my Mother

my Mothers

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To the women who came before me,
I hope to keep on honouring you through the practice of textile.

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INTRODUCTION

The art of making textiles has been more than just a functional pursuit throughout history: it has been a form of expression, a means of survival and a way of maintaining tradition. All the women that came before me, in my family, have practiced crochet, knitting, sewing, and weaving. It has been woven in the very fabric of their lives. These textile crafts have served in creating useful objects but have also represented resilience, creativity, and a connection to a cultural heritage and to each other.

It has been normalised to associate textile crafts with femininity, often reducing it to a domestic chore, a "woman's job". In many societies the home was, and sometimes still is, considered the women's domain, where they are expected to manage household duties and care for their family. Sewing, knitting, crocheting, and embroidering were seen as belonging to the domestic sphere; As these crafts were useful in maintaining and producing household items which were essential for the family's comfort. Due to the close tie to domestic life, they became gendered as "women's work".

As such they have been devalued and dismissed by a patriarchal society, where the men's work was often linked to the "public sphere" - outside the home,

engaging in physical labour, commerce, or politics. This division of labour reinforced the idea that women were responsible for the good function of the household, while men engaged in "physical labour" outside the home. Women's work in their home was unpaid and undervalued as their total devotion to the inner workings of their home was expected, even if this work was critical to the families survival.

By reducing these complex artistic skills to domestic chores, women's creativity always got overlooked since it had to be infused it into everyday necessities, that people took for granted. My grandmothers and their mothers did not escape this fate, as it was tradition for young women to have basic knowledge of these crafts before being set to leave the family sphere. The tradition ended with my mother in a way, as she learnt from her own volition and had a genuine interest for sewing. It was never really a necessity for her.

I myself did not have much interest in the textile crafts until my twenties - I grew up in the early 2000s having clothes, garments, and other household items always available to buy, and rather for a cheap price too. The joy and satisfaction procured from creating with my hands took me by surprise. I started learning and experimenting on my own, with techniques I had always associated with my grandmothers like crochet, knitting, or sewing. It quickly took a very important place in my life, and still brings me peace to this day - but it also keeps me wondering as it is such a vast field, and I have yet so many exciting techniques and materials to explore. It is only when I started actively incorporating these crafts into my daily life that I started wondering about my own Mothers and their own journey with textiles. How come I always refused to learn from them? I had always observed them with a sort of fascination and envy: how were they able to create garments from threads or meters of fabrics? It always felt intimidating, complicated and I saw it as slightly old fashioned.

By delving into my family's history and our complex relationship to textiles, I want to try to answer questions that have accompanied my thoughts during my creative explorations of textile endeavours. *What importance did making textiles played in our lives? Would making or crafting allow us to reconnect with part of our heritage and tradition? Can we re-root ourselves through the exploration of our ancestors' textile practices?*

Therefore, in the following pages I will first look into the historical connection in western societies between women and textile crafts. I will do this by exploring the women's expected duties in the domestic sphere - such as caring for the home - as well as in the work space - focusing on the textile industry. I will illustrate it by visiting, or revisiting, memories with the help of my mother and my paternal grandmother; I will explore the stories behind each Mother from my lineage I was able to meet and interact with. Their relationship to textile, how it came to be, how it defines them and how it was transmitted to me in the most indirect manner.

In the next pages, I will first look further than my Mothers, and consider the historical roots of the association of women to textiles. Afterwards, I will bring attention to my Mothers, their lives, the special textile techniques they mastered and how it defined them; to then finally explore my relationship to Them and these techniques. This is a deeply personal subject which I am apprehensive to explore. Taking the time to remember these women and their importance in my life also means facing the emotions associated to them.

I am dedicating a chapter to each of the Mothers. It seems logical to start with their story rather than mine, as without them, I would not be. They were also the ones who have unintentionally introduced me to the vast world of textiles. As such, I will progressively introduce you to the five Mothers that have impacted my life: my mother, her mother, my mother's paternal grandmother, my paternal grandmother and her mother. They are respectively known as Laurence or *maman*, Edgar "Louise" R. or *mamoune*, Suzanne or *mémère*, Maguy or *mamy* and Louise V. or *mamie Léo.*

PART 1

A LABOUR OF LOVE?

A short exploration of women's relationship to textile crafts throughout history.

I started wondering about my family's link to textiles when discussing parts of my paternal grandmother's life, and how textiles had found a way into her life. For instance, I had never considered how important the mastery of sewing or knitting was to her. Mastering textile techniques is certainly a resourceful skill, that my grandmother and her own mother were involved with. Later on, I also questioned my mother and her story with textiles - we came to same conclusion as with my paternal grandmother: my mother's mother and my mother's paternal grandmother too, had a complex relationship to textile crafts. I would like to clarify that the following paragraphs primarily focus on Western European examples and their white-centric values. This perspective reflects my background, as my family and I are predominantly of French nationality, and I was educated within the French system, which emphasised a Eurocentric view of history.

Women have been expected to be nurturing and caring beings as a result of their ability to bring life into the world. The responsibility of caring for the life created has been seen as a natural consequence for carrying, birthing, and feeding the child with their body. This can explain why women are expected to have a

natural instinct for caring, as they 'seem to' have a "predisposition" for it. Which also explains their relegation to the domestic sphere, due to their main roles as wives and mothers.

The domestic sphere refers to the social and cultural space traditionally associated with the home, where women's roles were often confined to caregiving, homemaking, and nurturing the family life. This concept underlines how society has historically viewed the home as a woman's domain, emphasising gender roles that restrict women's participation in public life as well as broader social issues. The domestic sphere is essential for understanding the power dynamics and gender inequalities.[1]

Textile works have traditionally been considered a domestic chore, being a woman's job and responsibility. Works like spinning, weaving, and sewing were viewed as "cottage industry" work - meaning it could be done at home, allowing women to balance these tasks with childcare and household duties.[2]

In medieval and early modern Europe, spinning was an essential part of daily life. Women of all social classes were expected to spin thread, a task often done alongside other domestic responsibilities. This was so common that the term "spinster" originally referred to a woman who spun thread, then later became synonymous with unmarried women, reinforcing the gendered association of textile work.[3]

In pre-industrial societies, textile production often followed a family-based model, where men handled activities requiring physical strength (such as shearing sheep or harvesting flax), while women did detailed, time-consuming work like carding, spinning, and embroidery.[4]

Even in societies where textile work became a formal trade, women were still often involved in certain stages of production, particularly those that could be done within the household, such as lace-making and quilting. In France, the 18th-century silk industry of Lyon relied heavily on female labour, especially for delicate and finishing tasks like embroidery and sewing, which were seen as an extension of their domestic roles.[5]

1- (Bilancetti, 2012)
2- (Barber, 1994)
3- (Lee, 2018)
4- (Van Nederveen Meerkerk, 2008)
5- (Martini, Vernus, 2021)

If we focus on a cultural and moral aspect, different societies throughout history promoted textile-related work as an ideal feminine activity, as it was considered modest, diligent, and an appropriate way for women to occupy their time.

During the Renaissance and Baroque periods, pattern books and household manuals encouraged women to practice needlework - which was not only seen as a domestic duty but also as a moral virtue - emphasising that it kept them from idleness and moral corruption.[6]

In Victorian England, embroidery and sewing were promoted as ideal feminine pastimes, reinforcing the image of the "proper" woman as one who dedicated herself to refining the home.[7]

In religious texts and societal teachings, diligent women were praised for their textile work. In 17th- and 18th-century France, upper-class women were expected to engage in embroidery and lace-making as a sign of refinement and virtue, while lower-class women performed similar tasks out of necessity.[8]

With technological advancement, the changes in textile technology influenced the labour division and the gender roles in production. In many cases, women were the original weavers, but when new tools and techniques emerged, men often took over, particularly in commercial settings.[9]

During the Industrial Revolution, textile production shifted from homes to factories, but women remained in low-paid, low-status roles (such as spinning), while men often handled machine operation and managerial positions.[10]

As previously mentioned, the 19th-century silk industry of Lyon, in France, heavily relied on female labour; But the introduction of Jacquard looms in the industry changed weaving from a more domestic craft (where women participated) to a male-dominated, mechanised trade, limiting women's access to skilled work. The liberal economist Louis Reybaud made several mentions of the workings of Lyon's weaving workshops in a book based on research conducted in the mid-1850s, explaining the determining role that marriage played within them: "As soon as [a worker] manages to save enough to buy one or two looms, he looks

6- (Parker, 2010)
7- (Chilenski, 2014)
8- (Watt, 2003, Bard Graduate Center Gallery, 2022)
9- (Cazzola, 2016)
10- (Hunter, Macnaughtan, 2010)

within his own class for a partner of his choice, skilled and hardworking like himself, who can stand in for him where required. As well as running the household, his wife will prepare the silks, occasionally operate the shuttle, maintain order among the apprentices, speed up production, and share in his responsibilities. From that point on, everything in the worker's life becomes focused on the home." In this instance, the wife takes care of domestic tasks fitting the expected division of labour of the mid-nineteenth century, but she can replace her husband "where required."[11] This specific example highlights an uncommon situation where a skilled woman married an equally skilled man, therefore she could be expected to take on more responsibilities than the average female textile factory worker at that time.

Women's roles in textile work were shaped by economic structures that valued male labour more highly, reinforcing societal expectations. In industrialised settings, men were typically given tasks involving new technologies and higher pay, relying mainly on their physical strength, while women continued to perform manual textile tasks for a lower wage, as the tasks were seen as common and normal for women to master. For instance, during the 19th-century in France, women working in textile factories earned significantly less than men, despite performing essential tasks like spinning and thread preparation. The gender wage gap reinforced the idea that women's textile work was supplementary rather than primary.[12]

During the 20th-century, ready-made clothes and textile household items became more available and cheaper than making your own - thanks to the normalisation of mass industrialisation that began in the 18th-century. Correspondingly, the default way to dress oneself turned into buying rather than making clothing, therefore becoming less of a common practice. The appreciation of the evident dedication required in the crafting process was somewhat lost overtime, as affordable and easy to access clothing became the norm. While European societies evolved, women were given more rights, gained independence and autonomy. Less and less were they forced into a domestic role and its associated chores, even if tacitly, it was still expected of women to handle everything related to the proper functioning of the home (cooking, cleaning, childcare, etc...).

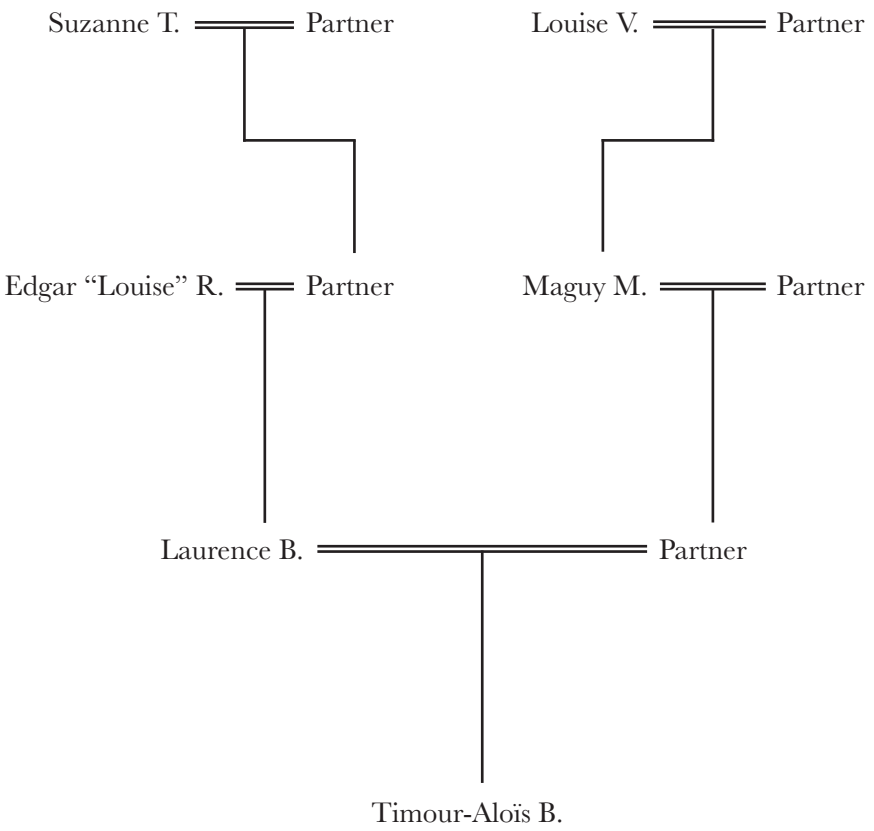
Textile crafts have evolved from being seen as a necessary knowledge in the past, to being seen as a labour of love in more recent decades.

11- (Martini, Vernus, 2021)
12- (Hunter, Macnaughtan, 2010)

Creating textiles often involve repetitive hand gestures, making it a perfect medium for personal expression. Indeed, textile work is a time consuming process that requires patience, precision and attention to detail. It is a deeply personal act that involves choosing fabrics, colours, styles, and reflects, in all aspects, the personality of the maker. Many women, however, across generations and cultures have done textile work as a necessity, and not necessarily a hobby.

To this day, many of these historical associations persist in the way societies view domestic work and women's labour. The expectation of women to handle house chores, as well as textile chores, and its characterisation as a labour of love - is historically tied to domestic and gender roles, as well as cultural values, often rendering it an invisible work. And further emphasises its association as a labour of love.

FAMILY TREE


Suzanne T.
Partner
Louise V.
Partner
Edgar “Louise” R.
Partner
Maguy M.
Partner
Laurence B.
Partner
Timour-Aloïs B.

CHAPTER 1

Laurence B.
ou maman

Laurence

Born in 1964 in Antony, France.

When I think of my mum, I think of her creating; making things. She would draw, she would cook, she would paint, she would knit, crochet, and sew - always with mild restraint and privacy at first, as if it was a sort of secret. She would not really talk about her ongoing project until it was finished. Only then would she share the results with us, and wait for our reactions or feedback.

I remember that sewing was not a regular occurrence but when the urge took her, that is all she could do. I have an image of her, setting her old but trustworthy sewing machine, on one end of our massive dining table. I can picture her sitting at the table, late in the evening, the shape of her black curly hair barely distinct from the darkness surrounding her. My mum's face illuminated by the faint glowing light emanating from her machine. The humming of the sewing machine, regularly stopping and starting again, dictated by the pressure of her foot going up and down on the pedal, the fabric moving according to the soft but precise movements of her hands. She knew exactly what she was doing. I would watch her from the stairs, from afar, in silence, completely captivated by what was happening before my very eyes. It looked so complicated, nearly magical, like the fairy godmothers in tales, agitating their hands with a focused face, muttering under their breath and poof! A dress for a princess.

Maman did make princess dresses for my little sister and I when we were young. My little sister and I are three years apart, we were always very close growing up as we often shared a bedroom, as well as many interests. We played the same games, used the same toys, liked the same music, knew by heart the same movies and did the same sports. In our house, everybody had a colour assigned to them: my mum had orange (it is her favourite), my step-dad had green (because he is a pruner), my older sister had purple (if it was available), I had blue (because I didn't want to be a "girly-girl"), my little sister had pink (because I chose blue) and my little brother had yellow (because my mum said so).

When I was in primary school in the early 2000s, my little sister and I desperately wanted princess dresses. There was probably a school carnival where we were allowed to come wearing costumes, as I do remember seeing a girl wearing a very accurate princess costume right out of a fairy tale. The costume, made with a soft and shiny pink fabric, adorned a frilly white collar, short puffy sleeves, a corset, and the long voluminous skirt, harbouring many white tulle layers, was gathered at the waist and cascaded in a perfect circle around her legs. When she walked, the skirt's round shape would stay in place, thanks to the large hoops that were sewn at the bottom of the skirt. When I expressed my admiration for her garment, she proudly said that her mum had made it for her.

Probably that same day, or in the following week, my sister and I were repeatedly asking for princess dresses, until my mum said she will think about it. We asked if we could go buy them soon, which she answered by asking if we it would be OK if she made them. To be honest, I would have been happy with one of those cheap looking ones, that were probably too expensive for the construction and materials used. But we thought, if mum is offering to make us princess dresses, then it would have to be at least as pretty, if not prettier, than the one we saw the other day.

Laurence has always been a resourceful person, with slight hoarding tendencies. She buys things because they are cheap or on sale and might be useful at some point. She likes to buy pretty fabrics because one day, when she will have time to sew, she will use them to make something nice. I remember my mother had a plastic box filled with textiles she fell in love with, she saw potential in each one of them.

She could draw patterns, use them to cut the fabrics, pin the different shapes together, and sew everything with precision.

Laurence grew up in the 1970s, on the outskirts of Paris, in Antony. Her family lived in a small flat, in one of these massive apartment complex in the *banlieue*[1]. There were three bedrooms for nine people. The three daughters had to share one bed in one bedroom, the 4 sons had to share another bedroom and the remaining bedroom was for their parents (my grandparents).

My mum told me there wasn't much to do in the *banlieues*, all the interesting activities were in the city centre of Paris. She would often visit her best friend that lived in a different neighbourhood, as in her friend's neighbourhood there was *une maison de quartier*[2], and that is where she properly learnt how to sew.

I listened to her explaining these details while she set her sewing machine on one corner of the dining table. She then dived into her big plastic box to examine which fabrics were best suited to execute our vision.

We had requests of course, and rather specific ones too. It definitely had to be a princess dress, it had to look expensive, and for me, it could absolutely not

1- The French *banlieues* are suburban neighbourhoods situated beyond the city boundaries. They are now considered to concentrate a population of foreign nationality. The word serves as a convenient designation, in the press and in everyday language, for the so-called "immigrant" population whose integration into the rest of the population is difficult; Whether because of mass unemployment which exploded at the end of the 1970s, or the various discriminations to which they are generally subject, linked precisely to their origins and, above all, to their social status. (Onur, 2024)

2- *Maison de quartier* can be translated to "community centre" but literally translates to "neighbourhood house". Using the term "*maison*" aims to make the place more approachable to the local residents. Following a wave of mass unemployment in the 1970s, the *maisons de quartier* started appearing as a result of residents questioning their relationship to their local landscape and what expectations they had from it. The *maisons de quartier* were found in the popular area of the city, and were focused on a more social, cultural and educational aspect - often with an accent on the social aspect. Not to be confused with the *Maisons des Jeunes et de la Culture* (community centre for the youth and culture), also called or M.J.C., which were more prevalent in upper and middle class areas, where the cultural aspect was more of the focus. The *maisons de quartier* played a major role in creating a welcoming space for the youth of these popular areas, where a majority of the inhabitants were immigrants or children of immigrants. (Poyraz, 2005)

be pink. We wanted puffy shoulders, long sleeves (we had noticed that the girl's dress had short sleeves; and as it was a cold day, she was forced to wear a black sweater underneath, which ruined the image she wanted to project), a marked waist, and a long voluminous skirt. I even shared the great trick of the sewn in plastic hoops with my mum, in case she needed help with the construction. She simply smiled, with a slightly sceptical air in her eyes - she already had a plan.

Maman had selected a few different fabrics for us. For me, she had settled on a gold velvet fabric, accompanied by a gold satin one and completed with a gold lace fabric. For my little sister, she chose a light rosewood pink satin fabric to be combined with black lace. We agreed to this selection with excitement. And thus, she started. She took our measurements, looked for patterns in her sewing magazines, and even online; and eventually, with great focus, started tracing lines and shapes on her pattern paper. Soon enough, she started cutting the fabrics. Then came pinning everything together. And finally, sewing with her reliable sewing machine.

After a few weeks, they were done. The beautiful princess dresses, made with love and care, were ready for us. While barely containing our excitement, we tried them on. Once we were both wearing them, we ran to the mirror to admire ourselves. I thought my little sister's pink dress was amazing. The "corset" was embellished with black lace in some places, like the centre and bottom part, which felt very princess-like. The long pink sleeves were short enough to allow a black lace detail to show hugging the wrist from underneath. I felt jealous. My dress did not feel as pretty. The heavy velvet skirt, the full lace top and long sleeves were looking kitsch and ill-fitting to me. It was not as refined as my sister's. I did not love it, and was not even sure if I liked it very much. But I could not say that to my mum, after spending so much time creating this for me, after I asked her to do so, it would be like spitting in her face as a thank you.

Alas, my facial expressions betrayed me. She asked me softly "What is bothering you? Don't you like the dress? I made what you asked." But it was not what I asked. Or was it? I stayed silent. I could see she was getting annoyed from my dissatisfaction. My little sister interjected: "Well, I love my dress, mommy! It is even more perfect than what I asked for."

I remembered this story last year, during the summer of 2024, when visiting my parents. While keeping to myself the part where I did not really like

the princess dress my mother had so hardly worked on to please me, I did ask her to sit down with me and tell me more about how she came to sew. I tell her I remember she mentioned learning the basics with her mum but that she went to this community centre too, with her best friend.

My mum nods and explains "The *maison de quartier* was for everyone. There were a lot of young people that just came in to pass time and hang out with one another. But there were also classes organised for immigrant women so they could share knowledge from their different cultures together, like knitting, crocheting and sewing. I did learn the [sewing] basics from mum. But at this community centre, I met this person called Helene, her last name sounded Polish. She was always sewing, quilting, patching; always sat behind the sewing machine that was available there: the PFAFF creative 1469. And she made time to teach me how to sew properly you know, to understand the sewing machine. How to copy patterns… Just the very basics of sewing and the slightly technical stuff, like adding zippers and making pockets."

She continues and explains that later on, when she was able to afford her first sewing machine in the 1980s, she chose the exact same model available at the community centre: the PFAFF 1469. I ask why, and she answers that all sewing machines were different from each other, this one was the model she felt the most comfortable with, and it was affordable. She still owns it to this day and it still works perfectly well. This sewing machine has been a constant in my mother's life, it has accompanied her in all the different steps and events of her life, it is imbued with various memories. It is this sewing machine I remember her using on that corner of the table, it helped my mum make my princess dress, as well as many garments before and after.

I ask my mother if she also learnt to knit at the community centre, and she shakes her head answering that her mother taught her knitting when she was very young. She first learnt to knit a "*pull tube*" - a jumper knitted flat, shaped like a cross (with a hole at the centre for the neck), and once finished, you fold in half so it resembles a "T", and sew the sides together. When it came to knitting motifs or cables to decorate jumpers, her mother would take over. "But when I got older, I saw my mum sewing with her sewing machine, that's what got me really intrigued about sewing. It fascinated me. I wanted to know how the machine worked, what possibilities it offered." She says. She did try to knit different things later on in her life, but never got the same passion or curiosity as she did

with sewing. In the more recent years, my mum has been mainly crocheting as it requires less preparation time than sewing. She has been making various models of slippers, always colourful ones too.

My mother has a love story with textiles and textile techniques. This relationship has been fostered since a young age, when her mother would make her participate in the projects by asking for her help. Being able to access a space dedicated to sharing and learning with other people from different backgrounds also played a major role in transmitting a passion for sewing. The curiosity of my mother was the driving force behind her thirst for knowledge. This curiosity, strengthened by her diverse environment, allowed her to freely explore and express herself through sewing, and many other textile techniques throughout her life.

CHAPTER 2

Edgar “Louise” R.
ou mamoune

Mamoune, Clélia and Laurence

Born in 1926 in Guadeloupe.

It feels difficult to write about mamoune as I have never known her. Well, it is not exactly true as I have met her just after I was born in 1997, but she died of cancer later that same year. What I have gotten to know about mamoune has mostly been through the retelling of my mother, uncles, aunts, cousins, and my older sister.

Even though I cannot remember my maternal grandmother, I associate to her a sweet powdery scent with a slight hint of honey. I had this strange experience once while I was working in a store - a customer walked past me, and an incredibly familiar smell, that I was unable to place, enveloped me. It brought me to tears because I immediately thought of mamoune. I cannot explain why, but I knew that it is what she smelled like. When I phoned my mum later that day to tell her, I tried to describe the smell to her, and I could hear her smile while I was stumbling on my words. She said mamoune was probably trying to contact me, letting me know she was looking over me.

My maternal grandmother was a Black woman. Born in Guadeloupe, a butterfly shaped island located in the Lesser Antilles chain, in the Eastern

Caribbean Sea, with a rich history and mix of different cultures. Guadeloupe was first inhabited by Indigenous people of the Americas. The first identifiable group was the Arawak people, that were then displaced by the Kalinago-Carib people. The archipelago was called *Karukera* (or "The Island of Beautiful Waters") by the native Arawak. Christopher Columbus named the island Santa María de Guadalupe in 1493.

During the 17th-century, French settlers expelled the Spanish that had failed to conquer the land due to the resistance of the local population and formally took possession of the island. The Spanish name was retained by the French, but was altered to fit the French orthography and phonology. Later on, French farmers were brought to colonise the land, and many indigenous people were violently killed and died of diseases brought by the European foreigners.

During the triangular trade of the 18th-century, enslaved African people were brought to the island, and were forced into labour on different plantations. Slavery was abolished in 1848 in the, then, French Empire. At the end of the 19th-century, indentured labourers[1], from the French colony of Puducherry in India, were brought in, adding to the cultural diversity of the island. Guadeloupe officially transitioned from a colony to a French overseas department in 1946, following the end of the second World War.[2]

My grandmother was born in 1926.

It is the summer of 2024. My mum and I are sitting on her bed, chatting, the bedroom door is closed. I want to ask questions about her mother, I want to know more about our mamoune, but I mostly want to hear my mum talk about her, as she is the last born child.

She always talks very fondly about her mum, her eyes are usually glistening with nostalgia. Maman says she always felt that mamoune died too soon, she tells me "I was not ready. I know we are never ready for these kind of things, but it destroyed me." I can easily feel the bitter pain and sadness, coupled to the joy and fondness, when she dives in her memories and tells me about her mother, about the time they spent together.

"She lost her mum when she was thirteen years old." She starts. Mamoune

1- Indentured labour is form of labour in which a person is contracted, by an official agreement, to work without a salary for a fixed length of time, or until a debt has been paid. (Raikar and Pai, 2023)

2- (Jaffel, 2024)

was the first born of four sisters, who were brought up by their very strict grandmother and grandfather. They were both born into slavery, which meant they passed down the arbitrary rules forced by French colonisers, including not being allowed to talk Creole[3], as it was not seen as a "proper" language. My grandmother would get hit if she spoke her native language, which is why she did not transmit it to her children, creating a gap and loss of connection regarding parts of our heritage.

Mamoune had a role to fulfil as the oldest sister. She had to learn the things a mum is supposed to do, so she could second their grandmother with daily tasks, and the education of her own siblings. Growing up, she was in charge of making sibling's cotton underwear, sometimes adding lace for details if she had time. This was her first encounter with sewing. The lack of employment opportunities on her native island pushed my grandmother to uproot herself and her children from their familiar environment, to join mainland France.

They arrived in France during the winter, in the 1950s. Mamoune had to rapidly learn to knit jumpers and winter accessories to face the harsh cold of the French winter season. She then found a job at the *Manufacture des Gobelins*, in the *tisseries* (weaving mills) situated in the 13th *arrondissement*.

The Gobelins Manufactory is a prestigious institution that is deeply tied to the artistic and cultural heritage of France, and it historically catered to elite clients who valued tradition, artistry, and exclusivity. The manufactory was originally established during the Middle-Ages as a dyeing business by the Gobelin Family. It has been known to produce luxury tapestries for the court of the French monarchs since Louis XIV. Later on, during the 1950s, in a society still rebuilding itself from the second World War, and wanting to reaffirm its cultural identity, the Gobelins contributed by continuing to produce the high quality woven artworks it had been known to create. The manufactory began working with contemporary artists such as Le Corbusier, or Pablo Picasso, bringing modernism to tapestry-making. These collaborations kept *les Gobelins* relevant in a changing artistic landscape.[4]

3- The Creole language is a vernacular language (the informal, spoken form of a language, perceived as having lower social status than a standard language that has been codified and institutionalised) that developed in colonial European plantation settlements, mostly around the Caribbean, during the 17th- and 18th-centuries. Creole is the result of contact between groups that spoke different mother tongues and were mutually unintelligible. (Jaffel, 2024)

4- (Manufacture Des Gobelins | Mobilier National)

During her time at the manufactory, my grandmother would focus on lace work, but also had the opportunity to specialise as a pleater, as it was sought after and rarely practiced by women. During these first years, "Louise" would knit and sew all of her children's clothings.

"Whenever she had a moment, I always saw her knitting." Says my mum. "Always, always knitting... A vest for someone, an Irish sweater for another… Always knitting something." She is lost in her thoughts. "We would go to la *Droguerie*, our favourite shop in *Rue du Jour* in Paris, we would buy skeins there, and at home, she would place one around my open arms while she would wind it."

Maman tells me how they would always end up going all around the city, to different markets to look at the fabrics sold there. "We knew what we had to buy, but we could not resist looking at the pretty fabrics, and touch all the different materials." Ever since my mum was young, my grandma would bring her on her day-long outings in the city, which my mother would love. Over time, the roles reversed and my mum was the one taking her mother out, and share her excitement about textiles.

Mamoune taught my young mum the basics of sewing by telling her to watch her. When Laurence had a basic understanding of the sewing machine and sewing techniques, my grandmother put her in charge of adding the last finishing touches to garments. My grandmother was often sewing, and with seven children to care for, she did not often have time to properly teach my mum the more complex techniques she would use - especially since "Louise" would mostly sew "*comme dans la haute couture*", like my mum would say. Intricate planning and techniques would be involved in the garments my grandma would create, with neat finishings, paying very close attention to every detail (the button choice, the way it was sewed on, the pleats used, the stitch of the hem, …). My grandmother was often dressed following the prevalent fashion trends of the 1950s-1960s in France. "Always accessorising her outfit with a matching purse" my mother tells me, with a soft smile, and eyes veiled with a faint sadness.

Mamoune was a resilient woman, who was able to use her textile skills and knowledge to earn a living. But more than a monetisable skill, textile crafts allowed her to provide another level of caring for her family by meticulously creating different types of garments. It also allowed her to express her creativity and technical skills through the clothes she sewed for herself.

I deeply regret not being able to know my maternal grandmother.

A woman who had to uproot herself from her native land, to have access to better job opportunities; leaving behind her family, culture, and parts of herself. She had to adapt to the French culture and way of life, undoubtedly facing institutionalised racism, while taking care of and provide for her family and her children. Not being able to grow up with mamoune means I missed a chance to learn from a grandmother, but also to connect to this other culture, and parts of my heritage - parts of who I am.

By not transmitting her native language to her children and grandchildren, by not sharing much about her life before living on mainland France, she erased parts of her identity, and consequently ours, her descendants. I know preservation was most probably behind this intention. Having children and a life in France meant better chances of a stable income, of a decent quality of life. Restraining access to her story, culture and native language, meant better chances for her family and herself to be accepted by the French society - a society that was unable, and still struggles, to accept diversity and the consequences of its colonial past.

CHAPTER 3

Suzanne T.
ou grand-mère Suzanne
ou mémère

Suzanne and her five great-grandchildren

Born in 1916 in Roudouallec, France.

I somewhat remember *grand-mère* Suzanne. When I was little, we would sometimes go visit her in the South-East of France during the summer or winter vacations. It was a long drive too, my whole family and I cramped together in the car, bags filling the trunk, more bags at our feet - filled with our sleeping bags, pillows, entertainment to pass time and various snacks. My dad would always make us sandwiches for the drive, and the only moment we were allowed to eat in the car was during these long drives.

Mémère lived with her youngest daughter, my great aunt Marie-Louise, and her husband. Their house was in the main street of the very small village they lived in, it looked crooked from the outside. The house had windows that seemed too small for the thick stone walls, the daylight would barely reach inside, but the house was always fresh in the summer. From the entrance door, a short and dark hallway would serve as a path to the tiled, uneven winding staircase leading to the main living floor and the former attic. The ceilings were low and decorated by regularly spaced dark wooden beams.

Suzanne was staying in a bedroom on the main floor, only accessible through a couple of steps at the end of another short dark hallway, located close to the only bathroom of the house. Her room was bare with essentials: a bed,

a big wooden wardrobe with a mirror, an armchair in a corner and a chair facing a small TV. I did not go in there often, it felt like a special, but forbidden place.

I can remember going to the bathroom to brush my teeth and seeing mémère on her chair, crocheting. She would not look at her hands while using the crochet hook, or very rarely, her eyes were fixed on the small television, watching retransmissions of the senate or the parliament. She could not really see well anymore, her glasses were as thick as glass bottle bottoms, which made it hard to discern her eyes or emotions. But she did always have a smile on her face when she would talk to us.

We would not see her often during our stay either, as she would be resting a lot. She would also eat before us and go to bed very early. To child me, mémère was this large tall woman that walked around the house with the help of a cane - if you met her in the tight hallway, she would fill the whole space.

When I recently talked to my mum about her paternal grandmother, she mentioned that during her own youth when she visited *grand-mère* Suzanne, she would crochet the same way. Hands busy and steady on her project, eyes focused on the TV, chatting away with her daughter or granddaughter. She would knit or crochet, unravel old projects to reuse the yarn. My mother loved watching her create, she admired her confidence in the craft.

I then asked my mother if she knew more about her grandmother's life, because I felt that I never asked. My mother told me the following:

Suzanne was born in Bretagne in 1916 in a small village called Roudouallec, where she grew up. She was from a poor and large family that worked and lived on a farm. During her youth, she learnt to knit, crochet and embroider lace for the *coiffe bigoudène* (the women's coif worn with the traditional Breton costume), and for the aprons worn on top of the traditional black dresses.

France of the early 20th-century experienced a slower rate of urbanisation and industrialisation. Resulting in more than half of the female labourers working in agriculture, in 1901; as the agricultural sector in France represented more opportunities of employment to women. My great-grand mother did not escape this fate. On small French farms, the family economy required the work of both men and women. Women laboured in the fields, at home, and also often sold their products on nearby markets.[1]

1- (Louvier, 2019)

When the first World War started, Suzanne's brothers had to join the army, and only few returned. The ones that did return decided to stay and help on the farm. My great-grandmother was then placed in a *maison bourgeoise* as a helper, because she knew how to do so many different things - like embroidering, sewing, knitting, cooking and cleaning. Domestic service was a staple part of young women's lives in the early 20th-century. It can be characterised by the relationship at its core - working for a master and within their household - rather than an occupation dedicated to a specific task. Housemaids like my great-grandmother were not visiting workers performing domestic tasks, but people who left their home to live and work in someone else's.[2] I can imagine Suzanne, leaving her tightly-bonded agricultural community, probably with her own dialect and style of dress. She might have felt inferior with her slightly old fashioned clothes, her accent and her unfamiliarity with urban ways. Her rural identity defined her as 'other'.

The house she was placed in was close to the city of Paris. While working there, she met her first husband Louis Émile Bonin. They got married and had two children. While my great-grandmother was pregnant with their second child, the second World War started. My great-grandfather was part of the French resistance, and was shot as retribution when he was discovered.

Suzanne was suddenly alone, having to care for two children and herself during the war. She cumulated small jobs sewing, patching, washing clothes, working in factories. Resources at the time were scarce, so to be able to clothe herself and her children, mémère knitted a lot. She made socks, scarves, gloves, sweaters, vests,… Anything that could be knitted or crocheted, she would make.

Later on, she remarried and moved to a different region. After losing her second husband to a heart attack, she lived alone for a long time until heart problems were diagnosed. It was then agreed she would moved in with her daughter and her husband. Mémère took charge of making dinner, handled the vegetable garden and the house plants. As her sight worsened, she left the house less and less, first only joining for grocery shopping, then only for the doctor's appointments, then only to the vegetable garden, until she could not leave the home anymore. She grew older, became less mobile, and was eventually bed-ridden. I can still see her at the end of her life, so different from how I got to know her, thin and frail, lying down in bed, under one of the blankets she had made.

1- (Louvier, 2019)

I am proud to own one of these granny square blankets. I am lucky that I have something tactile to remember and reminisce *grand-mère* Suzanne by. She left most of her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, these covers; imbued with her craft, a piece of her love and parts of her soul. This blanket has accompanied me since I moved out of my home to live abroad, allowing me to create a safe and familiar environment for myself anywhere I place it. Its presence calms me. With time passing, the seam of my blanket is coming undone in some parts, creating small holes between the granny squares. It is easily fixable but to this day, I still cannot allow myself to mend it as it would feel like interfering with the memories I have of mémère.

Sometimes, in my moments of wonder, I look at all the differently coloured squares that send me back to the warm summers spent at my great-aunt's odd house, where mémère would simply exist quietly around us, her presence getting smaller by the year, as if she had already accepted that she was slowly fading into a memory.

Grand-mère Suzanne had a difficult life, filled with tragedy and pain, where she was forced to be resourceful in order to survive. Her textile skills certainly came in handy in these difficult moments - when she needed to provide for her family, she was able to rely on her knowledge and monetise it. Even though Suzanne lived through poverty and harshness, I will always remember her by her resilience and the smile on her face when our eyes would meet. She would beam with a soft joy and gratefulness, to be able to be in the presence of the many different generations that followed her.

CHAPTER 4

Maguy M.
ou mamy

Maguy

Born in 1936 in Lyon, France.

My paternal grandparents' house is spread on one floor - it is the only house I have ever known them to live in. I would always sleep *dans la chambre verte* (in the green bedroom), at the end of the main hallway, on the right side. It has not changed since I was a child: the curtains and bed cover match, alongside the pillowcases that hang from a bar on the wall. The wallpaper has green patterns on it, and if I remember well, there was green carpet covering the floors when I was younger.

When I would wake up in the morning, I would wear a robe and head to the kitchen to find my grandparents already having breakfast since they woke up early. Often times the doors of the hallway and kitchen would be closed, so the noise of their early routine would not reach me. I slept in complete darkness, as my grandma would close the shutters of my bedroom, so the morning light would always feel blinding, and it took a few minutes for my eyes to get accustomed to the day light.

The kitchen table is still the same: the top is constituted of brown tiles framed by wooden planks, the whole mounted on square wooden legs. I had a designated seat, a bowl with a cow drawn on it, and resting next to the bowl, a fabric napkin hugged by a wooden ring with my name engraved on it.

Every morning, my *papi* would look through his cereal box and prepare a line of crunchy muesli, placing it perpendicular to my bowl, and ranking them from the smallest to the biggest. I would fill my empty bowl with different, very round, chemical chocolate cereals, and then eat the line of crunchy muesli. Starting from the smallest and following the order carefully established by my grandfather, while waiting for my grandma to warm up whole milk in a pan. Before she poured the milk in my bowl, she would offer me the skin of the milk. This is how we would start our mornings, quietly, with a well established routine. This is a memory I still cherish to this day.

In this same kitchen, my grandma and I would make crepes together every so often, but especially in early February for *la Chandeleur* (Candlemas). I would help preparing the batter by measuring the ingredients, breaking the eggs, and starting the blender.

Mamy would often make "jellyfish" crepes by accident - the batter would not spread evenly in the pan while mamy would move it in a circular motion, creating a crepe with a half full part, and another half part that looked like the batter tried to escape, but got caught in its bolt for freedom by the extreme heat, creating the "jellyfish legs".

It is when visiting mamy two summers ago that it really hit me: she is getting older. It feels that she is aging so rapidly now, and every year when I see her, it becomes more and more obvious. It is very painful to think that someone I have known my entire life, from the moment I was born, and who played such an important role in my childhood, will pass soon. This unpleasant feeling that our time together is reaching an end, overwhelmed me when she informed me she had prepared a box for me, containing elements of our time spent together, to open after her passing. I suddenly faced the reality that my only remaining grandparent, who has always been a part of my life, a constant, will not be living forever. I started crying and hugged her very tightly as if not to let her go. I want to remember the softness of her peachy skin, her genuine smile, her beautiful white hair, her calming presence. I felt this urgency, to ask her about her life, to get to know her again, who was she exactly before I was born?

Last summer, after having to wait a whole year to see mamy, I finally faced reality and asked her to sit down with me to take the time to answer some of my questions. We have always liked to go over photo albums together, revisiting or learning about memories. Mamy has an impressive collection of photo albums, organised by year. While we are looking through one album, sitting at the dining table and commenting on some of the scenes captured, I tell my grandma that, while I don't remember her sewing very often, I do remember this one time she got her sewing machine out. One day, when we were children, my little brother and I were visiting, he asked my grandma if she could help patch the knee hole of his brand new jeans. He asked my grandma if she could repair them, which she accepted with a smile. She then installed her machine on the dining table, asking my brother if a colourful cartoon patch was to his taste. He agreed to it, and we observed as mamy expertly pinned the patch to the pair of jeans, placed it on the machine, right under the needle, and started sewing with a zigzag stitch.

She smiled, commenting it was funny I could remember such a specific memory. I tell mamy I also remember her sitting on her green velvet recliner chair at night, where she would sometimes knit. Mamy asks if I still have the scarf she knitted for me, the one with "that nice purple pompom yarn". I take a second to answer because I had forgotten about it. I say I still probably have it somewhere at my mum's house but the truth is, I cannot remember if I still own it. What I can remember though, is when mamy was making me that scarf.

In this memory, I was staying over at my grandparents' house during a cold weekend, and my grandpa was still with us. Mamy always sat on her green reclining armchair that directly faces the TV. On her left was a small rolling tray table with a glass top, holding a small table lamp, the remotes for the TV and speakers, and maybe some other small trinkets I cannot remember. On the bottom part of the of the tray rested a small collection of tabloids and fashion magazines. Often, when she had an ongoing knitting project, she would place the basket containing her yarns and needles on top of the magazines. These magazines would keep me company amid the long and hot summer days spent at my grandparents' house, when time seemed to nearly stop during the interminable summer holidays. I would spend hours flipping through the fashion magazines, dreaming of being on these pages one day.

That one winter evening, mamy was looking through her basket of yarns and called my name. I presented myself to her and she showed me a gradient purple pompom yarn: pompoms were placed on a string of yarn, every few centimetres at a regular interval. The pompoms seemed to be made of a soft spongy or towel material. "I am not sure how to knit with this type

of yarn, but I will give it a go, then you will have a nice knitted scarf by your mamy!" She said. I wasn't very fond of the colour but I just accepted by nodding with a weak smile. When I joined them later in the evening to watch a movie in the living room, I could see mamy knitting with a perplexed look on her face. The light of the table lamp glowing softly on the left side of her face. She approached the knit closer to the lamp to see what she had made so far. She shot me an amused look and kept going at it. I cannot remember the movie that was playing in the background, but I do remember that moment.

Our conversation goes on. I ask mamy where she learnt to knit and sew, because I had never asked before. She tells me she learnt to sew on her own. She went to an only girl religious school where she learnt the basics of sewing in a work room ("*un ouvroir*") with her classmates. She then went to business school to study secretariat. There, she enrolled in the all-girl handball team, and this is when Maguy started making clothes following patterns, as they needed sport outfits. They would compete with other business schools in the country, and even became *championnes de France de Handball* in their category.

In the early 1970s, my grandparents and their two sons (my father and uncle) moved to Germany as my *papi* had a work opportunity in Frankfurt. Mamy says she would mostly be sewing her own clothes at that time, though she qualifies them as "simple ones to make, like skirts or dresses". This is also where and when she learnt to crochet, as she only knew how to knit and sew so far. The homeroom teacher of her youngest son (my father) had taught her basic crochet stitches.

She gets up from the table and leads me to the cupboard in the hallway where she keeps some extra clothes. She shows me two crocheted vest she had made at that time. One is orange, using only the pineapple stitch, the other one is a patchwork of brown leather pieces crocheted together. She tries them on and strikes a pose for me.

In this very moment, it feels like time is stopping. I am looking at her and feeling much love and gratitude, maybe some regret too, as time is fleeting. It feels strange, as if she is slowly disappearing in front of me. I am so glad that she is a part of my life, she is the only grandmother I have ever gotten to know and spend time with. Even then, I feel I have only known the grandmother side of her. Being able to ask her about her life before she became my mamy, even before

she became a mother, has been very eye opening. It allowed me to understand her own relationship to textiles better. It had been, partly, imposed on her as she grew up as a girl and woman in the 1940s and the 1950s, and it was required of her to know basic sewing and embroidery knowledge. Ready-made clothes were of course available, but in a post war time, it was practical to be resourceful and handy - making your own clothes could be cheaper than buying ready-made ones. Nonetheless, I have never seen my grandma as the cliché of an old woman. She was an active, resourceful, working woman with a strong personality that knew textile crafts enough to get by, but did not need to rely on them to survive.

As she takes off her crocheted vest to hang it back in the cupboard, I want to know more about her. I ask "When did you learn to knit then, mamy?" She answers "Probably with my mum. She used to knit woollen socks for my dad."

I have very few and distant memories of my grandma's mother, Mamie Léo. As I am about to ask mamy to tell me more about her mother, she stops me and says she needs a small break.

CHAPTER 5

Louise V.
ou mamie Léo

Louise

Born in 1912 in Lyon, France.

I did not get to know mamie Léo[1] very well, I only remember one of our encounters when I was a young child. Mamy brought my two cousins and I to visit her - the drive there felt long, the car followed the curves of the winding roads. As I had to look "presentable" (to my great dismay), my jeans and sneakers were swapped for a dress and sandals. Bored on the back-seat, I looked at the hideous sandals my grandma had selected for me and regretted not protesting more.

Louise was awaiting our arrival inside, sitting on a chair by the window. When we entered what I remember being a small bedroom, my grandma greeted her mother and walked towards her. I was following mamy but suddenly froze, as an overpowering musty smell met my nose, which incited me to stay close to the door. "Come say hi, Timour." Mamy said with a smile, waving for me to come closer. I shook my head and stood my ground. "Be polite, and come say hello to mamie Léo." Insisted my grandma. I could not protest any longer without facing possible retributions, so I slowly approached the two older women and quickly grabbed my mamy's hand for safety. I then timidly whispered "*Bonjour mamie Léo*". Just when this unpleasant, forced interaction finally seemed over, mamy added

1- Mamie Léo's nickname comes from her husband's name. It is not related to her first name.

"Don't be shy, give her a kiss on the cheek". *Malheur!* I thought. *Will this ever end?!* I shot my grandma a horrified look and directed my eyes towards her mother, still sat on the chair, waiting patiently to receive a proper greeting from me. I finally caved in and gave my great-grandmother a kiss. Her skin was soft and fuzzy. She smelled like an old person does - slightly musty, slightly soapy, slightly sweet.

I only got to know about Louise and her life more recently, while having a conversation with my grandmother. I knew mamie Léo was born in Lyon but not sure about the rest of her life. My grandma shares the following bits and pieces about her mother's life, while we are seated at her dining table.

Louise was born in a family where the mother was from a *famille bourgeoise,* and the father was a coal merchant. They employed a nurse, a cook, a maid, and a seamstress, who came once a month to do some sewing chores. The mother died at the age of thirty-six years old while giving birth to her second child, Louise's younger brother. As there were no incubators at that time, they kept the baby brother in the stove oven to keep him warm. Louise's father neglected himself, as he could not cope with the loss of his beloved wife. He entrusted his two children to the maid and gave her the jewellery of his deceased wife as payment. The maid put the children in a factory and sold the jewellery for money - she had five children of her own to care for. That is how Louise started working in Lyon's silk industry, in a weaving factory, at the age of thirteen.

My grandmother then stands up to find a specific photo from a magazine that had struck her one day. She asks for my help, then instructs me to look into a closet and dig through the dusty upper shelves, as in one of these boxes was the important image. We do find it after only a few minutes. On the magazine's page, I could see a young blond child, a girl, standing between two massive industrial weaving looms, discarded spools and dust littering the floor around her. "*La petite fileuse de Caroline*" is the title of the article. With her eyes fixed on the photo, my grandma confirms this was her mom's first job in the factory. She had saved this photo because it reminded her of what her mother had described her work in the factory to be.

As Louise was only thirteen at the time, she had to monitor two hundred spools, as the threads would often break and needed to quickly be rejoined, so as

not to stop the machines during production. Children were mainly recruited for this job as their hands were small enough to access the threads with more ease than adults. The factory would be running day and night, but Louise would not work at night, as after all, she was only a child. Once her shift at the factory was over, she would deliver freshly ironed clothes to people's houses. She also learnt to sew and knit overtime, to get by more easily.

After the weaving factory closed, my great-grandmother started working in a *boutique de soirée* that had their atelier attached to it. She was in charge of finding faults in garments, and signal them by attaching a small piece of thread next to it. When this boutique closed, my great-grandmother worked in a pan factory. She worked her whole life, until she was able to retire, and even received a medal of honour from the government, for working thirty consecutive years. My great-grandmother and her husband retired in the countryside, far from the city of Lyon, which greatly annoyed Louise because she did not want to leave the city. My grandmother told me mamie Léo would feel stuck and bored in the small village.

From the little atelier Louise worked in, my grandmother kept two silk scarves bought there, that she then gifted me. They are marked with the name "Odile St Germain" on the bottom right corner. When I looked up the name online, I could not find informations about this name or the brand, the only results that came up were silk scarves of similar styles, that were up for sale for around twenty Euros.

Being able to learn more about Mamie Léo's life made me realise she was partly robbed of what her life could, or should have been. She was born in a *famille bourgeoise*, her parents had enough money to hire staff to help around the house. Louise would have most probably been able to focus on her education and learn to run a home, as expected of women at that time. Instead, for reasons out of her control, she was left to fend for herself and had to find a way to make ends meet from a very young age. To me, Louise had to enter a forced relationship with textiles, mainly because of her gender, as the works available to her revolved around textiles, especially in a city like Lyon, known for its silk industry.

Timour-Aloïs

Born in 1997 in Valence, France.

As I explained in the first chapter, my first contact with sewing was through my mother. I have memories of her sitting behind her sewing machine, working hours on end on a project, day or night. I grew up associating the mastery of textile crafts to women, as I was surrounded by my mother, grandmother and great-grandmother - who were all capable of sewing, patching, knitting, crocheting, and more, as I had witnessed it myself. To me, women were the all-knowledgeable people of textile.

During my childhood and teenage years, I already struggled with being confronted to the clichés considered inherent to my gender. Too many times I heard "You are too sensitive.", "Don't be too loud.", "Why don't you wear girl clothes?", "Boys would be interested in you if you behaved better.", "You are not pretty when you cry.", "You talk too much.", "You don't know how to sew? But you're a girl." All my actions, and the emotions I expressed, were constantly being brought back to the fact that I was a girl. I was either deemed being too much of a girl (crying, being sensitive or shy, showing interest in quieter activities, congratulated for being mature, …) or not behaving enough like one (being loud, running around with wild uncombed hair, wearing trousers, getting dirty, fighting, …). I always thought to myself "what does being a girl have to do with how

I should behave? That makes no sense." However, having my close environment, sometimes my immediate circle, and even strangers, always pointing out how I should or should not behave - or exist, or breathe - made me reject wanting to be associated with their idea of what a girl should be. I am Timour: I am loud, I don't like brushing my long hair, I hate pink, I don't care for make up, I don't want to sit still, I cry when I am upset, I get angry and I scream, I want to be a knight and fight dragons, or a pirate and sail far from here, I don't care for sewing, or pretty clothes, I don't want to learn how to knit either, that's for the other girls.

Of course being your authentic self doesn't always resonate with the rest of your environment when you go against the grain. Overtime, I learnt that in order to be able to interact without being rejected by my environment, I had to adopt some traits expected of my gender, and tame myself. If I had to be quieter, be more presentable and pretend to care about boys, I would draw the line at not being involved with "girls' interests" like make up. It never seemed fair that because you appear to be of a gender, you should be limited by arbitrary rules that do not reflect your true self. Rejecting these associations was my way of defining myself. I am a girl, but not only a girl like society dictates it, I am a girl in my own way.

Even though I rejected the more traditional associations of girls and women to textile chores, I did have my own interactions with different textile techniques through my life, starting as early as my childhood.

My first personal experience with sewing was when I was a child, probably around the age of ten years old. I remember asking my mother if I could invite a friend over during the weekend, which she agreed to. Eventually we approached her with the infamous statement "We are bored." To which she answered by offering a multitude of activities to us - but none of them seemed as interesting as watching a movie, which was our initial goal when we signalled our boredom. Nonetheless, one activity seemed fit to us in this very moment: sewing. I cannot remember if the idea came from my mum or one of us, but my mum agreed to dive into her fabric box to locate scrap pieces. She asked what we wanted to sew, I proposed doll clothes, she nodded. My mum set us up on the garden table of our small courtyard, placing sewing needles, scissors, threads and fabric scraps all over the table. She stayed with us for a little while, explaining the basics of sewing, but we were not receptive to her instructions: we wanted to start immediately. She eventually left us, indicating that she will be inside.

My friend and I agreed to share the task of creating the different parts of the doll outfit: she will make a pair of trousers, I will make a t-shirt. The roles assigned, we selected from the variety of fabric scraps lying in front of us. I settled on a scrap with a black and white houndstooth pattern. As I needed to cut a front and a back part to make the t-shirt, I felt very smart when I figured I could simply fold the fabric in half and cut the two panels in one go. Without any pattern tracing, I cut the approximate shape of a t-shirt into the fabric. Once this was done, I made sure to layer the two pieces together on top of each other, and selected a black thread and a sewing needle. I tied a big knot at the end of the thread and started eagerly sewing (with what I know now is a running stitch) the pieces together. Halfway through, I suddenly remembered I should only sew together certain parts. Unfortunately, the neck and one sleeve were sewn shut together. With an annoyed sigh, I set to start again while glancing over at my friend. She was carefully sewing along the edges of the little panels she had cut out. Bringing my focus back on my own creation, I started sewing again after taking out the first stitches. This time, I made sure to sew only the shoulders and sides of the t-shirt.

After sewing along on the edge of one shoulder, I needed to cut the thread, secure with a knot, cut a new piece of thread, tie a knot on one end, pass it through the sewing needle, sew along the other shoulder, and eventually along the sides of the t-shirt as well. It was a long and tedious task.

My friend managed to finish before me, when she eagerly fitted the shorts on the doll, we realised they did not fit very nicely. Once I finished the small t-shirt, I excitedly yelped to my friend "It is done! The outfit is complete!". We realised the top would not fit around the head of the doll, as it was bigger than its body. We had failed our task. My mother reappeared at this moment, just in time to witness our disappointment. She had come to get us to have a snack, because she hadn't heard from us in so long, and as we learnt, we had been sewing for two hours already.

At the end of this day, I realised how time consuming sewing was. It required a lot more preparation and dexterity than anticipated. I could not help feeling disappointed, but kept in mind the momentary happiness and pride I felt when I had successfully finished sewing the t-shirt panels together.

Many years later, when I was a teenager in high school, all the rage revolved around D.I.Y. (Do It Yourself) videos on Youtube, distinctive by their bright colours and same use of copyright free music. With many tutorials available, I

would spend hours watching people explain how to "easily" make something from scratch, or enhance items you already owned. A lot of sewing videos were suggested to me, which I happily watched as I was still fostering this small hope of one day becoming a famous fashion designer.

While browsing for a tutorial that seemed accessible to me, I stumbled upon a video that explained how to add a braided detail on your t-shirt. Intrigued, I watched the entirety of the tutorial, and felt this urge to try it myself. I settled down in my bedroom and looked through my wardrobe in search of an old tank top, something I did not wear anymore, in case I failed the project. I found a yellow one that I could not remember ever wearing. It will have to do.

I played the video back from the beginning, making sure I had gathered the right tools, pausing every so often to follow the detailed instructions. I measured and traced a straight horizontal line, a few centimetres under the neckline, then drew regularly spaced small vertical lines along that first line. The next step was to cut along the small vertical lines. I reflected a moment and pondered: what if I did it wrong? I shut down this anxious thought and started carefully cutting as indicated. Small vertical strips of fabrics were now looking at me, they looked exactly like the example shown in the video. I took the time to breathe and admire this successful step. The woman in the video explained that starting on the right side, we now needed to pass each strip of fabric we created, under the next one, and repeat this step until we reach the last strip. Along the way, the braid would appear. I executed myself and once I reached the last strip, I could indeed see the braid. The last step was to secure our last strip of fabric with a safety pin, turn our top inside out and sew the strip to the t-shirt. Once I turned my tank top inside out again, my first ever successful sewing project rested proudly in front of me.

I felt immense joy. I tried the top on and admired my work in the hallway mirror. I then knocked on my mom's bedroom door to show her my exploit. I pointed out my tank top and she looked at me with questioning eyes. I had to explain that I had transformed my tank top from something basic into something slightly less basic by adding this braided detail. I still remember the way her face illuminated once she realised: I had been sewing. With barely contained excitement, she looked closer to the details of the braid and asked me questions about the different steps taken. My dad entered the room at this moment, and my mother eagerly explained the situation. Finally, one of her children was showing interest for her first love, sewing.

I am not sure if I still own this tank top, in a way, I hope I do. I hope it is

waiting for me in the wardrobe of my bedroom, back in my home country.

Soon after my first sewing success, I set to a more ambitious project: making a pencil case. As my mum had repeatedly told me, I could ask her for help or directions if needed. So one weekend, I asked her to help me with sewing a simple rectangular pencil case with me. We chose some scrap fabrics from her stash - a light blue cotton fabric patterned with small pink flowers for the shell, and a light purple cotton fabric for the lining. I did not consider adding a zipper, I wanted to keep it "simple" by adding a button, but my mother said "If you can add a fake braid to a tank top, you can add a zipper to a pencil case." When she suggested using her sewing machine so I could learn to use it, I categorically refused. I wanted to sew it by hand. "It will go much faster with the machine, you know." I still shook my head no. Now looking back, I guess she just wanted to share more about her passion and love for the craft with me.

We gathered the necessary sewing supplies, and started planning how we would tackle this project. My mum gave an overall explanation: the stitches I would need, how to cut the fabrics, and how to fold and sew the fabric around the zipper to have a clean edge. We started together, she indicated the first steps and allowed me to complete the rest alone. I went to my bedroom and hand-sewed a first part. When I was done with a step, or had a doubt, I would go ask my mum for directions. I think it took me a couple of days, but I did manage to finish the pencil case. Set on the dining table, maman and I were examining it together. My mum then proceeded to examine it, making sure the zipper opened and closed properly, that my stitches were strong enough, and handed it back to me, with a proud smile sitting on her face. She added "It would have been a matter of minutes with the sewing machine." I ignored this last comment with a smile.

Being able to start and finish this more complex sewing project imbued me with a weak confidence. I was capable of making objects. In this moment, I also realised I was not so set on fashion creation, as much as I had thought. I could not explain it yet, but the very act of hand sewing, the repetitive gesture, the diligence and dedication it required, was a feeling that would later guide me towards textile. But first, I needed to graduate high school and lose myself for a bit.

Once I graduated high school with a specialisation in French and English literature and languages, I integrated the demanding program of c*lasses prépara-*

toires littéraires[1]. And failed - after only one intense year. I had a very difficult summer following my first ever academic failure. I questioned my entire existence, my own intelligence and the plans I had made for myself and my future. I was 19 years old.

I then went on to follow a preparatory year in an art school in Lyon, to figure out if the design or artistic path was more adapted to me. It did feel right, but I did not feel ready to commit fully to anything yet. I took two gap years, moved abroad, and settled in the Netherlands.

After finding a part-time job in a clothing store, I wanted to fill my days off with an activity. I was not interested in reading or sports, I needed novelty. Around that time, I felt this itch for sewing again, it was only a few months before the first cases of COVID-19 appeared. In these blissful months, I would look for inspiration online, and crochet kept on showing up, which I immediately associated to my great-grandmother. Yet, I wanted to give it a go, the videos I watched made it look simple enough. I got supplies, found tutorials, and started. I was immediately confronted to the fact that it was much harder than anticipated. It required a certain dexterity I was unfamiliar with. Surprisingly, I did not give up, I felt up to the challenge. Why was I not able to hold the hook properly? What is a single crochet? A half-double crochet? Why does it require so much movement? And why was the tension so hard to keep? The frustration I felt fuelled me. After a few days of crocheting questionable looking samples, I reached a certain level of ease. I could hold my hook, keep the tension, identify the top part of a stitch, and build rows. Once lockdown started, being confined home meant long days of idleness, it meant finding ways to occupy myself. I had this particularly time-consuming new found skill to pass time, while sheltering myself. With different projects, involving volume or counting stitches, came more confidence.

I feel lucky that the spring and summer of 2020 is a quiet, soft and warm time in my memories. Busy with my new pastime, I ended up looking for more inspiration, and weaving made its appearance. I estimated I had mastered crochet well enough at that moment to take a break, and put all my focus on this new technique. I secured a small hand-held weaving loom and followed along different tutorials. I set up a small warp, drew a pattern on it, and started weaving the different shapes. This process felt more excruciating than crochet had been. I still felt a great sense of accomplishment when I finished my first weaving sample.

1-A two year academic program in the French undergraduate system, with a specialisation in the humanities or social science.

The weeks kept on going by, life slowly started returning to the city again, I went back to work on a more regular basis. Still, I found time to maintain and improve my textile skills. As time went by, I found a sense of relief from crocheting and weaving, it presented itself as a form of refuge. The meditative nature of these techniques contrasted with the restlessness of a tightly regulated society (still learning to deal with a pandemic), that required my active participation as a store employee. Indeed, the economy was in danger. Going back to work, dealing with stressed customers while adapting and trying to enforce the imposed safety rules, drove me to the conclusion that I needed to figure myself out. In the evenings, while I would crochet or weave, I wished I could simply make this my main focus.

And I did. After finding a bachelor program that focused on Textile Design, I worked hard, prepared for the entrance exams and was accepted into program.

These last 5 years of studying textiles were challenging for many different reasons. But along the moments of doubts, stress and anxiety, a strong love for textiles was born, comforting me in my choice. A connection was created. It did take me a long time before I allowed myself to enter the realm of textiles.

I do think I needed to reject the association of women to textile crafts society had projected onto me growing up - with its categorisation of making textiles a purely "woman's job or hobby" - to be able to consciously choose it and integrate it in my life. As it was not something imposed by my environment either, I slowly allowed myself to explore more of its vastness. There were techniques I was not attracted to until I was actively studying textile design - like knitting or embroidery - and techniques I had not considered possible, as there were more experimental ways of thinking about the very nature of what we define as a textile - like bio-textiles.

Following my instinct allowed me to find moments for reflection, to look back, much further than myself, at my mother, at her mother, and all the other women that came before us - the Mothers. This interest I have nurtured, this relationship I have explored, the objects I have created - fall in line with a long tradition, deeply rooted in the blood I share with Them.

Perhaps even, this link was decided a long time ago...

...That is why, I dedicate this poem I wrote,
to my Mothers.

“The Spinners’ gift”

The Fates have spun
a single thread,
a red string,
red always,

to weave and
intertwine,
this period to
the later one.

Kindred fates tied,
a faint pull from
the crimson
glowing line.

I answer
to the old
ancestral call,
the command of

the Mothers who
before me came,
bequeathing
knowledge and

insight on
the fabrics
that defines my
unfolding fate.

CONCLUSION

Through the exploration of personal memories and the stories of my Mothers, I have come to a deeper understanding of how textiles have shaped our lives, how they have both connected and distinguished us across generations. Engaging with their experiences, I discovered not only the similarities in our relationships with textiles but also the stark differences. For many of my Mothers, interacting with fabrics, a thread, or a needle, was not a choice. It was survival. Learning to sew, knit, pleat, or crochet was a matter of necessity, a means to clothe themselves and their children, to earn a living, to meet the demands of life with the tools they had. For me, the act of making came from a place of curiosity, of instinct, of seeking.

Despite the difference in motivations, I found myself drawn into their world, drawn towards something much deeper than the practical. I began to understand how these skills carried stories and strength, how they were passed down, sometimes directly through teaching, but often indirectly, through observation, through unspoken gestures. My learning was lonely at times, self-directed, but in many ways I was never alone. I was accompanied by the shadow of their knowledge, by the quiet persistence of their legacy.

This journey has brought many questions about identity, tradition, and

the role that making plays in shaping who we are. By pondering on the importance of textiles in our lives, how they shape our experiences, our relationships, and our sense of self, I have come to see making as an act of remembrance, of connection, and of healing. It has allowed me to reconnect not only with the women who came before me, but with parts of myself that were hidden or fragmented. It has become a way to reconstruct a sense of identity, from scattered pieces.

As someone who carries a multiracial heritage, the feeling of belonging has often been elusive. I have felt the tension and complexity of being in-between, of not fully belonging to one place, one culture, or one history. This dissonance, this sense of displacement, is not something I can resolve entirely. But I have found a form of peace in reclaiming the practices that once shaped my ancestors' lives. In learning the techniques they once used, I have begun to create a space for myself, a space built on both inheritance and intention.

Textile practices have become a bridge that connects me to a maternal lineage that I cannot fully access. Each stitch is a quiet act of remembering, of honouring the lives and labour of the women before me. With each thread, I add myself into their history. I claim it, not in a way that romanticises or simplifies their struggles, but in a way that acknowledges their skill, resilience, and creativity. Through my own hands, I carry their spirit forward.

Today, I am able to sew, knit, crochet, embroider, and weave like the Mothers before me. Some of their knowledge reached me through stories, others through glimpses of them making. However it came to me, it has now settled and lives within me. To me, these practices once born from necessity have become acts of connection, of grounding, and of self-discovery. They have given me a language to speak with my ancestors.

To know where I come from is to begin to know who I am. And while the past is not as clear as I would want it to be, it is present in fabric, in thread, in memory. I carry it with me. And as I continue to make, I continue to remember, I continue to belong.

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With gratitude,
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