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Stories of **Wear & Care**



The Lives of Garments and the Stories They Hold

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The outcomes of a series of garment-led community conversations and photography sessions undertaken as part of RMIT PlaceLab's 'Wear & Care' Research Project.

RMIT PlaceLab acknowledges the people of the Woi wurrung and Boon wurrung language groups of the Eastern Kulin Nations on whose unceded lands we conduct the business of the University.

RMIT PlaceLab respectfully acknowledges their Ancestors and Elders, past and present, as the original and continuing Makers of Place.

RMIT PlaceLab Initiative Overview

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RMIT PlaceLab is an urban initiative connecting community, shaping place and taking a radically different approach to doing research.

Designed to free research from the campus and bring researchers street-side to connect with local government, industry and community groups, RMIT PlaceLab facilitates site-based research to support the co-creation of new ideas, partnerships, and systems that grow positive impact and opportunity.

Dynamic, actionable and accessible, RMIT PlaceLab research projects are bite-size and community-engaged, generating insights, ideas and solutions that can be implemented together with our government and place-making partners.

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Long Story Short — ‘Wear & Care’ is an exploration into methods of fashion “rewilding” in Brunswick, Melbourne. It has gathered locals, retailers, makers, creators, and researchers to learn about and encourage practices that mend, repair and share clothing to build a local response towards a new fashion system.

What We Explored — ‘Wear & Care’ considered Brunswick’s future as a creative fashion district by exploring methods of fashion “rewilding” accessible to the community. The changing fashion landscape depends on shifting values and approaches to transform how we produce and consume, to consider new positive ways of experiencing fashion that aligns people and planet. Local fashion “rewilding” supports new cultures in how we better use, make and recreate clothing.

The project included a series of community repair workshops, a research survey on rewilding fashion for the community, a student second-hand clothing redesign display, a research survey for Brunswick-based second-hand clothing retailers, several garment-led group conversations, a community forum in collaboration with RMIT’s School of Fashion & Textiles, and finally a ‘Wear & Care’ exhibition. This book forms part of a collection of outputs and resources emerging out of the ‘Wear & Care’ Research Project, and focuses on telling the special stories that were generously shared as part of the community conversations.

This book is a collection of 24 garment-led stories gathered across six semi-structured, in-person group conversations with people from our Brunswick, Merri-bek and wider Melbourne community, as part of the ‘Wear & Care’ Research Project. ‘A Garment’s Life: Conversation Series’ was created to cultivate discussions about how we wear and care for our clothing in ways that support a “rewilding” of fashion. “Re-wilding” fashion describes actions that support new cultures in how we better use, make and recreate clothing, and how we experience fashion outside of the commercial industry.

One of our key research aims was to bring together local people to learn about their practices of mending, repairing and sharing clothing that support a community response towards developing a new fashion system. The research had a particular focus on activities embraced in the home or collaboratively in the community. Taking into consideration the changing fashion landscape in Australia and shifting social values in Brunswick, Melbourne, we used garment-led interviews and storytelling to establish a safe and supportive environment in which people could share their lived experiences naturally and honestly.

Our community collaborators were invited to bring along a garment from their wardrobe that had been mended, repaired, or shared, or a special garment with a story behind it. We gathered groups of three to five collaborators, with each person, in turn, presenting their chosen piece and generously sharing the tales it told, allowing each garment to guide the narrative. The clothing textures, tatters, embellishments, stains, markings, and mends were illuminated by stories of loss, change, connection, joy, optimism, and reclamation. Local contemporary artist Jody Haines joined each session to document the clothing through photographs and to create a garment-centred portrait with each of our community collaborators.

Worn, crafted and cherished garments from homes, wardrobes, neighbours, and loved ones were celebrated at the heart of these sessions, with the stories shared catalysing broader conversations. The garment-led method not only allowed for meaningful conversations around daily practices of wearing, repairing, and laundering to emerge, but also encouraged reflections on the deep and complex interconnections between fashion and sustainability, and topics including gender, societal values, language and authorship.

Although we began with an open but simple proposition of what to bring along, the stories themselves expanded to encompass far more than what flaw, spill or general wear and tear may have been mended, or how a garment was shared and with whom. The stories alongside the group conversations revealed intricate weavings of values, influences, motivations, memories, relationships, and practices. The garments formed markers of moments in life, statements of values, tools to signify care and to nurture relationships, and connectors between siblings, grandparents and grandchildren, mothers and daughters.

In this book, alongside the stories, we offer eight themes emerging out of the conversations that speak to both the complexity of our connections to clothes and contemporary understandings of fashion explored deeply in academic fashion discourse far beyond the intent of this book.



A community collaborator presenting their jumper for 'A Garment's Life: Conversation Series' at RMIT PlaceLab Brunswick.



A community collaborator sharing the story of their coat for 'A Garment's Life: Conversation Series' at RMIT PlaceLab Brunswick.

Emerging Themes

Family influence of women on making and mending skills

The stories and conversations about the influence of family overwhelmingly featured women. Mothers, grandmothers, sisters, and neighbours played roles in encouraging, or deterring, teaching, and caring through making, mending, or offering skills and advice. Women in the lives of our community collaborators nurtured the learning of Sashiko techniques, taught the art of darning, passed on the skill to sew, and planted the seeds of future creative practice. It is amongst these stories and conversations that we acknowledge the emphasis on women's work and recognise that so much of the weight of driving individual and community action towards more sustainable clothing practices is carried by women, too often in the form of unpaid labour.

Memories and embedded stories in garments

The strength of memories was held by the pieces embedded with personal stories, both visible and concealed. We saw garments with visible mending, organic markings of use over time and hints of hobbies, craft, and creative practice. We heard stories about significant life events, birthdays, weddings, holidays, graduations, homes sold and faded friendships. These were both recollections attached to the garments and future imaginings of memories yet to be made.

Valuing and cherishing the garment or object

It was clear in the stories shared that garments and objects can hold value in diverse forms. The garments were cherished for their representation of creative pursuits, their connection to key life moments, the quality of their fabrics and fibres, their fit for purpose, and their prolonged lives in the wearers' wardrobes.

Valuing the materials and recognising their worth

The stories also revealed values centred around materials and their worth. There was a desire to protect, reuse and restore

materials and textiles. Our community collaborators created garments to make use of leftover fabrics and threads, made “new” garments using worn clothing and repaired pieces in their wardrobes to extend their useful lives.

The role garments play in influencing moods

Some items in the collection were embraced to generate confidence, to symbolise optimism, to align with the climate, to boost happiness or to assert a particular emotion through clothing.

Connection to creative or meditative practice

A selection of garments symbolised a deeper connection to creative practice, from Sashiko stitching and tapestry crafting to garment making, pottery and painting. These pieces were either worn while creating or formed the final creation. Connections were also drawn between creativity and meditation, emphasising mending or stitching as meditative practice where the craft delivered calm and comfort.

Relationships and storytelling through garments passed on

Some garments in the collection formed artefacts, passed between wearers in acts of care, that represent the relationships of our community collaborators with loved ones, friends, and mentors. The pieces told stories of successive garment lives, why they were passed on and the meaning they now hold to their owners and wearers.

Resourcefulness reflecting values or family influence

A sense of clothing and material resourcefulness was revealed amongst the stories and conversations. Alongside the practice of using leftover materials and worn clothing, there were also intentions to mend and embellish clothing to prolong their use. This not only revealed the values of our community collaborators, but at times also reflected the influence of their parents or grandparents in sustaining behaviours introduced while growing up.

The intent of this book is to celebrate the lives of garments and the stories they hold. It offers a glimpse into the humble practices embedded in the clothes that support a “rewilding” of fashion. In reading this collection, we wish to generate a deeper consideration of your own wear and care practices, captured amongst the garments living in your wardrobe. You might be a wearer, a clothing sharer, a mender, or a garment maker. In whatever way you position yourself in connection to the garments you own, wear, repair, or share, we hope you might find a little of yourself reflected within this book that inspires you to share your own garment stories.

Garment story sharing as part of
‘A Garment’s Life: Conversation Series’
at RMIT PlaceLab’s Brunswick
Research Studio.



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Emerging Themes

Women

Family influence of women on making and mending skills.

Memories

Memories and embedded stories in garments.

Value

Valuing and cherishing the garment or object.

Materials

Valuing the materials and recognising their worth.

Mood

The role garments play in influencing moods.

Practice

Connection to creative or meditative practice.

Relationships

Relationships and storytelling through garments passed on.

Resourcefulness

Resourcefulness reflecting values or family influence.



Lia's Coat

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'In the late nineties, Dangerfield had a vintage rack, and I was shopping with a friend who was right into animal print. I wasn't necessarily, but we both headed to this coat. And I put it on, and it fitted me, because she's size 16, and so I bought it. And then about three months later, she told me that she was really annoyed with me, [laughs] because I bought the coat. I said to her, "You can borrow it any time you like." So, she took it and kept it for a year, and gave it back to me. Well, it was completely ripped. The lining, the pockets, the whole lot, but I sew, so I patched it all up and wore it a bit, to the Melbourne Cup and places like that. During COVID, I decided to completely reline it with red lining.

And then I bumped into her. We kinda stopped being friends. She kinda ghosted me. [Laughs] I bumped into her just this year, and she mentioned the coat. It was for the first time ever, she said, "Yeah, you bought it out from underneath me." And I said, "Yeah, I guess I did." And I said, "You can have it if you like." She said, "No, it was always too small." [Laughs] So, that's the coat.

All the buttonholes were ripped, and the buttons had been ripped off. And there were holes where the buttons had been. It was a nasty mess. The pockets were stuffed, like ripped as well, from where she put her hands. So yes, I completely fixed it and relined it. It was during COVID, I put the new lining in. But after she gave it back to me in 2000, I patched the whole thing up by hand. And then during COVID I thought "It needs a new lining." The lining was black. I thought that red would go really well with the gold.

When I originally got it, I just had to redo all the seams. It's quite old. I think I saw it in a movie and it's probably a sixties coat. It's got the neckline. Which I really don't like, the neckline. And I just don't know how to change it. There's a label inside, 'Travel Coats'. It attracts a lot of attention. When I wear it, people kinda look.

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It's for special occasions. I'm kind of sick of it now because you can only have so many wears—when you just wear the one thing to all the special occasions. So, I might start wearing it around during the day. I bought a poodle just when COVID started, and I thought the coat might match the poodle. [Laughs] Which is why I did the lining. It's a black poodle. But when you've got a dog and you're in a dog park, you just end up covered in mud, so that didn't work.

You'll also notice under the buttons that it has been ripped on the outside as well. And then around the pockets, I think that had to all be stitched and a lot of the stitching was coming undone. I've been a seamstress all my life. Then during COVID, I was on social media a lot, and people were going through their wardrobes and asking if they knew anyone who would put up a hem or — So I've got a business now doing alterations. And it's great to hone your skills that way because you get to rip clothes apart and see how they're made, which is really good. It's like being a mechanic. You get to rip the engine apart and then put it back together, and you need skills for alteration. So yes. I enjoy it.

People are always asking me about repairs and alterations. And then they're always asking me to make them clothes as well, but that's so time-consuming. It's much easier—and more challenging I find too—to just repair and try to figure out how to fix it or how to alter something. Which is why this conversation really appealed to me, because I thought, "Oh, this is down my alley."

I had a woman come to me with a coat that was also vintage. It was a massive job. All the cuffs were frayed, and I needed to salvage as much of the original fabric as I could to fix it. This waist coat was a full-length Armani coat that got attacked by moths, and this is what I salvaged. So, I got to rip an Armani apart, which was nice.'





Olivia's Backpack

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'This is my backpack. It's my only backpack, so I take it everywhere. I got it when I was 8, and I'm 22 now. Recently, I've torn off these little pieces, they used to be like rubber, so I tore those off by accident, and all this stuff has happened to it. I was kind of thinking I don't really like it anymore, you know, like it isn't very fashionable. It's not a colour that I love. I was starting to kind of mull over, like "maybe I'm gonna donate this bag one day" or something like that.

But it carries all my stuff everywhere, it's been very faithful. Then my best friend, well, one of my best friends, owns the same bag and I didn't know. I saw it one day, and you know, she had all these beautiful stains all over it, and she was carrying it around so lovingly. I was like, "wow, here are our bags together," you know, serendipitously. And I had this newfound love for my bag. When it broke and I patched it up, I loved it so much more than before it had broken.

The patch itself is from like an art project I did for the City of Melbourne. I had some scraps left over, and I just found these scraps under my bed and patched it up. The thread I got on Facebook Marketplace or Gumtree in like 2012, something like that. Someone was passing on her mum's deceased estate embroidery thread. I was a child, and I snapped it up, and I was like "oh my God, DMC embroidery thread, incredible." This is so old as well, and I used that for it. I just kind of took stock of all these different crafty things that I had had in my life. And I was like, "actually, I love this bag." I'm gonna carry it with me everywhere. I love it so much now. There you go.

The thread was totally fine to use. This lovely lady who had owned it, she like wrapped it around one of those little thread cards, and she had them all colour arranged in a little tacklebox and they were in perfect condition and really cared for and loved. I was so chuffed. So that's my bag.

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I feel like I pretty much had the approach in the back of my head, just like through little embroidery projects here and there, like learning from my nan. Kind of conceptually I think I knew what to do. And then recently I've been really into books like this, mending books and seeing Sashiko, which I think has really been the in-vogue thing in a lot of craft circles recently. I've seen it really come up a lot. And so, I think that particular style of mending was in the back of my head, so a bit of like both. I didn't google anything to figure it out. I was just like, "oh, needle and thread." A really intuitive process.'

