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Decentring Fashion – Participatory Practices for Shifting Narratives and Regenerating Cultures

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Introduction

Historically, the textile heritage of minorities has often been subjected to cultural appropriation practices (Young, 2008) or systematically undervalued and ‘othered’ as ‘non-fashion’, as such ‘sacrifice zones’ do not sit within the confines of specific fashion systems (Niessen, 2020). Designers are often ‘parachuted’ into marginalised or disadvantaged communities premised on bringing their knowledge and expertise to solve other people’s problems. However, there is growing recognition of the need to ‘decolonise’ such dominant approaches in collaborative design practice (Escobar, 2018; Mignolo, 2018; Tunstall, 2023). Different methods have been applied, sometimes in tandem, to tackle the challenges that face us as well as define new roles for the designer under different contexts, such as design activism (Fuad-Luke, 2009, 2017), design for social justice (Constanza-Chock, 2020), social entrepreneurship (Martin & Osberg, 2007) and policy design (Bason, 2014; Kimbell et al., 2023).

While guest editing this Special Issue, we were undertaking the research project ‘Decolonising Fashion and Textiles: Design for Cultural Sustainability with Refugee Communities’, which addresses some of these multiple-level challenges in the UK (Mazzarella & Mirza, 2023). In line with Walker et al. (2018) and Kozlowski et al. (2019), we advocate for adding a cultural dimension to the three most recognised pillars of sustainability: environment, economy and society. Cultural sustainability refers to tolerant systems that identify and cultivate diversity of cultural heritage, beliefs, practices and histories in connection with places, resources and ancestral lands (Williams, 2022). Starting from the premise of not re-enacting dominant power narratives, we are engaging London-based refugees and asylum seekers in storytelling sessions, textile co-creation workshops and roundtable discussions as part of participatory action research aimed at understanding what cultural sustainability and community resilience mean in this context. These liminal and peripheral communities actively search for a new voice and identity as they rebuild their lives and resettle in a new place. Our research contributes to understanding the lived experiences of refugees, mapping ways to build resilience within the local community and collectively framing a sustainable future vision. Our ambition is also to shift narratives around refugees, amplify the participants’ voice and agency and foreground an alternative fashion and textile system based on equality, diversity, inclusion and sustainability of cultures.

It is essential to highlight that our project team presents a mix of cultural backgrounds, and we speak at least one language other than English, overlapping with our research participants. This position of ‘credible messengers’ contributes to the varied frames of cultural and social reference, which are crucial in projects of this nature. We also acknowledge the different forms of privilege each of us brings to the project. At the same time, we strive to challenge power dynamics and adopt a critical self-reflective approach, leveraging our lived experiences to foster empathy and inclusion within the collaborative design process.

With our project team, we engaged with 41 participants having either refugee or asylum-seeking status and who had come to London from 13 different countries (e.g. Eritrea, India, Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan and Sudan, to name but a few) for very different reasons (fleeing from war, gender-based violence or discrimination due to racial, religious or political reasons). We conducted the research activities in community centres in East London, an area with centuries of fashion and textile manufacturing heritage and home to diverse migrant communities. We adopted an embedded and situated approach to designing (Mazzarella et al., 2021) and explored cultural, social, economic, and environmental issues faced by refugees within the fashion context of East London.

Insights

Against the backdrop of our ongoing project, key themes have emerged from the research observations and public discussions corroborated through the 'Shifting Narratives' symposium we held at the London College of Fashion, UAL, in January 2024. These themes capture the multifarious meanings attributed to cultural sustainability and community resilience, which help frame the parameters of fashion in this context and to which the authors of the papers published in this Special Issue have responded. The themes presented here relate to cultural sustainability and community resilience and are defined more specifically in the context they resonate with. This Special Issue is organised by correlating papers to these themes.

The discussion on decoloniality foregrounded in this Special Issue aims to invert power in how knowledge is presented. In discussing the themes below, we highlight the voices of the participants and MA students from the London College of Fashion, UAL, who were involved in a collaborative project brief aligned with our research. We have chosen to use direct quotes from the participants and others involved in the project to give voice to their concerns and the space they deserve, which they are often denied.

Reframing fashion

Our project and the papers published in this Special Issue exemplify ways in which the practice of textiles and fashion design can be used as the catalyst for conversations around colonial legacy and lived experiences. In our project, we learnt that participants might be far from articulating or relating to definitions in a conventional way, and this made us think about accessible terminology and how to invert narratives by listening and recording what the participants defined as fashion, cultural sustainability and community resilience. In this Special Issue, we also intend to unpick and lay out the definitions from a non-dominant perspective. The visual data – textile artworks and fashion artefacts – produced by the participants in our project show a better articulation of cultural sustainability and community resilience than the words used to describe them.

In her paper 'Designed for life: Fashioning emergent futures', Erica de Greef reviews the exhibition 'Designed for Life' at London College of Fashion, UAL, from October 2023 to January 2024. De Greef examines the various elements of the exhibition and how the projects' teams engaged with the lived experiences of refugees and migrants, involving them directly in the design process to bring forth untold stories of silenced communities and discuss the inequalities inherent in the world of design and fashion. De Greef also foregrounds a space in which design and conflict intersect at 'the meeting of art with the extreme scale of human suffering' as the unusual and challenging context from which some of the projects exhibited in 'Designed for Life' originated.

As we understand it in our research context and the papers published here, fashion is a system of what and who we interact with, not just an industry, which it is often reduced to or associated with in the mainstream narrative. Besides the fact that every garment we wear is made by a pair of hands, in the Global South, what we have understood from our diverse project participants' decentred narratives about fashion is that it can provide an accessible, desirable medium to all. Therein, 'fashion' exhibits a divergence in its perceived privilege of access to some while others are excluded. In this context, fashion provides a vehicle through which participants from different levels of society, even those with no prior experience, education or training in fashion, are still keen to learn and pursue a career in fashion to build their new life in their new place of resettlement. Here, we see a glimpse of the less-defined spaces of inclusion for diverse players. For instance, a participant in our project stated that fashion 'is about finding yourself, learning new skills, bringing together people from diverse cultures'. Fashion is conceived as 'a tool to tell a story', and the project 'creates values and feelings ... beyond the idea that fashion is something worn on the outside'. In her paper, de Greef also discusses the practice of making fashion and textiles to enable refugee participants to enact 'practical negotiations between the local, global, past, present and future', undertake a process of 'becoming whole again', engage with more established residents and, in so doing, influence the place where they resettle.

Decentring fashion

This Special Issue illustrates ways in which fashion can provide a different access platform in a decentred context. Historically, it has been used as a political and social symbol of defiance to colonial power, notably in Gandhi's personal choice of dress and the Swadeshi movement (Bean, 1991; Gonsalves, 2012). Through the handmaking of clothing, cheaper industrially made imported European textiles were boycotted as a metaphor for liberty from colonial oppression in South Asia. In our project's context, amplifying a peripheral fashion system tied to 'othered' identities is also examined through the lens of clothing that is separated from the dominant stance of the 'Fashion' industry. In decolonising dominant design practices, it is vital to adopt a listening-first perspective, unlearning inherent knowledge and relearning new viewpoints.

In her article 'The decentralisation of fashion education in the Northeast of England through collaborative practice between education, communities and industry', Gayle Cantrell *et al.* report on initiatives to re-localise the fashion system through collaboration with various stakeholders. With the ambition to move away from the established centralised (London-based) fashion sector in England and contribute to a social diversification of the industry, such counter-initiatives are aimed at bringing benefits to the local system, having design education at the heart of this process. Such a system is grounded on values of localism, degrowth, circularity, sustainability, repair, activism, community engagement and social innovation. In this context, fashion is presented as a vehicle for the regeneration of the local industry and community through engagement with local fashion brands and the creative industries more broadly. The paper illustrates UK universities' role in engaging with local communities to foster place-making and decentralise the fashion system, which has the potential to shift power dynamics and contribute towards decolonisation.

Through engagement with the diverse groups in our project, we argue that language must also be decentred. It became evident that using native languages in the artefacts created can promote diverse cultures. Embracing a multitude of knowledge and approaches, this decentred process entails working in solidarity 'with' marginalised communities rather than assuming a 'helper' attitude.

Cultural sustainability

Our project defines cultural sustainability as a strong sense of identity attached to an emotional sense of belonging, such as comfort in the space of two cultures and redefining fashion through nonconformity. Sustaining textile heritage and making spaces for its discussion can contribute to fostering a sense of belonging, especially for refugees who are displaced and live transient lives, as highlighted by one of our project participants: 'This project made me love my culture more. No matter where I go, my culture will remain with me'.

On the other hand, it is also important to note that some refugees have traumatic memories of their home countries and may want to erase some of their heritage while absorbing cultural elements of the place of resettlement. Hence, sustaining the past is not always appropriate, especially when it might echo the dominating narratives of imperial colonialism. This resonates with Hall's (1997) definition of culture, not as a return to our fixed 'roots' but as 'routes' through which we travel; therefore, our culture changes and develops. From this perspective, cultural sustainability means continuing certain traditions while allowing certain elements to evolve and embracing change to design 'regenerative cultures' (Wahl, 2016).

Our research shows that the dominant fashion system is making people from cultural minority backgrounds believe that their material culture and way of dressing may be less valuable. With this in mind, we argue for the designer's role as an advocate for foregrounding personal and cultural identity and the need to feel safe in embracing native and new cultures to express shifting identities. Equally, we advocate for the need to facilitate co-creation processes and enable the necessary conditions for all cultures to thrive in their own right, and this includes leveraging the power of cultural activism – through design, art, craft and making (Corbett, 2017; Fuad-Luke, 2009; Hackney, 2013) – to challenge social injustices and dismantle the many layers of dominant and oppressive forces that prevent equality of all cultures.

Our research also revealed that the reconciliation between values and economic differentials must be considered in any definition. This was highlighted at the 'Shifting Narratives' symposium. For instance, Professor Stuart Walker highlighted that regional and central government policies in the UK for economic development are often aimed at fostering innovation and change, which are at odds with the values of tradition and conservation on which the principle of cultural sustainability is grounded. Furthermore, mainstream Western cultures are grounded on individualism and consumerism, and such values are socially and environmentally damaging and should not be sustained.

Shifting narratives

The plight of people whose identity is instantly stripped away and replaced with a quick label when arriving in a new place, resounds in a quote shared by artist Laura Nyahuye at the 'Shifting Narratives' symposium: 'I became a black woman when I came to the UK'.

This statement illustrates the resistance to her strong sense of identity; she felt that 'there is no room for me because of what I look like' as the space 'resisted who I was'. Culturally, educationally, and linguistically, diverse people with differing backgrounds may be reduced to a single label, which confines them as the 'other' and, in many cases, as 'unwanted' in the dominant culture and power narratives. Moreover, listening to the stories of our project participants one on one and asking them to share culturally and personally meaningful textiles led to a reflection on identity and the juxtaposition of presumed identity and representation in a new context. It shed light on the human qualities and values necessary to diverse

participants in meaningful ways. For instance, the making space offered our project participants the opportunity to rebuild shattered self-confidence as well as relocate themselves within a vastly different social structure and as valuable contributing members of society whilst raising awareness of 'others' and the other 'self':

"I'm here to find myself. We can pray for this to happen every day and night ... The reason why I do this is because I know [that] a picture can send a message to the outside world. If someone sees this [referring to her textile artwork], they know that this lady is still fighting for her freedom".

The current prevailing narratives around refugees are reductive and limit the multidimensional aspect of being human. Our research highlights that refugees, similar to other groups, are neither a collective entity nor identify with the same things despite the collective grouping ascribed by general perception and often even those in power, such as the top tiers of governments. The refugee label might reduce the experiences of diverse individuals. Nevertheless, the labelling or exoticising or commodising of 'native culture' or people is not a new phenomenon.

Pallavi Chamarty's paper 'Kalamkari and chintz: A decolonial reassessment of entangled textile histories' in this Special Issue critiques the absence of artisanal subjectivity and the persistence of Eurocentric and Orientalist assumptions within the existing historiography pertaining to specific Indian textile crafts. Chamarty demonstrates and highlights the dialectic relationship of colonisation with traditional crafts in South India through its commodification. The paper underlines the significance of the relationships of power that may historically define spaces for cultures from non-dominant sources. As designers and practitioners working towards social change, our role is to question and identify the gaps by which we are endangering human values of creativity, resilience, resourcefulness and collaboration that form the basis of culture and ways of being.

Regeneration of cultures

What is culture in this context? Culture here can be defined as a multi-layered living reality that evolves with people as they travel, integrate, learn, unlearn and make meaning. In the paper 'Exploring the extraordinary design motifs of Wollo Gabi in Ethiopian textiles and design development of women's fashion accessories', Hazal Gümüş Çiftçi, Tewodros Tenagne, Temesgen Agazhie and Michael Reta discuss a traditional textile worn by both Ethiopian men and women. The paper discusses a commercial gap for product design in international markets and the potential for adopting co-design methods for an inclusive approach to brand development. The authors provide insight into traditional crafts that are less known in mainstream fashion and which contribute towards informing consumers against cultural appropriation practices and aesthetics. Importantly, it also frames the discussions around overlapping cultures where native material culture may have to adapt and regenerate towards a dominant one to survive. This raises questions about balancing power and values where diverse cultures meet.

Our research connected people who would not have otherwise met and focused on finding cultural commonalities that create a bridge between different worlds. While engaging with participants living transient lives and bringing together people from different countries, we were aware of potential conflicts and tensions that could have emerged across cultures. We felt our responsibility was to facilitate dialogue, co-existence, and connection. As one of our project participants shared, they were 'exposed to the sensitivities and perspectives of other people'. Another participant has consistently used a pair of jeans and

a T-shirt as symbols to campaign for unity and equity among different people, arguing that less division is created through reduced ring-fencing of cultures and cultural heritages. Our approach encourages participants to practise empathy for one another's struggles, respect diverse cultural heritages and engage in respectful and mindful conversations based on active listening.

Community resilience

Community resilience is highlighted in a description of lived experiences, as some forms of culture are carried while others are left behind in the cause of survival. Resistance is one basis of resilience in the face of extreme adversity. Similarly, one of our project participants pointed to the fantasy-like association with the UK as the home of Shakespeare and other positive Western narratives, which were in stark contrast to arriving in London as an asylum seeker where she felt unwelcomed and 'hated'.

Whilst we advocate for leveraging the power of communities (as groups of people with a shared matter of concern) to achieve social justice, we acknowledge the importance of also creating spaces for 'agonistic pluralism' (DiSalvo, 2010; Mouffe, 1999) to avoid the risk of creating echo chambers of the same ideas, seeking consensus instead of challenging existing power structures and activating social change. Our research highlights the resilience built by refugees in the face of experienced oppression and exploitation. However, it also critically challenges the notion of resilience, pointing towards the need for well-working systems and services instead of having no other choice than reacting to external shocks, as stated by one of our project participants:

"People from the Global South are resilient, although ... they should not have to always be resilient, because they also deserve tenderness and loving care, instead of violence and resilience. ... Sometimes, resilience is worshipped because it's easier to worship resilient people rather than deconstructing and dismantling the system that oppresses them. Many of them do not even want to be resilient or face this violence, but they have no choice".

While resilience is a positive quality to have to react to adverse situations, it should not be used – for instance, by local authorities, which have a duty of care towards their residents – to deflect responsibilities.

The power of participatory practices

In social and political theory, Foucault (1994) notes power as a form of domination, while Bourdieu (1984; 1986) describes a kind of power in social and cultural distinctions. It is essential for design researchers to constantly reflect on their positionality, challenge their privilege and consider the power dynamics at play in collaborative processes. In their paper 'Sustainability culture and fashion enterprises: From creating questions to co-creating participation', Daniele Busciantella-Ricci, Marco Berni, Andrea Del Bono and Rita Duina discuss an experimental collaboration between a circular fashion company and a local third-sector entity promoting co-design for social innovation and adopting a Design Ladder model. This is an example of design's role in fostering sustainability within the fashion industry by identifying new business strategies and systematically adopting co-design tools for social change.

Active engagement in a reciprocal process of making and learning 'with' project participants rather than studying 'them' underlines the power of participatory practice. Wherever possible, enabling opportunities for shifting roles, such as empowering refugees to progress from participants to facilitators of design activities, fosters spaces for personal growth and the development of new perspectives. Active listening is

crucial in such collaborative processes to not impose one's beliefs and design ideas and not elicit traumatic memories, as highlighted by one student participating in the collaborative project brief we set up: 'Listening with mind, not just with ears'.

As brought forth in the discussions at the 'Shifting Narratives' symposium and in the co-creation process with our project participants, making things together contributes to restoring lost connections (with people, places and practices), building support networks and fostering community resilience (Gauntlett, 2011; Hirscher, 2020; Sennett, 2008). Making things together also unlocks meanings and narratives that cannot be expressed through words but become evident in the choice of fabrics, the enactment of movements such as mark-making on cloth and the building of new relationships (Mirza, 2020).

Transformative learning

Decolonising fashion implies unlearning inherent knowledge and engaging wholeheartedly in learning new viewpoints. This points to the crucial role that design education and reflexive practice play in this process. In their paper '*Drum* magazine: A decolonial shift in teaching fashion theory and history,' Khaya Mchunu and Kiara Gounder discuss a cross-institutional project which offers a new perspective on decolonising fashion pedagogies. Mchunu considers fashion within the social, cultural and political landscape of South Africa in the 1950s and 1960s and illustrates – through biographical essays and magazine covers – students' responses to the brief, with a focus on creative individuals who, although featured in *Drum* magazine, are not widely documented in fashion theory. The project presented in this paper critically acclaim untold stories and shapes new narratives centred on alternative fashion histories and imaginaries, contributing to – necessary and yet uncomfortable – shifts towards decoloniality. By proposing context-specific examples within fashion education, the paper offers a poignant call for engaging in an ongoing process of 'renewing, stretching, and decentring the teaching of fashion theory and history'.

Education implies a journey of learning and transformation through self-discovery, new skills, gaining new knowledge and finding one's role in society. Two main contributors to adult learning, Mezirow (2000) and Freire (1970; 1973) advocate for transformation through critical reflection and raising critical consciousness. Both Mezirow's meaning making and Freire's experiential learning approaches are relevant to people's transformation, but our project points towards contextually relevant material culture as central to triggering transformative learning in participants. In particular, our project has contributed towards the development of a wide range of technical and soft skills (design, sewing, pattern cutting, embroidery, critical reflection, ethical thinking, listening and communicating, teamwork, systems thinking, creativity and advocacy) as well as personal qualities (such as empathy, flexibility, resilience, resourcefulness and activism), as stated by one of our refugee collaborators: 'I improved many skills in myself, like communication, teamwork and finding mutual goals whilst we stay creative'.

Most importantly, drawing on Miller and VeneKlasen's (2006) social sciences framework for power relations, we are witnessing that the refugees participating in our project are undertaking a transformative journey, from the feeling of being powerless while power is exercised by top-down institutions 'over' them, towards gaining power 'within' themselves (in terms of self-worth), power 'with' people (as collective strength) and power 'to' shape their own lives and make a difference in society. For instance, reflecting on her transformative journey of empowerment, one of our refugee collaborators stated: 'As a refugee, I felt like a stone. You need to find a way to share your pain, and this project is giving me an opportunity to get closer to my feelings and turn my pain into something beautiful'.

Closing reflections

While findings from our research point towards the invaluable lived experience of refugees and what it truly means to be human, we hope that the papers included in this Special Issue will inspire you – the reader – with multiple ways in which design and fashion can be used to challenge perceptions and narratives around marginalised groups and to engage in participatory and decolonised processes aimed at fostering cultural sustainability and community resilience. We would like to invite you to join us on a collaborative journey to develop practices of resistance to the hostile environment in which we live, nurturing ethics of care and repair and contributing towards unlocking people’s freedom to express their shifting identities and their abilities to access resources, representation and power – in and through fashion.

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