this object, I aim to show how my journey through the UoT was influenced by its emphasis on vocational training, professional precision, and hands-on learning.

This next narrative brings into focus the emotional and intellectual transitions evoked through my scissors, highlighting how they mirror my journey from student to teacher, and practitioner to lecturer. Following De Beer (2018) and Mitchell (2011), I start with the denotative description of my object.

Figure 8.1: A photograph of my fabric scissors



Note. Photograph taken by the author.



My 18-year-old pair of fabric scissors, with long silver blades and black plastic handles, are a significant part of my self and identity as a fashion designer. Pom bought the scissors for me from a fabric store in Pietermaritzburg. Their design is ergonomic, with a separate space for the thumb and fingers, and they are sturdy yet comfortable to use.

These scissors would be categorised as intrinsically active by Riggins (1994, p. 111), as they are purpose-built for cutting fabric, making them an essential tool in my trade. Despite having a variety of scissors for different tasks, including paper-cutting scissors for pattern-making, thread clippers, embroidery scissors, and craft scissors, none can compare to my fabric scissors.

As Riggins (1994) reminds us, objects can be used to trace memories along a timeline. These scissors have traced my journey as a fashion designer, from my university days when they were brand new, through my growing skills and experiences, to my current home in the UK. They are not just tools, but a timeline of critical moments, relationships and experiences shaping my self-perceptions, beliefs, and embodied feelings as a fashion designer.

This narrative highlights how the fabric scissors represent more than a tool – they symbolise the deeply embedded vocational practices that shaped my journey as a fashion designer and later, a lecturer. The scissors speak to the Departmental culture within the UoT, particularly within the Fashion Design department, where technical precision, skill acquisition, and mastery over materials were prioritised. This emphasis on hands-on, skills-based learning was a cornerstone of my education, and the scissors, with their weight and familiarity, embody these values.

The department of fashion design operated as a microcosm of this vocational focus, training us to achieve proficiency through repetition and discipline. These cultural practices were not just external; they became internalised in my identity, shaping how I learnt, how I taught, and how I came to think of fashion as an inherently practical discipline. My fabric scissors are a physical representation of these embedded practices, signifying both the learning experience and technical mastery that were core to my becoming.

As I move into the next narrative, the story of sewing itself takes on a more personal dimension. The act of cutting fabric connects me not only to my professional training but also to the enduring

practices of creativity and making. These practices have followed me throughout my life. Sewing is more than just a skill – it is a way of reconnecting with my past, and no matter where I am, it remains a grounding force that keeps bringing me back to the process of creation and creative thinking as materially situated.

I always come back to sewing

The fabric scissors Pom gave me at the start of my fashion design training are more than just tools; they are forms of enduring relations with sewing and making fashion. My fabric scissors are significant markers of my embodied and tacit knowledge as a fashion designer, deeply intertwined with enduring cultural practices that shaped my middle-class, gendered learning as a girl. The memories they evoke carry personal meanings of functionality, as a tool of my trade (Riggins, 1994), and connections to the women role models in my family, especially as a gift from Pom. The skills I developed through an apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 2020) and trial and error at home were further solidified through formal education at the UoT.



My fabric scissors and I are old friends. No matter how busy life gets, I always find my way back to sewing. When I pick them up, I feel their familiar weight - a comforting, reliable presence that has been with me for over 18 years. They are more than just tools; they've been a constant companion through the changing landscapes of my life.

These scissors evoke memories of my student days, when I was still searching for my place, not only in fashion but in the world. Through the repetitive act of cutting fabric, garment after garment, I began to find myself. Even now, miles away from that time and place, the simple act of cutting brings me back to those early days when I was discovering the joy of mastering my craft.

As a lecturer, I remain connected to my scissors. I use them to cut fabric for mock-ups and teaching examples, and the weight of them still brings the same confidence and comfort it did when I was a student. Now, though, that feeling is layered with years of experience and wisdom. These scissors seem to cut through time, linking my past as a student to my present as a lecturer.

I find joy not only in the finished product but in the process of making itself. The tactile sensation of the blades slicing through fabric, the sound of metal against material, and the satisfaction of a clean, precise cut - all of it makes me feel deeply connected to the act of creation. Cutting isn't just practical, it's emotional, grounding me in those first moments when fashion became part of who I am.

These scissors remind me of the many selves I've been - the eager student, the confident teacher, and the creative practitioner. They hold the memory of Pom teaching me to sew, of my own mastery, and of the examples I now create for my students. They symbolise how I weave the personal with the professional, connecting my many selves as a creative, a teacher, and a lifelong learner.

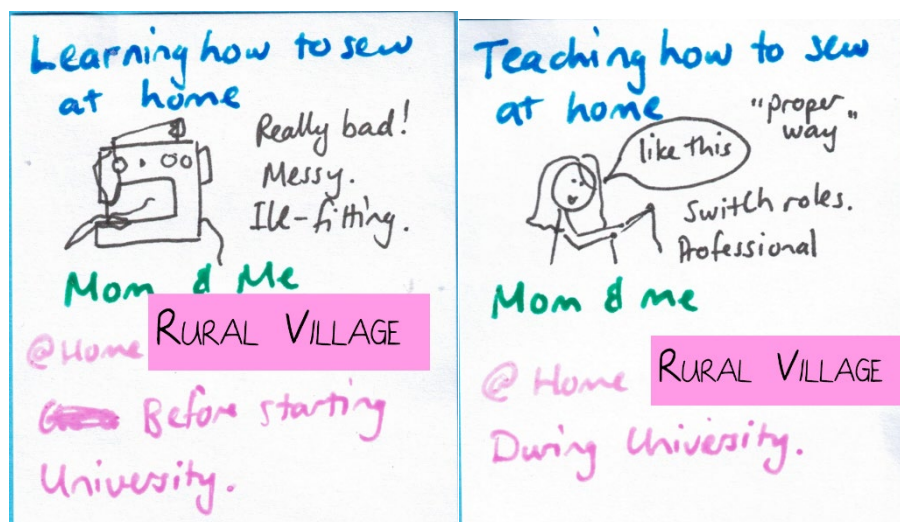
The seamless transition from sewing at home to working in the fashion production line and lecturing at a UoT reflects how comforting and familiar these practices were to me. The pattern-making and sewing routines became sedimented (Rowse & Pahl, 2007) into my ways of knowing and thinking as an early-career academic. This continuity highlights how the department's emphasis on vocational, hands-on training resonated with my own experiences (Harvey & Lucking, 2017) and reinforced my approach to teaching fashion design.

By privileging practical skills and embodied creative knowledge, I was enacting the fashion department's cultural values, resulting from its Technikon heritage (Kokt, 2010), in my teaching. As Christie et al. (2007) consider, learning is a social and situated activity. My journey with the scissors exemplifies this, showing how my personal history and the institutional context of the UoT coalesced to shape my identity and practices as a fashion design lecturer.

From student to teacher

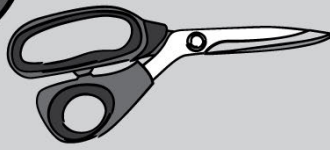
The scissors, as an evocative object, reflect not only my technical growth but also the skills of observation, repetition, and refinement. I began by learning to sew through imitation at home, but as I entered the formal education space at the UoT, my training became more regimented, guided by industry standards and professional expectations.

Figure 8.2: From student to teacher storyboard



Note. Figure created by the author.

The act of sewing, and more specifically, the act of cutting fabric with these scissors, symbolised the shift from the recipient of knowledge to the bestower. I began to teach these practices to others, like Pom, who had first taught me. This narrative (storyboarded in Figure 8.2) explores how the scissors became a marker of my teacher identities within the vocational and cultural fabric of the Fashion Design department.



Pom taught me to sew when I was in high school. She patiently guided my hands through each stitch and seam. Sewing was something we shared and enjoyed together. When I went to university to formally study fashion, I was taught the “proper way” to do things - the industry standards that would define my future in fashion. When I came home during the university holidays, I found myself teaching Pom the new techniques I had learnt, methods that were more precise or advanced. Our relationship had shifted; the teacher had become the student.

At home, I had learnt to sew by watching and imitating Pom. But at university, my understanding deepened as I was introduced to professional standards and techniques. It became clear that this process wasn't just about mastering technique. It was about the continuity of knowledge, the way skills endure and evolve across generations. My fabric scissors, in this sense, became more than just a tool; they marked an ongoing exchange between learning and teaching.

Sewing, for me, is deeply tied to the story of my scissors. It was through practising cutting and sewing at university that I began to understand the craft of fashion in a new way. Although learning to sew is not directly about using scissors, the scissors are always present, shaping the process. In order to sew something, I would inevitably start by cutting fabric. Even draping on a mannequin required first cutting fabric into manageable pieces, and then using scissors to refine the design, cutting away to reveal something new. Cutting and sewing are linked. Even though you don't sew with scissors, the two actions work in tandem. It was through the seamless connection between scissors and sewing that my transition from student to teacher became clear.

As Barad (2007) suggests, knowledge is always situated and entangled with material-discursive practices. In my case, this meant that my learning to sew at home, informally and intuitively, contrasted sharply with the formalised, industry-driven training I received at university. This tension shaped my initial approach as a lecturer. At university, I was trained to privilege precision, standardisation, and functional skills, seeing fashion as a technical, vocational field (Harvey & Lucking, 2017; Smal & Lavelle, 2011) with little room for error. Naturally, when I began teaching, I carried these values into the classroom, passing on the same emphasis on professional standards and precise skills. However, I see that these early practices were a direct reflection of the

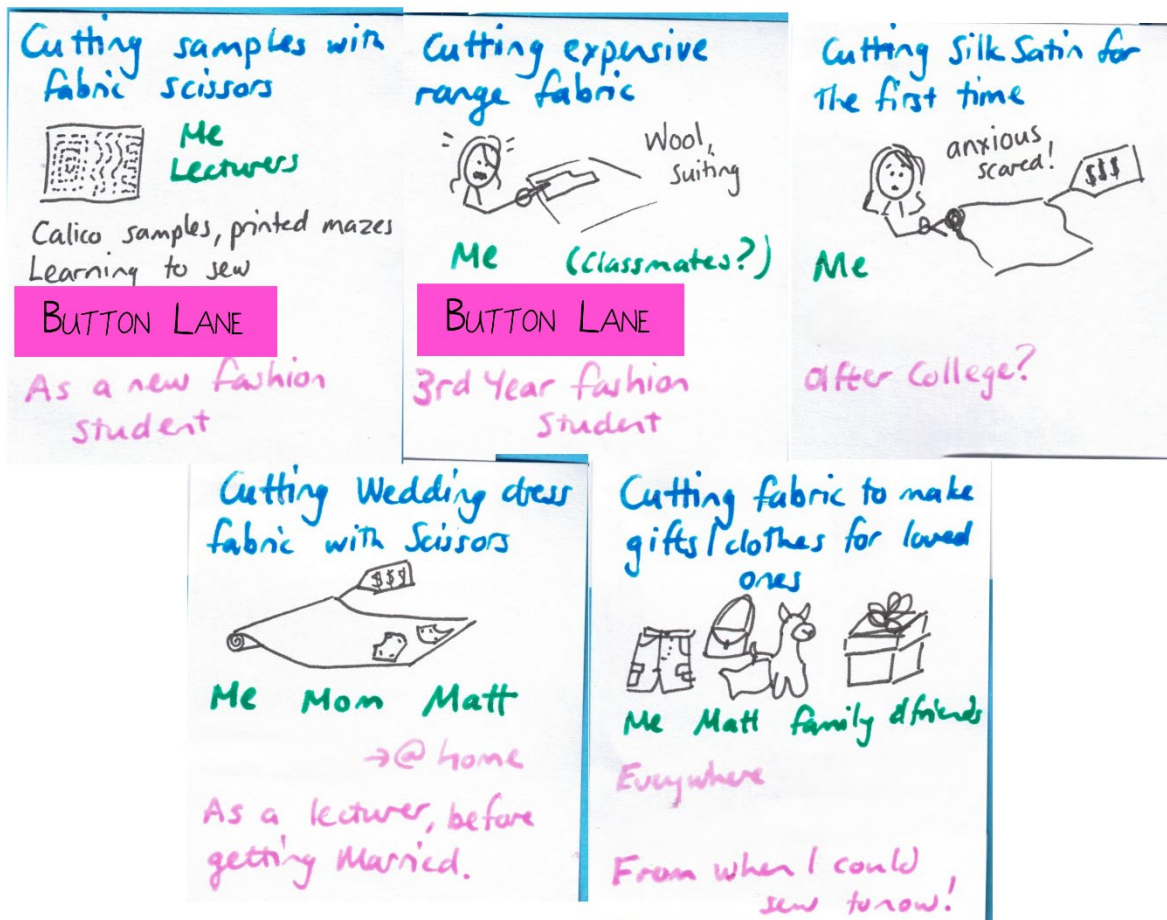
Departmental culture at the UoT, which favoured technical mastery over creative exploration (Schmidt & Zarestky, 2021).

As I moved further into my teaching career, I began to recognise that these approaches, shaped by my own experiences as a student, were limiting both for me and my students. The idea of teaching fashion as unchanging and linear was deeply embedded in the departmental emphasis on vocational education. In this way, my teaching practice was directly shaped by the micro departmental culture that prioritised functional over theoretical knowledge (De Wet, 2017; Faerm, 2015), reflecting the University of Technology’s mandate to produce industry-ready graduates (Du Pré, 2009).

Growing confidence: Making the cut

This next narrative (shown in Figure 8.3) explores how my fabric scissors became a symbol of my evolving confidence and expertise. The transition from working with inexpensive calico to delicate and costly fabrics like silk satin mirrors my technical precision and industry readiness.

Figure 8.3: Making the cut storyboard



Note. Figure created by the author.



When I first started learning to sew at university, I would use my fabric scissors to cut out calico for sample projects. The lecturers gave us intricate mazes and patterns printed onto fabric, and we were tasked with following these lines, guiding the sewing machine to build accuracy. We learnt to control the machine, make sharp corners, follow curves, and sew straight lines. Each sample began with cutting, and with my fabric scissors in hand, I felt like I was taking the first steps into the world of fashion design.

At this early stage, cutting calico was a low-pressure task. Mistakes were part of the learning process, and I didn't need to worry about wasting expensive fabric. This freedom to experiment helped me gain confidence in my scissors and my ability to control the cut.

As time went on, the stakes increased. By the end of my third year, when we were preparing for the big fashion show, I was cutting expensive wool and suiting fabrics. The thought of making a mistake while cutting filled me with anxiety—these fabrics cost more than I could afford to replace if I messed up. But despite my nerves, it all came together. I was no longer the student making harmless errors with calico; I had grown in confidence, learning to trust both my skills and my scissors.

I remember vividly the first time I cut silk satin—an entirely different experience. Silk satin is delicate, beautiful, and notoriously difficult to work with. One wrong cut with dull scissors could ruin an entire piece of fabric worth hundreds of Rands per metre. This wasn't the freedom to make mistakes I had in the beginning—this was precision work, where I had to be sure of every movement. But my fabric scissors were sharp, and by then, I had grown comfortable in my craft. It wasn't just about the cut—it was about my relationship with the tool in my hand, and how that had changed over the years.

After graduating, I cut even more expensive fabrics, including the fabric for my own wedding dress. The silk duchess satin was luxurious and more costly than anything I had worked with before. This time, there was no hesitation. Pom helped me with some of the sewing, but I made the patterns and did the cutting myself. By then, my fabric scissors were an extension of my hand—there was no longer fear or uncertainty. I had grown into my confidence, and my scissors and I worked together seamlessly, cutting fabric with precision and ease.

Over the years, I've used these scissors to create countless items: gifts for loved ones, clothes for myself and my family. The scissors have travelled with me from my student days to my career as a fashion lecturer, and now here, in the UK. They've cut through denim, silk, and everything in between, always reliable, and familiar. What began as a tool for learning became a companion for life, symbolising my journey from student to skilled fashion designer.

These stories highlight my emotions as I transitioned from a student filled with anxiety and fear of making mistakes to someone who skilfully handled expensive fabrics and created intricate garments. This evolution was not just personal but deeply connected to the cultural context of the department, where precision, technical mastery, and adherence to professional standards are highly valued (Schmidt & Zarestky, 2021).

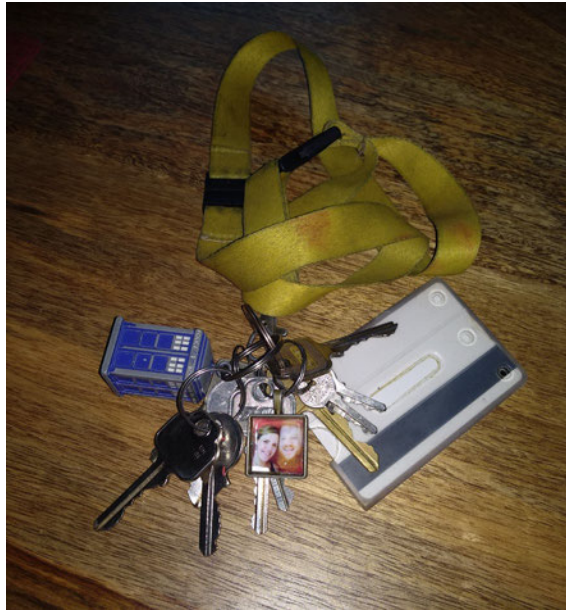
Being middle-class, I had access to resources like my own fabric scissors from an early age, which facilitated my learning and confidence. Bourdieu's (1977/2020) concept of cultural capital is relevant here; my upbringing gave me advantages that were not universally available to all students. This access allowed me to develop a level of proficiency that I initially expected my students to replicate. In my early teaching, I acted from a position of having tacit and embodied knowledge – being the 'knower' (Clarence & McKenna, 2017; Schmidt & Zarestky, 2021). I emphasised precision skills and the application of fashion design professional standards, often leaving little room for deep learning. This approach mirrored the way my lecturers had taught and revealed the departmental culture that prioritised vocational training and industry-ready fashion designers (De Wet, 2017; Lam et al., 2022; Postlethwaite, 2022; Smal & Lavelle, 2011).

In questioning how the department's emphasis on "learning by doing" (Schmidt & Zarestky, 2021, p. 2) might inadvertently exclude or disadvantage some students, the autoethnographic space helps to deepen my awareness of my entanglement in this enduring practice. In this scholarly space, autoethnography pushes me to consider how I might create a more inclusive learning environment that fosters more embodied learning experiences.

8.2.2. Unlocking a lecturer self

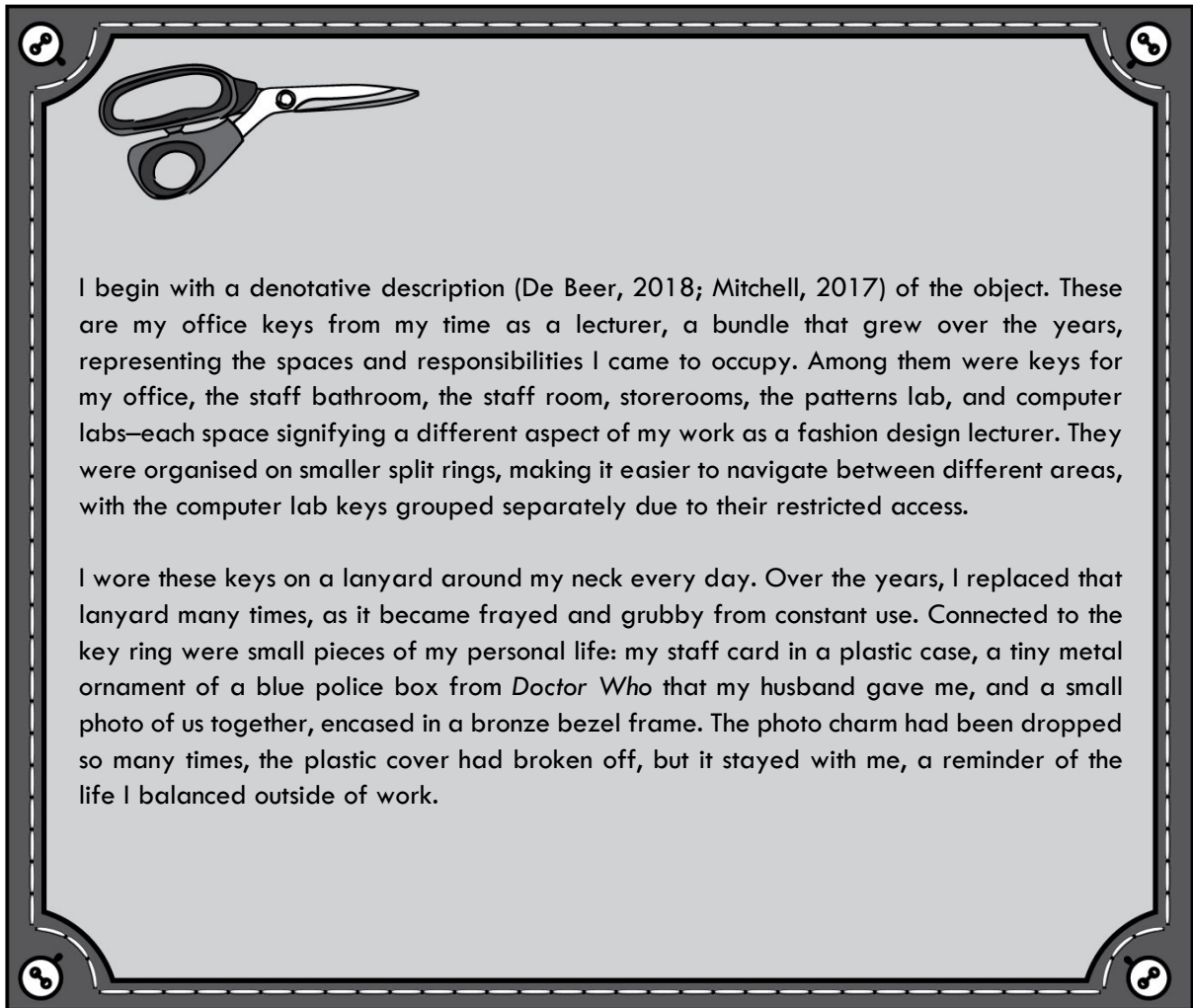
Like the fabric scissors, my keys were more than functional; they represented multiple ways of access, responsibility, and agency within the institution. These keys (shown in Figure 8.4) unlocked not only physical spaces but also the cultural routines of a vocational, hands-on teaching environment. My expanding key collection symbolised my growing role within this practitioner-based culture. As I navigated the University of Technology's shifting landscape, these keys symbolised the broader institutional forces at play – resistance to the rising emphasis on research and academic metrics while still rooted in Technikon's practical, skills-focused legacy.

Figure 8.4: A photograph of my office keys



Note. Photograph taken by the author.

At the faculty level, my keys symbolised both the creative freedom and autonomy granted to me, as well as the institution’s subtle resistance to the neoliberal policies (Enright et al., 2017; McKeown, 2022) and audit cultures (Shore & Wright, 2020) shaping the university’s macro context. These keys unlocked not only physical spaces – classrooms, offices, and storerooms – but also the deeper traditions of the institution’s vocational heritage and its aspirations of becoming a “university” (Du Pré, 2009; Du Pre et al., 2004; Kock, 2010).

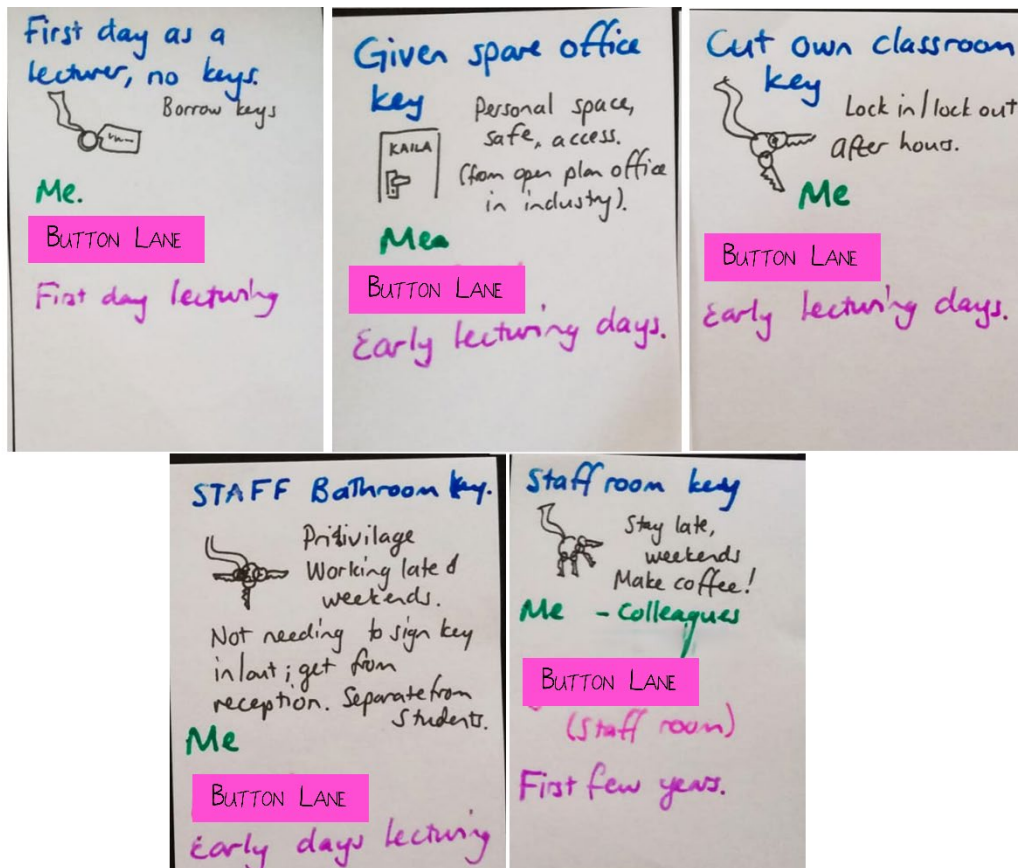


Becoming a lecturer differently

The first object narrative I explore through my keys reflects the departmental culture (micro level) of the UoT, where I began to experience a shift in my identities as I transitioned from student to lecturer. This transition was about navigating the vocational culture of the Fashion Department, steeped in skills-based education. The stories evoked by the keys that follow represent the gradual accumulation of responsibility, access, and belonging within this culture.

As I gained physical access to more spaces, my understanding of my position within the department evolved. Through these keys, I wasn't just unlocking doors; I was unlocking new aspects of myself as a lecturer, negotiating the balance between autonomy and expectation. The following narrative, *Becoming a Lecturer Differently* (Figure 8.5 shows the storyboard of this narrative), reflects the shift in my identities as I began to find my footing within the department. This process was also coloured by the cultural and linguistic barriers I encountered, as I navigated the intersection between my privileged position and the realities of my students' lived experiences.

Figure 8.5: Becoming a lecturer storyboard



Note. Figure created by the author.



Button Lane, a dedicated space for the fashion department, was like home to me. I had spent years there as a student, among peers with creative energy and bold personal styles, so returning as a lecturer felt familiar, yet different. Initially, I had no keys of my own and had to borrow them from reception to open the classroom. When I received my own key for my office, it represented more than just access; it marked my entry into a role that required independence, responsibility, and trust.

As I settled in, I realised that the simple act of holding keys brought a new level of autonomy and accountability. After waiting outside the locked pattern lab with students a few times, I was given permission to cut my own key. This small, practical privilege let me prepare the space on my terms, ensuring everything was ready for my students. Having that key was a sign of my growing commitment to the profession—it allowed me the freedom to work beyond the constraints of the formal schedule.

The next milestone was access to the staff bathroom. In the beginning, I used the student bathrooms, which were often untidy or lacking essentials. Signing out the staff bathroom key from reception was inconvenient, so eventually, I cut my own copy. This felt like a new level of status within the department, a separation from the student body that highlighted my increasing commitment to my role. Staying late into the evenings or coming in on weekends became part of my routine, making this small privilege essential.

Receiving the staffroom key was perhaps the most significant moment of integration. Here, I found camaraderie with my colleagues in a private space where we could unwind, share our experiences, and offer support. This key opened doors not just to a room but to a sense of belonging among my peers, adding a new layer to my professional identity.

However, each key also highlighted the cultural and social divides between my students and me. Teaching in an English-medium institution brought its own language barriers, as many students spoke multiple languages and had varying levels of English proficiency. I tried to bridge these gaps by simplifying language, incorporating visuals, and encouraging students to explain concepts to each other in their mother tongues. Still, I was often reminded of the distance between us—not only in language but also in privilege. My middle-class background and unbroken access to technology set me apart from many students who faced daily challenges I had not encountered. While my keys symbolised responsibility and belonging, they also brought into focus the privilege that allowed me this level of access and autonomy, a privilege not available to everyone in the department.

This story illustrates how I was gradually inducted into the department's cultural practices, where gaining access - both literally and metaphorically - marked my response-ability as a lecturer. The keys were symbols of trust, expectations and the department's rhythms and structures.

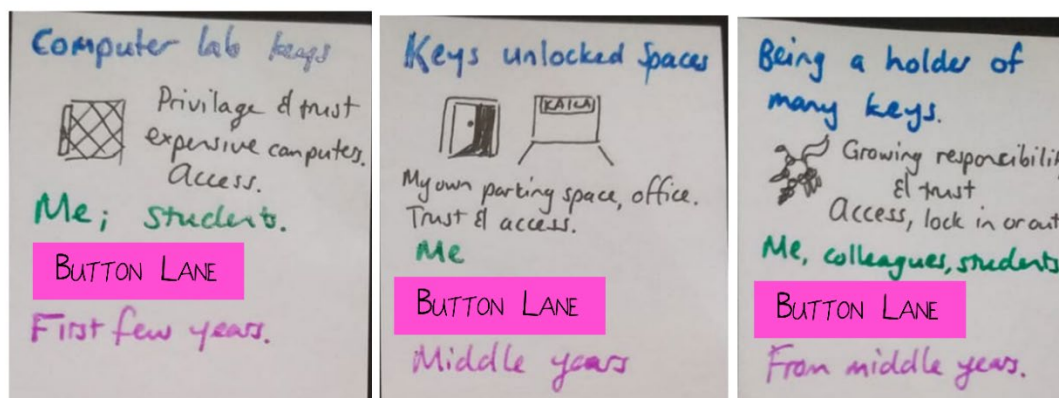
The keys signified the mounting demands of my commitment to my students and a response to the department's unspoken pressure to meet performance metrics (Netolicky, 2017). This scholarly space challenged the commitment I felt and experienced in supporting my students while juggling my own work. The autoethnographic space reveals everyday entanglements and tensions as opportunities (Ennals et al., 2016; Steadman, 2021) for being a creative, passionate fashion design lecturer at a UoT.

The keys I held unlocked more than just rooms – they revealed my increasing entanglement with the broader institutional culture of the UoT. While the department's vocational focus on hands-on learning initially shaped my experiences, the growing neoliberal tendencies of the institution soon introduced pressures to perform, produce, and meet targets that went beyond teaching (Shay, 2012). These keys symbolised not just physical access but the expectations of success and performance that had quietly locked me into a different kind of institutional responsibility.

Earning my keys

As I began to take on more responsibility within the department, the keys symbolise my growing integration into the fabric of the department's micro-level culture. The emphasis on skills-based education and hands-on learning extended beyond the classroom; it seeped into every aspect of departmental life. Each new key felt like a marker of trust, a symbol that I was becoming someone different – beyond the duality and hierarchical relations. This narrative, *Earning My Keys* (Figure 8.6), illustrates the relational tensions between the privilege of access and the burden of responsibility. The autoethnographic space also begins to hint at the cultural dynamics of the faculty level (meso), where creative and practitioner-based ways of teaching persisted, often resisting, jostling for space with the academic demands of research and outputs.

Figure 8.6: Earning my keys storyboard



Note. Figure created by the author.



As a lecturer, I gradually accumulated keys that marked my growing responsibility and trust within the department. After receiving my staffroom key, I was later given access to the computer labs, allowing me to open them for students outside class hours. These keys represented more than physical access; they symbolised the department's trust in me to manage resources and navigate my role with increasing autonomy.

Over time, my collection expanded to storerooms, labs, and even my own designated parking space. These keys became practical tools and signs of my transition from a new lecturer to someone who could be relied upon by colleagues and students. Holding them, I felt a stronger sense of belonging and autonomy within the department.

But these keys also heightened my awareness of privilege. Growing up, I'd always had access to technology and education—resources that many of my students could only dream of. Listening to their stories broadened my understanding of how privilege shaped my experience in ways I hadn't fully realised. While my family could support my education, many of my students juggled work, family duties, and study.

Occasionally, students accused me of being unfair or even racist—usually when they were upset about enforcement of academic rules. Although I consistently aimed to be fair, those moments always made me question myself. Student evaluations that praised my fairness were reassuring, but I worried about any invisible biases I might hold. I sometimes sensed subtle micro-aggressions from colleagues and questioned whether I, too, unknowingly contributed to those tensions. My privilege as a white person undoubtedly affected my journey, from the schools I attended to the cultural capital I inherited. I tried to become more aware of others' situations, but I know there will always be more I could learn and do.

My technological privilege was another area where our experiences diverged. While I had used computers since childhood, many students were navigating them for the first time at Button Lane. Tasks like typing or printing were intimidating to some, and although the campus had Wi-Fi, it didn't help students who lacked personal devices. These interactions reminded me that my keys symbolised not just access and success but an ease of navigation through academia that wasn't universal.

By the end of my tenure, I held keys to nearly every campus space. While this access brought freedom, it also symbolised the job's unspoken demands to do more and meet evolving standards. These keys, initially symbols of access and responsibility, had come to embody the complex expectations within my role as a lecturer.

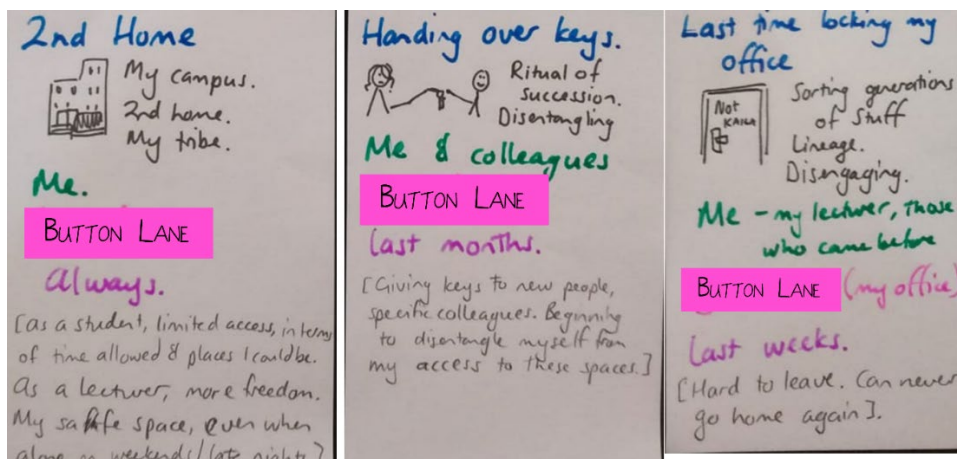
As a white, middle-class woman given unfettered access to education and technology, the keys as an evocative object jolted my autoethnographer self to critique and question my taken-for-granted routines and resources. I questioned what this may mean for the students in my classrooms who lacked the access to technology and resources. I challenged how my ability to stay late or come in on weekends, enabled by my keys, was a privilege that positioned me hierarchically in relation to my students and distanced me from the material situatedness of my students.

Stories about my keys exposed broader stories of inequalities that shaped my ways of thinking and experiencing my work as a lecturer. They embodied the multiple forces at play within the institutional systems and my complicity in the individualistic, colonial, and competitive culture, and neoliberal agendas of the university (Postlethwaite, 2022). Through this autoethnography, I recognise my situatedness within the entangled forces at play, and the risks and limitations of sustaining a binary, human-centred perspective. This recognition invites an exploration of alternative, relational approaches that disrupt entrenched power structures, fostering spaces for more equitable and imaginative educational practices.

Handing over the keys

This object narrative, *Handing Over My Keys* (Figure 8.7), delves into institutional culture and the pervasive impact of patriarchal neoliberal agendas, highlighting the pressures these forces placed on my work as a lecturer. The institution's increasing focus on outputs, audits, and performance metrics began to weigh heavily on me, and contrasted sharply with the vocational and creative ethos of the fashion design department. Relinquishing my keys became more than just a physical act; it represented my closing of history that helped to create the melancholic disengaged body I am now as an academic – and simultaneously opening up to something different. This narrative reflects the complexity of leaving behind a place that had been both a home and a site of struggle and potential.

Figure 8.7: Handing over storyboard



Note. Figure created by the author.



Handing over my keys was one of the hardest parts of leaving Button Lane. That small, familiar campus had been my second home for over a decade. As a student, I had a sense of belonging, but my access was limited. Certain spaces were off-limits, certain times restricted, and the locked doors were a reminder of my student status. Those barriers fell away when I became a lecturer; with each new key, my sense of belonging deepened. I moved through the campus with freedom and responsibility. Button Lane was my space, my refuge. I felt safe there, even when I was alone.

But as my time as a lecturer ended, the keys I'd collected slowly dwindled. One by one, I handed them over to colleagues. Each key represented not just access but a connection to the department and a role in maintaining spaces that had once felt like mine. The act of giving them up marked the beginning of my disentanglement from the campus and from the professional identities I had built there—a slow, deliberate process, much like the way I had earned those keys over time.

The final time I locked my office door was emotional. I sorted through years of history, papers, and materials left behind by previous lecturers—a legacy of vocational teaching practices spanning decades. It felt like sifting through generations of knowledge. The weight of that legacy was palpable, but I knew it was time to let go. I had to decide what to keep and discard, not only in materials but also in the ideas and practices I had inherited.

When I handed over my last key, it felt as though I was passing on more than physical access—I was passing on a legacy. The keys represented years of accumulated trust and privilege, as well as the burden of upholding traditions that sometimes felt rigid. This realisation made me reflect on how my upbringing, one that encouraged questioning, had allowed me to resist the status quo. My choices as a lecturer were shaped by this duality: the weight of tradition versus the need for change.

Leaving Button Lane felt like leaving home. It was a place where I had grown, shaped by the women who came before and worked alongside me. The keys were not just symbols of access; they marked a legacy of practitioners teaching the next generation. As I handed over the final key, I was reminded that while my time there was ending, the legacy would continue with those who came after me.

Handing over my keys was not just about giving up physical access; it symbolised disentangling from the hierarchical institutional and departmental routines that had shaped a traditional, humanist understanding of my professional identity. The weight of these keys no longer felt like a privilege and agency belonging to humans only; they now carried the traces of other stories that the culture had erased of other relationalities and non-hierarchical relations in the complex cultural fabric of the UoT, deeply embedded in the vocation, artefacts, objects, materiality, theories of fashion knowledge production and a maker epistemology (Ingold, 2013).

Sorting through my office was a symbolic act, one that made me confront the traces left by the generations of women lecturers who had come before me. Locked away in that space were decades of teaching practices, paper records, and vocational knowledge that had been passed down through the department. I was not just handing over my keys to the next lecturer; I was handing over a legacy that had largely remained unchallenged. In higher education, particularly in the South African context, vocational curricula have often been criticised for their lack of integration with academic learning (Du Pré, 2009), leading to a complex structure that separates vocational and academic education (Mafenya, 2013). This legacy, focused on practical, hands-on learning, has historically dominated fashion education, shaping both the department's culture and my own development as a lecturer (Lam et al., 2022).

The process of leaving forced me to reflect on how I was entangled in the institutional culture. As a white, middle-class woman with uninterrupted access to education, I had been able to thrive within the department's vocational, skills-based approach. As Dall'Alba (2009) argues, disciplines cannot be separated from the practitioners who embody them, and the keys I handed over symbolised the need to let go – of the enduring vocational practices, the unspoken privileges and of the pressures of performance within a neoliberal institution (Marginson, 2013; Shore & Wright, 2020).

However, I began to see how vocational and neoliberal cultures competed for importance within the institution. This tension underscores the importance of theories of knowledge production that legitimise embodied and tacit knowledges as scholarly spaces. These perspectives deepen our understanding of fashion design education while critically engaging with the pressures of neoliberalism (Postlethwaite, 2022).

8.3. Section B – Unlearning the practice and theory binary

The cultural context of the University of Technology (UoT) was a powerful force in shaping my identity as a lecturer. At the UoT, where vocational education historically dominated, I was stepping into a role forged by the institution's past and grappling with the evolving demands of higher education. As I earned my keys and began occupying more spaces within the department, I was simultaneously stepping into a professional identity, but this was no smooth transition (Steadman, 2021). The tensions between the vocational and scholarly (Shay, 2012) - between practitioner and academic - became a central theme in my development as a lecturer.

The institution had shifted from a Technikon to a University of Technology, yet the legacy of its hands-on, practical focus lingered in my department and in my faculty (Shay, 2012). The students I encountered carried their own notions of what the profession might consist of (Dall'Alba, 2009),

often viewing fashion design as a craft and vocation (Bill, 2012; Smal & Lavelle, 2011), an applied discipline requiring practical skills, rather than as a field demanding theoretical engagement and research (Harvey & Lucking, 2017). As Barad (2007) argues, materiality and discourse are entangled in a process of intra-action, where objects, ideas, and bodies co-produce meaning. In this context, my keys, which unlocked physical spaces like labs and storerooms, also unlocked the discursive tensions I was negotiating – between teaching as a practice and teaching as an intellectual pursuit.

8.3.1. *Shifting struggles: Becoming practitioner, researcher, academic, neoliberal subject*

The keys I carried, growing in number over the years, symbolised not just the physical spaces I accessed, but the evolving nature of my responsibilities as a lecturer within a UoT. They were tangible markers of the complex interplay between practitioner and scholar (Leavy, 2015). Each key represented a deeper entanglement within the UoT's cultural context. I inherited many of these keys from my own lecturers-turned-colleagues, but the students I was facing in my classrooms were different from those I had studied alongside. The apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 2020) that had shaped my understanding of teaching was no longer enough.

As my responsibilities grew, I found myself grappling with a disconnect between the vocational methods that had been taught to me and the needs of my students. This disjunction led me to question long-held assumptions about teaching and learning in fashion design education, propelling me into ongoing interactions with the material and discursive forces at play within the institution. My keys became symbols of the spaces I was meant to control. However, they also represented a deeper tension: how was I, as a lecturer, supposed to balance the heavy demands of vocational training and academic rigor?

The institutional culture was shifting toward academic outputs, research productivity, and greater engagement with theory (McKeown, 2022; Parfitt et al., 2021). This shift in the broader UoT context was creating friction at every level. The faculty remained committed to the vocational roots of professional practice, focusing on technical skills, while the institution increasingly emphasised research and scholarly publication. I was, like my students, caught in this transition, feeling the pressure to produce research while still prioritising hands-on learning in my classroom.

The diffractive readings of Barad (2007) help to illuminate this process. Diffraction, as a metaphor for understanding the interplay between academic expectations and the materiality of teaching, allows me to see how these cultural forces “bend” around each other rather than reflecting one another directly. The institution's demand for more research and scholarly output was diffracting through the vocational traditions of the faculty, leading to new, complex patterns of intra-action between myself, my colleagues, my students, and the institutional structures.

8.3.2. *The space between the vocational-academic divide*

As I engaged more deeply in research, I began to see how the tools of my practice - like my scissors and keys - were part of a larger conversation about what it meant to be a fashion design lecturer at a UoT. The tools became entangled in my shifting role from a designer to an academic, reflecting the cultural shift occurring at the UoT.

Reflecting on the staffroom key, I recognise its significance beyond access to a physical space. The staffroom was a site of performative identity where I, alongside my colleagues, would momentarily drop the pressures of our teaching responsibilities. Here, we engaged in debates and discussions about teaching, fashion, and students – conversations that were instrumental in shaping my understanding of the Discourse of being a fashion design lecturer. Yet, these discussions often laid bare the tensions between the old ways of doing things, inherited from the Technikon days, and the new demands of research and academic rigour imposed by the institution's shift toward becoming a University of Technology.

Barad's (2007) notion of *intra-action* helps illuminate how these tensions were not simply conflicts between people or policies but were material-discursive entanglements. The institution itself, the staffroom, the keys, the objects of our practice, and the evolving demands all intra-acted to shape my be(com)ing as a lecturer. As I collected more keys and responsibilities, I became increasingly aware that my teaching methods, learnt through observation and repetition, needed to be rethought. My students were not responding to these methods in the way I had expected, and this led to my searching for alternative approaches.

8.3.3. *Culture, the neoliberal turn, and becoming*

The UoT's evolving culture also mirrored broader neoliberal shifts in higher education, where institutions were increasingly focused on quantifiable outcomes – research output, publications, and performance metrics (McKeown, 2022; Parfitt et al., 2021). This shift placed new pressures on lecturers, many of whom, like me, had been trained in vocational settings. While I embraced the intellectual challenge of research, my colleagues, many of whom had spent their careers focused on practical teaching, found this shift burdensome.

One of the most pivotal moments in my journey was realising that my colleagues – many of whom had trained and worked in the vocational, skills-based environment of the Technikon – were themselves grappling with the changing expectations of what it meant to be an academic. The vocational training that had shaped us all was now being challenged by the university's neoliberal policies, which prioritised research outputs, publications, and academic status over practical teaching. Some colleagues embraced this shift, eager to integrate more theoretical approaches into

their teaching. Others, however, resisted these changes, clinging to the hands-on, practice-oriented methods that had defined their professional identities for decades. This resistance often placed me in direct conflict with those who felt that my push for research-based teaching methods was misguided. Reflecting on this now, I see how these entanglements – of vocational, academic, practitioner researcher – were part of a broader cultural assemblage. And my sensemaking of who I am as a lecturer was being continuously reconstituted through these material-discursive entanglements.

8.3.4. *Be(com)ing in a shifting academic landscape*

Intra-action (Barad, 2007) is not about static boundaries between teacher, student, or object; rather, it is about the ongoing entanglement of these entities. I was not merely teaching students how to cut fabric, draft patterns, or sew garments – I was engaged in a process of mutual transformation, shaped by the tools of my trade, the expectations of the institution, and the histories embedded in the vocational training I had received. As Barad (2003) emphasises, agency is not something possessed by individuals alone; it is distributed across human and nonhuman actors. My keys, scissors, and the spaces I inhabited were part of the material-discursive network shaping my identity as a lecturer.

My keys, in particular, represented my growing responsibilities and the tensions between vocational training and academic expectations. As Barad's (2007) theory of *intra-action* suggests, my be(com)ing as a lecturer was not a solitary process but one deeply entangled with the UoT's shifting culture.

8.4. Moments of displacement as opportunities for recreating self

Writing this chapter has stirred up emotions that I had not expected. It has been five years since I left South Africa and the UoT, and yet, reflecting on my office keys has brought to the surface the sense of loss I felt when I handed them over. The keys had become such an integral part of my identity that relinquishing them felt like relinquishing part of myself. Guyotte et al. (2018, p. 103) describe how moments of change often force us to "(re)consider the spaces we inhabit, our movements, and the ways in which our bodies respond in such spaces." This resonates deeply with me as I reflect on my relationship with Button Lane, the satellite campus that was my second home for over a decade. My identities shifted within this space – from student to designer, from designer to lecturer – and when I left, I was left wondering, who am I if I'm not a lecturer?

In hindsight, I realised how much of my becoming was tied to the material spaces of the UoT. The classrooms, the staffroom, the pattern labs – these were not just places where I taught but spaces that shaped how I taught. The material conditions of the UoT – the lack of resources, the increasing demands for research, and the cultural legacy of the Technikon – were all part of the *intra-action* that shaped my be(com)ing as a lecturer. Barad's (2007) concept of *intra-action* helps me see how my

identity as a lecturer was not something static or pre-existing but something that was continually being reconstituted through my interactions with these spaces, objects, students, and colleagues.

My supervisor once asked me where giving up my keys left me. Without students and without a university, I was not a lecturer anymore. This realisation opened up an uncomfortable space of displacement, but it also presented an opportunity to recreate myself, step back, and, in a scholarly meditative space, consider what becoming different might mean for the material-discursive environment of the UoT.

8.5. Summary

In this chapter, I have used object narratives to move beyond simply recounting *what* I did or *how* I became a fashion design lecturer. Through the stories I have shared, the deeper tensions between my learnt practices and personal beliefs to reveal the complexities of my lived experiences, entangled with the human, objects, stories, relationalities, materiality, vulnerabilities, and concepts. In wrestling with the uncomfortable space between practitioner/scholar, vocation/profession, I have started to untangle and recreate new threads and pathways for the kind of lecturer I want to become and teach. The autoethnographic lens was an ethical scholarly response to this inward, uncomfortable but necessary opportunity to refashion becoming a fashion design lecturer.

In the next chapter, I deepen this exploration by addressing the central research question: “*What Discourses have underpinned my becoming a fashion design lecturer at the University of Technology?*” as assemblages (Barad, 2007). Assemblages enable me to (un)learn the hierarchical relations and the tensions of becoming at a UoT. They allow for a more complex, affective, and relational understanding of be(com)ing not only in terms of personal experiences but also as part of the larger, ongoing interplay of institutional, social, and material forces.

9. BE(COM)ING THROUGH PLAY

9.1. Introduction

This chapter seeks to synthesise the key learnings and reflections from the analysis chapters (Chapters Four through Eight) to address the central research question, “*What Discourses have underpinned my being-becoming a fashion design lecturer at a University of Technology?*” By drawing on my theoretical framing of Gee’s (2008) big D Discourses, Butler’s (2002) notion of performativity, and Barad’s (2003) concept of intra-action, I explore how socially and culturally situated ways of thinking, knowing, and being have shaped my identities. These theoretical lenses work together to illuminate the relational and emergent nature of identity: Gee’s big D Discourses reveal how culturally recognisable ways of speaking, acting, and being signify participation in specific communities; Butler’s performativity underscores how these identities are continually enacted and reshaped through iterative performances of societal norms; and Barad’s intra-action challenges individualistic notions of identity by emphasising the entangled material-discursive processes through which identities emerge. Together, these frameworks position identity not as static or hierarchical but as fluid, relational, and co-constituted through human and non-human forces, providing a lens to critically examine the intersecting Discourses shaping my be(com)ing within the institutional, cultural, and material contexts of a UoT.

Rather than privileging the human, this chapter takes a non-hierarchical approach, recognising how identities are co-constituted within assemblages of human and non-human intra-actions. This perspective acknowledges that Discourses are material-discursive phenomena, emerging from the interplay between embodied experiences, sociocultural forces, and institutional structures. The Discourses surfaced through the preceding data chapters reflect these assemblages, where my autoethnographic inquiry has worked to uncover the intersecting threads shaping my professional be(com)ing as a fashion design lecturer.

This chapter builds on the findings of previous chapters by threading together key Discourses identified in the data: Lifeworld Discourses rooted in privilege and cultural capital; Vocational-Professional Discourses in fashion design education; Gendered Discourses shaping identities and societal expectations; and Institutional Discourses navigating the vocational-academic divide at a UoT. These Discourses were uncovered through iterative engagements with narrative, visual, and material methods, revealing how privilege, class, race, and gender intra-act to fashion my identities. By tracing these Discourses back through the data chapters, I emphasise the importance of reflexively examining how they materialise and are performed within professional and educational contexts.

The chapter is organised into two main sections. In Section A – Dressing up assemblages, I explore these Discourses as they emerge through play and relational intra-actions, using the paper doll assemblages as both a visual and metaphorical tool. The assemblages foreground the entanglement of identities within broader material-discursive forces, offering a way to critically reflect on how I navigate and perform multiple selves. This section situates these reflections within the broader sociocultural and institutional contexts explored in the data chapters, drawing attention to the lived and material realities of privilege, race, class, and gender.

Section B – Pictorial Tensions extends this exploration by examining the discomfort I experienced in visually representing myself through drawing and paper dolls. This section highlights the tensions between my idealised, perceived, and publicly read selves, revealing how visual methods brought to light my complicity in perpetuating sociocultural expectations and unspoken biases. These tensions are interrogated through a feminist new materialist lens, uncovering how visual autoethnography creates a space for resisting and reimagining dominant Discourses.

These visual and narrative explorations extend my autoethnographic inquiry, creating a reflexive space to consider how professional be(com)ing is relational to the institutional culture of a UoT and its implications for fashion design education, practitioner-academics, and academic identities.

9.2. Section A – Dressing up assemblages

This section examines how my identities as a fashion design lecturer are shaped through playful and entangled assemblages of social, cultural, and material forces. Drawing on Müller's (2020) idea that playfulness creates openings for resistance and discovery, I explore these assemblages through the metaphor of "playing dress up." Assemblages, as conceptualised in this study, are fluid, non-hierarchical constellations of human and non-human elements – including material objects, cultural narratives, and embodied practices – that shape identities as emergent and relational. Rather than privileging the human, this framework invites an exploration of the tacit, affective, and material forces that co-constitute being-becoming.

The metaphor of "dressing up" foregrounds this assemblage-focused approach by recognising how identities are performed through acts of trying on – whether these are physical garments, behaviours, or Discourses. For many women, dressing up in childhood was a way to experiment with social roles and future selves (Blaise, 2014; De Beer, 2012). Dolls and costumes became sites of early socialisation, shaping our understanding of femininity, creativity, and societal expectations (Driscoll, 2005). These early forms of "playing dress up" were my first forays into performing gender and creative identities. These acts now resonate in my professional life as I navigate the intersecting Discourses of Lifeworld, Vocational-Professional, Gendered, and Institutional contexts.

Extending this metaphor within the framework of a visual autoethnography, I use hand-drawn, coloured, and physically assembled paper dolls to explore how I perform my multiple selves across different Discourses – as a fashion design lecturer, a white woman, and a participant in broader sociocultural contexts. Each paper doll outfit serves as a metaphoric representation of a particular Discourse revealed through my narratives. By cutting, assembling, and interacting with these paper dolls in three dimensions, I engage in a tactile process of inquiry that diffracts and brings into focus the entangled material, cultural, and relational forces shaping my be(com)ing. This embodied engagement with the dolls foregrounds the iterative and performative dynamics of identity formation, offering a means to explore how these forces intra-act in shaping who I am and am becoming. The act of “dressing up” these paper dolls becomes a dynamic method to reflect on how I enact and embody these Discourses across various social contexts. This hands-on engagement provides the necessary distance to critically examine how these identities emerge through the entanglements of material, cultural, and relational forces, grounding the abstract in the tangible and making visible the invisible processes of my be(com)ing.

In the methodology chapter, I emphasised the value of arts-based methods for researching identities while maintaining complexity and nuance, as “[t]he visual provides expression where words fail” (Sousanis, 2015, p. 59). By using methods such as narrative inquiry and visual assemblages, I foreground how playfulness can lead to important research discoveries. Play, as Driscoll (2005, p. 230) notes, is “not necessarily about childhood play” but instead provides a space for exploration and experimentation, allowing us to uncover tacit knowledge and reflect on hidden beliefs. Through the playful and iterative processes of drawing and assembling, I expose the deeper sociocultural, historical, and material Discourses shaping my identities. Autoethnography provided a safe space to reflect on these aspects of privilege, despite the discomfort that comes from acknowledging bias and complicity (DiAngelo, 2011).

Playing dress up is not merely a nostalgic act but a critical lens for interrogating how Discourses shaped my identities from childhood to my professional life. These playful engagements allowed me to “try on” different Discourses much like different outfits, revealing how privilege, class, gender, and cultural norms became woven into my personal and professional be(com)ing. By using playful methods, I reflect on how these Discourses materialise in the assemblages of my identities, offering a deeper understanding of my experiences as a fashion design lecturer and opening up spaces for reimagining who I am and could become.

9.2.1. Lifeworld assemblage: Everyday Kaila and cultural contexts

Building on the foundational work of Gee (2008), my Lifeworld Discourse reflects the primary ways of being and interacting that shaped my everyday experiences. Viewed as an assemblage, this

Discourse encompasses intersecting human and non-human elements – cultural resources, material practices, language, and socio-economic systems – that shaped my foundational ways of seeing, being, and doing in the world. This perspective positions identities as dynamic and relational, emerging through material and sociocultural intra-actions within specific historical contexts.

The socio-economic climate of post-apartheid South Africa during the 1990s and 2000s, marked by the legacies of racial inequity and widening disparities (Manik, 2015; Shay, 2012; Waghid, 2009), formed the backdrop for my Lifeworld assemblage. As a white, middle-class girl, I occupied a position of privilege in a deeply unequal society, benefitting from private schooling and advanced material resources. While these privileges shaped my confidence and competence (Chang, 2018), they also underscored the systemic inequities that excluded many of my peers.

In Chapter Four, I explored how my childhood experiences, marked by both privilege and moments of marginalisation, formed the foundation of my Lifeworld assemblage. These narratives revealed the complexities of navigating identities shaped by intersecting privileges, societal expectations, and professional demands. This Lifeworld assemblage unfolds through three interconnected threads: *The Home Culture*, which examines the intimate relationships and creative practices that shaped my early worldview; *Habitus and Privilege in Everyday Life*, which reflects the tacit knowledge passed through intergenerational practices within my family; and *Privilege Beyond the Home*, which highlights my engagement with broader social and educational systems.

To visually represent my Lifeworld assemblage, I dressed the paper doll in an outfit that captures the tacit, everyday aspects of privilege and cultural capital shaping my foundational Discourses (see Figure 9.1). The doll is dressed in practical clothes, (a cardigan, jeans, and ballet flats) and wears her hair in a braid draped over one shoulder. These material choices reflect the ease and comfort of my upbringing. While ordinary at first glance, this ensemble symbolises the unmarked nature of privilege, where ease, access, and security were normalised as part of my lived experience as a middle-class, white girl in a post-apartheid South Africa.

The absence of accessories or overt markers of occupation or identities further emphasises the invisibility of my privilege: My identities did not require external validation or performative markers to be recognised within my sociocultural context. The practical, comfortable clothing also reflects the nurturing, creative environment fostered by the women role models in my family, whose hobbies and careers were grounded in intellectual independence and pragmatic creativity.

Figure 9.1: Lifeworld assemblage



Note. Figure created by the author.

This paper doll assemblage makes visible the tacit ways privilege and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977/2020) operate. By externalising these elements, the assemblage provides a tangible method for reflecting on how material practices and embodied experiences shaped my foundational ways of being and doing in the world (Gee, 2008). It highlights how privilege, while often invisible to those who possess it (DiAngelo, 2011), perpetuates systemic inequities and shapes how identities emerge within specific sociocultural contexts.

The home culture

Growing up in a white, middle-class household in South Africa during the 1990s and 2000s, I was immersed in a familial culture that privileged creativity, education, and resilience. This cultural environment was profoundly influenced by the non-traditional role models in my life, particularly Pom (my mother) and my grandmother. Both women defied societal expectations by choosing intellectual and creative independence, including divorcing at a time when such decisions carried a significant social stigma. Pom, a fine artist and educator, prioritised exploration, and critical

engagement over conformity, while my grandmother pursued a doctorate in sociology within a male-dominated academic field, exemplifying resilience, and a passion for lifelong learning.

The home culture normalised creative practices, which were supported by abundant resources, including art supplies, fabrics, and craft materials. These tools were not merely objects but embodied a lineage of making that connected me to generations of women who viewed creativity as a way of knowing, doing, and being (Tidwell & Fitzgerald, 2004). Unlike Makhanya's (2016) account of sewing as a means of economic survival, my creative practices were steeped in privilege and framed as leisure and self-expression (Gordon, 2009). These material practices informed my foundational understanding of identity, situating creativity as both a method of exploration and a source of meaning.

The material affordances of this environment extended to educational resources and technological tools. Access to books, computers, and early drawing software offered me opportunities to explore and develop skills that many of my peers, particularly those from under-resourced communities, lacked. This exposure fostered my confidence in engaging with emerging technologies, such as computer-aided design software, which would later become integral to my professional practice. As Bourdieu (1977/2020) notes, cultural capital – which manifests here as material resources and informal mentorship – shapes confidence and competence in navigating social and educational systems. In my case, this cultural capital supported my ability to confidently participate in class, seek help, and tackle complex tasks, advantages that Chang (2018) argues is often inaccessible to first-generation students.

Informal mentorship within my family played a central role in my development. Creativity was not merely encouraged but actively nurtured. Both Pom and my grandmother demonstrated the value of making and learning as embodied, iterative practices. Their emphasis on education and creative exploration instilled in me a respect for the process of making and a drive for academic achievement. These foundational experiences continue to inform my teaching philosophy, where I strive to create inclusive and nurturing spaces that celebrate diverse ways of knowing and doing.

Viewed as an assemblage, the home culture foregrounds the relational interplay between creative practices, familial mentorship, and sociocultural privilege. These intersecting elements were not merely additive but intra-active, shaping my foundational identities as a maker, learner, and educator. By reflecting on this assemblage, I trace how these early influences shaped my approach to education and creative independence while recognising the systemic inequities that rendered such privileges inaccessible to many.

Habitus and privilege in everyday life

The intergenerational transmission of skills in my family was deeply embedded in what Bourdieu (1977/2020) refers to as *habitus* - a collection of ingrained norms and habits that shape an individual's actions and thought processes. Rowsell and Pahl (2007, p. 391) explain that intergeneration *habitus* refers to “ways of being, doing, and acting in the world across generations, time, and space.” This intergenerational *habitus* was materialised through the everyday practices of making, crafting, and intellectual engagement fostered by Pom (my mother), my grandmother, and other family members. Creativity was not merely a leisure activity in my family; it was a valued way of knowing and a form of cultural capital embedded within our home. This *habitus* cultivated a tacit, embodied understanding of the world, where knowledge was both tactile and conceptual. It is through this process of making that ideas, identities, and ways of knowing materialise, a principle that continues to inform my approach to fashion design education.

From an early age, I was immersed in creative practices that normalised artistic expression and experimentation. Pom, in particular, played a central role in mentoring me, fostering my ability to “read the visual” (Schirato & Webb, 2004) and develop a fluency in visual grammar (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020). These informal lessons, embedded in the rhythms of daily life, laid the foundation for what Cross (1982) terms “designerly ways of knowing.” This tacit understanding of visual language became an intuitive skill that later underpinned my professional and teaching practices.

My formal education in art during high school and tertiary fashion design studies further refined these foundational skills, building on the *habitus* established at home. These experiences honed my ability to leverage creativity in designing assessments, developing innovative teaching methods, and engaging students with diverse learning styles. By the time I became a fashion design lecturer, this fluency in visual and creative practices had become a central feature of my professional identity, allowing me to draw on my embodied knowledge to foster similar capacities in my students.

This privileged access to resources and mentorship within my family was further enriched by middle-class material affordances, such as access to art supplies, books, and advanced technologies, including early drawing software. Harrison (2016, p. 24) describes how “middle-class access to the printed word” confers significant educational advantages, and this observation extends to the broader cultural resources that shaped my early experiences. These affordances reinforced my ability to navigate creative and educational spaces with relative ease, providing an unacknowledged advantage over peers who lacked such opportunities. Recognising this disparity has shaped my reflexivity as an educator, pushing me to create inclusive environments that respect and nurture the diverse ways of knowing my students bring to the classroom.

The intergenerational *habitus* within my family was also deeply intertwined with gendered practices. Both Pom and my grandmother modelled how creativity and intellectual pursuits could coexist with resilience and independence. For example, my grandmother's academic journey in sociology and Pom's artistic and teaching practices demonstrated that making and learning could challenge societal norms and contribute to shaping one's identities. These role models not only influenced my personal identities but also laid the foundation for my teaching philosophy. I strive to model the same independence and resilience for my students, encouraging them to explore their own creative practices authentically and reflexively.

Viewed as an assemblage, *habitus* reflects the tacit, embodied ways of being that emerge through intergenerational practices and cultural capital. These intersecting elements – material resources, familial mentorship, creative practices, and gendered experiences – coalesced to shape my foundational identities as a maker, educator, and designer. This assemblage highlights the unearned privileges of middle-class access to creative and intellectual spaces while foregrounding the relationality between material practices and identities.

Privilege beyond the home

The privilege of my upbringing extended beyond the boundaries of home, shaping my interactions with broader social, educational, and institutional systems. Despite growing up in post-apartheid South Africa, I was largely unaware of the systemic inequities that shaped the world around me. As a middle-class, white individual, I benefited from access to resources and opportunities that were inaccessible to many others. This disparity was particularly evident in the educational landscape, where historically “white only” schools continued to produce a disproportionate majority of senior certificate endorsements, the gateway to higher education (Badat, 2010, p. 32).

Attending prestigious private schools provided me with access to state-of-the-art resources, such as advanced technological tools and high-quality teaching. This exposure prepared me exceptionally well for tertiary education and professional life. However, these same experiences highlighted the stark inequities that persist in South Africa's educational system, inequities that many of my students at a University of Technology (UoT) continue to face. While my early exposure to computer-aided design software gave me fluency in emerging technologies, my students often encounter such tools for the first time during their studies. This disconnect forced me to confront the assumptions I carried into my teaching and reevaluate my methods to accommodate a wider range of technological proficiencies.

One of the most significant privileges shaping my Lifeworld assemblage was my fluency in English, the dominant language of instruction at my UoT. As a native English speaker in a country with 12

official languages, I experienced unearned ease in academic and professional spaces where English dominated (Hlalele, 2010; Maseti, 2018). For many of my students, however, English was a second or additional language (Xulu-Gama et al., 2018), often alienating them from full participation in these spaces. Maseti (2018) highlights how linguistic privilege creates barriers for non-native speakers, privileging those confident in English while marginalising others. My advanced vocabulary and ease with English sometimes excluded students unintentionally, and it was only through their feedback that I began to recognise and address this aspect of my privilege.

Reflecting on these experiences through an autoethnographic lens, I am struck by how deeply these privileges were normalised in my upbringing. As Chang (2018) argues that cultural capital shapes confidence and competence in navigating taken-for-granted tasks, such as seeking help or participating in class, and this was undoubtedly true for me. These privileges were part of my Lifeworld assemblage, woven into the material practices, familial guidance, and educational systems that supported my journey. However, the systemic inequities of South Africa's post-apartheid era shaped the lived realities of many of my peers and students, revealing the broader disparities that persist in educational and professional contexts.

Viewed as an assemblage, the privileges beyond my home – including linguistic dominance, access to advanced technologies, and private schooling – reveal how intersecting human and non-human elements shaped my foundational ways of navigating the world. These privileges were not simply inherited but deeply entrenched in the socio-economic structures of post-apartheid South Africa, perpetuating systemic inequities that continue to disadvantage those without access to similar resources. Recognising these privileges has pushed me to create more inclusive learning environments that acknowledge and respect the diverse ways of knowing and being that my students bring to their studies. By interrogating my positionality and privilege, I aim to contribute to dismantling some of the systemic barriers that persist within educational spaces.

9.2.2. Fashion designer assemblage: Tailoring the self through fashion

To visually represent the Fashion Designer Assemblage, the paper doll is adorned with elements that reflect the material-discursive practices of fashion design (see Figure 9.2). Her hair is half tied up, symbolising functionality and focus, while a pencil tucked into her hair and a measuring tape draped over her shoulders highlight the tools of her craft. These “objects of function” (Riggins, 1994) act as occupation markers, signifying her role within the Fashion Design Discourse. The mechanical pencil, with its sharp and consistent lines, represents the technical precision required in pattern-making, in contrast to the artistic fluidity associated with the softwood pencils of her artistic practice. This duality mirrors the balance between technical rigour and creative expression inherent in fashion design.

The denim dress she wears, self-made and chosen for its comfort, encapsulates her identity as a sewist and pattern-maker. Its functionality and personal significance reinforce the embodied practice of fashion design, where self-expression intersects with practicality. Her fitted, deep V-neck cardigan introduces a gendered performance within the Fashion Design Discourse, contrasting with the loose, casual clothing of the Lifeworld Assemblage (Figure 9.1). Flat, practical shoes complete the outfit, underscoring the physically demanding nature of fashion design work, which requires comfort and mobility for long hours of standing and movement.

This visual assemblage embodies the complex interplay between material practices, gendered performances, and professional identities within the Fashion Design Discourse. It also reveals tensions – between creativity and production, individuality and conformity, and tradition and critique – that define this assemblage.

Figure 9.2: Fashion design assemblage



Note. Figure created by the author.

Fashion design as a gendered and Eurocentric discourse

Fashion design education and industry perpetuate Eurocentric (Mbatha, 2017) and gendered standards, shaping designers' ways of knowing, being, and doing. These standards are particularly evident in the unattainable ideals of feminine beauty, which have evolved but remain deeply problematic. Calogero and Thompson (2010) describe the prevailing standard during my fashion education (2007 – 2010) as ultra-thinness with large breasts, an ideal that shaped both the industry and my training. France, the epicentre of many of the larger fashion houses, responded to public concerns over this dangerous thinness by implementing a minimum BMI (Body Mass Index – a formula that uses height and weight to determine if a person is morbidly obese, obese, overweight, healthy or underweight) for all their runway models in 2016 (Record & Austin, 2016). In the years since, the waif-like “heroin-chic” look has decreased in popularity, but at the time of my education, it was all I was exposed to. It was reinforced in my fashion illustration classes, where I was taught to elongate and slim down figures (Burke, 2013), reflecting a preference for these unrealistic attributes. These norms not only influenced my design work but also reinforced feelings of inadequacy, as I struggled to embody or fully align with these ideals.

The fashion industry at large has always been criticised for how it normalises unrealistic and unachievable bodies. Many fashion houses and retailers are trying to change this by hiring more diverse models – in terms of race, gender (androgynous and trans models are now headlining for major designers), age, body type and differently abled. Target, a major retailer in the USA, has been including models in wheelchairs or with their mobility aids in their promotional photoshoots (Kramar, 2018).

Bill (2012) explores how the fashion design discipline positions “creative girls” within ideological boundaries, perpetuating gendered expectations of creativity and professionalism. My training prioritised technical precision and aesthetic refinement (Aspers & Skov, 2006; Peirson-Smith & Peirson-Smith, 2020), often rooted in Western traditions that perpetuated a colonised mindset. This framework shaped my innate beliefs about what it meant to be a designer and how to perform within the Discourse. Over time, reflecting as an autoethnographer, I began to critique these inherited Discourses, recognising the limitations and biases embedded within them.

Belonging, tensions, and commodification

The Fashion Design Discourse initially offered me a sense of belonging, as its focus on technical precision and shared practices resonated with the tacit knowledge that I had absorbed at home (Bain, 2016; Gordon, 2009; Kokko, 2009). However, this belonging was accompanied by significant tensions. The creative freedom I experienced at home and in university was replaced by the regimented, procedural nature of the fashion industry (Lam et al., 2022). My romanticised view of

fashion design – commonly cultivated in “design school” according to Schmidt and Zarestky (2021) - lashed with the realities of mass production and commodification (Postlethwaite, 2022). The industry prioritised efficiency and conformity over creativity, reducing designers to “design technicians” who mediate between production and market demands (Aspers & Skov, 2006).

These tensions extended to the cultural narratives that framed my education and early career. Despite being born in the global South, my training prioritised North American and European designers, reinforcing a Eurocentric hegemony. Initially, I perpetuated these biases as a lecturer, adopting a curriculum that privileged Western perspectives. It was only through institutional initiatives aimed at decolonising education that I began to critically engage with non-Western perspectives. This shift has been slow and challenging but has prompted me to disrupt dominant narratives within fashion design education and industry.

The fashion designer assemblage as an autoethnographic critique

Through the lens of the Fashion Designer Assemblage, I reflect on how this Discourse shaped my professional identities, practices, and innate beliefs. Fashion design education and industry, rooted in Western hegemony, instilled ideological views of beauty, creativity, and professionalism. As an autoethnographer, I now see how these entanglements perpetuated systemic inequities and limited perspectives within the discipline.

The assemblage provides a framework for critiquing these norms while acknowledging the material-discursive practices that shaped my journey as a designer. By stepping back, I trace how my identities as a designer, lecturer, and maker were tailored through interactions with cultural resources, tacit knowledge, and systemic inequities. This reflective process underscores the importance of disrupting inherited Discourses to create space for alternative ways of knowing, being, and doing in fashion design.

9.2.3. Fashion design lecturer assemblage: Navigating the classroom

The *Fashion Design Lecturer Assemblage* (see Figure 9.3) captures the performativity of lecturing within a University of Technology (UoT) context, where identities are shaped by institutional expectations, material-discursive practices, and personal philosophies. Her outfit – a three-quarter sleeve bateau top, a circle skirt, and strappy flat sandals – balances modesty and comfort, signalling a professional yet approachable demeanour. The three-quarter sleeves are pushed up to her elbows, a gesture of readiness that embodies the dynamic engagement required in teaching. Her hair is worn in loose, natural waves, which further enhances the sense of warmth and femininity, aligning with the cultural expectations of lecturers to perform a balance of authority and approachability.

The pendant watch, an essential tool of her trade (Riggins, 1994), symbolises her integration into the teaching Discourse. As a functional object, it reflects the practical demands of time management in the classroom, while its intricate design (a bronze casing with a glass dome showcasing the inner mechanical gears) represents the combination of form and function that parallels her teaching philosophy. This watch, part of her self-defined “lecturer uniform,” acts as a material marker of her professional identities, recognised by colleagues and students alike.

The thick belt, accentuating her waist, serves a multifaceted purpose. It subtly adheres to the gendered norms of academic attire, where femininity is expected to coexist with professionalism, while also referencing the back brace she wore to manage physical strain from prolonged hours of teaching and marking. This detail underscores the embodied challenges of lecturing, where physical labour, emotional labour, and institutional pressures converge.

More formal than the *Lifeworld Assemblage* and *Fashion Designer Assemblage*, this outfit reflects the performative demands of academic work. It symbolises her negotiation between institutional constraints and her evolving teaching philosophy, which prioritises inclusivity, creativity, and embodied knowledge. The *Fashion Design Lecturer Assemblage* thus illustrates how clothing, tools, and bodily practices intra-act to construct and perform the identities of a lecturer, highlighting the entanglements of professional expectations and personal authenticity.

Figure 9.3: Fashion design lecturer assemblage



Note. Figure created by the author.

Transitioning from student to lecturer: Navigating institutional and faculty systems

My journey into lecturing began within a vocationally driven context shaped by the legacy of apartheid-era education systems (De Wet, 2017). By the time I started lecturing in 2012, 18 years into South Africa's democracy, the University of Technology (UoT) where I worked had already undergone significant restructuring and shifts in curriculum development (Badat, 2010; Chetty, 2010; Du Pré, 2009). However, remnants of its skills-based, teacher-driven traditions persisted, contrasting with my growing emphasis on inclusive, student-centred pedagogy.

As a lecturer, I encountered institutional and faculty-level cultures that often perpetuated Eurocentric and colonised curricula (Mbatha, 2017). For instance, the curriculum at the time primarily focused on the technical development of fashionable clothing and privileged a Eurocentric history of fashion (De Wet, 2017; Harvey & Lucking, 2017). These frameworks emphasised skill acquisition and vocational training, often sidelining critical engagement with decolonised perspectives. This tension between the vocational and academic aspects of higher education (Mafenya, 2013) became a significant site of negotiation in my teaching identities.

At an institutional level, the pressures of neoliberal academia (Parfitt et al., 2021), with its focus on performance metrics and publication, further complicated my transition. Balancing teaching, research, and the emotional labour of mentoring students created friction as I navigated these intersecting demands. Beijaard (2019) describes such frictions as inherent to teacher identity formation, where evolving roles and responsibilities generate moments of challenge and growth.

In the classroom: Evolving pedagogy and affective engagement

In the classroom, I initially replicated the “sage on the stage” (King, 1993) model I experienced as a student, focusing on skills transfer and technical mastery. This approach aligned with the UoT’s historical emphasis on vocational training (Kokt, 2010). However, as I developed my teaching philosophy, I transitioned towards a “guide on the side” (King, 1993) model, fostering participatory learning and critical thinking (Ingold, 2013).

This shift was influenced by my Lifeworld assemblage, particularly the informal mentorship I experienced growing up. These early experiences of creative exploration informed my approach to teaching, where I sought to create a learning climate that valued diversity and inclusivity. For example, I encouraged students to reflect on their own cultural identities and challenge dominant narratives within fashion design. This was particularly important in addressing the Eurocentric standards of beauty and design that permeated the industry (Calogero & Thompson, 2010; Burke, 2013) and fashion design education (Harvey & Lucking, 2017; Mbatha, 2017).

However, my own privilege often blinded me to the systemic barriers faced by my students, many of whom came from under-resourced backgrounds. While I aimed to foster an inclusive environment, I sometimes unwittingly perpetuated colonised Discourses through curriculum design and assessment practices. It was only through student feedback and my ongoing engagement with decolonisation efforts that I began to critically examine my teaching methods.

Engaging with students: Decolonisation, privilege, and inclusion

Working with students brought my privilege into sharp relief. As a white, middle-class lecturer, I initially underestimated the impact of linguistic and cultural barriers on student learning. English, the primary medium of instruction at the UoT, often alienated non-native speakers (Hlalele, 2010; Maseti, 2018), creating inequitable learning conditions. Recognising this, I adapted my teaching practices to prioritise inclusivity, and like Hiralal (2018), I elicited student feedback and tried to co-create projects to better address their needs.

Decolonising my teaching practice became an ongoing journey. Initially, my lectures centred on North American and European designers, reflecting my training as a fashion designer and the

Eurocentric curriculum I inherited (Mbatha, 2017). However, institutional pushes for decolonised education prompted me to integrate non-Western perspectives and challenge dominant narratives in fashion design. This required not only revising my assessments and working closely with my colleagues to implement change but also confronting my own biases and assumptions about what constituted “legitimate” knowledge.

In navigating these tensions, I found inspiration in my familial legacy of resilience and inclusivity. My teaching philosophy, shaped by my mother’s and grandmother’s mentorship, emphasised the value of tacit knowledge and embodied ways of learning. This approach aligned with Hiralaal’s (2018) emphasis on creating passionate, confident learners capable of transcending traditional boundaries.

The lecturer assemblage as a site of negotiation

The *Fashion Design Lecturer Assemblage* embodies the complexities and negotiations inherent in my teaching identities. As a lecturer, I navigate the intersections of institutional pressures, vocational-academic divides, and the diverse needs of my students. The assemblage reflects how material practices – such as the pendant watch, symbolising the structured and time-sensitive nature of teaching, and practical clothing that balances professionalism and comfort – combine with affective labour and systemic inequities to shape my professional presence and interactions in the classroom.

Through an autoethnographic lens, I critically examine how these elements converge to both reinforce and challenge Eurocentric curricula within vocational education. This assemblage highlights the entanglements of institutional expectations, gendered norms, and the embodied demands of teaching, while also illuminating opportunities for resistance and transformation. By engaging with these tensions, I strive to cultivate a teaching practice that foregrounds creativity, inclusivity, and critical engagement, challenging traditional models of vocational education and creating space for alternative ways of knowing and being.

9.2.4. Embodied assemblage: Fashioning my own path

The *Embodied Assemblage* paper doll (see Figure 9.4) symbolises an entanglement of creative, academic, and personal identities, where human and non-human elements intra-act to shape her becoming. Her outfit – a loose-fitting white T-shirt paired with a flared grey skirt – balances comfort with quiet confidence, embodying a material-discursive negotiation between introspection and functionality in scholarly and professional spaces. Her bare feet disrupt traditional markers of polished professionalism, grounding her in the material world and signifying her intention to remain authentic and connected to the material-discursive practices that define her teaching and research.

This choice reflects not only a rejection of institutional norms but also an active forging of her own path, rooted in embodied practices and creative autonomy.

Her turquoise-dyed hair, worn in natural waves, asserts individuality while pushing against institutional expectations, offering a quiet yet deliberate performance of self that aligns with her desire to navigate academia on her own terms. The reading glasses, a functional accessory, symbolise her engagement with scholarly work and her reconciliation of creative and intellectual selves. The mug of coffee – a mundane yet ubiquitous object – becomes an emblem of this self-forged path. It represents moments of ritual, reflection, and connection, anchoring her amidst the affective and intellectual demands of academia while connecting her scholarly and creative worlds.

This assemblage foregrounds the intra-action between materiality, affect, and identity formation, where each element is entangled with her evolving teaching philosophy, research practices, and creative pursuits. The visual elements do not merely represent her roles but actively participate in shaping her identities. The *Embodied Assemblage* invites a rethinking of identity as emergent and relational, illustrating her deliberate movement away from prescriptive academic Discourses to forge a unique path that values inclusivity, creativity, and embodied knowing.

Figure 9.4: Embodied Assemblage



Note. Figure created by the author.

Navigating tensions and forging connections

The Embodied Assemblage reflects the communal, social, and academic spaces that nurtured and sustained me during moments of tension and transformation as a fashion design lecturer. While the professional teaching environment often felt restrictive – dominated by institutional expectations, vocational-academic divides, and neoliberal metrics – my embodied practices provided alternative spaces for growth and validation.

These spaces included creative workshops, informal mentorships, academic collaborations, and artistic classes, all of which allowed me to explore alternative epistemologies and ways of knowing. Attending art classes outside the institution, for instance, not only reconnected me with my creative roots but also offered insights into the emotional and material processes that underpin knowledge-making. These spaces became sites of resistance and renewal, enabling me to reimagine my scholarly self.

Gender, embodiment, and the performance of identity

My identities as a woman shaped how I was perceived and how I navigated the classroom and the industry. As El Refaie (2012) notes, society defines women through their physicality, positioning them as inherently “othered” in ways that extend beyond professional competence to their very embodiment. Being othered made me realise that I, too, have been marked by these societal expectations of femininity and beauty. The conservative standards of beauty in the fashion industry reinforced my sense of being “othered,” and, in turn, I inadvertently perpetuated these norms in my teaching, particularly through an emphasis on narrow beauty ideals such as the ‘perfect’ sample size.

As a woman navigating both creative and academic spaces, my performative identities have been shaped by societal norms, cultural Discourses, and the gendered expectations of my roles. My choice of attire and embodiment – symbolised in the paper doll’s bare feet, glasses, and turquoise-dyed hair – reflects a nuanced negotiation with these norms. Unlike the hyper-femininity often associated with the fashion industry or the formal aesthetics of academic Discourse, the *Embodied Assemblage* illustrates a middle space, where functionality and introspection take precedence over external validation.

This middle space aligns with Butler’s (2002) notion of performativity, where gender and professional identities are constructed, deconstructed, and renegotiated. The turquoise hair, a deliberate act of self-expression, resists traditional markers of academic professionalism while asserting individuality within institutional structures. Similarly, the bare feet reject conformity to formal expectations, emphasising stability and connection to material practices.

Rogers (2020) highlights the interplay between resistance and accommodation in responses to societal norms. Resistance is evident in acts that challenge dominant Discourses, such as rejecting traditional femininity or academic formality. At the same time, accommodation reflects how certain norms are adopted to navigate cultural expectations – such as choosing practical, modest attire that meets institutional standards while allowing for personal expression. These ideas illuminate the *Embodied Assemblage* as a dynamic site of tension and transformation, where identities are shaped through the interplay of societal expectations and personal agency.

Creativity, collaboration, and scholarly spaces

The *Embodied Assemblage* also represents a shift from purely vocational or academic pursuits to a hybrid space where creativity and scholarship coexist. This intersection aligns with the notion of the ‘pracademic’ (Dickinson et al., 2022): academics within higher education who were or are still practitioners. Many pracademics feel tensions between their academic and practitioner selves, may have what Dickinson et al. (2022) term “fragile academic selves” and contend with imposter

syndrome and feelings of inadequacy. The term ‘pracademic’ encapsulates the multifaceted nature of my professional identities as both a fashion practitioner and an academic. This tension arises from the need to balance practical, industry-oriented skills with theoretical, scholarly pursuits.

Workshops, collaborative art projects, and interdisciplinary research have been instrumental in reshaping my teaching philosophy and academic practice. These engagements allowed me to develop inclusive pedagogies that value tacit knowledge and diverse ways of being and knowing, inspired by theories of new materialism (Barad, 2007) and feminist new materialist thought (Truman, 2019).

Leavy’s (2015) emphasis on arts-based research further informs this assemblage, where creative practices become integral to knowledge-making. By integrating artistic inquiry into my academic work, I challenge traditional research paradigms, foregrounding the affective, material, and imaginative dimensions of scholarship. This approach reflects my commitment to exploring alternative epistemologies and fostering reflexivity within my teaching and research.

The *Embodied Assemblage* highlights the affective and material dimensions of scholarship, illustrating the intra-action between human and non-human elements in the knowledge-making process. By embracing creative and communal spaces, I have been able to critique and disrupt colonised Discourses, forging a research approach that prioritises inclusivity, reflexivity, and alternative ways of knowing.

Embodied assemblage as a site of transformation

The *Embodied Assemblage* illustrates the entangled nature of my professional and personal identities (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011), grounded in creative practice, scholarly inquiry, and feminist values. It highlights the transformative potential of material and affective dimensions in identity formation and pedagogical practice. Ingold’s (2013) assertion that materials actively shape understanding and experience aligns with the tactile, grounded practices central to this assemblage, where connection to the material world fosters creativity and reflection. Barad’s (2007) concept of intra-action underscores how identities emerge through entangled processes, revealing transformation as an ongoing negotiation between human and non-human elements.

The embodied performance of femininity, as theorised by Butler (2002), adds another layer to this transformation, illustrating how gendered identities are not static but continuously renegotiated in response to societal and institutional Discourses. Rogers’ (2020) insights into gender as a site of both accommodation and resistance further frame this assemblage as a dynamic process of becoming. Together, these perspectives illuminate how the embodied assemblage becomes a site where materiality, affect, and scholarly practice converge to forge new pathways of knowing and being.

Barad's (2003) work on materiality and intra-action has further shaped my understanding of how the physical body and its material realities intersect with these Discourses. My own embodied experience as a woman inevitably shapes how I teach, how I present myself, and how I interact with the material world of fashion. This interaction between the body, the tools of fashion, and the Discourses surrounding gender has compelled me to rethink how I approach the classroom, aiming to create spaces where students can challenge and redefine what femininity and gender mean to them.

Rather than positioning myself as having 'overcome' these norms, I view this process as ongoing – a continuous negotiation of what it means to perform gender within both my professional and personal identities. My goal is not only to navigate these Discourses myself, but to open up spaces for my students to question and resist the expectations that the fashion industry, and society at large, places on them.

9.2.5. Fashioning identities through paper doll assemblages

Throughout Section A, I have explored the entangled assemblages that shape my being-becoming as a fashion design lecturer. Using the metaphor of paper dolls, I have engaged critically with how these assemblages – comprising material practices, cultural norms, affective labour, and personal histories – intra-act to shape my professional and personal identities. This metaphor offered a tactile and visual means to examine how these elements intra-act, creating identities that are neither fixed nor singular but continually emerging.

Each assemblage reveals the intersections of privilege, embodied knowledge, and institutional structures that both enable and constrain my being-becoming. The tensions I encountered highlight how these assemblages are sites of negotiation and transformation. As I reflect on these entanglements, I see how the assemblages I inhabit are not passive but dynamic, requiring constant adaptation, resistance, and reimagining. By stepping back as an autoethnographer, I position my identities not as isolated constructs but as emergent from the material, affective, and social intra-actions of these assemblages. This perspective allows me to critique and disrupt inherited norms, while also imagining new ways of being and doing that align with my values of creativity, inclusivity, and reflexivity.

Ultimately, this reflective process underscores that the assemblages shaping my fashion design lecturer identities are not merely inherited, they are crafted, reshaped, and reassembled in ways that allow me to navigate the complexities of teaching, making, and researching in the context of a UoT.

9.3. Section B – Pictorial tensions

The paper doll assemblages in Section A revealed the tensions between the Discourses shaping my identities as a fashion design lecturer. These assemblages captured how cultural ideals and professional training influence my self-perception, creating a fragmented narrative of my being-becoming. However, engaging with these assemblages surfaced a deeper discomfort: the paper dolls didn't look like me. They were idealised versions shaped by the templates I was trained to create as a fashion designer—distorted forms reflecting unattainable ideals of womanhood. This discomfort pushed me to interrogate not only the assemblages themselves but also the visual and embodied representations of my selfhood.

In this section, I expand on these assemblages by exploring how the tensions between my perceived, idealised, and publicly read selves materialise visually. By confronting these pictorial tensions, I aim to untangle the entangled material-discursive forces shaping my self-representation, offering insights into how visual methods deepen our understanding of identity as performative, relational, and always in process.

9.3.1. Navigating discomfort in tensions

Discomfort has been a constant companion throughout my PhD, signalling moments of growth and self-confrontation. As an autoethnographer, I've learnt that discomfort shouldn't just be endured; it needs to be explored. Mezirow's (2009) transformative learning theory frames discomfort as a necessary step in uncovering and dismantling internalised beliefs. For me, these tensions emerge from conflicting Discourses (Gee, 2008): the primary ways of being shaped by my upbringing and the professional Discourses I have acquired. Navigating these overlapping roles as a fashion designer, lecturer, and academic has revealed the ways I unconsciously replicate dominant norms, prompting me to critically reimagine my approach to identity and practice. This discomfort led me to critically explore how visual embodiment reveals the complex interplay between societal expectations and self-representation, which I further unpack through my pictorial tensions.

9.3.2. Pictorial tensions

The following comic (Figure 9.5) depicts my internal dialogue as I have been grappling with this discomfort. This shapes my understanding of my conflicting representations of self.

Figure 9.5: Uncomfortable thoughts



Note. Figure created by the author.

In Figure 9.5, I illustrate a fictional conversation between two parts of myself: PhD Kaila, distinguished by her neatly braided hair, contrasts with my critical inner voice, Anxious Kaila, who is characterised by her messy hair. The opening panel shows PhD Kaila happily drawing the paper dolls from the previous chapter, only to be interrupted by Anxious Kaila, who points out an unsettling truth: “You know you don’t actually look like that, right?” PhD Kaila initially dismisses the critique, arguing that this is merely “my drawing style.” However, the dialogue quickly deepens into a confrontation with the discomfort these drawings have stirred within me.

While this exchange is fictional, it represents an internal dialogue that has significantly shaped my thinking throughout this PhD. Externalising this dialogue in comic form allowed me to interrogate the source of my discomfort more critically. Without this visual representation, these tensions might have remained hidden, making it harder to address the invisible beliefs and insecurities shaping my drawings.

I build on Lauriala and Kukkonen’s (2005), notions of the ideal, ought, and actual selves to navigate the sociocultural expectations that shape my identities as a woman, fashion designer, lecturer, and academic. While Lauriala and Kukkonen (2005) explore the tensions between these selves from an enacted perspective, my pictorial tensions focus on how I am perceived visually. Through the exercise of visually representing myself, I uncovered the tensions between three selves: the Idealised Self (shaped by unattainable beauty standards in fashion), the Perceived Self (filtered through internalised insecurities), and the Publicly Read Self (traced from photographic reference to remove bias). Comparing these representations illuminated how societal norms, professional Discourses, and personal insecurities distort my self-image. By visualising these tensions, I was able to confront how my fashion designer training influences my self-representation, offering a deeper understanding of how visual embodiment shapes identity.

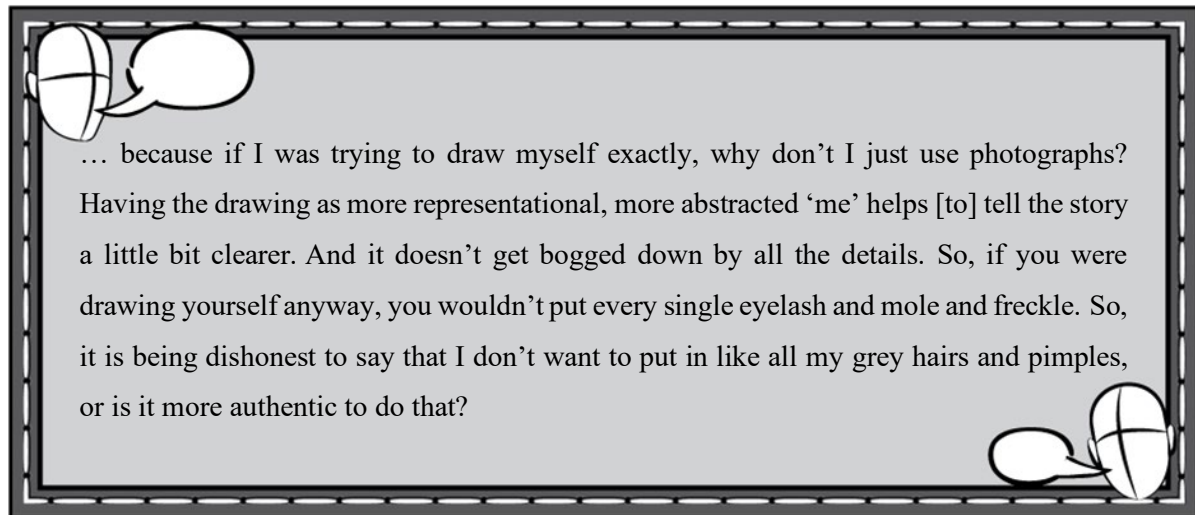
9.3.3. Pictorial embodiment: Exploring visual selves

El Refaie (2012, p. 8) uses the phrase “pictorial embodiment” as the relationship between an autobiographical artist’s sense of self and their visual representation of bodily identities. This resonates with my use of visual texts to explore my being-becoming as a fashion design lecturer. Through drawing, I confront the complex interplay between how I see myself, how I wish to be seen, and how I believe others perceive me.

This discomfort led me to question what makes a visual representation both simplified and authentic. McCloud (1994) argues that simplification intensifies meaning, allowing readers to step into the narrative and engage with its universality. This resonates with my desire to evoke connection and participation in my autoethnographic work. However, El Refaie (2012, p. 147) notes that readers of

expect a certain level of resemblance and may feel “cheated” by overly stylised depictions. The challenge lies in balancing this universality with an authentic representation that captures the essence of my identity without distorting it. But the difference between ‘simplifying’ and deceitfully ‘glossing over’ is not quite so clear.

In conversations with my supervisor and a critical friend, I grappled with these questions of simplification and authenticity. As I reflected during one discussion:



(M. Cavanagh, personal communication, July 21st, 2020.)

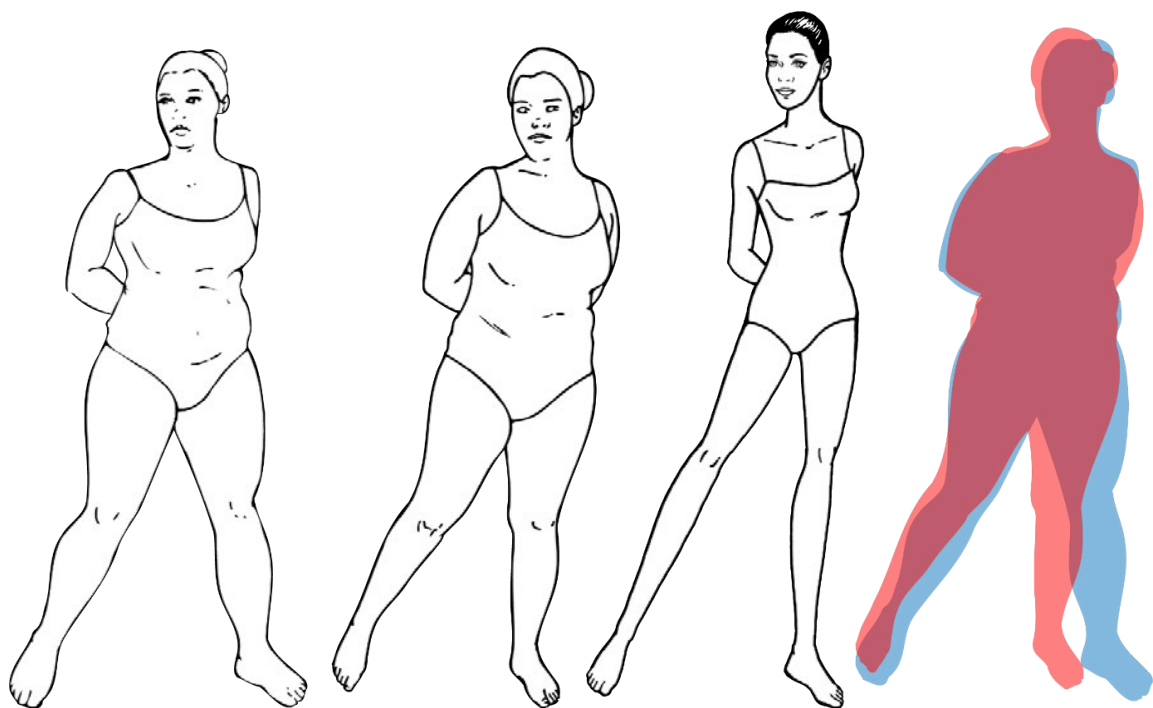
To think through drawing (Tversky, 2011), I've created three distinct representations of myself (Figure 9.6). After discussing my discomfort with my supervisor and critical friends, I realised that I could visually represent the three pictorial embodiments I was experiencing: the Idealised Self, the Perceived Self, and the Publicly Read Self. I had already drawn the Idealised Self when I created my paper doll assemblage, embodying the unattainable standards of beauty shaped by the fashion industry's ideals. To create the Perceived Self, I stripped down to a bodysuit, tied my hair back, and mimicked the pose of the paper doll from the assemblages as closely as I could. My husband took a photograph, which I then used as a reference to draw myself, applying my fashion design training to create a figure as close as possible to the real thing.

'Exposing' myself in this way was deeply uncomfortable, but it felt essential to confront how I perceived myself on a tangible level. When I completed the drawing, I believed it captured my flaws and insecurities accurately. However, when I showed it to my husband, he noted that I had drawn myself larger than I actually was. Intrigued, I returned to the photograph and traced directly over it, removing any possibility of subjective distortion.

The comparison was surprising. The Perceived Self, drawn using the photograph as a reference, revealed how my internalised insecurities exaggerated my size and distorted my proportions. My legs and belly were larger, my head smaller; subtle yet telling distortions shaped by my self-critical tendencies. In contrast, the traced drawing (the Publicly Read Self) was unmediated, offering a representation of how others might see me, unaffected by the biases of my perception. To make the differences clearer, I overlaid the two images in Photoshop: the red tracing represents the Publicly Read Self, and the blue freehand drawing represents the Perceived Self.

Finally, I included the Idealised Self alongside these representations to complete the triad (Figure 9.6). The Idealised Self reflects the impossibly tall, thin, and graceful proportions of the paper doll, shaped by the fashion industry's Discourses of beauty and femininity. Together, these three representations illustrate the stark contrasts between how I wish to be seen, how I perceive myself, and how others may see me.

Figure 9.6: Pictorial representations of Kaila



Note. Figure created by the author.

Using comic drawings, I externalised my internal dialogue and uncovered unspoken tensions between how I perceive myself (the Perceived Self), how I wish to be seen (the Idealised Self), and how others may see me (the Publicly Read Self). This exercise illuminated how societal norms, professional Discourses, and personal insecurities influence self-representation. The Idealised Self reflects unattainable beauty standards shaped by fashion Discourses, while the Perceived Self, drawn

from internalised insecurities, exaggerated my flaws. Comparing these with the unmediated Publicly Read Self, traced directly from a photograph, revealed the distortions embedded in my perceptions.

Visualising these selves (Figure 9.6) brought into focus the tensions between societal expectations and personal insecurities. It revealed how my fashion design training, which prioritises idealised forms, shapes my self-representation. This process underscored the performative nature of identity (Butler, 2002) and demonstrated how visual embodiment can surface invisible beliefs, offering a deeper understanding of how subjectivities are constructed and navigated within material-discursive practices.

By situating these pictorial tensions within my broader inquiry, I not only reflect on my internalised beliefs but also challenge the norms of self-representation embedded in both the fashion industry and academia. This section's exploration of pictorial tensions extends the metaphoric use of paper doll assemblages, grounding the discussion in embodied, visual representations of self. By engaging with these pictorial embodiments, I aim to illuminate the ways in which sociocultural expectations and internalised Discourses manifest in visual self-representations. This work is integral to unpacking how fashion design lecturers navigate identity as a material-discursive practice, offering a richer, nuanced understanding of the interplay between visibility, embodiment, and identity.

This visual exercise is not intended as an objective analysis but as a diffractive exploration of the tensions inherent in self-representation. By juxtaposing idealised, perceived, and publicly read selves, I surface the entangled Discourses and internalised beliefs shaping my being-becoming. This aligns with feminist new materialist commitments to engaging with complexity and relationality, recognising that knowledge production is both embodied and situated (Barad, 2007; El Refaie, 2012). In doing so, this critical reflection transforms discomfort into a generative space for reimagining identity and practice.

9.4. Summary

This chapter has explored the Discourses shaping my being-becoming as a fashion design lecturer at a University of Technology. These Discourses – rooted in privilege, gender, class, and professional norms – have not only defined how I am expected to act and think but also how I perceive myself and am perceived by others. Gee (2008) highlights that mastery of a Discourse requires more than participation – it demands embodying the “right” ways of thinking, acting, and being. While failure to perform this fluency authentically often marks one as “outsider,” a feeling I have experienced both as a tomboy resisting traditional femininity and as a novice academic navigating the unfamiliar Discourses of higher education.

Gee (2008) also underscores the conflicts between Discourses, as their “ways of being” often demand contradictory performances. I have lived these conflicts, and the tension between vocational Discourses in fashion design and the theoretical, research-oriented Discourses of academia has been especially pronounced. These struggles have been formative, revealing not just the limits of these Discourses but also the spaces where resistance and reimagining identities become possible.

Throughout this chapter, moments of resistance and struggle have surfaced as pivotal to my navigation of the Discourses shaping my being-becoming as a fashion design lecturer. These moments have been both transformative and fraught, forcing me to confront the ways I have been socialised into narrow ideals of what it means to be a white, middle-class woman, fashion designer, and lecturer. The assemblages in Section A illuminated how identity emerges through entanglements of material-discursive forces, while the pictorial tensions in Section B explored how visual representation brings these entanglements to the surface. By juxtaposing idealised, perceived, and publicly read selves, I uncovered the hidden ways in which sociocultural expectations and internalised norms distort self-representation. These visual embodiments deepened my understanding of how identity is negotiated not just conceptually but materially, pushing me to critically examine the ways I inhabit and resist dominant Discourses.

Feminist new materialism and visual autoethnography have been instrumental in this process of critical reflexivity. Thinking with these concepts has enabled me to see identity as fluid and emergent, shaped through intra-actions with material and non-material forces. Engaging with these tensions has opened new possibilities for teaching that move beyond reproducing inherited Discourses, allowing me to reimagine pedagogical practices that are more reflexive, inclusive, and attuned to the socio-material complexities of my students’ lives.

Importantly, this chapter is not just an account of resistance, but a recognition of the ongoing work required to unlearn ingrained Discourses and to create spaces where new ways of being can emerge. Through critical reflexivity, the creative practices explored here are beginnings of generative traces that extend into the broader themes of this thesis. They exemplify how embodied and reflexive practices, like the assemblages and visual methods, can surface tensions and open possibilities for reimagining identity and pedagogy. These traces will carry forward into Chapter Ten, where I weave together the fragments of my journey to consider the broader implications of being-becoming a fashion design lecturer.

10. THE FINAL STITCH: A REFLEXIVE DISCUSSION

10.1. Introduction

This thesis has documented my journey of be(com)ing a fashion design lecturer through an autoethnographic lens, offering a material exploration of how my personal experiences as a fashion design lecturer are woven together within a University of Technology (UoT). Each chapter surfaces the complex entanglements of social, cultural, and institutional contexts that shape my professional practice. Employing visual autoethnography has allowed me to externalise my reflections in ways that are both evocative and critically engaged, embodying the iterative and performative nature of identity development. Through these chapters, I have explored the relational nature of my identity as it has been fashioned by the intersecting Discourses of fashion design and education, with *fashioning* serving as a core metaphor for the fluid, iterative, and performative nature of identity development. This process parallels the struggle of navigating between distinct disciplinary Discourses, where, like Müller (2020), I have often found myself navigating foreign lands, as I moved between fashion design and education.

Over the previous nine chapters, I have explored how my becoming as a fashion design lecturer at a UoT is fashioned through multiple cultural threads (Chang, 2008), where the entangled forces of race, class, and gender intra-act to materially and discursively shape my lived experiences. This process has uncovered key tensions, uncomfortable truths, and the transformative power of vulnerability, deepening my understanding of what it means to be a fashion design lecturer at a UoT. Central to this exploration are the dominant Discourses of gender, academia, art and design, and vocational education, which have shaped my self-perception and professional practices. Through this autoethnographic journey, I have tried to remain true to the tenants of good autoethnography and opened myself up to be vulnerable, empathetic, and authentic (Berry & Hodges, 2015). By embracing visual and arts-based methods, I have sought to trace the intra-actions between the material world and my embodied self, revealing how these forces have shaped my becoming. The chapters of this thesis offer a textured narrative, mapping the entanglements of identity, materiality, and context.

In this final chapter, I draw together (both metaphorically and visually) the critical insights and contributions of this study. Section A explores the significant learnings that have emerged, focusing on the relational, performative, and materially situated nature of my becoming as a fashion design lecturer. Section B reflects on the methodological contributions of this study, highlighting visual autoethnography, arts-based research methods, and narrative studies as avenues for exploring identity and creative practice. Section C discusses the theoretical contributions, including the concept of “creative be(com)ing” and the role of pracademic inquiry in reimagining identity and pedagogy. Section D considers the practical contributions, with a focus on gendered constructions in fashion

education, the integration of practical and conceptual learning, and the unique challenges faced by fashion design lecturers at Universities of Technology.

This chapter concludes with avenues for further research and experiments, considering how using visuals and autoethnography might deepen understanding of identities and pedagogy. Finally, in “Carrying the Threads Forward,” I reflect on how the insights gained from this study will continue to shape my teaching and scholarship, inviting others and challenging them to engage in their own journeys of becoming within the creative and academic spheres.

10.2. Section A – My interpretive scholarly understanding

Section A offers my interpretive scholarly understanding of the tensions, vulnerabilities, and embodied experiences that underpin my being-becoming. I make use of comics, doodles, and concept maps to articulate how these experiences are shaped by cultural, academic, and creative threads. The use of visual autoethnography reflects not only my personal discomfort and tensions with self-representation but also exposes deeper vulnerabilities tied to my being-becoming a fashion design lecturer at a UoT.

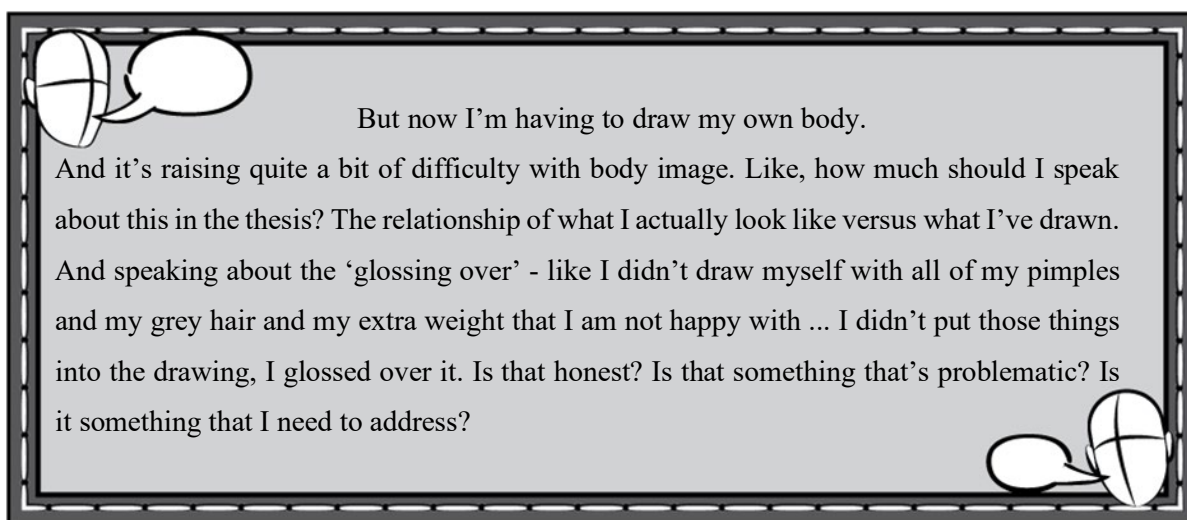
The act of drawing myself revealed subtle and often invisible narratives that illustrate how societal expectations and internalised Discourses of gender, academia, art and design, and fashion have influenced my self-perception as well as my educational practices. Yet, through adopting a feminist new materialist lens to view my fashion design practice and visual representations, I was able to interrogate my assumptions, opening up possibilities for understanding what it means to be a fashion design lecturer who values embodied and tacit knowledges within a practice-based approach. The PhD enabled me to imaginatively engage with a maker epistemology (Pahl, 2017) – a way of knowing through the hands and the making of things, where knowledge is embodied and produced through creative practice. This approach allowed me to reconceptualise my be(com)ing as a fashion design lecturer and the interplay between making, thinking, and being.

10.2.1. Pictorial tensions: Personal reflections on uncomfortable insights

Reflecting on my pictorial tensions, I explored how self-representation through paper doll assemblages illuminated the sociocultural threads shaping my perceptions of self. These tensions, discussed in depth in Chapter Nine, revealed conflicting perceptions of the Perceived, Idealised, and Publicly Read Selves, offering critical insights into how I grapple with Discourses of gender, academia, art and design, and fashion design education. This act of representation became a site of negotiation, where relationalities and materialities intra-act, exposing cultural histories and socio-material entanglements that shaped my being-becoming as a fashion design lecturer.

Autobiographical comics, as El Refaie (2012) observes, reveal the artist’s relationship with their body, requiring a symbolic representation that is both recognisable and reflective of broader contexts. When I first started drawing comics for this PhD, I was out of practice with drawing formally. Although I doodle all the time, deliberate practice is important in honing and keeping a skill like drawing. Over weeks of experimentation, I tried various styles, yet none fully looked like I wanted “me” to look. Drawing myself repeatedly exposed the limitations of human representation, forcing me to confront how Kaila-in-the-thesis was not just a likeness, but a complex assemblage shaped by sociocultural and material forces. As Pahl (2017, p. 31) suggests, paying attention to the ‘traces’ in such work allows us to “witness what has gone before” while pointing toward what might yet materialise. Through these symbolic representations, I was able to critique the assumptions and histories embedded in my self-representation and reflect on how this process has reshaped my understanding of self as relational, dynamic, and evolving.

As a fashion designer, I was trained to draw elongated, waif-like figures prioritising aesthetics over realism (Burke, 2013; Kiper, 2011), a stark contrast to my body and my students’. I shared my discomfort about this during a meeting with my supervisor and a critical friend:



(M. Cavanagh, personal communication, July 21st, 2020.)

Representing myself visually in this PhD brought my discomfort with societal ideals to the forefront. I struggled with how to depict my body – whether to stay “true” to my overweight figure or to draw a more “idealised” version. This process pushed me to rethink representation, not as mere reflection but as a way to explore the cultural and material forces shaping how bodies are understood. It revealed deeper tensions about belonging and categorisation, which I continue to grapple with. Below is a reflective journal entry on these feelings (no date):

Many people struggle with their body image, we haven't developed healthy ways to really speak about it. As a woman, I've been exposed to other women speaking about how they need to diet more, how they hate their bodies, how they are "so fat." What is a woman who doesn't fit the ideals meant to think and feel about their own body? I feel that if I speak about my body in this thesis in disparaging terms, I am potentially hurting readers who themselves don't fit the 'norm.' If I call myself 'disgusting and fat' how is someone who looks like me meant to feel? Why can't we all be happy?

Adopting a feminist new materialist lens, this process became an exploration of vulnerability as a scholarly and ethical practice (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2009; St. Pierre et al., 2016). The symbolic representation of Kaila within the thesis let me confront the embodied discomfort of self-representation while challenging fixed and essentialised understandings of identity. This aligns with Braidotti's (2006) idea of the "closing of history" and the potential for becoming something different, reimagining the self through artistic inquiry. Such visual engagements have opened up a deeper understanding of how creative practice generates knowledge, fostering reflexive insight into my being-becoming.

10.2.2. Embodied discomfort

The collective discomfort around discussing weight and the struggles of PCOS (my experiences are detailed in Chapter Five) makes it taboo to discuss in "polite company." Although I have made the conscious choice to be open about these topics to those who ask, I recognise the lifelong impact PCOS symptoms have on how I view my body. I don't know if this should be included in my PhD. Does my PCOS affect my teaching? No, but it affects how I view my body. I began this thesis by trying to draw a normalised version of myself so that I would not need to discuss this. Yet these uncomfortable thoughts keep materialising, unprovoked, even as I actively try to ignore them. Is it honest to leave this out?

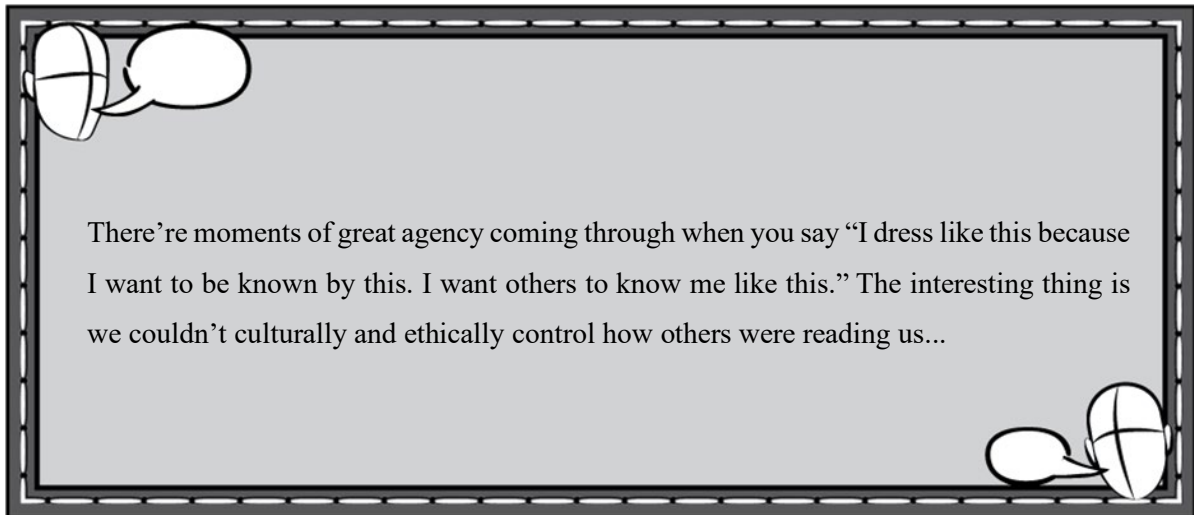
As I reflect on this discomfort, I see how the Discourses I have internalised as a fashion designer, lecturer, and academic have shaped not only how I view teaching and research but also how I view fashion, bodies, and my own embodiment. My training in fashion design privileged certain types of bodies – tall, slim, often racially ambiguous figures that conformed to an idealised, Western standard. Fashion design education, at least in my experience, operated within a Eurocentric framework that assumed these bodies were the norm and 'othered' those that fell outside these narrow parameters. These ideals became embedded in how I viewed and depicted bodies, including my own, making it difficult to reconcile the difference between my embodied reality and the standards to which I had been trained to adhere.

This internalised tension extends into my teaching practice. Fashion design is rooted in practicality, creativity, and embodied ways of knowing, while academic Discourses often privilege theoretical abstraction. Adding to this, fashion design education itself often operates within a vocational framework, emphasising rote learning and an “apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie, 2020), where teaching practices are absorbed through imitation rather than critical reflection. Like Leavy (2009, p. viii), I experienced “a disjuncture between my researcher identity and artist identity,” and this triad of tensions – practical, theoretical, and vocational – extended into how I was taught and how I teach. As I engaged with different educational theories and concepts during my PhD, I began questioning whether these inherited practices aligned with the more inclusive, reflexive approaches I now value.

This chapter provides a scholarly space to offer my ethical interpretive understanding of the tensions between vocational and academic Discourses, inherited pedagogies, and evolving practices, as well as societal expectations and personal embodiment. These entangled forces shape my teaching practices and influence how identities are formed through the interplay of tacit and explicit knowledge. Mitchell et al. (2009, p. 124) remind us that “it is through our bodies that we act, teach, and think,” emphasising that we are not merely individuals with bodies but em-body-ments of the identities we perform. The body becomes both a site of knowing and a medium through which tacit, embodied ways of understanding the world are enacted (Pahl, 2017). Barad (2003, p. 809) further highlights the role of materiality, asserting that the body’s physical constitution and its intra-actions with material forces are central to understanding how identities materialise.

For me, these entanglements extend into fashion’s narrow ideals, shaped by Eurocentric and hegemonic Discourses, which privilege specific forms of embodiment – tall, slim, and racially ambiguous – while othering those that deviate from these norms. Such ideals influenced not only my internalised beliefs about what my body should be but also how I viewed and depicted bodies within my practice. These internalised tensions reveal how societal Discourses shape not just the ways we present ourselves but also how we understand and inhabit our identities. Yet, as Snowber (2012, p. 55) reminds us, “we do not have bodies, we are bodies.” My resistance to fully engaging with my own embodiment in this thesis has forced me to confront the deeper relationship between materiality, identity, and the tacit knowledges embodied through creative and pedagogical practice.

During a meeting with my supervisor, she pointed out:



(D. Pillay, personal communication, August 11th, 2020.)

This highlights the tension between how we present ourselves and how we are perceived, an experience shared by Amin and Govinden (2012), who found that the identities they thought they projected were often read differently by others.

This tension reveals the complexities of identity as an embodied and relational process, where the meanings we assign to our bodies and choices, such as clothing, are entangled with broader cultural Discourses. Fashion, as both a practice and an industry, is deeply implicated in these dynamics, often perpetuating fixed ideals about bodies, aesthetics, and identity. Uncovering the tacit truths embedded in these notions requires not only self-reflection but also a willingness to confront and unlearn the assumptions that underpin our practices and perceptions.

10.2.3. Uncovering my ‘truths’: Unlearning notions of fashion

Drawing the comics of myself and more specifically, the paper dolls, had helped me to see what kind of power-based lies (Wood, 2016) I had been believing. I had been raised in a political, educational, social, cultural, and historic context that normalised privilege while simultaneously relegating women – their stories, lives, and practices – to the periphery. The objectification of women as pretty and passive (what I viewed as perfect ‘dolls’) is reinforced and reproduced through cultural and educational practices that privilege idealised and normative stereotypes of how women should look and behave (Calogero & Thompson, 2010; De Beer, 2012; El Refaie, 2012). These stereotypical portrayals shape not only how women are perceived but also how they internalise societal expectations of femininity and beauty (Davis, 2008), often resulting in self-objectification and psychological distress (Halim et al., 2014). This persistent privileging of narrow ideals was deeply

embedded in my fashion designer education and practice, shaping both what I created and how I performed as a designer.

When I started this PhD journey, I thought it would be about my teaching and struggle between being a practitioner and scholar. My gender, race, class, language, nationality, the generation I was born into, the parents I was born to have all shaped the path I have followed. These ‘facts’ about me taught me ways of seeing, being, thinking, and doing that are so deeply embedded and ingrained that they became invisible. Yet, they have profoundly influenced the beliefs, values, perspectives, and choices that inform what I know and how I live as a white, female fashion design lecturer. Autoethnography created a safe and creative space (Gannon, 2018) to articulate my personal experiences while questioning and unlearning my fashion designer self. And through artful inquiry, “losing-finding of the self” (Blacker, 1998, p. 363) sparks off ideas beyond self-absorption and human essentialism but the untangling of taken-for-granted notions and “being absorbed into the world” (Blacker, 1998, p. 363) differently and embodied.

Sharan (in Pillay et al., 2020, p. 267) highlights how emotions are ‘embedded’ in our experiences. Like St. Pierre (1997), she found that it was impossible to ignore the emotional data of her experiences. The act of drawing her memories elicited the emotional connections, allowing her to view them from an external perspective. Similarly, I have found that drawing the visual assemblages of my paper dolls (in Chapter Nine) and unpacking the three levels of my pictorial representation made my emotions tangible and visible – not just to me, but to the world. This process has shown me that re-living and re-telling (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), inherently involve emotions that are inseparable from the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which they are embedded.

The scholarly gaze turned inward was both an intellectual and emotional process of ‘undoing,’ marked by pain and growth (Christie et al., 2007). As an autoethnographer, I have been called to sit in this discomfort, to express “a sense of vulnerability and nakedness” (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2009, p. 23) through my writing. Unlearning the danger of the single story of self (Adichie, 2009) was a painful and sometimes melancholic process. Part of my unlearning has also been an acceptance of aspects of myself that are “stereotypical.” Adichie (2009) reminds us that “the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete.” Having stereotypically feminine hobbies and interests and choosing a stereotypically female-dominated career is not in itself a problem. It does not make me less of a feminist (Bain, 2016), or less woman. It is a part of who I am, but it is not my whole story. Instead of chastising myself for liking these things that are hegemonically ‘feminine,’ I choose to use this a materially situated pathway to understand my multiple stories of experience whole story.

And yet it is only through the vulnerabilities, reflexive moments and emotions, through the lived body, and through the material practices of doing that we engage in ethical and embodied scholarship. Autoethnography requires us to recognise that the self is always a constructed artefact, shaped by the materiality of language and the choices we make in writing (Gannon, 2018). These entanglements remind us that ethical scholarship is both reflexive and deeply situated in the material world.

10.2.4. Moving forward differently

One of the key themes of this chapter has been my taken-for-granted assumptions of what it means to be a woman, a fashion designer, and an academic. As a researcher, this scholarly space has allowed me to realise that it is more important to enact those identities – to *be* the thing, to *do* the thing – than it is to *look* like the thing. Through this research, I have stepped back to examine my fashion design lecturer self, bringing awareness to the ways in which I may have unwittingly caused harm to my students by perpetuating enduring practices and assumptions about what a fashion designer should be. I teach diverse students in my classroom, who embody different experiences of the fashion design world and who do not all fit the idea of what traditional fashion designers “should” look like. I find myself asking “according to who, anyway?” As a lecturer, I need to find ways to stop perpetrating and being complicit in saying what girls should do, fashion designers should do, or what fashion designers look like.

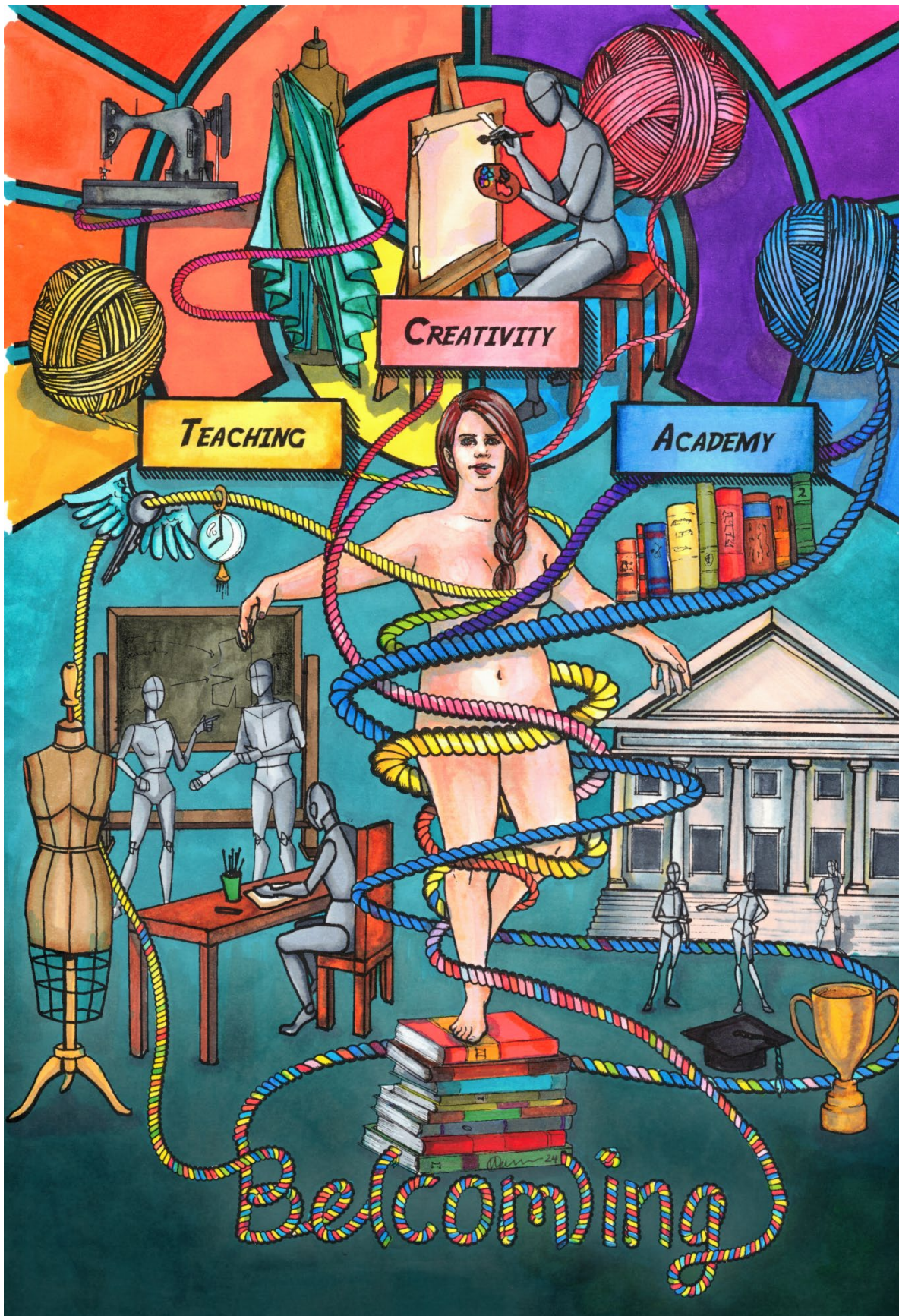
The process of completing this PhD has transformed my thinking, offering me a way to approach this as an ethical responsibility. It has freed me from fixed notions of fashion design knowledge and practice, creating possibilities for doing things differently with students in UoT fashion design education classrooms.

10.2.5. Weaving the fashion design lecturer into being

Through this autoethnographic study, I have come to recognise and acknowledge particular threads that have woven through my being-becoming and ultimately lead me to becoming a fashion design lecturer: academy, teaching, and creativity. Using an autoethnographic lens, I reflect on how being a fashion design lecturer creates a space for me to express embodied creativity, engage in daily artmaking, conduct research, and achieve validation for intellectual contributions – all while teaching and mentoring others. The career I ended up in is the only path I could see that would allow me to weave all three of these threads together. Much like Barad’s (2007) intra-action, these threads are not merely parallel; they co-constitute one another, materialising my being-becoming through their entanglements. Barkhuizen’s (2008) notion of interconnected stories resonates here, as each thread pulls from and informs the others, in an entangled multi-layered assemblage of my be(com)ing Kaila.

My own insecurities around art and not feeling good enough to pursue it as a career led me to choose fashion design as a practical alternative. However, being in the fashion industry felt creatively stifling and academically unchallenging. Teaching and lecturing in the beginning as I had been taught did not work for my students, and it was only through research and bringing creativity into my classroom that I was able to find a way forward. These three threads have converged and diverged, weaving a tapestry that portrays my being-becoming. Finally, the three threads meet together to fashion me into being a fashion design lecturer at a UoT.

Figure 10.1: Visualising be(com)ing



Note. Figure created by the author.

This image (Figure 10.1: *Visualising Be(com)ing*) represents my be(com)ing in this autoethnographic journey. Tversky (2011) argues that the page or canvas represents the frame of reference of the viewer, using visual-spatial markers to help make sense of the image. In this figure, I have positioned myself at the centre, reflecting the focus of the study: my own being and becoming as a fashion design lecturer. Objects placed at the centre of a composition often hold greater significance (Tversky, 2011), echoing the self-reflexive nature of this research. The visual markers in this image help illustrate the entangled processes of artful becoming, highlighting the embodied and intellectual dimensions of this transformation.

Unlike my paper doll assemblages from Chapter Nine, which were shaped by the fashion design Discourse's idealised ways of depicting women, I have drawn myself in a more rounded and three-dimensional way. This depiction represents my embodied self, woven together from the diverse threads of my experiences and relationalities within my sociocultural context. Enfleshed and authentic, this image challenges the Discourses that have dictated how I should look, instead presenting my raw, material self.

I have metaphorically unrobed myself, like Rosenberg (2016), and shared within this thesis some of my more painful and shameful experiences, becoming vulnerable for the reader (Berry & Hodges, 2015). I am naked, but my nakedness is artfully concealed by the cultural threads I embody and entangle with as a researcher, academic, artist, and fashion design lecturer working at a UoT. Everyday Kaila is a blank canvas for becoming that is relational to other entities and forms of relations beyond the hierarchies to shape what I know and how I live and work. From this open, naked space, I embrace the opportunity to engage in multiple relationalities – remaining open to change, fluidity, and the non-rational (as discussed in Chapter 9.2.4 Embodied Assemblage: Fashioning my own path).

I stand on a stack of books. Ancient looking, leather-bound tomes. They represent the many scholars who came before me and whose work has paved the way for my own – not to defend but to engage in the landscape, as an ethical responsibility but also “a political, social and philosophical endeavour” (Allan, 2013, p. 29). Like Noy (2003), I want to move those academic conversations from the margins (where we put less important things) and bring them to the forefront. These scholars have influenced my thinking through theories of knowledge that enhance and recognise tacit and embodied knowledge. This recognition has been critical to my scholarly reflections in the thesis on becoming differently as a fashion design lecturer.

The threads of Academy, Creativity and Teaching move around, over and under, and across, swirling, tangling, and entangling. The threads weave through, over and under each other, overlapping and

diverging; they are interconnected, influencing, and shaping one another in dynamic and equal ways. While I am central to the assemblage, it is not to denote hierarchy: I stand as both object-subject. I am a sculpturesque form – unstable, unsteady, with outstretched arms to balance me. For now, I am the armature of the assemblage held and entangled by the threads. These entanglements resist fixed or rigid structures, reflecting the fluid and collaborative nature of my becoming as a fashion design lecturer. Through this autoethnographic journey to the artistic engagements enable me to see how the different elements, objects, concepts, theories, and structures interconnect in my becoming. The act of twining two or more plies of thread together creates a stronger, more resilient whole, just as the interwoven threads of my being-becoming reinforce and support one another. This metaphor reflects the agency that emerges from the entanglement of diverse experiences, identities, and relationalities, each contributing to the strength and adaptability of my being. Rather than a rigid solidity, this assemblage of human and non-human offer a sense of ‘solidity.’

Academic threads of [un]be(com)ing

The visual material enabled me to play with the thread of Academy woven into my practice, seeing it differently and challenging its traditionally hierarchical position. Tversky (2011) explains that visual diagrams mimic physical space, and things at the bottom of the page become “ground”. My drive for academic performance and validation has been a grounding force in every career decision I made, and I have depicted a generic university building (not based on any real place) to represent the ‘academy’ at large. I found the Academy to be a safe space for much of my life. When I began to look critically as an autoethnographer, however, at the self and the everyday mundane practices within the academy, visual artmaking helped me to see the surveillance, neoliberal performativity metrics, and exclusionary practices in a new light. This building where I worked as a fashion design lecturer was both a safe space and second home to me, but also, at times, a prison where I was trapped by norms, institutionalised routines and practices that I was entangled in (Netolicky, 2017), caught up in a fast paced performative culture, churning out graduates and publications. The trophy in the image shows the validation and accolades of academia that I crave, but also the neo-liberal performance metrics the university presses upon me. This visual assemblage challenges fixed notions and binaries, instead capturing the multiplicity of the forces in tension. It demonstrates how academia rewards measurable outputs and individual exceptionalism while perpetuating systemic pressures that commodify knowledge and constrain intellectual freedom (McKeown, 2022; Parfitt et al., 2021; Shore & Wright, 2020), without resorting to dualistic or hierarchical representations.

Imagining fashion design lecturer differently

Closer to the university building, anonymised people stand in idle chatter. They seem far out of my reach as they stand closer to the university, closer to joining the in-group of academia. Perhaps this is an untold signal about how I don’t feel like I am included, I am still an outsider. Their anonymity,

emphasised through a lack of facial features, clothing or individual details, reinforce the idea of a template that I do not conform to. They are drawn in fashion illustration proportions, impossibly long and thin legs with narrow waists (even the masculine figure at the far back is drawn in idealised proportions). They have conversations without me.

I strive to be the Doctor that gets to wear the silly bonnet, hold my bound thesis in hand, and show everyone that I have achieved academic excellence – I want to be validated for all the work and effort I have put into the PhD. But I realise that I am chasing someone else’s definition of excellence, and like the hat and book, it is based on historic ideas of what mattered and has little grounding in my current context. Being a Doctor of Philosophy will not necessarily make me any better as a teacher in the same way that the bound thesis won’t make me smarter or wiser. But I do believe that the journey to get here has changed me and made me aware of my failings, critical of my complicity, and inspired to strive for better.

In the illustration, above the university, a collection of ancient books nestles into the threads of the image. The books, woven into my becoming, are my stories too. Each story has its own wisdom to teach me, but they remain on the shelf collecting metaphoric dust until I use my academic reflexivity to examine them critically.

The vintage sewing machine pays homage to my life changing sewing machine, a treasured object evoking memories of embodied and tacit experiences of practicing my creative thinking within the home as an informal learning space. Makhanya (2016, p. 90) believes that “if you have a sewing machine you are able to do impossible things,” because this domestic object serves as a tool through which you can clothe and feed your family. The sewing machine’s adaptability and practicality mirrors my embodied and tacit knowledge as a fashion designer as well as highlights how this creative craft opens up pathways for different things and different relationalities. Encouraging a reimagining of what it means to be a fashion design lecturer opens up a space to nurture ways of knowing and being that go beyond traditional, representational, or rational frameworks. Thinking with assemblages offers a way to reimagine what it means to become a fashion design lecturer. It highlights the interconnectedness of human and non-human elements, such as sewing machines and creative tools, and their role in shaping the fashion design world. This perspective allows for a more fluid, relational understanding of pedagogy and teaching, creating, connecting, challenging rigid boundaries, and fostering innovation. By disrupting hierarchical relations – between lecturer and student, skill and creativity, subject and object, or art and craft – it becomes possible to envision teaching and practice as dynamic and inclusive processes that shape and are shaped by their contexts.

Creative threads of my be(com)ing

Creative becoming as ethical work enhances and reaches up to the visual-spatial-temporal sky (Tversky, 2011) of becoming, signalling the intangible “airy” nature of arts and creativity. The image is framed by a colour wheel, depicting how colour is a spectrum in the same way that creativity is, where there are many different shades and tints. Colours work together in harmony, in contrast or complementary ways. All are interconnected and their vibrancy flows and echoes through the assemblage. Through this creative scholarly engagement, I learnt how my handcraft skills (sewing, knitting, crocheting, and crafting) enhance my fashion design practice. These embodied experiences and tacit skills affirm my ethical response-ability (Lather, 2017) as a fashion design lecturer, where nurturing diverse notions of creativity and fostering imagination spaces are central. Such materially situated spaces rely on “a maker epistemology that values the process of doing” (Pahl, 2017, p. 31), where embodied thinking becomes tangible and offers new possibilities experiencing and becoming differently and aesthetically- counter to the functional and traditional ways of being.

Teaching my threads of be(com)ing

My teaching weaves behind the fashion design mannequin, the perfect size 34 dress form that symbolised the idealised body I had been taught to admire and take for granted as the standard my students should work with. The mannequin, set in the classroom scene in the bottom left of the image, represents the implicit and explicit biases reproduced in my UoT classrooms. These include ideas of body positivity tied to restrictive templates of womanhood, Western hegemonic norms of beauty, and the privileging of trends and designers from the global North. I find it slightly humorous that the mannequins have no heads, no capacity for thought or creativity, and yet they evoke stories, nudging me to question my assumptions and limits. These figures, whose curves I know better than my own, tell me without mouths that I don’t fit. Unthinking mannequins have agency and provoke me to consider how materiality and bodies entangle with culture to question the exclusions and silences, the untold stories entangled in fashion design education that culture erased (Said, 1994).

While the traditional and conservative curriculum constrained me to teach sample sizes and industry norms, I simultaneously began to critically and engage with these limitations. As a department, we worked to highlight designers from the African continent and locally, instead of focusing on the global North. We encouraged projects that integrated and celebrated traditional skills, local and historic materials, and students’ own diverse heritages. These efforts, though bound by limitations of the curriculum, allowed me to push for inclusivity and foster critical conversations that challenge hegemonic norms in the classroom.

Hanging from my teaching core thread is my pendant watch, an object of function (Riggins, 1994) that demarcated my identity as a lecturer. Its ticking hands reminding me that time and space need

to be claimed in order to positively resist the neoliberal practices of the Academy and counter this sense of urgency to deliver content and pass on skills. Yet, the potential to be – symbolised by the key with wings – is bound by the thread of teaching that seems to come directly from my heart in the illustration, connecting directly to my passion for teaching. This thread cultivates in me the desire to move beyond the pedantic and instrumentalist views of fashion design education. The connection with the heart of a teacher (Palmer, 1997) fosters feelings of joy, passion, love, and the potential of what might be immanent. The power of the visual evokes emotion, opens pathways for becoming differently.

The old school black board is another object of function (Riggins, 1994), symbolic of my initial old school teaching methods, which were shaped by the ways I was taught. “Blackboard” was also the name of the first online learning management system I used as part of revamping my teaching practice, incorporating e-learning, videos, and digital content into my classroom. The diagram on the board is one I’ve drawn hundreds of times – a basic front bodice meant to fit a women’s size 34 mannequin. This enduring image reflects the industry standards ingrained in fashion education, symbolising the persistent privileging of certain body ideals.

The visual invites ambiguity and openness to question whether it is me sitting at the table in front of the conversing couple. Am I the impressionable fashion student eagerly taking notes? The early-career academic and lecturer trying to do things the ‘right way’? Or, maybe, the lecturer who is stepping back and letting her students take the lead? Letting them argue, explain to each other, and engage in making their own way to knowing. Or perhaps it is all three. This assemblage, within the larger assemblage of becoming, reflects how teaching and the academy share space. Although distinct threads, they entangle and blur together in messy ways. I cannot teach without theory, and I cannot theorise without learning. These threads share the same spaces, informing one another as they fashion me. Teaching roots my past on the left, entangling with the academy of my future on the right. Above both, at the “top of mind,” lies the creativity thread, always present, always behind me.

Above I have shared my own interpretation of my artwork. Throughout this thesis I have been reminded that the visual carries many voices, multiple openings and ambiguities sometimes too humble to be noticed: What I as the artist intend, what I as the artist might interpret, and the meanings and interpretations that each different viewer brings with them (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2010; Charlie, 2016; Davis, 2008; El Refaie, 2012; Lerner, 2016; Mannay, 2015; McCloud, 1994; Riggins, 1994; Scarles, 2010; Sousanis, 2015; Tidwell & Manke, 2009; Tversky, 2011; Wood, 2016; Yob, 2003). All interpretations are shaped through the individual’s sociocultural and historic lens.

I wonder, dear reader, what does this image say to you?

10.3. Section B – Methodological contributions

When I started this thesis, I identified as a constructivist, believing that knowledge is constructed through social interactions and experiences. Initially, the ideas of post-qualitative scholars like St. Pierre (2018) (see also St. Pierre (1997), St. Pierre et al. (2016)) and Mazzei and Jackson (2012) seemed too abstract, philosophical, and vague for a practitioner like me to engage with. However, as I delved deeper into the literature, I began questioning my ontological assumptions, which led to a profound transformation in my understanding of reality.

In my study, I have advanced methodological practices by integrating textual and visual elements into a cohesive framework. This multimodal approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of fashion design education as a vocational field and the process of becoming a fashion design lecturer. Fashion design education, as a site of learning, is entangled with objects, practices, and Discourses that shape both teaching and identity (Barad, 2003; Pahl, 2017). Viewing these entanglements through a material lens repositions how learners engage with thinking-through-doing and doing-as-thinking, fostering a deeper connection between practice and knowledge. Engaging with the works of Bhattacharya (2021), Bozalek et al. (2020) and MacLure (2021, 2023) enabled me to embrace the methodological messiness of this study, making space for its complexities while resisting overly simplistic narratives of becoming. Entering the post-qualitative space overturned that comfortable certainty. Where I once thrived on controlled and goal-oriented work, I now found myself lost in a research process that resisted closure or resolution, demanding a critical unlearning of my practitioner mindset.

10.3.1. Embracing methodological messiness and liminality

Embracing the complexity was by no means comfortable, but the discomfort was necessary in shifting my very ways of thinking and knowing. Coming from a practitioner context where the kinds of research I had engaged with were linear, clear, and always within control, I was comfortable with research where the next steps were certain. Engaging in a visual autoethnography that insistently shifted more towards seeking out something different, destabilising the traditional linear research processes of data generation, coding, thematic categories and interpretation (Coleman, 2022). This shift challenged my reliance on a single, fixed approach to research as a fashion design academic, echoing Adichie's (2009) warning against the 'danger of a single story' that flattens complexities and diversity of experience. Engaging with the philosophical and iterative nature of post-qualitative inquiry required me to move beyond the linear methods of practitioner training, opening up space for concepts to be continually explored and redefined.

In entangling with this messiness, I found my ontological grounding within a new material feminist stance. Influenced by Barad's (2003, 2007) concept of intra-action, this perspective emphasises the

interconnectedness of the material and conceptual worlds. Barad's (2003, 2007) notion of intra-action suggests that objects, people, and ideas are not separate entities, but are co-constituted through their relationships. This resonated with my experience in fashion design, where fabric, tools, and the human body do not simply "exist" independently but continually shape and re-shape each other in the process of creating garments. Although challenging to grasp and often leaving me in a state of confusion, these ideas provided opened up a complex understanding and entangled with affect it plugged into creative assemblages of becoming.

10.3.2. Visual autoethnography in fashion design education

At the heart of this study lies a commitment to visual and narrative storytelling as a powerful tool for reflexivity, sharing and drawing on the gaze of others as funds of knowledge for critical inquiry. Through autoethnographic narrative, I have sought to capture my vulnerabilities, uncertainties, and the moments of unlearning that shaped my being-becoming a fashion design lecturer. This deliberate reflection allows me to interrogate what is and reimagine what could be, fostering hope and the possibility for change. Using visuals as text has further enriched this process by creating spaces for vulnerability, reflexivity, and empathy, which are central to both evocative and critical autoethnography (Berry & Hodges, 2015). These stories provide a raw, authentic account of my personal and professional journey, offering a way for others to learn from my experiences and, perhaps, from my mistakes.

By turning the autoethnographic lens inward, this process allowed me to critically evaluate the singular identities that I came to be known by and how I choose to be known. The transformative power of autoethnography lies in its ability to make the hidden visible, revealing underlying beliefs and practices that might otherwise go unquestioned, and to 'speak against' them (Adams et al., 2017, p. 3). This process has not only allowed me to make more conscious choices moving forward but has also contributed to a deeper understanding of theories related to reflexivity, professional development in fashion design education, and the concept of becoming as a work in progress. Like a work of art, it remains open to reworking and transformation.

My research uses a novel approach to visual autoethnography within a fashion design education context. Combining self-narrative with visual self-portraits and graphics gave me the ability to delve into the complex, multifaceted nature of identity. In doing so, I move beyond traditional textual narratives to a space where the visual and textual coexist, opening up new pathways for expressing how identity is not only narrated but embodied. Moreover, my training as a fashion designer seeped into my art-making in ways that showed who I was intuitively, reinforcing the notion that drawing is a way of externalising thought (Tversky, 2011). This resonates with my design background, where sketches and graphics were not just a mode of representing ideas but an active, constructive tool

shaping them (De Wet, 2017). In this sense, drawing is more than a product of reflection, it becomes an integral part of how I reflexively think, explore, and question ideas, and the act of art-making becomes ethical work in this process (Yob, 2003).

The integration of drawing into my autoethnographic research extends the methodological potential of visual inquiry in new directions. My use of drawing as a methodological innovation offers a nuanced and deeply personal way to understand how identities are constructed and performed in a specific sociocultural context. Following the deeply reflexive and visually autoethnographic works of Parker (2017), Thiessen (2019), and Stephens-Griffin (2017), I've used drawing to play with the fixed ideas of 'self' steeped in my fashion design learning and socialisation experiences viewed through the cultural context.

MacLure's (2021) discussion of a bespoke methodology resonates with this practice, as it has enabled me to patchwork together a unique approach to data generation that melds artistic and scholarly modes. This aligns with Leavy's (2015) notion of arts-based research, where the art-making process itself becomes a site of inquiry, allowing for both the expression of personal truths and the critique of broader cultural Discourses. By integrating these methodologies, I have crafted a multi-layered inquiry that not only reflects my personal experiences but also critically engages with the sociocultural forces shaping my becoming.

My use of paper dolls, originally inspired by the power of drawing discussed in in Tidwell and Manke (2009), further enhances this methodology. The paper doll assemblages in Chapter Nine employ a stereotypically feminine plaything traditionally associated with young girls, uncovering unspoken understandings of what being a woman means to me. As Yob (2003, p. 130) explains through Thayer-Bacon's quilting bee metaphor, such symbols acknowledge "traditionally discounted" ways of knowing. Similarly, using a 'feminine' metaphor in my study reveals my internalised beliefs about womanhood while creating space to critique and question these assumptions. These tangible drawings allowed me to visualise and embody identities in ways that mere words could not, tie together the gap where words fail and "opening spaces of understanding" (Scarles, 2010, p. 906). In this way, visual autoethnography becomes not just a methodological tool but a means of creating new spaces for critical reflection and meaning-making.

10.3.3. Entangling the visual and the written

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in the innovative braiding of visual and written methods. Inspired by Sousanis' *Unflattening* (2015), a PhD thesis presented as a graphic novel, I sought to integrate the strengths of visual and textual storytelling. While a full comic-form thesis would not have suited the nature of my inquiry, the strength of my approach is in entangling visuals

and art with written analysis. This approach assembles different entities – objects, humans, emotions, and concepts – fostering conversations and stories within my practitioner (artistic) and scholarly (theoretical) selves.

In my study, I have advanced methodological practices by integrating textual and visual elements into a cohesive framework. This multimodal approach connects theory and practice, visual and textual, allowing for a more holistic understanding of identity formation. The interplay of visual and textual methods has pushed my learning beyond traditional modes of inquiry, fostering deeper reflections on the complexities of self-representation and professional identity (Leavy, 2015). Such an approach provides a starting point for future research in creative disciplines, demonstrating how these methods can complement each other to produce richer, more nuanced insights.

One significant methodological contribution is the use of comics and visual assemblages, such as paper doll assemblages, as tools for data generation and analysis. Drawing comics depicting my professional identities provided a way to map and interrogate how my identity is performed and shaped across different contexts. The paper doll assemblages, informed by a feminist new materialist stance, moved beyond metaphor to highlight the intra-actions between cultural Discourses, material practices, and embodied experiences. These assemblages revealed how identities are not fixed but are dynamically constituted through relationalities and entanglements, making visible tensions and connections that might remain obscured in textual analysis alone.

While I hand-drew my paper doll assemblages, this approach is adaptable to various mediums – photographs, collages, or digital tools – making it accessible to researchers with diverse skill sets. More than a metaphor, these assemblages acted as entangled sites of inquiry, creating spaces for thinking and reflecting differently. They enabled me to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions and explore the relationalities between the human and non-human, generating insights that go beyond traditional academic narratives (Tidwell & Manke, 2009). The methodological innovations in this study demonstrate how creative practices can open up new ways of knowing and being, particularly in disciplines where identity formation is deeply intertwined with cultural and material intra-actions.

These methodological innovations not only enrich this study but also offer valuable strategies for future researchers in creative disciplines. Weaving visual and written methods together paves the way for more inclusive and dynamic forms of academic inquiry, inviting a broader range of perspectives and interpretations into the research process (Leavy, 2015). By pushing the boundaries of traditional academic frameworks, this study contributes to a growing body of work that advocates for the integration of arts-based research methodologies in higher education and creative practice.

10.4. Section C – Theoretical contributions

This study offers theoretical insights into being-becoming in creative and professional contexts, emphasising the fluid, relational, and material nature of identity formation. Through feminist new materialist perspectives, it explores how identities are co-constituted by the intra-actions of personal histories, sociocultural Discourses, and creative practices. This process, always entangled and ongoing, challenges static conceptions of fashion design lecturer identity and opens possibilities for new ways of thinking, doing, and being.

The concept of creative be(com)ing emerges as a pivotal contribution, illustrating how embodied practices like handcrafting and visual autoethnography enable a reimagining of self and profession. This thesis also engages deeply with the duality of the practitioner-academic, capturing the tensions and synergies between practical expertise and scholarly inquiry. These contributions not only illuminate the intricate entanglements of identity within fashion design education but also extend to broader reflections on professional identity in practice-based disciplines.

10.4.1. Theoretical insights on creative be(com)ing

In this creative scholarly PhD space, I learnt how my handcraft skills of sewing, knitting, crocheting, and making crafts are more than practices of making. They enhance my fashion design pedagogy and affirm my ethical response-ability (Lather, 2017) as a fashion design lecturer, allowing me to nurture diverse notions of creativity and foster imaginative spaces for embodied, relational thinking. These practices rely on what Ingold (2013) calls a “maker epistemology,” where knowledge materialises through the process of doing, through the tactile interplay of hands, tools, and ideas. This materially situated engagement opens new possibilities for creative thinking, teaching, and learning, where the act of making is itself a site of inquiry.

The visual autoethnography central to this study embodies my being-becoming as a fashion design lecturer. Drawing on Butler’s (1988) concept of performativity and Barad’s (2003) theory of materiality, this approach foregrounds the intra-actions between materiality, embodied experience, and sociocultural forces. These entangled threads – personal history, cultural narratives, professional experiences, and theoretical insights – are not separate strands but vibrant assemblages that constitute the ongoing process of becoming. This assemblage reflects my commitment to engaging with fashion design education as an ethical and creative practice, where the boundaries between the material, the theoretical, and the relational are intentionally blurred.

The fluidity of identity emerges here as a core principle, not as a fixed construct but as a process of continual negotiation, adaptation, and intra-action. Professional identities within fashion design education, shaped by cultural Discourses and material practices, evolve as relational, context-

dependent performances. By embracing this fluidity, I move beyond static representations of the fashion design lecturer, instead situating identity as an ongoing, messy, and generative process – one that is always entangled with the material, social, and affective forces that shape who we are and how we live and work.

10.4.2. Being a connection for practitioner-academics

This thesis contributes to the growing body of arts-based and arts-integrated scholarship by demonstrating how bespoke methodologies (MacLure, 2021) can be effective when closely aligned with the ‘home discipline’ (Hunter, 2020) of the practitioner-academic. Drawing from my background as a fashion designer, I have employed creative techniques such as fashion illustration-styled self-portraits, paper doll assemblages, and visual thinking as integral to my inquiry. These methods are not simply tools but are embedded in the rhythms and materialities of my practice, offering ways to interrogate and disrupt conventional academic processes. By centring disciplinary expertise within this methodological assemblage, this study reimagines how creative practitioners can navigate the tensions and possibilities of academic research.

Through the integration of visual and graphic elements into a conventional academic framework, my approach challenges the dominance of “writerly” modes of knowledge production (Leavy, 2015; MacLure, 2021). This multimodal methodology extends beyond mere inclusion of visual artefacts; it amplifies the relational and embodied dimensions of knowing that are often overlooked in traditional academic outputs. By embracing visual and kinetic ways of thinking, I make visible the tacit and embodied knowledges that underpin practice-based disciplines, offering a model for more inclusive and responsive scholarship. This approach also addresses a broader institutional need: recognising that traditional theses do not always accommodate the diverse epistemologies of creative practitioners. It invites future academic work to explore alternative formats, such as integrated arts productions, interactive installations, or videos, as proposed by Peat (2012), creating space for new modes of scholarly expression.

The dual identity of the ‘pracademic’ (Dickinson et al., 2022) serves as a focal point of critique in this study, where resisting the fixed binary illuminates the multiplicity of tensions and synergies between professional practice and academic scholarship. In fashion design education, these identities are continually negotiated and redefined through the interplay of creative, pedagogical, and scholarly practices. By examining how pracademics navigate these entangled selves, I reveal how professional identity is not fixed but emerges through ongoing relational and material intra-actions with institutional, cultural, and disciplinary forces. This perspective offers critical insights into how the pracademic straddles the worlds of making and theorising, teaching, and researching, crafting a professional identity that is at once dynamic, fluid, and deeply situated within both fields.

10.5. Section D – Practical contributions

This section builds on the earlier discussions of being-becoming, situating it within the practical realities of fashion design education. By reflecting on my transition into academia without formal pedagogical training, I illuminate the entangled processes of being-becoming a fashion design lecturer and how these unfold within a materially situated, gendered, and sociocultural context. These contributions address a gap in the literature regarding the unique challenges faced by fashion design professionals entering academia and offer insights into how alternate and collaborative networks can support such transitions.

Through this lens, I examine how internalised gender norms and sociocultural expectations shape the fashion design world and influence how we come to know, live, and teach within it. This exploration extends the theoretical discussions of gender identity and performance by offering practical strategies for fostering more inclusive and supportive learning environments in UoT classrooms. By doing so, this study contributes to both the theoretical understanding and practical implementation of more equitable fashion design education practices.

10.5.1. Being-becoming a fashion design lecturer

This thesis addresses a notable gap in the literature by detailing the complex process of being-becoming a fashion design lecturer – a career path that is not well documented, particularly within fashion education. While there is some discussion of practitioners transitioning into academia (Chitanand, 2015; Ennals et al., 2016; McMillan & Gordon, 2017), little is said about the specific experiences of fashion designers, whose professional identities are often anchored in creative, industry-based work rather than academic scholarship. This contribution may help others navigating a similar path by shedding light on the challenges of adapting to an academic setting without formal pedagogical training.

Without formal mentorship, I created my own professional networks by forging connections with colleagues, attending conferences, and engaging in workshops. These networks played a pivotal role in my professional development, helping to mitigate the isolation often experienced by new academics who lack traditional academic foundations. My research underscores the importance of these networks as care-full supportive spaces for thinking about fashion design lecturer differently.

Through this autoethnographic study, I also adapted my teaching practices to better serve students from diverse backgrounds and with varying levels of preparedness. This includes addressing issues such as technological literacy, language barriers, and differing learning styles. The process of continuously evolving my teaching methodology highlights the importance of flexibility, empathy,

and a commitment to lifelong learning in order to foster inclusive learning environments, particularly in institutions like the UoT, where students often come from underrepresented and under-resourced backgrounds. This contribution is particularly relevant for educators in diverse, multicultural settings, such as many higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa. It attempts to provide a framework for teaching practices that are responsive to the unique needs of students in this country.

10.5.2. Fashion education: Integrating practical and conceptual learning

In fashion design education, my study emphasises the creation of an authentic learning experience that empower students to explore their own paths to understanding, moving beyond the rote acquisition of skills. Fashion design, often seen as a discipline rooted in practical skills, may struggle to integrate more conceptual or reflective ways of teaching (De Wet, 2017; Gale, 2011; Postlethwaite, 2022), particularly with the increased reliance on technology and e-learning. My experience revamping the pattern technology classroom highlights how creativity and passion can be the driving force behind a more meaningful learning experience, one that transcends rote skill-building to foster critical and creative thinking (Cavanagh, 2018a; Cavanagh & Peté, 2017).

This integration of practical and conceptual elements offers a roadmap for other disciplines facing similar challenges in adapting to new educational stances. By weaving hands-on learning with conceptual exploration, fashion design educators can create more dynamic, flexible classrooms that meet the evolving needs of students.

My study also examines the unique challenges faced by pracademics transitioning into a University of Technology (UoT). Navigating the vocational legacy of a former Technikon in South Africa, I found myself negotiating the tensions between a historically vocational approach and the academic expectations of a university setting. Although this context is specific to South Africa, similar transitions have occurred globally, such as in the UK (Boliver, 2015) and Germany (Dittrich, 2006). My study highlights strategies for adapting to these pressures, including informal approaches and reflective practices that eased my transition.

By adding a personal narrative to broader discussions about academic belonging, this study contributes to understanding identity in academia (Lasky, 2005; Steadman, 2021; Trautwein, 2018). The tensions I experienced underscore the complexities of balancing professional practice with academic expectations in a university context still shaped by its vocational roots. These reflections offer valuable insights for others navigating the intersection of creative practice and academic scholarship, helping them develop a sense of belonging and purpose within this dynamic and evolving space.

10.6. Avenues for further research

This study offers significant insights into the complexities of pracademic transitions and identity formation within fashion education. Yet, its scope is limited by necessity, leaving several opportunities for further exploration. Future research could expand on autobiographical representation (El Refaie, 2012) through various visual media – collage, doodles, comics, fashion illustrations, paper dolls, or even the clothing one wears – as a means of investigating identity and culture. Such studies could offer rich, multi-layered data, extending the possibilities of visual and arts-based research methodologies.

Additionally, the unique challenges faced by pracademics in creative fields such as fashion design remain underexplored. Further studies could examine how these individuals navigate the intersections of professional practice and academic expectations, offering valuable insights into the tensions and synergies between these roles. Such research could inform institutional support structures, fostering smoother transitions for new academics while integrating practice-led expertise into academic frameworks. By addressing these gaps, future studies could contribute to a more inclusive understanding of how practice and theory coalesce within the academy.

This thesis has drawn upon key theoretical frameworks – Gee’s (2008) Big D Discourses, Butler’s (2002) theories of performativity, Barad’s (2007) concept of intra-action, and Barkhuizen’s (2008) model of interconnected stories – to engage with the nuances of professional be(com)ing. Together, these perspectives reveal the intricate entanglements between practice-led and academic identities, illustrating how identity is co-constructed through interactions with human and non-human elements; the people, cultures, and material objects I work with, through, and alongside.

Through Barad’s (2007) ethico-onto-epistemological lens, I have come to see my role as not only an educator but as an active participant in an ongoing process of *fashioning* that incorporates the material-discursive dynamics of my environment. This understanding positions me as part of a relational web, where pedagogical identity is continuously shaped and reshaped by the intra-actions among the social, cultural, and material elements that constitute my educational practice.

10.7. Carrying the threads forward

Building on these insights, this study contributes to the growing body of literature that positions visual autoethnography as a critical tool for reimagining academic Discourses. The integration of feminist new materialism within a visual autoethnographic framework challenges traditional methodologies, highlighting how material-discursive practices shape both individual and collective identities. By embracing a material-discursive approach, this thesis frames fashion design education

as part of an assemblage of human and non-human intra-actions, offering a transformative lens for understanding how educational practices evolve.

Moving forward, I aim to carry this reflexive and critical approach into my teaching practice. Each classroom interaction and professional encounter offers an opportunity for renewed insights and deeper understanding. The arts and visual methods employed in this research have proven invaluable in capturing the complexity of my be(com)ing, allowing me to navigate the evolving landscape of fashion education with creativity and intention.

Through this thesis, I invite others to embark on their own journeys of be(com)ing. By embracing the layered, evolving processes of identity formation, we can collectively reimagine and reshape our disciplines, forging new possibilities for creativity, inclusivity, and transformation within academia and beyond.

APPENDIX A – ETHICAL CLEARANCE



11 November 2019

Mrs Michaela Cavanagh (218083740)
School of Education
Edgewood Campus

Dear Ms Cavanagh,

Protocol reference number : HSS/0171/019D

Project title: Fashioning identities : An autoethnographic study of being-becoming a fashion design lecturer at a University of Technology

Approval Notification – Full Committee Reviewed Protocol

This letter serves to notify you that your response received on 21 July 2019 to our letter of 26 June 2019 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

This approval is valid for one year from 11 November 2019.

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Urmilla Bob
University Dean of Research

/ms

cc Supervisor: Professor Daisy Pillay
cc Academic Leader Research: Dr Ansurie Pillay
cc School Administrator: Ms Sheryl Jeenarain

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Dr Rosemary Sibanda (Chair)

Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building

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APPENDIX B – LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT

LETTER OF CONSENT TO INTIMATE OTHERS

83b St. Thomas Road
Musgrave
4001

Dear [participant]

I am a PhD student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, undertaking this research in the Department of Education. The provisional title of my thesis is “Fashioning identities: An Autoethnographic study of being-becoming a fashion design lecturer at a University of Technology”.

Aims of the Research:

In this study, I am to interrogate who I am, how I came to be and how I am becoming a fashion design lecturer in the context of a South African University of Technology.

Autoethnography involves studying oneself through culture, and in this study, I aim to explore how the socio-cultural context I am in has shaped me. This involves telling my story. But in order to tell my story, I must speak about the people in my life who are part of my story. You are one of the people who feature in my own stories. In some cases, I might request that we have a conversation for which I will ask your permission to audio record. In other instances, I might ask your permission to publish a photograph that you are in or that you may have taken. I might request your permission to share excerpts of emails, messages or letters. You have the right to refuse any of these requests.

In order for me to be ethical and transparent about my research process, I would like your consent in publishing my stories about you, so that you are aware of and have the opportunity to discuss the stories before they are made public. I have drawn on my stories from my personal memories, journal entries, and visual artefacts (like objects and photographs), but also from causal conversations and encounters in which I make mention of particular incidents of home/school/home that we attended together.

As part of you giving your consent, I undertake to abide by the following conditions where possible:

1. To give you the opportunity to read through any stories in which you feature in my story. You have the right to request changes, omissions or clarifications if you feel that the story is untrue or that the information is too sensitive or you are uncomfortable with any aspect of the story.
2. To give you the option of using a pseudonym or changing (fictionalising) any details which might cause you to be recognised or identified. Please note that this is not compulsory and you may choose to use your real name and details, or a combination of some real and some fictionalised details as you see fit.
3. To request your permission when publishing any personal communications (such as emails, letters or social media messages), photographs of you or taken by you and/or any audio recorded conversations (transcribed into written form). You have the right to refuse these requests or withdraw consent at any time.
4. To write as truthfully and honestly as possibly, and to be open to any feedback you may have about the stories.
5. To respect your right to choose not to participate, to choose limited participation or to withdraw from the study. You will not be disadvantaged if you choose not to consent.
6. To respect your stories, and to ensure that sensitive information is stored securely. Digital data will be stored on a secured cloud service that is not publicly accessible. This data will be deleted after 5 years. All participant’s identifying information will be removed before storage where possible [if applicable]. Any physical data will be stored in a locked cupboard, to which only the researcher has access. These documents will be destroyed through shredding and discarding after five years. Any further use of these stories may only be allowed with your permission.

Please note that there is no financial incentive for participating in this study. Information is collected for research purposes only.

If you have any questions or concerns, you are free to contact either myself or my PhD supervisor, Professor Daisy Pillay. Her contact details are as follows: Office - (031) 260 7598. Email - pillaygv@ukzn.ac.za

Alternatively, the Research Office Manager can be reached on the following:
Mr Premlall Mohun - Senior Administrative Officer
Email: mohunp@ukzn.ac.za
Tel: 031 260 4557
Fax: 031 260 4609

My contact details are:

Kaila Cavanagh
83b St. Thomas Road, Musgrave
Email: michaellag@dut.ac.za (work) or kailacavanagh@gmail.com (personal)
Cell phone: 073 84566291

Thank you.

Warm Regards,

Kaila

Should you have no objection with the conditions mentioned above, please fill in the following form.

DECLARATION

I (full names of participant) hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project, and I consent to participating in the research project.

I understand that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time, if I want to.

I give permission to the researcher (Michaella Cavanagh) to audio-record:

YES / NO

I give permission to the researcher (Michaella Cavanagh) to use photographs of myself:

YES / NO

I give permission to the researcher (Michaella Cavanagh) to use photographs I have taken:

YES / NO

.....

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

DATE

APPENDIX C – GATEKEEPER’S LETTER



*Directorate for Research and Postgraduate Support
Durban University of Technology
Tromso Annexe, Steve Biko Campus
P.O. Box 1334, Durban 4000
Tel.: 031-37325767
Fax: 031-3732946*

21st February 2019

Mrs Michaela Cavanagh
c/o College of Humanities and Social Sciences
School of Education
University of KwaZulu-Natal

Dear Mrs Cavanagh

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT THE DUT

Your email correspondence in respect of the above refers. I am pleased to inform you that the Institutional Research and Innovation Committee (IRIC) has granted Provisional Permission for you to conduct your research “Fashion identities: An autoethnographic study of being-becoming a fashion design lecturer at a University of Technology.” at the Durban University of Technology.

The DUT may impose any other condition it deems appropriate in the circumstances having regard to nature and extent of access to and use of information requested.

We would be grateful if a summary of your key research findings can be submitted to the IRIC on completion of your studies.

Kindest regards.
Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads 'Carin Napier'.

PROF CARIN NAPIER
DIRECTOR (ACTING): RESEARCH AND POSTGRADUATE SUPPORT DIRECORATE

APPENDIX D – EDITING CERTIFICATE

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26 November 2024

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

This is to confirm that the dissertation written by Michaella Cavanagh (Reg No 218083740) entitled **Fashioning Identities An Autoethnographic Study of Being-Becoming a Fashion Design Lecturer At A University of Technology** has been edited for layout, grammar, spelling, language type consistency, punctuation, tables, and figures by the undersigned. The document was subsequently proofread, and a number of additional corrections were advised.

Prof S D Govender

APPENDIX E – TURN IT IN REPORT

FASHIONING IDENTITIES: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF BEING-BECOMING A FASHION DESIGN LECTURER AT A UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

ORIGINALITY REPORT

3 %	1 %	2 %	1 %
SIMILARITY INDEX	INTERNET SOURCES	PUBLICATIONS	STUDENT PAPERS

PRIMARY SOURCES

1	"Object Medleys", Springer Nature, 2017 Publication	<1%
2	journals.dut.ac.za Internet Source	<1%
3	Academic Autoethnographies, 2016. Publication	<1%
4	michaellag.wixsite.com Internet Source	<1%
5	"Critical Reflections on Teacher Education in South Africa", Springer Science and Business Media LLC, 2024 Publication	<1%
6	www.journals.ac.za Internet Source	<1%
7	journals.ukzn.ac.za Internet Source	<1%
8	qspace.library.queensu.ca Internet Source	

APPENDIX F – EXTENDED GUIDE TO READING THE VISUAL

In this visual autoethnography, visuals are woven into the inquiry as “texts” designed to engage readers with the complex, multilayered dimensions of meaning underpinning my journey of be(com)ing a fashion design lecturer. This argument is not merely that visuals offer “extra” detail but that they possess a distinct and culturally mediated language, a form of “visual literacy” requiring engagement beyond an initial glance (Schirato & Webb, 2004). Visual literacy, as lisahunter (2016, p. 96) contends, is not an innate skill but one that is culturally and contextually shaped, influenced by historical and personal lenses (Scarles, 2010).

I recognise that this inquiry departs from traditional, text-heavy approaches by integrating visual methods, which some may find unconventional in academic contexts. However, this integration is intentional, as it aligns with feminist new materialist commitments to embodied and relational ways of knowing (Barad, 2007; Guyotte et al., 2018). Recognising that readers may approach these visuals with differing levels of familiarity, I have included this guide as an Appendix to support their engagement. This guide contextualises the visual texts within the post-qualitative stance of this thesis, offering interpretive tools without dictating fixed meanings. It invites readers to reflect on how visuals operate as cultural texts embedded with relational and symbolic meanings, aligning with the feminist new materialist commitment to relationality and multiplicity.

While this guide is intended to enhance understanding, it also anticipates and addresses potential concerns regarding the subjective and open-ended nature of visual methods. Such methods may be perceived as unconventional or even opaque by readers accustomed to traditional research paradigms. However, their subjectivity is central to their strength: visuals make visible the tacit, affective, and embodied dimensions of lived experience that text alone cannot fully convey. By situating the guide in the appendix, I aim to balance accessibility for readers unfamiliar with visual methodologies with the theoretical and methodological coherence of the thesis.

In a visual autoethnographic study such as mine, understanding how to ‘read’ these visuals is essential for a deeper engagement with the narratives (Hunter, 2020). This thesis invites readers to explore how the visual and textual narratives entangle to expand understanding, connecting the emotional, symbolic, and intellectual dimensions of my experiences. It moves beyond reading to invite the audience into the inquiry itself.

Why visuals are central in this autoethnography?

My choice to foreground visuals aligns with the way I, as a designer, navigate meaning through patterns, connections, and symbolic interaction beyond the surface (Cross, 1982). Designers learn to

engage deeply with visual elements like colour, space, and form, interpreting them as ‘texts’ that communicate through both subtle cues and explicit details (Schön & Wiggins, 1992). I draw on Cross’s (1982) concept of a “designerly way of knowing,” which aligns with my autoethnographic approach by allowing me to express meaning through both content and form, weaving my story through visuals as well as words.

This way of working with visuals is rooted in my own experience, shaped by a background in fashion design and nurtured in a family of artists. As Tidwell and Fitzgerald (2004) reflect, growing up in creative and culturally rich environments develops visual competencies that allow one to perceive and create meaning through design. My “visual fluency” is therefore not universal; it is cultivated, and I recognise that readers may bring different perspectives, potentially less attuned to reading images in layered ways. In embracing visuals as an autoethnographic method, I seek to share my story in a way that speaks to both designer and non-designer audiences, using visual texts to access layers of identity and experience that extend beyond language alone.

The role of visual literacy for readers

To assist readers in engaging with these visual texts, I build on visual literacy frameworks like those from Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020), which propose that images are read through social and cultural lenses that shape interpretation. Schirato and Webb (2004) add that what we “see” is influenced by both cultural literacy – the knowledge and skills for navigating cultural contexts – and by *habitus*, Bourdieu’s (1977/2020) concept of ingrained dispositions. This guide encourages readers to actively engage with the visuals in a reflective manner, approaching images as cultural texts embedded with meanings, values, and social codes.

In this interpretive process, I invite readers to notice symbols, patterns, and layered meaning within visuals that may echo experiences in their own lives. For instance, a recurring use of colour or framing often symbolises shifts in mood, time, or identity, and these choices are deliberate. Rather than providing fixed interpretations, the guide offers tools for engaging with the visuals reflexively, allowing readers to notice how their own perspectives might shape their responses to the imagery.

An invitation to interpretation

In autoethnography, where the self is both subject and object (Chang, 2008), visuals provide a means of stepping back and examining identity from a fresh perspective. They allow me to visually map out my identity development and challenge the conventions of traditional, text-based academic inquiry (Melrose, 2003). Comics and other visual text formats let me layer my personal experiences with broader Discourses of identity, culture, and academia, offering an entry point for readers to witness my internal dialogues and interpretive processes.

This guide encourages readers to approach my visuals with openness, using interpretive tools to consider how images communicate through both explicit visual grammar and implicit cultural associations. In doing so, it invites the reader to engage deeply with the nuances of my autoethnographic journey, uncovering complex meanings that might otherwise remain hidden. By developing visual literacy, readers are empowered to see beyond the surface, recognising the interconnected layers of my experience and understanding the transformative potential of visual texts in shaping this study.

Representational, interactive, and compositional meanings in visual texts

The framework draws on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) foundational work on 'visual grammar', using their three interpretive metafunctions: Representational Meaning, Interactive Meaning, and Compositional Meaning. Together, these offer a "roadmap" for readers, guiding them to engage with each visual's multiple, layered meanings, situating visuals within cultural, symbolic, and relational contexts.

Representational meaning: How visual texts depict the world

Representational meaning looks at how visuals represent the world around us. In Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2020) visual grammar, visuals may have a narrative structure (depicting actions, events, or unfolding interactions) or a conceptual structure (representing static ideas or categories). In this thesis, these structures allow me to present my journey through both specific stories and broader reflections, diffracting different facets of my identities.

For instance, narrative visuals, like comics showing my interactions with students or colleagues, depict dynamic interactions. They invite the reader into my lived experiences as a lecturer, with visual cues that signal emotions, actions, and evolving identity roles. Conceptual visuals, such as diagrams and concept maps, offer a static, summarised view, representing broader themes or relationships without a sequential storyline. Through these conceptual visuals, I can convey the complexity of abstract ideas, like my personal reflections on disciplinary practices or the overarching framework of my study.

Interactive meaning: Engaging the reader with each visual

Interactive meaning explores how visual elements establish a relationship between the viewer and the visual. Elements like gaze, social distance, and perspective shape the viewer's experience and engagement. For example, a "demand" gaze, where my illustrated self looks directly at the reader, invites active engagement, making the viewer feel as though they are part of the story. This demand gaze contrasts with the "offer" gaze, where visuals are presented for observation rather than direct interaction, guiding readers to contemplate or reflect without feeling drawn into the image.

Through varied social distances in my visual texts – close-ups to evoke intimacy and wider frames for detachment – I guide viewers to engage with the content at different emotional and cognitive levels. These choices mirror my autoethnographic process, inviting readers to experience moments of introspection or active participation, much like the reflexive dialogues I navigate within my research.

Compositional meaning: Organising meaning within the visual space

Compositional meaning considers how elements within a visual are arranged to create a cohesive whole, which can guide interpretation (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020). Concepts like information value, salience, and framing help convey hierarchical relationships within visuals. For example, important elements may be positioned at the top or made more prominent through size and colour, directing the viewer's attention and indicating their significance. This organisation reflects how I prioritise certain ideas or themes within my work, guiding readers through layered meanings in a structured manner.

In my visual texts, framing techniques differentiate between the various aspects of my identity, such as “Kaila-the-designer” and “Kaila-the-lecturer.” Strong frames delineate boundaries within the image, clarifying shifts in perspective, while weaker frames suggest fluidity and interconnectedness, mirroring the complexity of my identity construction. Through these visual compositions, I aim to communicate not only the themes of my study but also the relational dynamics inherent in my journey.

Designerly ways of knowing: Connecting disciplines in visual autoethnography

As a designer, my way of knowing is deeply visual and intuitive, shaped by years of training that emphasises pattern recognition, symbolic meaning, and spatial arrangement (Cross, 1982). Designers are accustomed to working with visuals as “texts,” interpreting and constructing meaning through visual forms rather than relying solely on words. This designerly way of knowing supports my autoethnographic inquiry, providing a mode of expression that aligns with my identity and invites readers into my unique perspective.

In this thesis, I draw on my designerly approach to make abstract concepts tangible, translating internal reflections into external forms. Visuals such as sketches, comics, and diagrams allow me to present ideas that might be challenging to convey through text alone, offering readers an entry point into my experiences. Through this guide, I encourage readers to adopt a designerly lens as they engage with the visuals, moving beyond passive observation to an interpretive process that reveals layered meanings, patterns, and cultural associations within each image.

By connecting these visual texts to broader concepts in visual literacy and design thinking, I aim to equip readers with interpretive tools that enhance their engagement with this thesis. This guide, therefore, is more than a roadmap for understanding the visuals; it is an invitation to explore the intra-action of narrative, art, and scholarship, embracing the transformative potential of visual autoethnography as a process of inquiry and academic storytelling.

Text and visuals: A collaborative narrative

In this thesis, text and visuals are not independent elements; rather, they intra-act and entangle, creating a multi-dimensional narrative assemblage that invites readers to engage on several levels. While text provides a detailed, linear account of my journey, visuals add depth and texture, capturing the nuances of experience that words alone might struggle to convey. This integration supports the autoethnographic goal of presenting a holistic, reflexive narrative, where personal insights and scholarly analysis coalesce into a layered, immersive experience (Hunter, 2020; Mitchell, 2011).

In the context of visual autoethnography, the entanglement of text and visuals creates a dynamic “dialogue” (Schirato & Webb, 2004), where each mode enhances the meaning of the other. Text offers context and explicit details, guiding readers through specific reflections and interpretations, while visuals provide a parallel narrative, often allowing for ambiguity or multiple interpretations. This approach aligns with El Refaie’s (2012) view that visuals embody meaning in ways that written language alone cannot, linking back to the post-qualitative call to deprivilege language as the primary mode of expression (Barad, 2007; St. Pierre, 1997). Moving beyond language allows viewers to “see” the complexities of identity, memory, and self-reflection.

For example, in Chapter Four, comics illustrate my early memories, presenting emotions and fragmented recollections that might be less vivid if described purely in text. These visuals capture the immediacy and sometimes chaotic nature of memory (Boyle, 2019), allowing readers to experience these recollections viscerally. Text, in turn, complements these images by grounding them in context, linking personal anecdotes to broader theoretical concepts, such as identity formation and memory (Bartleet, 2022). Together, text and visuals work to convey a nuanced story that invites readers to see and understand each experience from multiple angles.

Layered interpretation: How text supports visuals and vice versa

The relationship between text and visuals is intentionally layered, designed to encourage readers to engage actively with both modes. Text often provides cues that guide the viewer’s interpretation of the visuals, such as highlighting recurring symbols or motifs that hold significance within the broader narrative (Rose, 2022). Conversely, visuals can foreshadow or elaborate on textual themes, offering subtle visual cues that invite further reflection. This layered approach aligns with McCloud’s (1994)

theory of “closure,” where readers fill gaps between panels or images, constructing a deeper narrative from these visual-textual interactions.

By incorporating both text and visuals, this thesis invites readers to participate in an interpretive process that mirrors my own journey of reflexive inquiry. The layered interplay of these elements reflects my approach as both storyteller and researcher, encouraging readers to consider how images and words together convey more than either could alone. Through this duality, I aim to offer readers a richer, more immersive understanding of my be(com)ing as a fashion design lecturer, as well as the larger themes of identity, lived experience, and cultural context that shape this process.

Embracing ambiguity: The role of visuals in expanding interpretation

Visuals in this thesis are intentionally open-ended, allowing for multiple readings that align with the autoethnographic goal of embracing complexity and ambiguity. Kress and Van Leeuwen’s (2020) notion of visual grammar underscores the idea that images are “polysemous” – capable of holding multiple meanings depending on the viewer’s perspective. This characteristic enables visuals to expand upon the themes explored in the text, encouraging readers to bring their own interpretations and insights to the narrative.

For instance, the use of recurring visual motifs, like fabric scissors or office keys, symbolises the intersection of my fashion design identity with my role as an academic. While the text may describe these objects as symbolic of specific career transitions, the visuals allow readers to interpret their significance through their own experiences or cultural frames. In this way, visuals become active agents in the narrative, opening up interpretive possibilities that encourage readers to engage reflexively with the content, resonating with Barad’s (2007) concept of intra-action, where meaning is co-constructed through relational dynamics.

Guiding readers through visual and textual integration

Part of my work in this thesis is to provide readers with a framework for interpreting the interplay of text and visuals without dictating a single, authoritative reading. This guide aims to offer practical tools for navigating these visual-textual dialogues, encouraging readers to adopt a reflexive stance as they engage with the material. For example, readers might pay attention to how certain symbols recur across chapters, or notice shifts in colour or composition that signal changes in mood or theme. This intentional guidance aligns with Cross’s (1982) designerly ways of knowing, inducing readers to approach the visuals with curiosity, openness, and an awareness of the interpretive potential embedded in each image.

In summary, the integration of text and visuals in this thesis reflects a layered, dialogic approach that enriches the autoethnographic narrative. This collaborative diffraction allows readers to engage with the content on multiple levels, expanding their understanding of my journey in ways that words alone could not achieve. By approaching text and visuals as intertwined elements, this thesis offers a holistic, immersive experience that encourages readers to reflect on their own interpretive processes, connecting personal insight with scholarly inquiry.

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