Beverly Hillbilly

Fat, Queer, and Pink in the Shadow of Appalachia

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Preface

If I’m being honest, I am somewhat traumatized by academic writing. I originally started college in 2008 as a history major and eventually ended up hating my major and dropping out due to depression and dealing with closeted queer feelings while living with my extremely conservative and emotionally abusive family, so when my brain goes to serious academic writing, it takes me back to a time when I was in a very bad place. Designing and making a fashion collection? No problem. Writing a corresponding paper? Oh boy.

Going into this project, I had no idea what form the written component should take because I didn’t have a precedent to look to. I don’t think anyone else at UNCG has ever created a fashion collection for their senior honors project, and I know for certain that no one else ever created one for the Pubantz Artist-in-Residence program (a program within UNCG’s Lloyd International Honors College through which I received funding for my senior project). My project is largely a creative work, not research, and I used to enjoy writing when I was younger until academic research papers made me hate it. I actually want to have fun writing this paper and recapture some of that lost magic of putting my heart into words, so I got creative when looking for something to inspire my take on the required written component of my senior honors project.

Sometime before I started working on this project, I read *Dressing Barbie: A Celebration of the Clothes That Made America’s Favorite Doll and the Incredible Woman Behind Them*, by Carol Spencer (2019). The author designed Barbie’s clothing for Mattel from 1963 to 1998, and her book details her background, professional life, and both the technical process that went into designing for Barbie dolls as well as the social context of her design work. The book is an excellent narrative as well as a fascinating take on both fashion
history and material culture channeled through Barbie... and seemed as good a model for my paper as any.

I know I’m taking an unconventional approach to this paper, but my project itself is unconventional for the assignment, and the subject matter and output of my project are also unconventional- it consists of hand dyed bisexual themed westernwear made entirely in plus sizes. I’m pretty sure I’m walking the school’s first exclusively plus size collection in the student fashion show¹ this semester, and all through my four years at UNCG I’ve had to take unconventional approaches to my work just to make clothing that I can actually wear due to working with more limited design resources compared to my classmates designing for smaller sizes. It’s kind of terrifying to do something different, but hopefully it will be worthwhile. It has been so far.

¹…I would have done this had the spring show not been canceled.
The Context
Here and Queer

My love affair with westernwear started several years ago, when my long term boyfriend and I broke up. I awakened to my bisexual identity in 2014 and had little time to explore it before becoming involved in a monogamous, heterosexual relationship, so when that boyfriend and I broke up in 2018, I found myself truly able to explore my queer identity for the first time in my life. Not that being in a heterosexual relationship made me any less queer- if we defined people’s sexualities by who they were actively sleeping with, that would classify large swaths of the population as asexual- but you feel very invisible as a bisexual person when you’re in a heterosexual relationship. There’s a lot of biphobia both from straight people and from within the queer community, so it’s easy to feel alienated even when you’re single or in a homosexual relationship, but in a heterosexual relationship that alienation can be painfully intense. Not to mention that I lived with my very conservative family until 2016, which greatly limited the ways I could express my queer identity without compromising my personal safety (to this day, I’m still in the closet to the vast majority of my family). In 2018 I was single, living by myself for the first time in my life, and starting my degree in fashion design.

I’ve always loved country music, but 2018 was also the year that I discovered that queer country music was a “thing”. Not that it was anything new (just new to me at the time)- Brandi Carlile has been making country music as an out lesbian under the “Americana” subgenre since the mid 2000s, and you can go farther back to the 1970s, when the band Lavender Country made the first openly gay country music (that we know of) (Groff, 2022). But my fondness for RuPaul’s Drag Race led me to listen to the 2017 album Two Birds (and the 2018 follow up One Stone) by drag queen Trixie Mattel, and I was enchanted.
Trixie Mattel, the stage name of the performer Brian Firkus, hails from rural Wisconsin and is half Native American (specifically Ojibwe). He grew up very poor and with an abusive step-father who would call Firkus a “trixie” when bullying his stepson for being gay, which Firkus would later reclaim as the name of his drag persona (Weaver, 2017). Firkus learned how to play the guitar from his grandfather and developed a deep love of country music. In drag, he regularly plays the autoharp while dressed as an over the top Barbie parody, pulling style inspiration equally from Dolly Parton, June Carter-Cash, and Kacey Musgraves (Lorusso, 2018).

In Firkus’s music, I heard my lived experience played back to me. Family trauma, alienation, nostalgia for the good parts of my childhood at war with the fear of abuse and rejection. I became a regular watcher of Firkus’s YouTube channel, and discovered that he loved the same musical artists that I did growing up (which makes sense given that we were both rural queer kids born one year apart). In addition to country staples such as Dolly Parton and Johnny Cash, he also loved country-pop icons Shania Twain and Michelle Branch. It’s no wonder why his music spoke to me, and it was also unsurprising that I would fall in love with his draggy take on westernwear. I’ve been dyeing my hair pink since 2014 and Trixie Mattel is a Barbie parody- why wouldn’t I love his style of drag?

Around the same time, pop singer Lil Nas X released his country/hip-hop track, “Old Town Road”, and then in the summer of 2019 he came out as gay. That same year masked cowboy crooner Orville Peck dropped his unapologetically gay debut album *Pony*, and it was a success in both the LGBTQ scene and indie country circles (Groff, 2022). It felt like westernwear emerged as a cutting edge style trend within the queer community, and I was right there with it, walking my first western look in UNCG’s 2019 “Pink Power” fashion show (the annual show hosted by Threads, the school’s fashion club, to raise money for
breast cancer research). Westernwear expressed through a queer lens was exciting to me, and diving deeper into that helped me find my voice as a fashion designer.
UNCG Threads Pink Power Show, Fall 2019
Photographer: Alycee Byrd
Tennessee

Going to Nashville felt inevitable for me. For reference, my family has deep roots in Tennessee and I spent over two decades of my life making many trips through the Appalachian mountains every year to visit my father’s family in Greeneville, a small town nestled in the foothills just on the other side of the NC/TN border. My father’s family immigrated from Germany sometime in the 18th century before the Revolutionary War, becoming members of the Pennsylvania Dutch. They were among a number of families who migrated to Tennessee, fought in the Revolution, and then settled down and inbred for a couple hundred years. Perhaps I’m engaging in a little bit of hyperbole, but I do have the genealogical records from St. James Lutheran Church (my family’s ancestral church in Greeneville, TN where I have relatives buried going back to the Revolutionary War) to substantiate my claim (St. James Lutheran Church, 2019).

In any case, I can’t overstate the influence my father’s Tennessee family had on my upbringing. My mother’s side of the family, based in North Carolina, was very hard on me and very stereotypically “redneck”. They bullied me for being too nerdy, too fat, not southern enough (by their definition of “southern”), while also subjecting me to some of my earliest memories of sexual harassment. I’ll never forget my grandfather telling me that I sound like “a damn Yankee” and groping my thighs and calling my preteen breasts my “assets”.

In contrast, my father’s side of the family was quieter, gentler, and encouraged my creativity. My grandmother (and namesake) on that side of the family died before I was born, but she left behind her a legacy as a talented homemaker and fiber artist. She was good at cooking and baking, a precise knitter, and an accomplished seamstress. My aunt (my father’s...

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2 I wish I could locate the book of history and genealogy that St. James Lutheran Church published years ago, but by way of citation I’ve used the “About Us” page from the church’s website, which details two centuries’ worth of its history and how my family (first as “Nehs” and then “Neas”) was there from the start… among the other families that settled in the area and just never left. Which I think supports my joke about inbreeding (if this wasn’t an academic paper, I would insert a laughing emoji here).
sister) gifted me crafting kits every Christmas and taught me how to cross stitch and embroider, passing that on from my grandmother by proxy. In the dusty closets of my paternal grandfather’s old, crumbling house, I found beautifully intricate intarsia knit sweaters my grandmother made in the 1950s. The basement of my great-aunt (my father’s aunt) was a dedicated art studio, where she taught me how to paint ceramics and showed off her array of sewing machines and sergers (one of which she gifted to me when I became serious about sewing as an adult). Perhaps a bit of a tangent, but when I initially shared the name of my senior collection online, an acquaintance berated me for using the “hillbilly” slur in the name. If I was someone who wasn’t Appalachian, I could understand that critique, but the mountains are an important part of my family, my past, and my connection to fiber arts. I also was teased for “redneck behavior” as a teenager and found myself constantly having to downplay my accent to the point where I hardly have one anymore, so while there are many slurs that I have no business using, “hillbilly” is absolutely mine to reclaim. In response to that acquaintance who refused to stay in her lane, I tacked onto my project subtitle a couple more slurs that have also been used to hurt me in the past: “queer” and “fat” (and while it’s hardly a slur, people on the internet occasionally like to use “pink” as a supposed insult to me, and I’m like… people that is literally just an observation, be more creative when you try to make fun of me, please).

Anyway, my childhood was difficult and traumatic (I have so much to work through in therapy now that I have insurance that properly covers that), but my best memories were in Tennessee. The handful of more liberal folks within the family moved to Nashville, one of the two “blue” cities within the very “red” state (the other city being Memphis), and I have a deep bond with those family members. My Aunt Fredna is one the few relatives I’m out to as

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3 Yes, to clarify, my mother’s family thought I wasn’t redneck enough and people at my high school thought I was “too redneck”. Yes, this dichotomy was very exhausting.

4 Technically she’s my second cousin, but family members my age or younger tend to all be “cousins” and family members my parents’ ages and older all tend to be “aunts/uncles”.

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a queer woman, and I delight in visiting her with my brother (who is trans and also queer) whenever we can.

During a Thanksgiving visit in 2020, we ate dinner one night at White Limozeen, the extremely pink and extremely stylish Dolly Parton themed rooftop bar. I dressed up for the occasion, wearing the Trixie Mattel dress collab from indie designer Fashion Brand Company (yes, that’s the brand’s real name) - a pink affair embroidered with Trixie Mattel’s music and trimmed with white fringe. On the way out of the bar, a lady on the street flagged me down to tell me that she loved my dress.

“Have you been to Manuel’s?” she asked.

I didn’t know what she was talking about and told her as much.

“The designer!” she said, “You know, Manuel!” With a flourish she opened the garment bag she was holding, revealing a rhinestoned pink western shirt embroidered with horses she had commissioned for her daughter’s birthday and had just picked up from Manuel American Designs. I was familiar with the work of westernwear designer Manuel Cuevas, but was not aware that I could actually visit his studio. I thanked the woman and the next day my brother and I did just that.

Manuel Cuevas, known mononymously as “Manuel”, was the head tailor of the legendary designer Nudie Cohn during the 1950s through the 1970s (most of the “Nudie suits” on display in Nashville museums were made at least in part by Manuel), and is known for making Johnny Cash “the Man in Black” as Cash’s primary designer (Country Music Hall of Fame, 2021). He’s dressed everyone from Elvis Presley to Lady Gaga and it was an honor to meet him. For my visit to his studio, I wore a Shania Twain inspired dress I designed and made that semester for school, and Manuel really liked my work.
Picture of myself at White Limozeen in Nashville, TN

Photographer: Fredna Hodge

Picture of myself with Manuel Cuevas and Marty Stuart

Photographer: Mary Nease
Picture of my Shania Twain inspired dress, pictured in UNCG Threads’ Spring 2021 student magazine

Photographer:
Paula Damasceno
A couple of months later when I was applying for design internships to fulfill one of my remaining requirements for my degree, I applied to Manuel’s studio and was offered a position as a tailor’s apprentice. I received a few other internship offers, but they were all unpaid, and while the internship with Manuel was also unpaid, at least in Nashville I had family and a free place to stay (Aunt Fredna offered to house me for the summer) so I accepted the position at Manuel American Designs.

Working directly under Manuel, I learned traditional suit tailoring and how to sew western shirts. This involved a lot of hand sewing, making and applying yards and yards of piping, and attaching probably a thousand dollars' worth of rhinestones (using the special machine in the studio that pressed rhinestones into metal settings) over the course of the summer. It was a lot of work with very little compensation (though I was paid to be in a Marty Stuart/Connie Smith music video), but I came away from the experience with elevated technical skills as a designer and a lot of inspiration for my senior fashion collection.
I spent the 2020-2021 school year trying to show versatility in my design work while still making clothing that felt like me. During the Spring 2021 semester I completed the capstone project required for my major (Consumer, Apparel, and Retail Studies), which was a group project that paired design students and retail students together to come up with a product/brand and all of the accompanying merchandising, marketing, etc. My group decided to create size inclusive sustainable activewear, and I stepped outside my comfort zone to add activewear to my portfolio and create my first original designs using knit fabric. I have dyed my own fabric for years, typically just tossing my fabric into my washing machine with some liquid RIT, but that winter I discovered ice dyeing and was excited to incorporate those techniques into my design work. Ice dyeing uses ice to melt powdered dye into fabric, creating dreamy, watercolor-esque effects. The powdered dye (I favor Procion fiber-reactive dyes, which work with cold water on natural fibers) is composed of primary colors in different concentrations, so as it melts into the fabric the pigments split and blend in different concentrations, causing the dye to split into different colors from what would conventionally be a single color dye.

I incorporated ice dye into my leggings designs for my capstone project, using the color splitting effect to create unique color blocked effects by taking ice dyed fabric with different shades of colors and pairing it with solid colored fabric dyed using the same shade that I used for the ice dye. I really enjoyed the aesthetics of my final products and knew that I wanted to incorporate those same textile design techniques into my senior collection.
Pictures of leggings from my Spring 2021 CARS capstone project, dyed using ice

Photographer: Mary Nease
Pictures from my CARS capstone project

Photographer: Mary Nease

Models:
Allie Nelson (in pink)
Maksim Rex (in purple)
I’m very enamored with colorful westernwear and it has certainly trended over the past couple of years (Lawrence, 2018). The head to toe pink Versace western look Lil Nas X wore to the 2020 Grammy’s lives rent-free in my mind, and going a more traditional route, Indiana designer Jerry Lee Atwood creates brightly colored and traditionally tailored westernwear for the likes of Lil Nas X, Post Malone, and Orville Peck (Country Music Hall of Fame, 2021). Out in California, designer Asia Hall launched her brand Neon Cowboys, which combines westernwear with wearable technology. Her light up cowboy hats and accessories have been donned by Kacey Musgraves, Miranda Lambert, and even found their way into the most recent 2022 ad campaign for Beyonce’s Ivy Park line with Adidas (Elan, 2021). The zeitgeist has not passed, and every year I fall more and more in love with brightly colored and avant-garde westernwear, and I’m well aware of how privileged I am to have learned the traditional techniques used within this style of fashion directly from one of the living legends who helped develop the style in the first place.
Lil Nas X in Versace at the 62nd Annual Grammy Awards

Photographer: Frazer Harrison/Getty Images for The Recording Academy

Lil Nas X in Union Western by Jerry Lee Atwood at the 2019 MTV Music Awards

Photographer: Manny Carabel/Getty Images
Orville Peck in Union Western by Jerry Lee Atwood
Photographer: Ramona Rosales

Neon Cowboys CEO Asia Hall
Photographer: Andrew Taylor
Photos from Beyoncé’s Adidas X Ivy Park collection “Rodeo”
Photographer: Adidas X Ivy Park
Going into this school year, I knew that I wanted to combine the dyeing techniques that I have experimented with over the past year with the traditional styles I learned to make during my internship with Manuel. I also had to be realistic about what I could feasibly create within the roughly six months I had available to work on this collection, as well as within my limited budget and without any of the specialized equipment that I had access to during my internship (rhinestone setters, industrial snap setters, embroidery machines, etc).

I’m something of a perfectionist and this collection was a lesson in humility and patience. At the risk of sounding arrogant, a side effect of coming into the design program at UNCG as a grown adult with years of sewing experience is that I already possessed relatively advanced technical construction skills from day one at school and I hold myself to high standards of quality. For most everyday garments, I understand exactly what I need to do to sew them together with professional quality polish and finishing. Learning to make westernwear was a very real challenge because the techniques involved are very advanced, requiring a lot of patience and precision. I appreciate how much my internship with Manuel challenged me, because learning those techniques very tangibly grew my technical proficiency as a seamstress, and I was very excited to apply what I learned to my senior collection. However… oh wow all of this was so much harder to make than anything I created at UNCG before.

For me the challenge in my design classes was the patterndrafting. That was the skill I did not have before coming to UNCG and is what I worked hard to learn as a student. The garments that I made for those classes were not technically difficult for me to sew and the challenge was solely in the patterndrafting and getting the fit right. With the westernwear-inspired collection that I decided to make for my senior project, the patterndrafting wasn’t easy, but it wasn’t too much more difficult than the work I have created previously. The actual sewing construction? Oh god I almost thought that I bit off
more than I could chew. I designed garments that I couldn’t just make. Like for example, a basic pair of pants or a fit-and-flare dress are things I could sew in my sleep, but my designs for this collection were all doable for me… if I thought very carefully about every step of the way and consulted my notes and cross-referenced sewing books and held my breath and prayed for good luck and dear god one mistake might ruin the whole thing. It was like blissfully driving down a highway at 80 mph and then slamming on my breaks for a 35 mph speed trap.

Creating this collection was hard and emotionally draining. I’m a perfectionist, remember? I constantly had to remind myself that I was doing very difficult sewing and that I am not Manuel with 70+ years of experience and I do not have access to a fully equipped atelier and I absolutely do not have the kind of budget to fund anything like the $10k+ suits I worked on last summer, so it would not be productive to keep comparing my work to Manuel’s but that absolutely did not stop my brain from going there. Like I said, this collection was a lesson in humility because I had to look at imperfections in my work and tell myself that it’s ok and expected.

Who drafts and makes their first suit and executes it perfectly? Who sews with silk for the first time and doesn’t mess up some part of it somehow? Who tries something new and does it perfectly for the first time?

Imperfection is a requirement of learning.

I tell myself that and it’s difficult to swallow even though I know it’s true. My consolation is that I also know that I’m my harshest critic and that I need to celebrate what I did well instead of fixating on what I could have done better.

So let’s do that.
The Collection
A Note

Do not consider this collection the same way you would a deliberately constructed seasonal collection from a large fashion house with lots of employees and resources. As mentioned before, I’m one mentally ill student working part time and paying for about 75% of this out of my limited pockets and working under very tight time constraints. In the fall I could only work in the school sewing lab on Fridays due to COVID-19 restrictions, plus I live by myself and pay all of my bills myself, so I had to balance my class schedule, finding time to work on this collection, and working enough hours at my job to make ends meet.

I think it would be much more helpful to view this collection as a depiction of the creative process. I tried many techniques unsupervised for the first time. I drafted my first ever pants from scratch. I worked with fabrics that were new to me and tried different dyeing techniques on new (to me) fibers as well. I gained weight in quarantine and had to figure out how to fit my new body, so I created this collection with the intention of making most of the pieces size adjustable. I think that is an important factor both in terms of body acceptance and sustainability, so people do not need to buy new wardrobes whenever they gain or lose a little weight- it’s natural for bodies to change over time and our clothes should honor that. This meant approaching my design work very differently from how I have in the past and required a lot of trial and error. You absolutely will see improvement in the quality of my work over the course of this collection.

It’s not as cohesive as I would like, but I respect the reasons behind that. As I worked on these pieces I course-corrected fabric issues I had with earlier looks by choosing different fabrics for my later looks. I had to make some compromises simply due to not having enough money for certain materials or a lack of access to what I needed due to location or just not having enough time to wait for an online order. I also fought burnout and changed design
plans to keep myself motivated and to challenge my skills as a designer. I prioritized my mental health and I make no apologies for that.

I’ve already ranted about imperfection, so I’m not going to rehash that. I just wanted to make a note that I am an artist and not a mass market designer. This collection is not a commodity to be sold, but a look into my artistic process and the physical evidence of my growth.
The Experiment

Photographer: Ciara Kelley
Model: Nicole Campbell
Is this the part of the paper where Mary rambles about her gender identity? Yes, yes it is, but I promise that it's an important context for understanding my collection. I used to be the kind of person who exclusively wore skirts and dresses, but at some point over the past few years I’ve shifted into a pants person. There are several reasons for this change. One of them is greater body confidence and comfort in my own skin. I used to be so self-conscious about the size of my legs, but now on bad days I don’t care and on good days I’m proud of my curves and enjoy the shape of my body. That is the result of growing up and maturing and unlearning a lot of the fatphobic nonsense rife in our society. The other reason I started wearing pants more is because my preferred gender presentation shifted from ultra-femme to what I would consider to be “futch” or “soft butch”. I enjoy masculine clothing with a feminine twist and it just really makes me “feel” myself.

I touched on this earlier, but to go more in depth, I was raised in a very conservative religious family. The somewhat fundamentalist flavor of Christianity that influenced my upbringing espoused very strict gender roles. I went to college the first time around to become a teacher because growing up that was one of the few jobs considered “appropriate” for women in my religious community (other acceptable options would be nursing or cosmetology). The gender binary was very strict and there were absolutely “wrong” ways to be a woman or a man and I witnessed first hand how being a woman the “wrong” way was used to excuse violence against women.

Now as an adult, I still identify as a woman, but I’m repulsed by the concept of gender as a binary with only two options in very neat, specific boxes. I like using the nonbinary label for myself as a rejection of binary “Biblical womanhood”, and enjoy getting to play with my gender expression. In my opinion, gender should be a playground, not a
tightly graded true or false test. One of the things I enjoyed about my tailoring internship was the opportunity to learn traditional menswear techniques, because that’s not offered in the design program here at UNCG at present. Learning the “rules” of menswear gave me the tools to break those rules and play with them in conjunction with the womenswear techniques I was already trained in.

This first look for my collection was an experiment, combining hard and soft fabric elements and playing with some of my personal styling preferences. I like wearing booty shorts over leggings because I like my butt but I hate thigh chafing, so I tried to incorporate that styling into this look, creating a bodysuit instead of leggings because I don’t like how leggings waistbands create additional bulk underneath shorts waistbands. I also used to have a cute pair of faux thigh high illusion tights, creating the illusion of thigh high stockings, but after they got a run in them I’ve yet to find a good pair to replace those in my size. I wanted to create a pattern that I could use to create more of that style in different colorways in the future. I’m not 100% sold on how this full look came together for my collection, but I’m happy to have that bodysuit pattern and a good shorts pattern in my personal design catalog for future use.

The robe was inspired by sheer western shirts I saw in Manuel’s studio last summer. I wanted to try my hand at combining that aesthetic with a longer, more glamorous robe. I love hand embroidery, and I wanted to try my hand at working with silk for the first time. I designed a very western-style rose and thorns motif in Procreate (I used my iPad as a lightbox to trace my design onto my silk for me to embroider over), pairing it with my personal mantra, “The only way out is through.” I said this to myself a lot over the past few years of school, because it means the only way to get myself out of this difficult, stressful situation is to finish what I started, and I thought that worked well with rose/thorns imagery (it made me think of Prince Phillip fighting through the hedge of thorns to reach the sleeping Princess
Aurora in the old Disney movie). When starting this project I had never worked with silk before in any capacity, so this was my first time constructing a silk garment and embroidering with silk thread.

I love how the western elements of this robe turned out. The shotgun cuffs (which I learned how to execute while interning for Manuel) and western yokes are gorgeous, and I’m overall happy with the finished product of my embroidery. I largely used chainstitching because of how traditional that is in westernwear, though I executed it by hand because I do not have access to a chainstitching machine.

My challenges came in the form of that damn fringe. It’s gorgeous and feels so glamorous, but I underestimated how heavy it was compared to the chiffon of the robe. I added the tie on the front to help counterbalance it, but the look still works best when pinned into place. No shame in that, but it is a bit frustrating. I also struggled with how delicate the silk chiffon was. Getting the hem even was a nightmare and while I executed the French seams perfectly, the fabric is already showing wear at the seams just from modeling the garment because of how fragile the fabric is.

This was a good learning experience about what does and does not work with silk chiffon. I would like to try another version of the robe, but perhaps as a dress or more traditional shirt and without the fringe. The silk yokes and cuffs are my favorite parts of this look and feel amazing against the skin, so I would really like to revisit this in the future.
The Pivot

Photographer: Ciara Kelley
Model: Nicole Campbell
The Pivot

This second look was supposed to be something else entirely. I love Dolly Parton—she’s the patron saint of Tennessee and I grew up going to Dollywood, not Disney World. To me she represents how you can come from a poor, country family, and become glamorous and celebrated by both your rural home community and the queer community as well. I adore her and wanted to pay tribute to her with one of the more feminine looks in my collection.

I started out with designing a dress inspired by one she performed in at the Grammy’s in 2019. It required a lot of structure and corsetry that I ended up just not having the time or energy to execute to my satisfaction. These first two looks were created in part for my senior design studio course, so I needed to finish the work by the end of the fall semester. Two weeks before my deadline, I decided to cut my losses and ditch my original design (though I may revisit it in the future), and I took a hard look at my materials to create a totally new design that I could execute in time. I was working with a vintage cotton tween shot through with metallic fibers and a stretch silk chiffon. I hand dyed both fabric and ice dyed the chiffon. I don’t think it was my best dye job, but definitely serviceable for the look. I was also having to work around fabric that I had already cut for the original dress, so that limited some of my “print” placements with my dyed fabric.

I kept my Dolly Parton inspiration, but looked further back to her style during the 1970s. I was already pulling a lot of inspiration from vintage westernwear and a lot of the shades of pink Dolly has worn over the years, and decided on a blouse design inspired by the sleeves on a dress Dolly wore to the 5th annual American Music Awards in 1978. I originally sketched a different sleeve design- I knew I wanted large, dramatic sleeves- but the patternmaking was proving to be frustrating, so I started looking through pictures for inspiration. I saw this Dolly dress and it reminded me of sleeve instructions I saw in a vintage
Dolly Parton at the 5th Annual American Music Awards in 1978

Photographer: Getty Images
This is the page I found though an internet search that aided the drafting of my blouse’s sleeves. As far as I can tell, it’s from a 1945 book called Método Teórico-Práctico de Corte Y Confección Del Vestido, or “Theoretical-Practical Method of Cutting and Making the Dress”

My final sleeve pattern piece and a picture from the trial-and-error drafting process to get to a shape and drape that I liked.
Spanish patternmaking book, so I took that and ran with it. As for the jumper dress, it was inspired by home sewing patterns from the 1970s. I got the idea into my head for a short dress paired with dramatic sleeves a foot longer than the hem, and the A-line jumper dresses that seemed to be popular in the 70s felt like a good pairing to my blouse design and would work with the amount of fabric that I had available to work with.

So yes, I designed, drafted, and constructed this look in less than two weeks. And goshdarnit this may be the most successful look from my collection. The response on social media has been extremely positive, as was the feedback from the models that tried it on. I must admit, this look does feel really cool to wear as the sleeves are literally silk scarves, and the pockets are deep and functional. The back of the dress is also elasticated, making it very comfortable to wear. I wanted a feminine, dramatic moment with this look, hence the original dress design, and I think the look I ended up with still fits that design brief. Having one specifically femme look among a four look collection also sounds like the appropriate ratio of conventional femininity to the more masculine/menswear inspired looks that compose the rest of the collection.

Designing the dress was pretty straightforward (lots of straight lines), but the blouse was very much so an adventure in sleeve making. I went through several sleeve designs before I came around to the finished version, which I’m happy with because it lets me wear dramatic, voluminous sleeves while also showing off my tattoos. Honestly, sleeves are like my least favorite things to draft, so it ended up being quite the learning experience as I tried different shapes and used a lot of slashing a spreading to modify the designs, and seeing how the flat pattern pieces translated into three dimensional shapes with fabric, especially seeing the fabric drape of those different pattern shapes. The bodice of the blouse was inspired by my first experience working with chiffon- years and years ago, I sewed the Taffy Blouse from The Colette Sewing Handbook, one of the books that taught me how to sew back in 2012.
My 2012 version of the Taffy blouse and Meringue skirt, sewn during the first few months of me learning how to sew.
That blouse also featured French darts and a bateau neckline, which I reinterpreted and redrafted from scratch and also worked in a sideseam zipper and elegant closure at the back of the neck to make it easier to put on and take off. It was also nice seeing how much I’ve progressed as a seamstress- that Taffy blouse also used a bias finish on the neckline, which I executed with store bought, premade bias tape and also finished the sleeves that way as well and it was very clumsy. My new blouse was delicately finished at the neckline with bias strips from my hand dyed fabric and the sleeves with a narrow hem. Seeing this look side by side with my look from the summer of 2012 is a trip.
The Coveralls

Photographer: Ciara Kelley
Model: Mary Nease
The Coveralls

Sometime around my sophomore year at UNCG, I fell head over heels in love with jumpsuits, specifically colorful interpretations of workwear style coveralls. California indie brand Big Bud Press makes ethical sustainable 70s-inspired clothing in a rainbow of custom dyed colors, and played a part in my love of the ice dyed aesthetic that I infused into my collection. My friend Kyle visited California and I saw her comment on a Big Bud Press Instagram post, saying that she was kicking herself for not buying one of their jumpsuits (which are often out of stock, due to demand), and despite my misgivings on how one of those jumpsuits would look on me, I bit the bullet and bought one for myself when a new batch went up for sell. I wasn’t crazy about the color, but I ended up adoring the style on me and over the next year I bought another half dozen jumpsuits. My favorite ones had elastic in the back waistband, allowing me to wear them comfortably as I gained or lost weight, and I desperately wanted to draft a jumpsuit of my own incorporating all of my favorite design features.

The biggest challenge was with the fact that I had never drafted woven pants before. The shorts of my first look was my exercise in dipping my toes into the water, and the knitwear/leggings from my past work was a different beast entirely compared to designing bifurcated garments for woven fabrics. I also knew that I wanted to get stretch denim for this jumpsuit to make it more comfortable to wear, which meant I also had to take that into consideration during the pattern drafting. The pants ended up not being too difficult - I discovered the trick for drafting a balanced pant leg is to draw a straight line from the front princess seam to the center of the front hemline. The bigger struggle ended up being getting the sleeves just right, and honestly I’m still not totally happy with the exact fit of the sleeve cap, but I sewed the jumpsuit last and finished it literally two days before I had to give my
first presentation of my collection, so it just is what it is. All I can do is take notes, examine what’s not right, and do better next time. And I did do better! I drafted the suit jacket after drafting the jumpsuit, and I think the sleeve fit and drafting is much better on the suit, and I’ll take that with me into my next drafting project.

What I think worked well with this jumpsuit was all of the western style elements I incorporated into the design. The piped shaped yokes all turned out quite nicely, and despite my time crunch, I think I also executed the faux smile pockets well. Originally those were functional pockets, but when worn I didn’t like how the pocket bags made my chest look, so I altered them to be decorative pockets without a pocket bag. The fit of the pants ended up being pretty much exactly what I wanted- roomy through the thighs and hips, but tapered to the ankle. I feel like a lot of plus size straight leg pants feel too voluminous compared to their smaller counterparts because designers will literally make the leg straight down, resulting in the ankle being as wide as the thigh. That looks fine on smaller sizes, but totally changes the aesthetic of the pants on larger sizes despite in theory being the same style. Tapering the leg gives that same relaxed, straight leg feel, but without the lower halves of the pant legs feeling like palazzo pants next to a smaller size in the same design. This reflects my belief that you can’t just scale designs up between sizes, care needs to be taken to alter designs to accurately translate the intended aesthetic.

Also I have a fun story about the zipper I used on this jumpsuit that I want to share here so when I’m reminiscing about this collection a decade later, I can remember this and smile. I’m very picky about zippers and while I ordered from Amazon a zipper for the dress I made earlier on in this collection, I wasn’t 100% happy with it and I knew I would be going to New York City for a few days on my spring break. It was my first time in New York as a fashion designer (before then I had spent a single day in the city over a decade ago, well before I learned how to sew, so that brief trip doesn’t count in my mind), and I was
desperately excited to visit the garment district. It was how I spent my first day in the city, roaming between fabric and notion shops, and when I stepped into Pacific Trimming I just about lost my mind. I had to consciously stop myself from dancing down the literal aisles and aisles of zippers in every size and color imaginable, and they had a zipper technician who would install for you your selection of zipper pulls from their vast catalog onto your zipper purchases. They also sell the high end Riri brand of zippers from Switzerland, and I picked out two of their Prism Pink\(^5\) silver metal zippers and had my favorite circular zipper pulls attached.

As mentioned before, this collection is inspired by a lot of 1970s fashion, and being a Millennial a lot of my impressions of 70s fashion is filtered through the lens of 90s fashion when a lot of 70s aesthetics came back into style (such as tie dye, bell bottoms/flared jeans, smiley faces, etc). In elementary school, I had a lime green zip up polo shirt with coordinating A-line green plaid skirt, and the zipper had a circular zipper pull and for some reason that detail lodged itself into my mind and works its way into my adult life through my design work, because that is my favorite style of zipper pull and I can’t wait to order more colorful zippers with circular pulls from Pacific Trimming.

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\(^5\) Prism Pink is an official Pantone color (PANTONE 14-2311 TPX), and is my favorite shade of pink. It appears a lot throughout my collection.
The Suit

Photographer: Ciara Kelley
Model: Mary Nease
The Suit

This collection began and ended with this suit. Ok, maybe not this suit specifically, but the idea of a suit. While interning with Manuel, it was only natural for me to start sketching suits because I was working on suits pretty much the whole time I was there. The Country Music Hall of Fame has an excellent online exhibit called “Suiting the Sound” about the various rodeo tailors throughout American history who created and shaped the concept of “westernwear”, and it features a full section about Manuel. This was a fabulous resource when I worked on the assignments required for my UNCG class that accompanied the internship because much of those assignments required me to dive into Manuel’s history and present it to others. The point of this tangent is that one of the pieces featured in that exhibit is the jacket Manuel created for Dwight Yoakam to wear on the cover of his 1987 album “Hillbilly Deluxe”.

I remember that album distinctly from when I would go through my dad’s vast collection of CDs during my childhood in the 1990s, so it hit a nostalgic cord for me. I sketched a suit inspired by the Hillbilly Deluxe jacket mashed up with Elle Woods’ pink lawyer aesthetic from the 2001 movie Legally Blonde, thinking specifically of a pink tweed suit that I had in my fabric stash at home, and lovingly called it the “Beverly Hillbilly Deluxe” (the classic 1960s tv show The Beverly Hillbillies was frequently watched in my family’s home growing, so the name was also a nod to that). I did not make that specific suit, but it was my starting point for the design of the suit I ultimately ended up making as the pièce de résistance for my collection. And of course, the name “Beverly Hillbilly” lodged itself in my brain and became the name of the collection as a whole.

I could have focused this whole project on just creating this suit, but nooooo, I had to be an overachiever and also fulfill a long time dream of creating a collection for my senior

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6 You can view that exhibit at https://countrymusichalloffame.org/exhibit/suiting-the-sound/.
Dwight Yoakum’s *Hillbilly Deluxe*

The “Beverly Hillbilly Deluxe” jacket I designed during the summer of 2021.
year of design school. Never mind that my fantasy of walking my senior collection in a runway show has been shattered by the cancellation of the spring student show, I sacrificed my time and sanity to create a tailored suit for my finale look, pouring my heart into what would have been the climax of my canceled runway presentation. I am a kinesthetic learner and I just desperately wanted to put into practice the tailoring skills I developed last summer before they slipped away from my attention deficit goldfish brain. It’s one thing to work on non-consecutive bits and pieces of suits under the guidance of someone else and executing another person’s design vision. It’s another thing entirely to apply those skills to your own personal vision while also creating the entire look from start to finish, from initial drafting to polished result. This suit was absolutely the hardest project I have ever attempted both from a design perspective and in terms of technical construction.

I started the patterndrafting process in early February with the goal of being ready to construct the finished garment by the start of March. Omitting a five day spring break trip to New York City, I was able to complete something like 95% of the jacket construction over the course of two and a half weeks. Which is crazy. Incorporating the pant construction and the finishing details of the jacket (plus the little silk chiffon scarf I made as a matching accessory), I made this entire suit within a month, fitting in late hours of sewing around my job and class schedules. Again, crazy.

I haven’t even mentioned the dyeing processes yet or my journey with the fabrics, because that was… a lot. Like it was significantly more of a process than it was for any of my other collection garments primarily because my budget (or lack thereof) did not align with the fabric needs of the project at hand. I couldn’t afford wool suiting, the traditional fabric of choice for tailoring suits, plus I had specific color needs that meant that I couldn’t settle for a polyester alternative because you can’t dye them the same way that you can with natural fibers (plus from a sustainability perspective, I didn’t want to use synthetic fabrics). I stepped
back to consider my options and ended up returning to my faithful lover, denim, though I was still taking a risk ordering my fabric online. Locally all I have access to is Joann Fabrics, which has a limited selection of non-synthetic denims and all the white denims were too thick or too sheer for my needs.

At the end of February I ended up placing an order from Cone Denim’s White Oak shop for non-corporate consumers for twelve yards of “Cone Deeptone Denim™ Clean Water Natural Selvage with Sea of Blue Selvage ID”, which is a 12.75 oz denim comprised of 79% cotton and 21% Tencel. Theoretically sustainable, this denim is OCS-certified organic and is a high quality selvedge denim with a nice drape from the added Tencel (the name brand of lyocell, a rayon-like fabric made from recycled wood pulp using more environmentally friendly production methods than rayon). The texture and weight of this fabric ended up being near perfect, though I faced a dyeing challenge in that the fabric was a much yellower off-white than pictured online, making the base fabric color different from the other fabrics I’ve used in this collection. I address this dilemma the way I would when dyeing my hair- just as I would counteract yellow brassy roots with purple toner, I lightly dyed my denim with purple dye to neutralize the yellow undertones, and then overdyed that with fuchsia liquid RIT (this whole process was done in my washing machine). From there I ice dyed half of the denim for my pants fabric and jacket contrast. I really do not want to do the math on how much fabric I ice dyed for this collection (but probably will for the conclusion of this paper), but it was at least eleven yards for this suit:
• 6 yards of Cone denim
• 1 yard of silk chiffon
• 3 yards of Bemberg rayon lining
• Maybe 1 yard of muslin for the contrast piping? (I was reusing pieces of fabric from the prototyping phase of pattern drafting, so I can’t say with confidence exactly how much muslin I dyed)
• Bonus! 1 camisole undershirt from Target because at the point of purchasing it I was one week out from my hard deadline for this collection and I did not have the time, money, or sanity left to design and make *yet another thing*, especially a thing that would only show an inch or two over the lapels of the jacket and only served the purpose of keeping my bra from being visible.

I experienced several challenges during the design and drafting of the jacket, the primary struggle being that *I didn’t know what I was doing*. Ok, perhaps I am using hyperbole and being hard on myself, but compared to my confidence constructing literally every other piece in this collection, my experience with designing and making tailored jackets was decidedly novice. During my internship last summer, I received a lot of instruction and practice utilizing specific tailoring skills, primarily making and installing piping, sewing different types of double welt pockets, structuring shoulders with sleeve heads and shoulder pads, and lots of different hand sewing techniques. These things are all crucial to making a traditionally tailored suit, but I didn’t learn any of the technical patterndrafting and only made one jacket from start to finish. This means that drafting this jacket was new territory for me and the construction required skills I had just learned over six months ago and hadn’t used since then.
Another challenge I faced was figuring out how to adapt menswear design features to womenswear in a way that satisfied me. An example of this was my inner pocket dilemma. I love inside pockets on jackets— it feels like they’re common in menswear and rare cryptids in womenswear, making them feel like a privilege I have been denied my whole life. Pockets in general are some of my favorite things to sew, probably because off the rack womenswear usually has dreadfully small pockets… if they even have any pockets at all, so I take great pleasure in tricking out my designs with beautiful, luxurious pockets. The dilemma I ran into with installing inside pockets into the lining of my jacket is that if I placed them in the chest area, which is customary for menswear, actually using the pockets and putting anything into them would ruin the lines of the jacket due to how that traditional placement is over the largest parts of my chest. That placement might work on a jacket intended for a woman much smaller than me, but part of good plus size design means adjusting your design for different body shapes instead of just universally scaling everything up without alteration. I wanted functional inside jacket pockets, but I also wanted nice clean style lines that draped neatly over my curves, so I solved this issue by placing my inside double welt pockets towards the bottom of the jacket instead of over my chest. I originally planned on doing just one inside pocket, but with this placement I made two to keep the weight of each side of the jacket balanced.

The suit jacket was essentially a practice in patience for me. I was able to sew my pants and then the jumpsuit at warp speed because I knew exactly what I was doing when I constructed those. I have made those types of garments many times before with techniques that I’ve used many times as well, while with the jacket I had to think very carefully every step of the way. I made mistakes and had to redo things. I checked out a few tailoring books from the school library to refresh my memory on some tailoring techniques that I learned last summer, as well as to aid me with some techniques that I had never executed before, such as
constructing and installing the lining on hem and sleeve vents. I had never draped a collar and lapels before in my life and had to carefully follow my draping textbook to execute that effectively.

Consequently this suit was also a practice in humility. I discussed this much earlier in this paper, but again I had to make myself accept imperfection with this jacket because at the end of the day, I was attempting very advanced drafting and sewing on a very tight time crunch and I’d have to be a prodigy to execute everything 100% perfectly. And this jacket is also a celebration of how far I’ve come as a designer and seamstress because so much was executed very well. I achieved beautifully dreamy colors with my dyeing work. This was the first time I’ve ever sewn peaked lapels and they turned out pretty dang spiffy. The four pockets installed on that jacket are all perfectly balanced— I can put my phone into any of them and it’s not noticeable on the outside of the jacket. While I made some interfacing mistakes with the inside welt pockets (they turned out a little too ripply for my liking), the piped double welt pockets on the outside of the jacket are exquisite. And perhaps subjective, I think I achieved my intended fit of a jacket that is comfortable to wear and feels oversized, while also being tapered and fitted in ways that flatter my figure. While there are absolutely ways I could have executed this better, I think the final result is something to be proud of (even if the process caused several mental breakdowns).

So if all of this was difficult and stressful, why did I decide to make a suit? A suit that was just one of FOUR looks?? The short answer is that I’m crazy. The long answer is that I have been experiencing a large amount of dread about graduation. It’s why I decided to take my time and graduate in May instead of December and to actually make a senior collection and graduate with disciplinary honors, rather than take it easy my senior year and only do the minimum required to get my degree. It’s why I challenged myself to make different kinds of garments for this four look collection, creating different types of pants and legwear. I don’t
have the same design resources at home that I have available to me at UNCG. As much as
I’ve complained over the years about the limited number of plus size dress forms with broken
stands compared to the army of size 8s in much better conditions, having access to a plus size
dress form close to me in size with legs has been a game changer for me as a designer. It’s
allowed me to drape clothing that makes me feel good in my body and satisfied with my
gender presentation. Dress forms with legs are also f***ing expensive and I have no idea
when I’ll be able to afford one of my own to use at home. Even if I could drop the money to
buy one right this second, I don’t know when I’ll be able to afford the kind of home that
affords me enough workspace to have a large hanging dress form and room to comfortably
draft patterns. So I used my senior collection as an opportunity to draft different kinds of
patterns in my size so I’ll have those patterns on hand to make more clothes for myself after I
graduate and cannot easily drape new designs in my size.

This endeavor nearly drove me off the deep end, but I think ultimately has been worth
the trouble. It’s certifiably insane that I decided to make a suit in less than a month, but I did
it! And oh my god I feel so good wearing this. It makes me feel so joyously like me and
reminds me of why I learned how to sew in the first place. Nothing like this suit exists
anywhere else in the world- it’s a hand dyed denim plus-size western suit and bringing it into
existence is one of the best things I’ve ever done as an artist and as a person.
The Conclusion

So why did I even make this collection? It wasn’t really a requirement for me to graduate, so why bother to do all this work? The simple answer is because I wanted to. I love to sew. I love to make beautiful things. I objectively enjoy the activities of designing, drafting, and making clothing. The more complicated extension of this answer is that since I knew my long term goal at UNCG was to finish my time here with a senior fashion collection, as a sophomore I applied to join the Honors College after learning about the college’s Pubantz Artist-in-Residence program. That program provides funding to up to ten Honors students every year to create an artistic project, which can be applied towards a student’s senior honors project, and as I was already doing a lot of extra work in my classes for my own edification anyway, the Honors program seemed like a great way to get academic credit and funding for a project that I knew I wanted to complete anyway. The written component is more than what I would have done on my own, but I have mostly enjoyed writing this.

But yes, in addition to simply enjoying making clothing, I just wanted to apply everything I’ve learned at UNCG to a project of my own making. The capstone project for my major is a very business-focused group project, which is educational, but involves a lot of compromise and working within more specific design limits set by other people on a very tight timeline. I wanted to create something that was entirely my own vision and over the course of a full school year. This meant I could set my own challenges instead of addressing challenges set by my professors. I was able to think about what I can do and what I could do, and set specific design goals for myself, which can be summarized as follows:
- Successfully sew with silk for the first time
- Execute western styles and techniques that I learned at my summer internship with Manuel, independently applying them to my own design work
- Create looks that were at least somewhat adjustable in size
- Draft pants for the first time
- Hand dye most of my fabric
- Draft and tailor my first suit from scratch

I am very happy that I was able to achieve all of those goals with this collection, which is incredibly satisfying. I dropped out of the first college I attended in 2012 after struggling with many health issues, and for a long time I had this mental hangup that I could never finish anything. The fact that I’m finally finishing college now and finished this collection means so much to me because it feels like I stepped over such a huge hurdle in my life.

I also actively learned a lot from the creation process. I developed an insight into the nuances of working with silk. I honed my dyeing techniques. The patterndrafting process was very educational because every time I create a new pattern it further cements the process in my mind, and working through draping and drafting different types of collars and sleeves helped me when I interviewed for a patternmaking position with Kontoor Brands Inc. (the parent company of Lee and Wrangler Jeans). They execute a fit test with job candidates, during which the candidate examines fit issues on different types of patterns and identifies what is wrong and how to fix it. Working through many different garment types for my collection enhanced my patterndrafting knowledge base and helped me succeed during my fit test.

I sacrificed a lot of time, money, and energy to create this collection, but I do not regret it and I’m proud of what I was able to accomplish. It’s a body-positive explosion of
color and very purely expresses who I am and my point of view as a designer. That will surely change over time (I would be concerned if it didn’t), but this will live as a snapshot of the here and now, showcasing who I was when I graduated from UNCG.
In Gratitude

This project would not have been possible without the help and support from my friends, family, and community. I would particularly like to specifically thank the following:

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Thank you!
References


