Reality, Reciprocity, Resilience: Scoping a Decolonised Process of Designing for Cultural Sustainability with Refugee Communities

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Contents

Abstract

With the mass displacement of people on the rise, it is clear that we need to rethink and address the diverse needs and aspirations of refugee communities and find ways to honour their diverse cultures. Until now, the textile heritage of minorities has often been the object of cultural appropriation practices undertaken by fashion brands or has been systematically undervalued as 'non-fashion' produced by 'the other'. As things stand, designers are often 'parachuted' into marginalised communities with the assumption that they can bring their knowledge and expertise to solve their problems. However, there is growing recognition of the need to 'decolonise' such dominant approaches. With this in mind, the Reality, Reciprocity, Resilience project aimed to investigate and value the lived experiences of refugees in relation to the themes of cultural sustainability and community resilience, to inform the future development of a framework for decolonised fashion design practice. To meet this objective, participatory practice research was undertaken with London-based refugees and asylum seekers. Following ethnographic research, the project team facilitated storytelling sessions and co-creation workshops that led to understanding the lived reality of refugees, mapping out ways to build resilience within the local community and collectively framing a vision for a sustainable future. As a result, the project contributed to amplifying the refugees' voice and agency, re-examining research methods and advancing a cultural sustainability agenda within a fashion and textile industry context.

We cannot 'save' other people and we should never imagine we can; instead, we can fine-tune into reality as it presents itself and let it determine what needs expression, making, changing, inventing, or letting be, together.

(Helen Storey, 2022).

Introduction

This report discusses a participatory practice research project undertaken with refugees with the long-term aim to sustain their cultural heritage, whilst fostering social inclusion, enabling local economies to flourish and enhancing environmental stewardship, through fashion and textile practices. This research contributed to filling a knowledge gap in relation to what refugees can teach us in terms of cultural sustainability and community resilience. Overall, the research was conceived as a pilot project to inform the future development of a framework for decolonised fashion and textile design practice.

Project contextualisation

The social and cultural context

The mainstream system of fashion production and consumption is proving unsustainable in terms of cultural heritage, social equity, autonomous livelihoods and environmental stewardship (Mazzarella et al., 2019). Improvements in these areas are unfolding at a slow pace and new research is needed urgently in order to build a sustainable future for the sector. While the industry is currently being guided by the three core pillars of sustainability — environmental, economic and social — there is a need to add a cultural dimension (meaning cultural heritage, diverse cultural systems, values, behaviours and norms) as an essential component of a sustainability agenda (Walker et al., 2018; Kozlowski et al., 2019).

With a harrowing 89.3 million people worldwide having been forcibly displaced at the end of 2021 (UNHCR, 2022) due to global and local political, economic and environmental issues, it is clear that we need to re-address the needs and aspirations of migrant communities and find ways to acknowledge and engage respectfully with their diverse cultures. Historically, the textile heritage of marginalised groups has often been the object of cultural appropriation practices undertaken by fashion brands (Young, 2008) or has been systematically obscured, undervalued or 'othered' as 'non-fashion' (Niessen, 2020).

By adopting a holistic approach to sustainability, this research focused on artisanal practices carried out by refugees who, regardless of their transiency, retain their original culture, customs, faiths and craft skills, despite having lost their material possessions (Storey, 2020). Furthermore, this research intended to avoid the current situation where designers are 'parachuted' into marginalised or disadvantaged communities bringing their knowledge or expertise to solve other people's problems. This is in line with some critical design scholars (Mignolo, 2018; Escobar, 2018) who are calling for an urgent need to 'decolonise' dominant design approaches. This means dismantling colonial systems of oppression and exploitation, empowering a multiplicity of voices and agencies, and leveraging the values of equality, diversity, inclusion and sustainability of cultural heritages. With this in mind, this research intended to fill a knowledge gap through its focus on eliciting what refugees can tell us in terms of cultural sustainability and community resilience.

6

This project built on the heritage of textile and fashion manufacturing in East London and intended to facilitate the integration of refugees and migrants in the local community and fashion economy. Poplar HARCA is an award-winning housing association in East London, committed to creating a place where people, communities and businesses can thrive. The association was chosen as a project partner strategically, due to its invaluable experience in the area and connections with many relevant organisations.

Previous studies or practice

The mass displacement of people is radically challenging our current way of living and contributing to shaping an uncertain future (Harris, 2019). Within this context, design for social innovation has become a well-established, human-centred, collaborative and multi-stakeholder approach to tackling social challenges (Manzini, 2015; Meroni et al., 2017). However, designers (originally from or trained in Europe and America) have often been 'parachuted' into marginalised or disadvantaged communities with the assumption that they can bring their own knowledge and expertise to solve their problems (Willis and Elbana, 2017). This has often resulted in top-down, technical solutions that do not effectively address the specific needs and aspirations of diverse local communities, nor honour the cultures from which they originate. Moreover, beyond the well-recognised role of the designer as a "facilitator" (supporting on-going initiatives), this research is positioned within the field of "design activism" (making things happen) as a contribution towards social innovation and sustainability (Manzini, 2014). This research aligns with Fuad-Luke's (2017) argument that design activism creates alternatives that challenge existing power structures and links marginalised communities with those in power.

The project built on the expertise of the lead researcher (Dr Francesco Mazzarella) in the fields of fashion activism, craftsmanship, design for social innovation, sustainability and place-making. The research adopted a situated and embedded approach to design as developed by Dr Mazzarella through his PhD (Mazzarella, 2018) and builds on the partnerships, learning and impacts of the projects Make Yourself… (Hirscher et al., 2019) and Making for Change: Waltham Forest (Mazzarella and Black, 2022). The research also built on the learnings from other UAL-led projects (e.g. Za'atari Action and Traces: Stories of Migration) that — respectively — research ways to improve refugees' lives through fashion activism, and explore personal and family migration stories through textile crafts (Mazzarella, 2022). The research also drew lessons of community resilience from other UAL-led projects (e.g. Cultures of Resilience, I Stood Up, Makeright and Public Collaboration Lab). According to Manzini and Thorpe (2018), such projects do not look for ready-made solutions but, by employing the act of collaborative encounters, create new opportunities for community resilience and development. This project also drew on the growing discourse on decolonising the arts (e.g. UAL's Decolonising the Arts Institute), design (e.g. the Decolonising Design group) and fashion (e.g. Research Collective for Decoloniality & Fashion). It intended to address a shortage of methodologies to support decolonised fashion design practice, through the future development of a framework for designers, researchers and organisations working in this field. Overall, the Reality, Reciprocity, Resilience project intended to advance a cultural sustainability agenda, in the context of fashion, and through an original and distinct focus on refugees living in London.

Methodology

The overarching aim of this research project was to investigate and value the lived experiences of London-based refugees in relation to the themes of cultural sustainability and community resilience, to inform the future development of a framework for decolonised fashion design practice. To meet this aim, practice research was undertaken as a sited, situated and situating investigation (Kaszynska et al., 2022) through collaboration with London-based refugees. The research participants (eight women refugees and asylum seekers) were selected from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds (from Nigeria, Congo, Syria, Eritrea and Singapore) and with an interest in enhancing their making skills and potentially applying them in the future. The activities took place at Love Welcomes, a social enterprise that supports refugee women through textile skills training and employment (Figure 1). Table 1 illustrates the methodological framework adopted for this project, summarising the multiple methods adopted to meet the research objectives and leading to specific outputs.

↑ **Figure 1. Refugee members of Love Welcomes. Photo by JC Candanedo.**

| Phases	Objectives	Methods	Outputs
Scoping	To gain a sense of the place and adapt the research process to better suit the needs and aspirations of the local community.	Design ethnographic methods (Salvador et al., 1999) were used, such as participant observations and unstructured contextual interviews with members of relevant organisations (Poplar HARCA, Credit Union, Idea Store, Aberfeldy Big Local, Oiti-Jo, E5 Bakehouse, Spotlight, Praxis, Tower Hamlets Inter-Faith Forum, TERN). Photographs were taken of the local area (Trinity Buoy Wharf, City Island, Chrisp Street Market, Making Space gallery) (Figure 2).	Detailed project plan and refined research tools.
Storytelling	To challenge how the outside world sees refugees, by giving them voice and agency to express their own identity and cultural heritage.	One-to-one interviews were conducted with each of the eight refugees (Figure 3), following a process of story-listening (Valsecchi et al., 2016) and storytelling (Tassinari et al., 2015). Using specifically designed storytelling cards (Figures 4A, B, C, D), the researcher asked semi-structured questions, allowing the participants to share their experiences in relation to their personal and local identity, heritage and material culture, community resilience, textile / fashion skills and employment. The participants were asked to bring, show, and talk about some fabrics, clothes, or accessories which they owned or have inherited and which they thought best represented their identity and culture (Figure 5). A co-creation workshop was then facilitated, using a purposely designed tool (Figure 6) to aid the participants in creating their own textile-photo-stories.	Photos of the participants were taken (Figure 7). Textile photo-stories were created by each project participant using textile craft techniques (embroidery, beadwork, painting, patchwork) to customise their own portraits printed on fabric (Figure 8) in order to express their inner world (as communicated in the texts in Appendix A). Photos were taken of the participants holding their artworks (and figuratively proud to hold their own identity) (Figure 9).
Mapping	To map out the connections between people and places, as a way to build resilience within the community.	A co-creation workshop was facilitated. The participants created bespoke circles (representing their skills and cultures) and positioned them within a map of London, showing where they currently live. Aided by a prompt tool (Figure 10), the participants thread the circles to places on the map that they currently visit (*e.g.* organisations providing services and community places where they volunteer, training / education providers, textile- and fashion-related places, personally meaningful places) or which they would like to connect to in the future to meet their aspirations.	Map of connections between people and places was created (Figure 11). The workshop contributed to sharing information between the project participants, building a support network, and discovering new places which could lead to future training or employment opportunities.
Envisioning	To aid the participating refugees in collectively framing their own vision for a sustainable future.	A co-design workshop was facilitated using a specifically designed tool (Figure 12) to aid the participants in reflecting on their personal values, and then framing their individual and collective visions for a sustainable future. The participants were then encouraged to outline some actions or steps they could take to realise their vision in the future, utilising the previously created map.	Individual postcards to the future (Appendix B) and a textile banner co-designed by the project participants (Figure 13). The participants were photographed all together holding their future vision; this evidences the sense of hope and collective agency gained by the participants towards building their own sustainable future.
Evaluating	To gather feedback on the quality and impact of the research, as well as advice on what could be improved and on ideal next steps.	An evaluation questionnaire (Appendix C) was completed by the project participants at the last workshop.	Insights on the participants (e.g. their change in skills, perspective on cultural sustainability, approach to community resilience) and identification of the research limitations and of its next steps.

↑ **Table 1. Research Design**

↑ **Figure 2. Aberfeldy Street in Poplar. Photo by JC Candanedo.**

↑ **Figure 3. Francesco and a participant in a storytelling session. Photo by JC Candanedo.**

personal & local identity
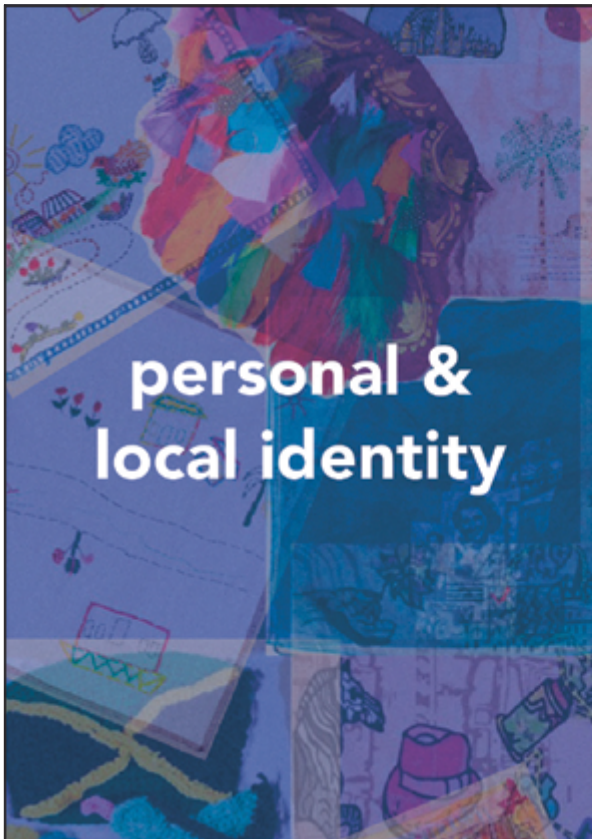
1) What's your name? How old are you? (Are you in your 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s or 60s)?
2) Which adjectives would you use to best describe yourself?
3) What are your key values? What things matter to you the most in life?
4) Where do you come from?
5) When did you leave your country? And why?
6) Where in London do you live now?
7) In the area where you live, which are the places most meaningful to you? And why?
8) Do you know any fashion and textile manufacturing businesses in your local area?
9) Where do you buy your clothes mostly? What shops do you like the most in your local area?
10) How would you describe contemporary London's fashion style? Of London's melting pot of multiple styles and cultures, what do you like the most?
11) To what extent do you keep up with fashion trends?

community & resilience

12) Did you come to London alone, or whom with?
13) Who are the most important people for you within your community? How did you meet them?
14) Do you know any other refugees near you? Would you mind talking a bit about them?
15) Do you support each other? In what ways?
16) How connected do you feel to London and the people around you?
17) What are the main support organisations in your area?
18) What type of services do you receive from them?
19) What are the main challenges you have faced in your transition from your own country to London? And what are the main challenges you face now, in your everyday life?
20) Would you mind talking about a situation in which you felt particularly welcomed and integrated within a community?
21) Based on your own experience, what are the main factors contributing to building resilience within a community?

↑ **Figures 4a and 4B: Storytelling cards.**

heritage & material culture

22) What are the most important things that you brought with you when you left your home country?

23) Do you have any textiles, garments or accessories that you brought with you from your own country and still wear proudly? What do they look like? Would you mind showing them to me, please?

24) Similarly, are there any textiles, garments or accessories which have been passed down from generation to generation within your family or community? If so, can you please describe and show those to me?

25) Are there any particular materials which are much used in traditional textiles, clothes and accessories from your own country? If so, what are they?

26) Do you know any unique textile making tools which are particular to your home country? If so, what are those?

27) Are there any particular garments which are very representative of your own cultural heritage? If so, what do they look like?

28) To what extent do the clothes you wear reflect your cultural heritage?

29) If you could design and make new fashion and textile items to represent your own personal and cultural identity, what would they look like?

30) What does 'cultural sustainability' mean to you?

31) How important is it for you to sustain your own cultural heritage and traditional fashion style?

32) Do you think this is the same across different age groups? For instance, what would your mum or your daughter think about their cultural heritage and traditional fashion style?

skills & employment

33) Have you ever studied fashion or textiles? If not, what did you study?

34) What was your job in your home country? And what do you do in London now?

35) Have you ever worked in the textile and fashion industry? If so, how long for?

36) How have you learned the skills which you use in your current or previous jobs?

37) What would your dream job be?

38) Do you know any particular textile craft techniques which are traditional to your home country? If so, what are those?

39) Do you practice any of these textile craft techniques? If so, how well?

40) Are there any particular textile craft skills which you would like to learn?

41) Are there any textile craft skills in your home country that have been lost, or you would like to protect, or bring back?

42) If you could name 3 things that keep your culture thriving and alive, what would they be?

43) Is there anything else which I didn't ask you, and you think I should have?

↑ **Figures 4c and 4d: Storytelling cards.**

↑ **Figure 5. Textiles shown in a storytelling session. Photo by JC Candanedo.**

crafting your own textile photo-story

What is the main quality you want the world to know about you?

How would you represent your **identity**?

What are your favourite **colours**?

What are your **hobbies**?

What would your **dream job** be?

Where do you feel at **'home'**?

What do the most important **objects** that you brought with you look like?

What traditional **textile craft skills** would you like to use?

What kind of **clothes** would you wear to best represent your identity?

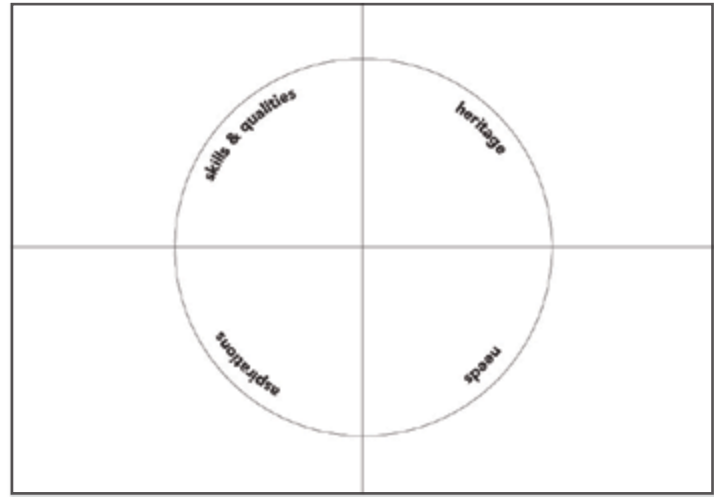↑ **Figure 6. Tool used at the textile photo-story-making workshop.**

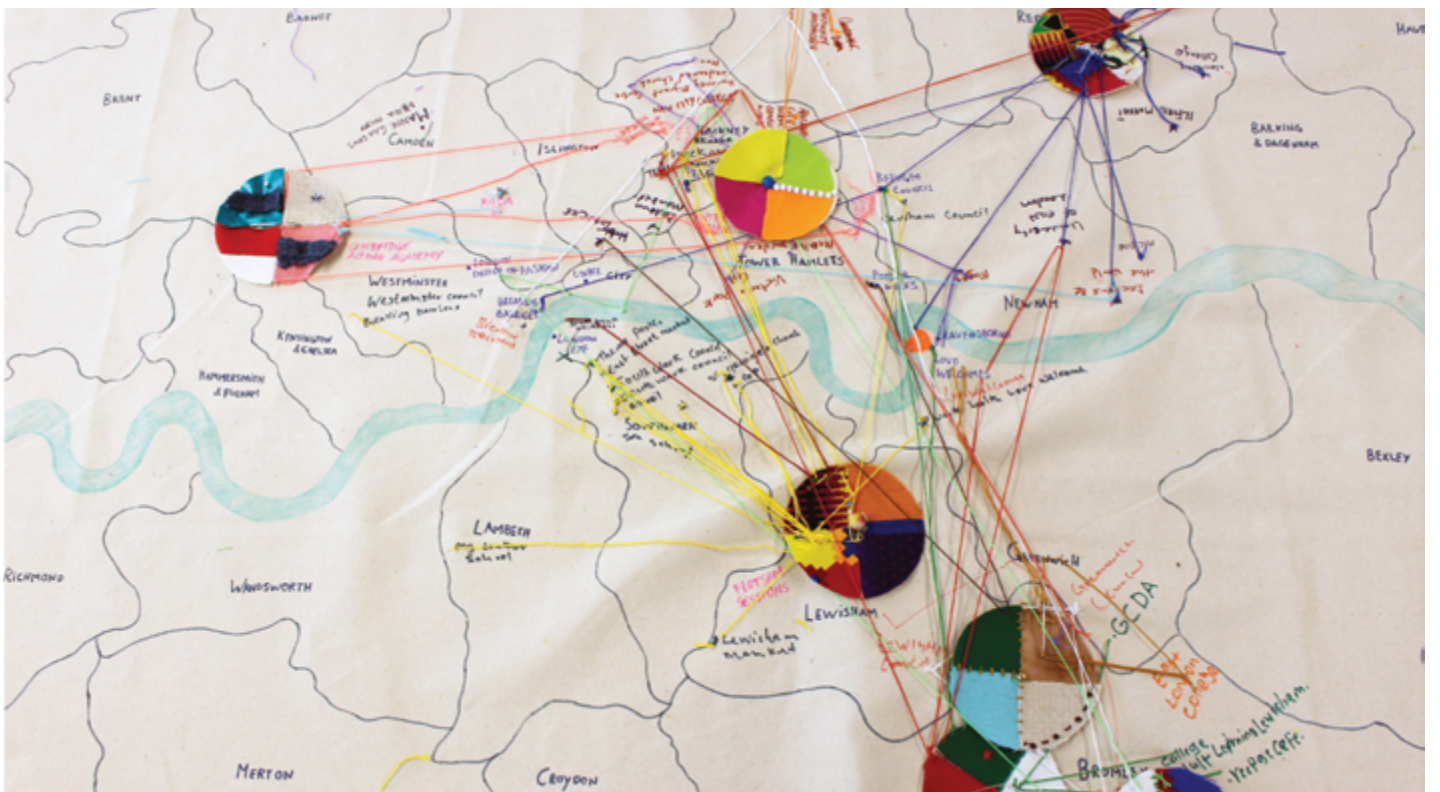↑ **Figure 7. Portraits of two project participants. Photo by JC Candanedo.**

↑ **Figure 8. Textile photo-stories. Photo by JC Candanedo.**

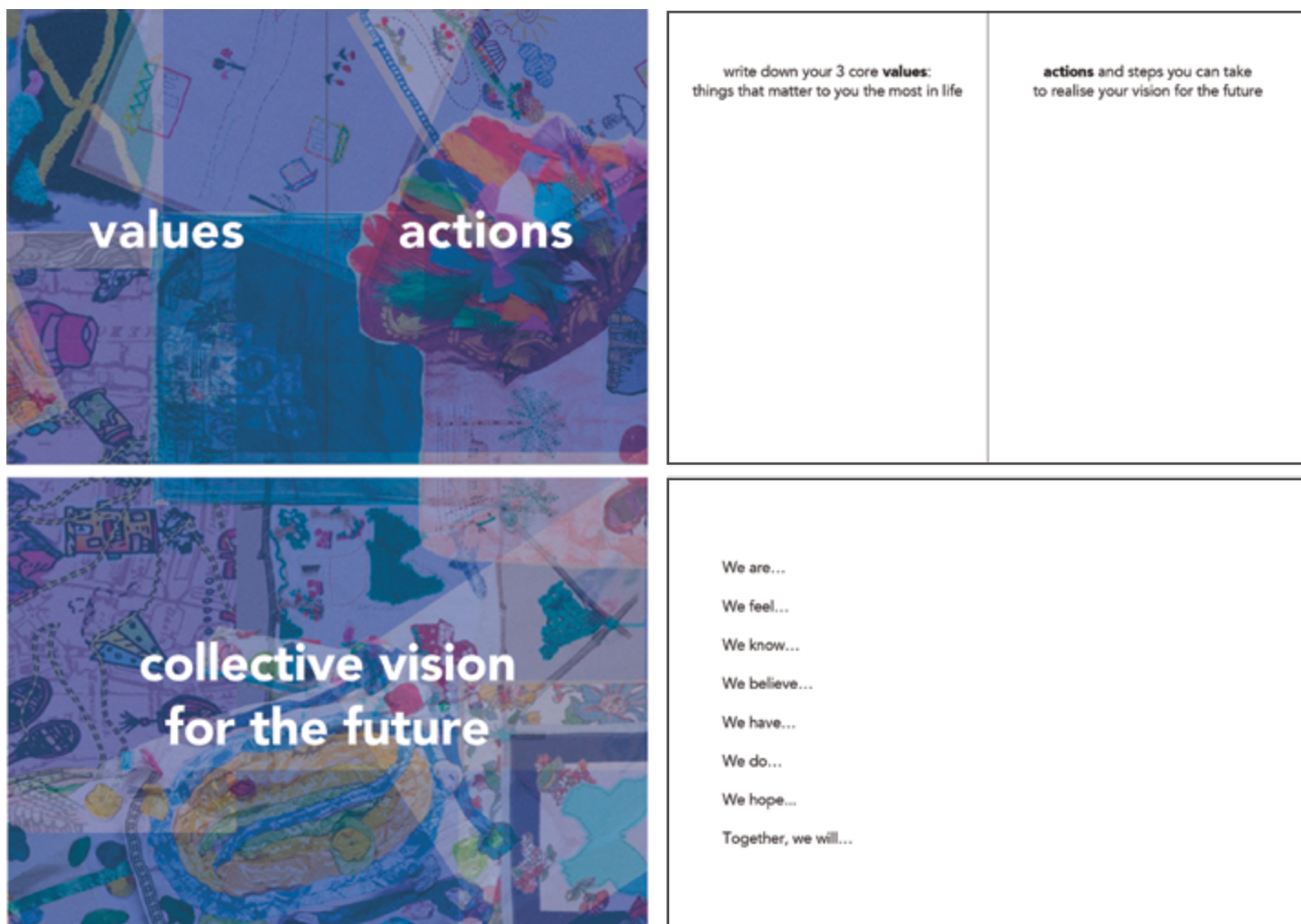↑ **Figure 9. Project participants holding their own textile photo-stories. Photos by JC Candanedo.**

↑ **Figure 10. Tools used at the mapping workshop.**

↑ **Figure 11. Map of connections between people and places. Photo by Francesco Mazzarella.**

write down your 3 core **values**:
things that matter to you the most in life

actions and steps you can take
to realise your vision for the future

We are...

We feel...

We know...

We believe...

We have...

We do...

We hope...

Together, we will...

↑ **Figure 12. Tools used at the collective future envisioning workshop.**

↑ **Figure 13. Project participants holding their collective future vision. Photo by Tashi Goldring.**

Insights and implications

Reality — eliciting the lived experiences of refugees

The ethnographic research highlighted the challenges and opportunities related to the local area (especially around Poplar). Lots of tensions and issues are experienced in relation to the current regeneration plans and strategies for the area. The research also showed that refugees are not a homogenous community, as they have diverse cultural backgrounds and life experiences, and come to London for different reasons (e.g. war, ethnic, religious or sexual violence, etc.). It also emerged that refugees do not have much visibility and are under-represented in the local service delivery.

It is evident that some refugees are willing to participate in a project like this because they would like to engage in creative activities, enhance their wellbeing, connect with others and gain some practical skills. Some refugees have great — currently untapped — textile-making skills, and there is potential to establish new routes to employment with local manufacturers, especially considering the struggles that businesses currently face in accessing a skilled workforce. Within this context, the Making for Change unit led by London College of Fashion's (LCF) Social Responsibility team could become a hub, to bridge the skills and attributes of refugees with the needs of fashion manufacturers, and establish progression routes from the training programme delivered at Poplar Works to local employment. The aim to increase employment of BAME residents evident in the strategies developed by the local authority does not consider sufficiently deeply the root causes of unemployment or the flexibility and bespoke support that refugees require. Better understanding of the barriers to employment faced by refugees is needed, as well as outline recommendations for policy change to overcome these.

In the storytelling sessions, at first some participants did not think that they had significant material possessions, but the reflective process made them aware of, and value more, what they own — items which, though small, are meaningful to them (Figure 14). For example, one participant spoke about a blanket made for her by her mother when she was one year old, which she still has and uses to cover herself when she feels homesick. Another participant talked about a dress that was made in her brother's factory and which she wears on special occasions.

← Figure 14. Project participant
wearing traditional clothes.
Photo by JC Candanedo.

Reciprocity — crafting a reciprocal process of making and learning

This project demonstrated that a neutral researcher working in such a contested field should be able to facilitate honest conversations and bridge the needs and aspirations of refugees' communities to the services delivered by support organisations. To start the process, the researcher, Francesco, showed textiles, clothes and accessories representing the key places in which he lived, places where he felt well-integrated as well as those where he felt unwelcome, as a way to build empathy and foster a reciprocal process of learning.

Francesco experienced some tensions in relation to his role and positionality in the project. He designed the workshops to match the participants' needs and aspirations rather than to deliver an *a priori* set of practical skills, such as operating a sewing machine, or to teach technical aspects of making (Figure 14). This approach was chosen purposely as part of a decolonising design process, which is about co-creation, and embeds equity and representation throughout a reciprocal practice of making and learning, rather than teaching others, based on the designer's knowledge, expertise, agenda or aesthetics.

↑ Figure 15. Francesco, designer and maker, Alisa Ruzavina, and two participants in a workshop. Photo by JC Candanedo.

Resilience — collectively framing a vision for a resilient future

The mapping and collective future envisioning activities encouraged the participants to turn their current — challenging — realities into a vision for a preferred future, and build hope (Figure 15). For instance, one participant expressed her desire to get into an acting school, whereas another shared that she will join a university in London. Such plans demonstrate that the refugees are paving their own pathways to achieve their personal goals. Project partner Poplar HARCA found it valuable that this pilot acted as a springboard for further opportunities for the participants, such as potential participation in future projects or training opportunities that take place at Making for Change or elsewhere.

↑ **Figure 16. Project participant sharing her future vision. Photo by JC Candanedo.**

Outputs, outcomes and value

Besides this report, the project contributed to the production of the
following outputs:

- **Textile photo-stories** created by each of the participating refugees (Figure 8).
Besides the artworks produced at the textile photo-story-making workshop, a
second copy of the portraits printed on fabric was given to the participants at
the end of the project, so that they could further reflect on their identity, keep
practising the explored techniques and use arts and crafts to heal their trauma.

- **A map** of connections between people and places, illustrating the potential to
build resilience within the community (Figure 11).

- **A list of organisations** relevant to refugees in order to build a support network
(Appendix D).

- **Collective future vision** co-created by the participating refugees (Figure 13).

- **Certificates of participation** were given to the participants at the end of the
project (Figure 16).

- A project **showcase** (accompanied by guided tours and a launch event) was
curated and delivered at the Making Space gallery in Poplar from 23 to 25
September 2022 and visited by 70 people (Figure 17). The showcase contributed
to enhancing the participants' pride, offering validation and fostering new
connections.

- **Two presentations** of the project, one at a panel on Pluralize Fashion as part of
The Berlin Fashion Summit, and one at the PG Research Symposium at LCF's
School of Media and Communication.

- A **blog post** on the Centre for Sustainable Fashion (CSF) website, and an **article**
published by The Future Laboratory; more publications are in the pipeline.

↑ **Figure 17. Project participant receiving her certificate. Photo by JC Candanedo.**

↑ **Figure 18. Snapshots from the project showcase. Photos by Eugenie Flochel.**

As a result of the analysis of the feedback collected through the evaluation questionnaire, all the respondents claimed that their main motivation in participating in the project was to experience something new, learn more about initiatives for refugees and asylum seekers, and meet new people. A few participants were motivated to share their story, build more positive narratives around refugees and get inspired about ways in which they could contribute to their community. All the participants noted that the project met their expectations and almost everybody rated the quality of the project as "very good". In addition, they highlighted that the project helped them to learn about cultural sustainability, gain new skills and improve their ability to communicate. The participants valued the sensitivity expressed by the research team and the safe environment that was created for the activities; they felt welcomed, safe and cared for throughout the project. Poplar HARCA acknowledged its appreciation of the researcher's efforts to establish equality in relationships with the participants.

[The researcher and his assistants] were extremely kind and warm. They
made me feel really seen, accepted and cared for. I felt nurtured under their
supervision and guidance.

Some participants recognised how the project benefited themselves, as well
as reflecting on ways in which such projects could be of benefit to others:

I think this [project] could potentially help those suffering from mental illness.
Fabrics and touch can boost memory and cognitive function or help adults
to reconnect with their childhood. This will also allow prisoners and patients
to be more vulnerable and experience catharsis and self-expression which
can lower rates of violence and self-harm.

Cultural sustainability

The project contributed to framing cultural sustainability through the lived
experiences of refugees who defined it as the ability to "pass a culture to the
next generation" and to "maintain one's identity". As stated by the participants,
education, access to information and increased representation of cultural minorities
are needed as well as policies to sustain cultural heritages. The research also
proposed a cultural approach to advancing a sustainability agenda, meaning
considering cultural heritage as a resource and asset to foster social inclusion,
contributing to local economies flourishing, and tackling environmental challenges.
Moreover, findings from the research revealed that everyday practices and work
undertaken by refugees are often ethical, sustainable and resilient 'by nature',
mostly due to an appreciation and optimisation of available resources, even if these
are limited.

One of the participants expressed that, through this project, she learnt more about
cultural sustainability and that "textiles can be a huge factor in presenting that and
increasing cultural appreciation". Another project participant stated: "this project
made me love my culture more. No matter where I go, my culture will remain with
me". A further participant said that, thanks to the project, her resilience improved,
and the workshops allowed space for her identity and cultural heritage to grow.
The project also demonstrated that some refugees are proud of their cultural
heritage and want to sustain it more than others do. Some refugees do not want
to wear traditional clothes because they associate their home country with
traumatic experiences, or they prefer wearing Western clothes so that they feel
more integrated into the communities in which they have resettled. This shows that
sustaining the past or cultural heritage when this has been traumatic is not always
appropriate or desirable. Instead, the approach to the creation of future possibilities
for healing and regeneration needs to consider and navigate the pervasive impacts
and remnants of colonialism.

Community resilience

Despite the challenges they face and the limited resources they have, all the
refugees participating in the project volunteer their time and support each other;

this is surely a lesson in community resilience to be learned from them. The research activities successfully allowed the participants to reflect and daydream, and to share knowledge as well as aspirations. One of the most important outcomes of the project was the re-establishment of a sense of connection and belonging, activated by the mapping activity. Through the conversations taking place during the workshop, the participants discovered new places and were inspired to connect to new people and organisations as a way to build resilience. One participant stated:

> [The project] helped me realise that resilience can be built when people come together to share experiences and resources that empower one another.

Importantly, the research shed a light on the resilience built by refugees and communities from the Global South as they face oppression and discrimination. However, one project participant argued:

> People from the Global South are really resilient, although […] they shouldn't have to always be resilient because they also deserve tenderness and loving care, instead of [having to experience] violence and [having to be] resilient. […] 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.

This critical perspective challenges the notion of resilience — which is a good quality to possess. However, it would be better if there was no need for resilience in this context, no external shocks to face, or if the system worked to provide the right support for refugees.

Key learning for UAL

Conducting practice research with vulnerable people offers an opportunity to experience considerations that are likely to become more and more important as the University increases its work in social purpose, as summarised in Table 2.

Themes	Learnings
Ethics	A long time is required to get the research ethics approval from large Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) such as UAL; during the waiting time, only ethnographic research could be carried out, as data cannot be directly collected from participants.
Participants' Recruitment	Participants' recruitment is a significant challenge. This is due to the fact that there are not so many refugees in London, it is difficult to find them (in part because some asylum seekers are undocumented and may use communication channels other than emails or newsletters), or they may not be interested in participating in research activities unless they receive financial incentives or learn practical craft skills. Other issues to take into consideration are: gender difference (i.e. most refugees interested in textiles and fashion are women, and some of them have cultural issues in engaging with researchers of the opposite gender), language barriers (therefore, avoiding jargon or having an interpreter would be useful), location of the activities (hence, embedding the sessions within charities or community centres which refugees already visit for work or training is beneficial).
Participants' Culture	Researchers should avoid trying to engage Muslim refugees during Ramadam, but could instead spend that period designing and testing research methods and tools.
Incentives	It is important to offer incentives to participants, e.g. reimbursing travel costs, providing refreshments, CV surgeries, gifting a certificate of participation, or showcasing their work in a public exhibition. However, considering that asylum seekers may not have a bank account, reimbursing travel expenses may be difficult; in this case, vouchers could be offered.
Project Partners	It is essential to partner with local grassroots organisations as community gatekeepers. They may be more agile in working around the bureaucratic issues that HEIs have to deal with.
Planning	Planning the time and location of the research activities is difficult due to various participants' availabilities. It is important to consider childcare in the design and delivery of workshops with women. The researcher should have everything well planned, but also be flexible and adapt plans as needed.
Reciprocity	It is important to include the research team in the making activities as a way to create a sense of equality within the project, especially considering that refugees are amongst the most interviewed and monitored populations. Moreover, critically considering the researcher's relationship with the local context, there is a need for self-reflexive methodologies as a way of addressing power imbalances, challenging privilege and prejudices, and maintaining receptivity to diverse ways of knowing and approaches to knowledge, as argued also by Öz and Timur (2022).
Empathy	Engaging vulnerable people in co-creation workshops might highlight the trajectory of trauma. In fact, asylum seekers experience more trauma than refugees who are more settled, have less fear and can be more creative. Working with vulnerable people requires researchers to develop empathy and know how best to provide support in challenging circumstances.
Legacy	It is crucial for the researcher to be sensitive in handling expectations, and to support participants beyond the project's timeline and funding, connecting them into future activities or pointing out other opportunities available in the community.

Table 2. Thematically clustered learning for practice researchers in social design.

Conclusion

It is important to acknowledge that this project was conceived as a pilot and conducted over four months only. More time would be needed to produce more substantial outcomes and to evaluate thoroughly the long-term impact such a project could have on a community.

Nevertheless, the SDI Seed Fund allowed the researcher, Francesco, to realise his initial ambition to develop new knowledge of fashion design for cultural sustainability and community resilience, elicited through the lived experiences of the refugees. Moreover, he involved UAL graduates in the research, so that they enhanced their experience in workshop facilitation, data analysis and report writing. Such skills are particularly relevant for both designer and maker, Alisa Ruzavina, and Migle as they plan to apply for a PhD. At his end, Francesco acted as a mentor for them, sharing his experience and expertise with the next generation of designers and researchers.

By initiating a reciprocal process of learning with refugees living in London, this pilot project enabled the establishment of a team, the testing of data collection methods and partnership-building with local organisations, to create a bond with the participants and establish meaningful connections with the local community, as well as contributing to advancing UAL's social design and place-making agendas.

The experience gained from the pilot is informing AHRC-funded project Decolonising Fashion and Textiles: Design for Cultural Sustainability with Refugee Communities, to be delivered by the researcher from September 2022 to August 2024. Building on the learnings from this pilot, this more extensive project will continue to elicit the stories of refugees. It will also expand on co-designing fashion and textile artefacts grounded in the cultural heritage of the participants and outline a social enterprise model to enhance the resilience of the refugees. The design of the project will also include a work package on advocacy, aimed at outlining recommendations for policy change, particularly considering the current refugee crisis and in the face of a collective uncertain future.

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Author biographies

Dr Francesco Mazzarella is Senior Lecturer in Fashion and Design for Social Change at London College of Fashion, UAL. His work at Centre for Sustainable Fashion explores ways in which design activism can create counter-narratives towards sustainability in fashion. Previously, Francesco was AHRC Design Leadership Fellow Research Associate at Imagination, Lancaster University, where he worked to support design research for change. Francesco was awarded a PhD from Loughborough Design School, funded by the AHRC Design Star Centre for Doctoral Training; his doctoral research project explored how service design can be used to activate textile artisan communities to transition towards a sustainable future.

Migle Radziunaite is a London College of Fashion MA Fashion Futures graduate. Working with creative communities in London, Migle focuses her research on cultural sustainability and wellbeing within fashion. As an example, for her Final Major Project, through the explorations of her own identity and heritage, Migle conducted ethnographic research, which involved four generations of her family. By looking at memory-rich belongings with the participants, she uncovered meaningful yet forgotten stories and emotionally significant handmade items. She then created artefacts that, when worn, promote conversations on cultural sustainability and highlight the importance of craft and the need to reframe our relationships with material belongings.

Appendix A: Artists' statements in relation to their textile photo-stories

Smiles and Pain

The main premise of my artwork is to invite the viewer to question and unpack what it means to judge asylum seekers and refugees. Many of us are born into dangerous places, and living a fruitful and fulfilling life can be impossible due to the amount of violence, instability and danger we go through. Though many of us might be wearing a smile and are resilient, behind these smiles and resilience lies inexplicable amounts of trauma, pain, and thoughts of death. We deserve to be treated with tenderness and gentleness, just like everyone else, and that is often forgotten by people who do not have to go through life altering violence. Amidst rising inequality and insidious asylum policies, I hope to share an insight of what it means to be truly vulnerable and human, and to see the helpless child longing for love and safety, in everyone alike.

Karuna

Resilient
Like a Palm Tree

I am from West Africa, Nigeria. I am a mother of two African British children, and I am so proud of my culture and heritage. I love our traditional clothing called Akra. One of our traditional clothing that I like is called 'bubu gown'; you can wear it in any occasion, like at weddings, to go to church, etc. We also have traditional beads like cowrie shells and coral beads which we use for our traditional marriage. Cowrie shells are used for sacrifice by the idol worshippers. The beads are kept really safe because they are very precious and expensive to buy. In this photo, I wrapped around my head a traditional African printed fabric, which I used to cover myself when feeling cold at night when I first arrived in London. I have then customised this portrait by using coral beads to make myself a traditional necklace and to represent a palm tree which, in my culture, is a symbol of resilience. I have also embellished my portrait with sequins as a wish for a brighter future, grounded in my cultural roots, and made of good health and a long life.

Joy

Wearing my Culture

This portrait is a full expression of myself, being happy wearing my culture. I have used colourful beads – typical of my home country – to add a necklace and a watch to my portrait. I also stitched a crown on top of my head to represent that I feel like a queen, while the beaded hearts represent my love for myself. Overall, I want this portrait to communicate the colours of my country, that make me feel good.

Esther

Respect for Every Culture's Beauty

I have used different fabrics, different ornaments, and hand embroidery in my portrait. Most of the decorations and colours that I have used represent the culture, belief, and system where I come from. Our culture and belief systems go hand in hand with our dress code; all colours have their own contribution to our cultural system. For example, we use bright colours to express happiness and dark ones for sadness. Therefore, in my portrait I have chosen bright colours such as white and I have used a golden thread for a traditional embroidery to embellish the t-shirt I was wearing in this photo. The jewellery I have added to my forehead is what I use in my parents' country. There, it is common to use different types of jewellery for different events. These clothes and decorations help us to be more visible and enhance the beauty we had. Finally, every culture has its own beauty and I feel that everyone should love and respect each other.

Helen

Shining Like a Rose

The beautiful piece of fabric that
I am holding in this photo means
a lot to me as it reminds me of
where I am from, and it's the only
item that I have from my sister and
mum back home who love me.
I customised this printed portrait of
mine with glitter pieces and small
pink balls to make it look fun and
more beautiful even if inside me
I was completely sad and broken
because my dad passed away.
But I believe that he's proud of me
and I will shine like a rose.

Benita

Proud of my Beautiful Culture

The textiles I am wearing in this portrait are from my home country, Nigeria and are called Adire. This is my traditional dress; it shows my culture and traditions. I have customised this portrait by using beads which are typical of my home country, and mixing light with dark colours, to represent that life is a journey, made of positive and negative moments. I have added pink flowers to it as a way to bring beauty to life. I am proud to be part of this project because it gives me an opportunity to show how beautiful my culture is.

Kemi

Belonging

Having left Russia 10 years ago, I feel that my identity has grown larger than what my homeland can hold. Hence, I've found belonging in the fragments, the little dots that constitute the totality of me, in places all around the world. UK, Panama, India, Mexico, and Russia – all of these have been my home. But most importantly I know that I am in every wave of the rolling sea, the breeze knows me personally, the leaves whisper their secrets to me daily and I am deeply rooted in nature, no matter what culture I am submerged in. I belong to this Earth. For this portrait, I've recycled hand-dyed and screen-printed fabrics scraps from my previous projects. The flowers share my inner resonance with nature. The planetary globe as the background represents the numerous cultures that have adopted me and shared their wisdom with me, and the dotted outline around my silhouette represents my ever-expanding, absorbing, and saturating identity.

Alisa

Life is a Journey

Where am I from? That's a question I can never answer clearly, and that's why my portrait is faded by a transparent fabric which represents the layering of cultures that influenced my identity. A better question for me to answer is: where do I feel at home? That's for sure when I am connected to my beloved Mediterranean Sea. For this, underneath my black leather jacket, I painted my t-shirt in light blue, representing the sea that fills my heart. Then, I painted all the space around me using the warm colours of the magical sunset of my hometown, like an explosion of my inner world and energy. I then used fabric straps to draw the journey of my life. Starting from Sicily (my birth land) a purple velvet strip marks my move to the elegant city of Turin. From there, I embarked on a series of trips to seek better education and employment opportunities. An orange line connects me to my studies in the Netherlands, followed by a naturally dyed strip that brings me to the green landscapes of Brazil, and a woolly knitted fabric marks my move to the cold weathers of Budapest, while a colourful line makes me land in the wonderful city Cape Town. Finally, a red thread marks my move to the UK, where I have settled and feel at home. Life is a journey, a wonder, a constant process of change.

Francesco

Life is a Journey

Where am I from? That's a question I can never answer clearly, and that's why my portrait is faded by a transparent fabric which represents the layering of cultures that influenced my identity. A better question for me to answer is: where do I feel at home? That's for sure when I am connected to my beloved Mediterranean Sea. For this, underneath my black leather jacket, I painted my t-shirt in light blue, representing the sea that fills my heart. Then, I painted all the space around me using the warm colours of the magical sunset of my hometown, like an explosion of my inner world and energy. I then used fabric straps to draw the journey of my life. Starting from Sicily (my birth land) a purple velvet strip marks my move to the elegant city of Turin. From there, I embarked on a series of trips to seek better education and employment opportunities. An orange line connects me to my studies in the Netherlands, followed by a naturally dyed strip that brings me to the green landscapes of Brazil, and a woolly knitted fabric marks my move to the cold weathers of Budapest, while a colourful line makes me land in the wonderful city Cape Town. Finally, a red thread marks my move to the UK, where I have settled and feel at home. Life is a journey, a wonder, a constant process of change.

Francesco

Appendix B: Postcards to the future

We are diverse, but like a family.
We feel positive.
We believe in love.
We have honesty.
We do arts and crafts.
Together, we will achieve equality.

Helen

We are humans, together in one family.
We feel the same pain.
We know we are also adding value to society.
We believe we are creative.
We have support and love for each other.
We do raise one voice for freedom and justice.
We hope things will get better in the future.
Together, we will stand and rule the world.

Esther

We are the united minorities.
We feel for one another through empathy.
We know that we have the power over the systems
if we fight together.
We believe in empowering the marginalised.
We need to dismantle oppression and power structures.
We do love our minority siblings.
We hope to create a more equal world.
Together, we will protect the weak.

Karuna

We are strong and intelligent people.
We feel happy and welcomed.
We know that we can trust ourselves and each other.
We believe in ourselves.
We have purpose and confidence.
We do what is needed for a better future.
We hope for the fulfilment of our dreams and wishes.
Together, we go and create this!

Nahed

We are beautiful.
We feel safe.
We know how to survive.
We believe we can make it.
We have so much love to give.
We do everything to improve the community.
We hope that others will follow our example.
Together, we will make this a better world.

Joy

We are not pest, we are strong.
We feel welcomed and loved.
We know there is a safe place for us.
We believe in hope and unity.
We have to work together to build a great community.
We do things with our hands.
We hope for a better future.
Together, we will be great.

Kemi

We are Christ-like.
We feel the presence of the Holy Spirit.
We know the Word.
We believe in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.
We have the power of the Holy Ghost.
We do exceedingly great through Christ who strengthens us.
Together, we will realise that paradise is heaven is our ultimate goal.

Adeola

We are passionate rememberers of the way of kinship.
We feel abundant. We feel supported. We feel rested.
We know that we inherently belong.
We believe that freedom and love are our birthright.
We have all the power that we need.
We do the best that we can at each moment.
We hope that a more beautiful world is possible.
Together, we will create this new reality in which all creatures, human and non-human, prosper.

Alisa

We are citizens of the world.
We feel resilient.
We know that the power is in our hands.
We believe in equity and sustainability.
We have the resources to craft a better world.
We do collective actions of making.
We hope that our creativity will help us.
Together, we will thrive!

Francesco

Appendix C: Evaluation questionnaire

We would like to hear about your experience in the Reality, Reciprocity, Resilience project. This questionnaire is anonymous, so please be honest, and do not be afraid to express any positive or negative feelings. Your opinion is important to us and will help us to improve our projects going forward.

1) Please rate the quality of the project

Very Good ☐   Good ☐   Average ☐   Poor ☐   Very Poor ☐

2) Did you enjoy the overall project?

Strongly Agree ☐   Agree ☐   Neither Agree/Disagree ☐   Disagree ☐   Strongly Disagree ☐

3) Have you met new people through your participation in the project?

Yes ☐   No ☐   Not sure ☐

4) Have you discovered new places or organisations through your participation in the project?

Yes ☐   No ☐   Not sure ☐

5) What were your main motivations for participating in this project? (Please select all that apply)

a) To experience something new ☐

b) I was already interested in fashion and sustainability and wanted to learn more about it ☐

c) I wanted to share my story and contribute to building new, positive narratives around refugees ☐

d) I already have some experience in this area and thought I could help ☐

e) To get inspired on ways I could contribute something to my community ☐

f) To learn more about initiatives for refugees and asylum seekers ☐

g) To meet new people ☐

Any other reasons:

……………………………………………………………………………..……………

6) Overall, did the project meet your expectations? (Please tick one only)

Strongly Agree ☐   Agree ☐   Neither Agree/Disagree ☐   Disagree ☐   Strongly Disagree ☐

7) As a direct result of participation in the project, do you:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Feel your voice and story are heard	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Value your identity and heritage more	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Feel more inspired to design and make	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Feel more relaxed and less stressed	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Feel more optimistic about the future	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Feel more connected to your community	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Feel that you know your place and community better	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

8) Based on your experience of the project, how would you rate the following?
(Please give one rating for each item)

	Very good	Good	Neither good nor poor	Poor	Very poor
The organisation, communication and administration of the project	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The timeframe of the project	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The location of the activities	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The welcome you received	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The feeling of being safe and cared for	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The opportunity to learn new things	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

9) Please note any specific skills you feel you have learnt through the project (e.g. communication, embroidery, hand-painting, collage, visual mapping, etc.):

……………………………………………………………………………..………………

……………………………………………………………………………..………………

10) Is there anything else you would like to learn in the future?

………………………………………………………………………………..………………

………………………………………………………………………………..………………

11) To what extent did the project give you an opportunity to value your identity and cultural heritage more, and rethink your engagement with fashion and textiles?

………………………………………………………………………………..………………

………………………………………………………………………………..………………

12) In what ways did the project change / not change your perspective on cultural sustainability and community resilience?

………………………………………………………………………………..………………

………………………………………………………………………………..………………

13) What did you like the most about the project?

………………………………………………………………………………..………………

………………………………………………………………………………..………………

14) What elements of the project do you think could be improved?

………………………………………………………………………………..………………

………………………………………………………………………………..………………

15) From your point of view, what would the ideal next steps of the project be?

………………………………………………………………………………..………………

………………………………………………………………………………..………………

Appendix D: List of relevant organisations

Charities & Not-for-profit	Websites
Breaking Barriers	www.breaking-barriers.co.uk
Community Apothecary	www.hedgeherbs.org.uk/community-apothecary-activity-calendar
Creating Ground	www.theground.org.uk
Doctors of the World	www.doctorsoftheworld.org.uk
East London Foundation Trust	www.elft.nhs.uk
GCDA	www.gcda.coop
Hackney Migrant Centre	www.hackneymigrantcentre.org.uk
Hibiscus	www.hibiscusinitiatives.org.uk/
Jesuit Refugee Services	www.jrsuk.net
Manor Gardens' Dhalia project	www.manorgardenscentre.org/dahlia-project
Maternity Mates	www.whfs.org.uk
Micro Rainbow	www.microrainbow.org
Oitij-jo	www.oitijjo.org
Poplar Union	www.poplarunion.com
Praxis	www.praxis.org.uk
Refugee Café	www.refugeecafe.org.uk
Refugee Community Kitchen	www.refugeecommunitykitchen.org
Refugee Council	www.refugeecouncil.org.uk
Salvation Army	www.salvationarmy.org.uk
Stories and Supper	www.storiesandsupper.co.uk
The Entrepreneurial Refugee Network	www.wearetern.org
Toynbee Hall	www.toynbeehall.org.uk
UNHCR	www.unhcr.org/uk
United Together	www.together-uk.org
West London Welcome	www.westlondonwelcome.com
Women for Refugee Women	www.womenforwomen.org

Local Councils	
Bromley Council	www.bromley.gov.uk
Hackney Council	www.hackney.gov.uk
Lewisham Council	www.lewisham.gov.uk
Newham Council	www.newham.gov.uk
Redbridge Council	www.redbridge.gov.uk
Southwark Council	www.southwark.gov.uk
Waltham Forest Council	www.walthamforest.gov.uk
Westminster Council	www.westminster.gov.uk

Education	
New City College	www.ncclondon.ac.uk
Grove Park Adult Education Centre	www.lewisham.gov.uk/organizations/grove-park-adult-education-centre
London College of Fashion, UAL	www.arts.ac.uk/colleges/london-college-of-fashion
Ravensbourne	www.ravensbourne.ac.uk
University of East London	www.uel.ac.uk
Businesses	

Businesses	Websites
Arbeit Studios Leyton Green	www.arbeit.org.uk
E5 Poplar Bakehouse	www.e5bakehouse.com/poplar-bakehouse
Forest Recycling Project	www.frpuk.org
Luminary Bakery	www.luminarybakery.com
Poplar HARCA	www.poplarharca.co.uk
Poplar Works	www.poplarworks.co.uk
The Reclaimery	www.thereclaimery.com
The Trampery	https://thetrampery.com/
Trashion Factory	www.trashionfactory.com

Textiles & Fashion

Chrisp Street Market	www.chrispstreet.org.uk
Dalston Market	www.hackney.gov.uk/ridley-road-market
East Street Market	https://www.southwark.gov.uk/business/markets-and-street-trading/
Give Your Best	www.giveyourbest.uk
Green Street	https://www.newham.gov.uk/community-parks-leisure/newham-markets/3
Hackney Shopping Centre	www.hackney.gov.uk
Ilford Market	https://engagement.redbridge.gov.uk/civic-pride/ilford-town-market/
Lewisham Market	www.lewisham.gov.uk/inmyarea/markets/street-markets/lewisham-market
Love Welcomes	www.lovewelcomes.org
Stitches in Time	www.stitchesintime.org.uk
Vicarage Field Shopping Centre	www.newvicaragefield.co.uk

Art, Music & Theatre

Bow Arts	www.bowarts.org
Bromley By Bow	www.bbbc.org.uk
Counterpoint Arts	www.counterpointsarts.org.uk
Flotsam Sessions	www.flotsamsessions.co.uk
Good Chance Theatre	www.goodchance.org.uk
Legal Aliens	www.legalalienstheatre.com
Making Space gallery	www.makingspace.co.uk
Rosetta Arts	www.rosettaarts.org
Spotlight	www.spotlight.com

Religious Places

East London Mosque	www.eastlondonmosque.org.uk
Fern Street Family Centre	www.fernstreet.org.uk
Redeemed Church	www.rccguk.church
Shoreditch Tabernacle Church	www.tabcentre.com

Public Places

Columbia Road Flower Market	www.columbiaroad.info
Hackney City Farm	www.hackneycityfarm.co.uk
London Eye	www.londoneye.com