

# Textile Autobiographies: Crafting shifting identities with refugee communities

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With the rising mass displacement of people, addressing the needs and aspirations of refugee communities and honouring their diverse cultures is urgently needed. Historically, the textile heritage of minorities has often been subjected to cultural appropriation practices or undervalued and ‘othered’ as ‘non-fashion’. Designers are often ‘parachuted’ into marginalised or disadvantaged communities premised on bringing their own knowledge and expertise to solve other people’s problems. However, there is growing recognition of the need to ‘decolonise’ such dominant design approaches. The paper discusses a participatory action research project engaging London-based refugees and asylum seekers with the aim to understand what cultural sustainability and community resilience mean in this context. The project provides a safe space for participants to reflect on their shifting identity and grow self-confidence while rebuilding their lives in a new place as the societal and legal upheaval in their life settles. Through a series of storytelling sessions and textile-based co-creation workshops, the project led to understand the reality of refugees, map ways to build resilience within the local community, and collectively frame sustainable future visions. The paper highlights the research’s contribution to shifting narratives around refugees, amplifying the participants’ voice and agency, re-examining research methods, and foregrounding a more equitable, diverse, inclusive, and sustainable fashion system. The paper outlines the need for further research into ethics of care, effective impact evaluation methods, ways to infrastructure legacies within communities, and design approaches fostering regeneration of cultures and respectful representation of shifting identities, especially considering the on-going refugee crisis.

***Keywords: decolonising design; fashion and textiles; cultural sustainability; refugee communities***

## 1 Introduction

The mass displacement of people is radically challenging our current way of living, and shaping an uncertain future. A harrowing 89.3 million people worldwide have been forcibly displaced at the end of 2021 (UNHCR, 2022) due to global and local political, economic, and environmental issues.

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Furthermore, the UK national policies on immigration have created a ‘hostile environment’ for refugees, limiting their integration and actively enforcing exclusion of communities and the de-skilling of asylum seekers whilst they wait for the refugee status to be granted (Griffiths & Yeo, 2021). Thus, there is a need to re-address the needs and aspirations of diaspora communities, and find ways to respectfully acknowledge and engage with their diverse cultures, foster connections, and shift prejudice and negative perceptions of refugees, including the stigma associated with this label (Wilson, 2011).

By adopting a holistic approach to sustainability, the research presented in this paper focused on artisanal practices carried out by participants who, despite their transiency as ‘refugees’, retain their original cultures, customs, faiths, and invaluable craft skills, instead of their material possessions (Storey, 2020). The research intended to avoid the current situation where mainly Western designers are ‘parachuted’ into marginalised or disadvantaged communities with the assumption that their own knowledge or expertise can be used to solve other people’s problems (Willis & Elbana, 2017). Critical design scholars are also calling for an urgent need to design for the ‘pluriverse’ (Escobar, 2018), considering diverse and interconnected worldviews as well as collaborative and place-based approaches to generate knowledge ‘with’ rather than ‘about’ (Schultz *et al.*, 2018), and contribute to ‘decolonising’ dominant design practices (Mignolo, 2018; Tunstall 2023). This means challenging colonial systems of oppression and exploitation, empowering a multiplicity of voices and agencies, and leveraging the values of equality, diversity, inclusion, and sustainability of cultures. This research provides a unique opportunity for design interactions and collaborations where diverse communities can develop new identities as they rebuild their lives in a new place.

This paper discusses the findings from a four-month pilot and from the first year of an on-going participatory action research project engaging refugees and asylum-seekers with the long-term aim to sustain or regenerate diverse cultural heritages, foster social inclusion, make local economies flourish, and enhance environmental stewardship, through fashion and textile practices.

## **2 Literature Review**

The mainstream system of fashion and textiles 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 slow paced and new research is urgently needed 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 as an essential component of a sustainability agenda (Walker *et al.*, 2018; Kozlowski *et al.*, 2019). Cultural sustainability can be defined as tolerant systems that recognise and cultivate diversity of cultural heritage, beliefs, practices, and histories in connection with places, resources, and ancestral lands (Williams *et al.*, 2022).

Historically, the textile heritage of marginalised groups has often been subjected to cultural appropriation practices by fashion brands, which use traditional designs from other countries without referencing or compensating the indigenous communities which they belong to (Young, 2008). The traditions of the ‘other’ have been defined by Niessen (2020) as the ‘sacrifice zone’ of fashion, which has often been obscured or undervalued as ‘non-fashion’, while being systematically confined within the dictations of dominant culture and ‘taste’ (Bourdieu, 1984). In this research context, we define

fashion not through the Western lens of the clothing industry that dominates mainstream narratives, but referring to the social and cultural practices and related material objects created in the peripherals where diverse multi-ethnic communities flourish. It is here that we find the most apt definitions or tensions of cultural sustainability in a decolonising or decentring sense. This first begins by unlearning what has been internalised about progress and modernity (Shultz *et al.*, 2018; Van Amstel, 2023). Not only “*we acquire core narratives from our culture, parents and religions*” (Wilson 2011) but globally “*things from the metropolis*” are enthusiastically welcomed, underlining the assimilated “*coloniality of making*” (Van Amstel, 2023). However, reframing our own practice as we engage with “*strange encounters*” with others and ourselves (Ahmed, 2020), changing the stories we tell ourselves, and creating spaces where diasporic communities can reflect on their cultures while resettled in the West can bring about psychological change that leads to situating the self in empowering narratives (Blomfield & Lenette, 2018).

The voice of refugees is missing in mainstream narratives and cultural production, yet ‘ethnoscapes’ (Appadurai, 1990) – meaning global cultural flows of people who migrate across cultures and borders – provide new opportunities for cultural approaches to sustainability, and give rise to positive empowering co-action spaces (Mirza, 2020). Working with fashion as a means to create cross-cultural engagement and community development allows designers to navigate what Murphy and Chatzipanagiotidou (2020, p.10) describe as the “*fraught space of possibility and hopefulness*”. Moreover, engaging with cultural ‘routes’ and not ‘roots’ (Hall, 1997) makes way for the emergence of new identities of people who adopt and retain certain aspects of their culture whilst leaving other aspects behind.

Design, as a signifying practice, has the power and a set of critical tools to shift perceptions and activate social change (Santamaria, 2023). Design and craft making also have the material power to challenge traditional arrangements of agency and domination, and foster empowerment (Mirza, 2020; von Busch, 2022). The research presented in this paper is positioned within the field of ‘design activism’ (Fuad-Luke, 2017) which creates alternatives that challenge existing power structures and links marginalised communities with those in power, contributing to social justice (Constanza-Chock, 2020). Building on Farahani’s (2021) discussion of the concepts of hospitality and hostility in the context of the entangled and intertwined global colonial relations that we are part of when working on craft and design projects with vulnerable communities, we need to move beyond the language of ‘help’ and, as design activists, create the conditions for the empowerment of refugees. Furthermore, the positive types of power set out in Miller and VeneKlasen’s (2006) social sciences framework help to navigate power relations in design terms (Mirza, 2020), considering power ‘with’ people (design as collective strength), power ‘to’ (design capability to shape own life and make a difference) and power ‘within’ (using design to build one’s sense of self-worth).

The project presented here draws on and contributes to the growing discourse on decolonising design (Schultz *et al.*, 2018) and fashion (De Greef, 2020), and it intends to address a shortage of methodologies to support decolonised fashion and textile design practice. It also contributes to understanding power relations in collaborative making spaces (Mirza, 2020), through the future development of a framework for designers, researchers, and organisations working with vulnerable communities. Overall, the project aims to understand the concepts of cultural sustainability and

community resilience in the context of fashion and textiles, and through an original and distinct focus on the shifting identities of refugee communities based in London.

### 3 Methodology

This paper draws on a series of workshops conducted as part of participatory action research, consisting of a pilot and the first year of an on-going two-year project, as illustrated in Figure 1.

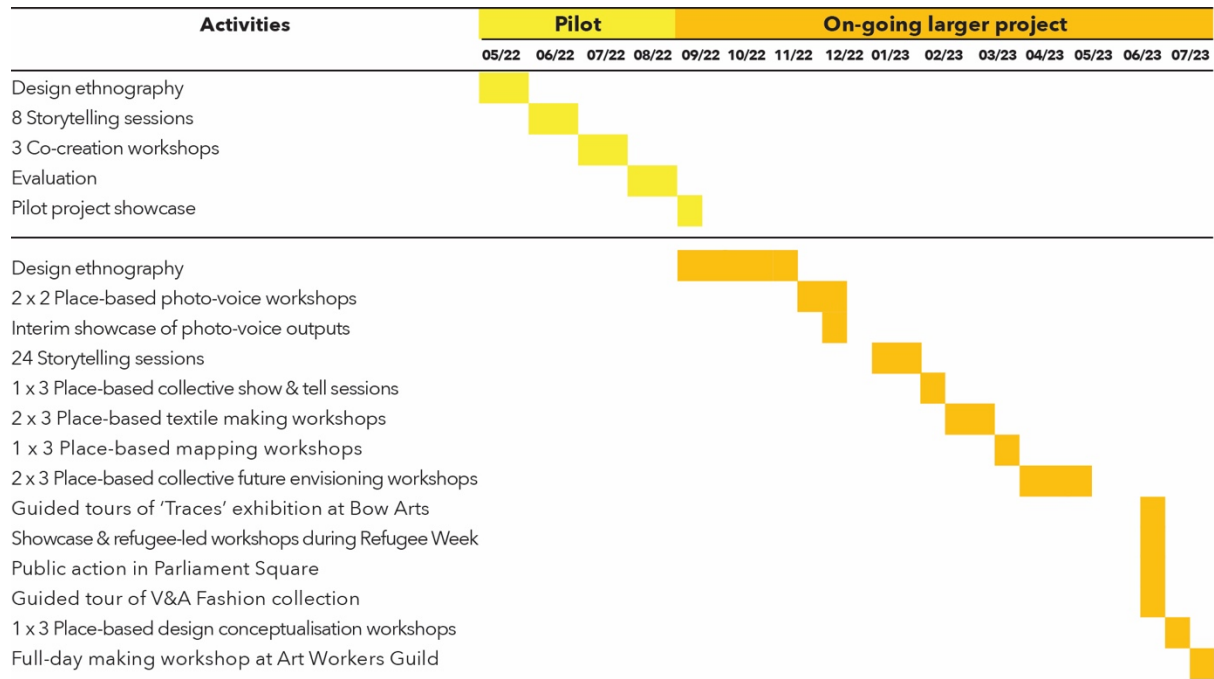


Figure 1. Project timeline.

The research involved participants who have either refugee or asylum-seeking status, to explore cultural, social, economic, and environmental issues in the specific context of East London. This is an area which has traditionally been the cradle of textile and fashion manufacturing and houses diverse migrant communities. Qualitative data was collected to inform the development of fashion activism interventions addressing locally experienced issues and contributing to building new identities (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2003). Over forty participants of different genders have engaged thus far, representing varying levels of education, occupation, and diverse cultural backgrounds (from Cameroon, China, El Salvador, Eritrea, India, Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sudan, and Syria, among others). They fled their home countries for different reasons (war, ethnic, religious, political, gender or sexual violence, etc.). Participants were interested in enhancing their design and making skills, and potentially applying them in the future to co-create fashion and textile artefacts that embody their shifting identity and cultural heritage. The on-going project activities are delivered in community centres that offer skills training and potential links to employment with diverse participant groups in three boroughs across East London.

The research team engaged in a reflexive process grounded in deep-listening (Akama & Prendiville, 2013), adopted an embedded and situated approach to designing (Mazzarella *et al.*, 2021) and shaped the project together with the participants.

Following desk research, ethnographic research methods (Salvador *et al.*, 1999) – such as participant observations and unstructured contextual interviews with members of the local community and relevant organisations – were used to get a sense of the place, and understand the needs and aspirations of the local community. The project team also facilitated ‘photovoice’ workshops, adopting a participatory method generally used in ethnographic research (Wang & Burris, 1997), where the participants engaged in street photography to help shift power dynamics within the research process and bring focus to the participants’ perspectives. The participants took photographs and showcased their own views of the world, their cultural heritage, everyday life, and environment – old and new – and produced artistic outputs (*i.e.* individual and collective collages) as a way to express themselves (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Collage created by one participant in the photovoice workshops. Photo by Francesco Mazzarella.

Following a process of story-listening (Valsecchi *et al.*, 2016) and story-telling (Tassinari *et al.*, 2015), the researchers conducted one-to-one interviews with thirty-two project participants. Using specifically designed storytelling cards, the researchers asked semi-structured questions so the participants could share their experiences in relation to their personal and local identity, heritage and material culture, community resilience, textile / fashion skills and employment. The questions were open-ended and invited the participants to speak on their own terms and share their stories. In the storytelling sessions, the participants were invited to bring, show, and talk about fabrics, clothes, or accessories which they owned, had inherited and/or which they thought best represented their




cultural heritage, story of migration, and community life (Figure 3). The participants were photographed wearing or holding their textiles; the portraits were then printed on fabric.



*Figure 3. Culturally diverse and meaningful textiles, clothes and accessories shown in a storytelling session. Photo by JC Candanedo.*

The researchers were also facilitators and participants in the co-creation workshops and actively engaged in a reciprocal process of making and learning rather than studying the participants as subjects. Textile making workshops were delivered to facilitate the participants in customising their portraits using textile craft techniques (*e.g.* painting, beadwork, embroidery, patchwork, etc.), and reflecting on their identity, aided by a purposely designed tool (Figure 4).



**crafting your own  
textile photo-story**

We would like you to think about the design of your 'textile photo-story', starting with a reflection about your **personal identity** and your **textile identity** by answering the questions below.

In the first instance, you can write keywords or draw images that come to your mind and the project team will discuss this with you individually. You do not need to answer every question.

Your responses will provide starting points for colours, materials, symbols, and motifs that begin to form a visual language, which helps to best represent your identity and culture.

Once you have finished your artwork, you will be invited to show and talk about it to the group, if you are happy to do this.

**personal identity**

Choose up to five **words** to describe yourself.

What image(s) or **symbol(s)** have a special meaning for you, and why?

What **colours** have a special meaning for you and why?

Where do you feel **'at home'**? How would you represent this?

What does **'tradition'** mean to you? What might it look like?

What word(s), images or colours would you use to represent your **future** hopes?

**textile identity**

What **materials** would you use to represent your culture?

What **embellishments** (e.g. sequins, beads, etc.) have a special meaning for you?

What textile **craft techniques** (e.g. embroidery, crochet, etc.) would you like to use?

Looking at your **portrait**, which parts / features of this are important to you, and why?

How might you use the **space** around your portrait to express yourself?

What **message** would you like to communicate to the world through this artwork?

Figure 4. Tool used at the textile making workshops.

These portraits – by way of being exhibited to the public as condensed ‘textile autobiographies’ – provide an opportunity for the participants to share their often-ignored stories, and express a bit of their inner world, their identity and cultural heritage. The activity was designed to challenge the prevailing negative narratives around refugees and perceptions of their identity. Finally, the participants – when photographed holding their artworks – seemed figuratively proud to hold in their hands the identity that they had chosen and created for themselves (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Some of the project participants holding their own textile autobiographies. Photos by JC Candanedo.

Mapping workshops were facilitated to aid the participants in making connections between people and relevant places as a way to build resilience within the local community. The participants created bespoke circles and positioned these within a textile map of London. Aided by a prompt tool (Figure 6), the participants threaded the circles to places on the map that they often visit (e.g., organisations providing services and community places where they volunteer, training / education providers, textile and fashion related places, and personally meaningful places) and those which they aspire to connect to in the future.



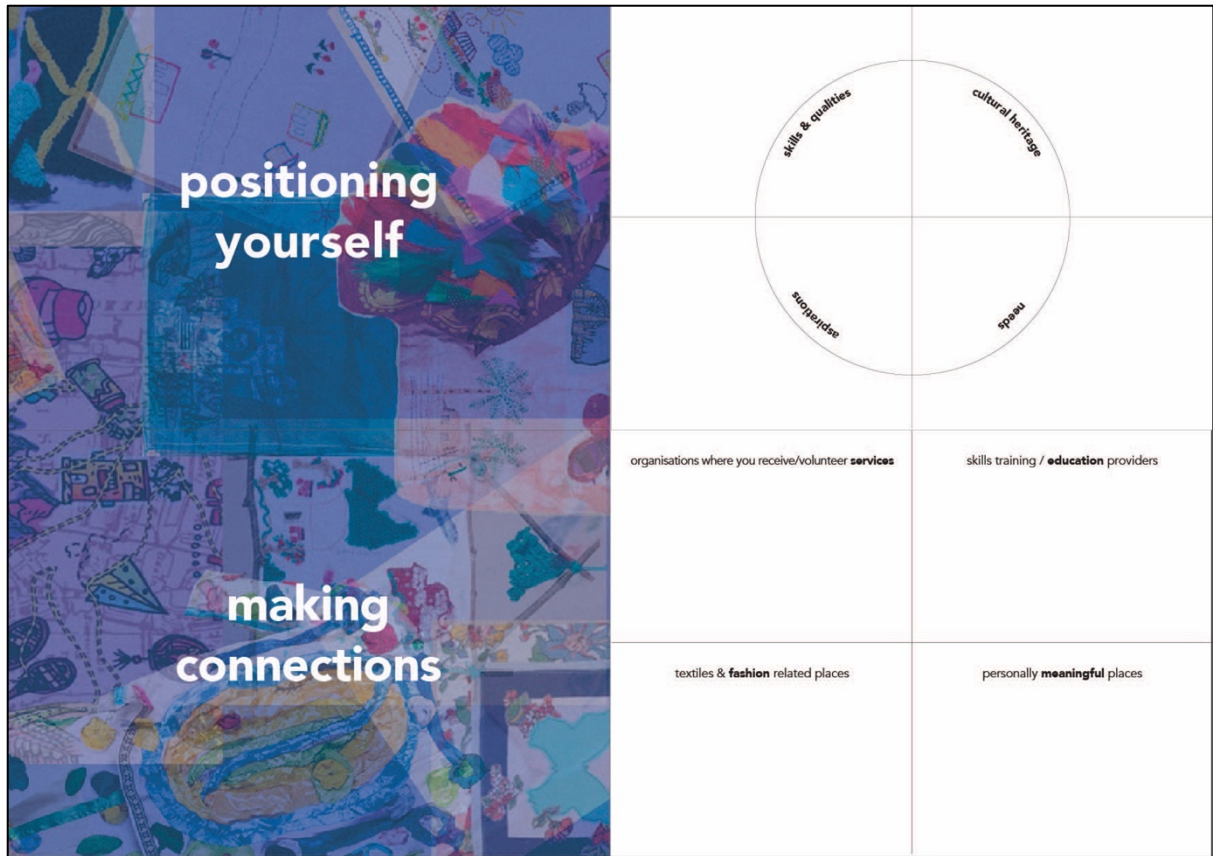


Figure 6. Tool used at the mapping workshops.

These workshops 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 or enhance their well-being (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Map of connections between people and places. Photo by Mehrdad Pakniyat.

The next set of co-creation workshops were facilitated using a tool (Figure 8) designed to aid the participants in reflecting on their personal values, and then framing their individual and collective visions for a sustainable future. As a result, individual postcards to the future and a textile banner were co-designed by the project participants in each of the three borough-based groups.

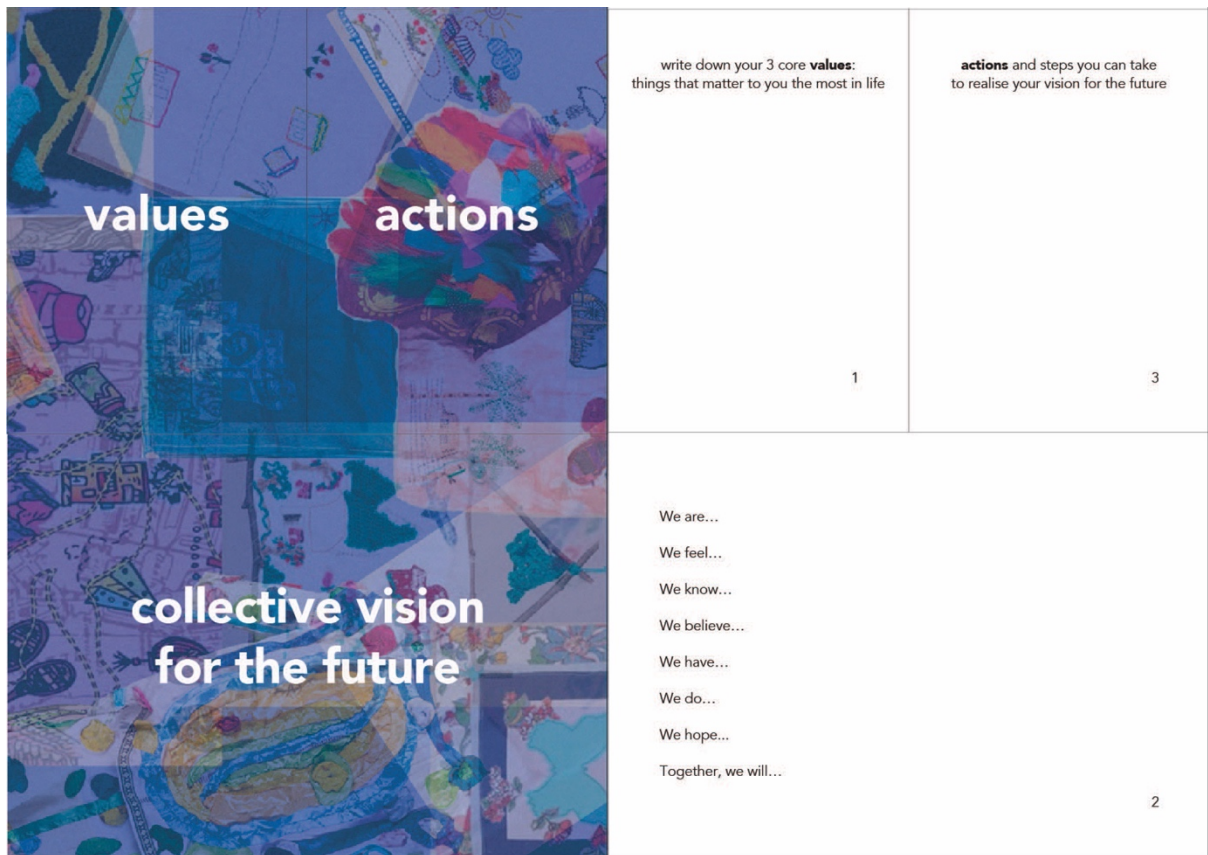


Figure 8. Tool used at the collective future envisioning workshops.

Each group of participants were photographed together holding the textile banner they co-created, evidencing the sense of hope, agency, and collective power that they had gained towards building their own sustainable future. The project team and participants used the banners in a public action in Westminster to protest the UK Illegal Migration Bill; thus, the banners became physical metaphors highlighting hope for the future as people were drawn to them in the public square (Figure 9).





Figure 9. Banners used in the public action in Parliament Square. Photo by Michaela Ajani.

The outputs of the project so far have been showcased in three gallery spaces, amplifying the refugees' voices and creations to the wider public and contributing to enhancing the participants' pride and self-confidence (Figure 10).



Figure 10. Some project outputs showcased at Bow Arts during Refugee Week. Photo by Mehrdad Pakniyat.



Feedback was collected throughout the pilot and on-going project via evaluation questionnaires, which gave insight on the participants' changes in skills, perspective on cultural sustainability, and approach to community resilience. The participants also suggested improvements and their ideal next steps for the project.

## 4 Results

From the analysis of the evaluation questionnaires emerged that the participants valued the project as an opportunity to share their stories, build positive narratives around refugees, meet new people, and get inspired on ways in which to contribute to their community. For some participants, practising their English language skills and being comfortable to speak in group settings were also considerations in their efforts to integrate into the local community. The participants highlighted that the project helped them learn new skills, build social confidence, value their cultural heritage in a new light and gain more knowledge of cultural sustainability and community resilience.

### 4.1 Identity – Shifting Identities and Rebuilding Lives, Through Design

Findings from the first phase of the research highlight that the participants experience the project as a space to find themselves, discover or rediscover their identity by engaging in textile craft practices. As a result, the textile autobiographies share plights of migration and personal battles with a wider audience, as highlighted by one participant:

*“I’m here to find myself. 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”.*

Such a reflection is evident not only in the textile artworks that the participants created and the artwork statements they wrote, but also in the actual making process itself, through which they discovered skills they did not realise to have or had not really tapped into, as stated by one participant:

*“You inspire and challenge my mind to explore different ways of thinking rather than just [...] functionality. I must use / exercise the other side of my brain for this project. Be inspired that you plant seeds of inspiration in those around you”.*

The project provided the participants with a crucial space for making things with their hands, head, and heart when dealing with the hardship and the everyday stress of having their life on hold while waiting for their refugee status to be approved. For instance, one participating asylum seeker enjoyed the collage making activity so much that she kept practising this technique in her own time together with her daughter in the contingency hotel where they are staying. This evidences that art and craft techniques can be used as coping mechanisms to heal traumas and enhance wellbeing. One participant highlighted that the project benefitted not only themselves, but reflected on how such activities could also 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”.*

The project also enabled the participants to critically reflect on certain aspects of their own culture. Even participants with traumatic memories of their home countries talk mainly positively of their own cultural heritage (in terms of dress, food, language, music) as a way to feel rooted even when displaced. Moreover, findings from the research show that one of the first challenges participants face in integrating in the new community and restarting their life is often to shake off the stigma associated with the label of ‘refugee’ or ‘asylum seeker’ before they can rebuild their new identity. One participant shared that when people with the same nationality as hers found out that she was an asylum seeker, they distanced themselves from her, shunning her. This is also evidenced in two textile autobiographies and statements created by another participant in the pilot and on-going project (Figure 9):

*“Through my artwork, I would like 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 [...]. 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”.*



Figure 9. The transformation and shifting identity of one participant evidenced by the artworks created in the pilot (image on the left) and subsequent project phase (right). Photos by JC Candanedo.

#### **4.2 Reality – Eliciting the Lived Experiences of Refugees**

The ethnographic research highlighted the challenges and opportunities related to the local area. It emerged that top-down strategies don't always meet the needs and aspirations of refugee communities, but there is a need to start from an understanding of diverse cultures, and engage people in co-creation processes. The ethnographic research revealed that Local Councils are receiving many asylum seekers who are hosted in contingency hotels, but the poor living conditions contribute to mental health issues. Some refugees have high-level textile making skills currently untapped, and there is potential to pave new routes to employment within local manufacturers, especially considering the struggle that businesses currently face in accessing skilled workforce in London. In the

strategies developed by Local Councils, there is a push for increasing employment of residents from cultural minorities, yet they don't often consider deeply enough the root causes of unemployment, as well as the flexibility and bespoke support that refugees need. The barriers to employment that refugees face need to be better understood, and recommendations for policy change could be outlined to overcome them.

In the storytelling sessions, some participants at first did not think that they had significant material possessions, but the reflective process made them aware of – and value more – what they own, even small but meaningful things. One participant spoke about a blanket her mother made for her when she was one year old, which she still has and uses to cover herself when she feels home sick. Another participant talked about a dress that was made in her brother's factory and which she wears on special occasions.

### **4.3 Empathy – Researchers' Positionality within a Reciprocal Process of Making and Learning**

The experience in the project demonstrated that researchers working in such a contested field play a political role in facilitating conversations and bridging the needs and aspirations of refugee communities with the services delivered by support organisations. Acknowledging that an intervention is intrusive by construction, but finding ways to mediate this, such as through the common language of textile craftsmanship, it is important for researchers to reflect on their own lived experiences and embrace their subjectivity, both in its negative and positive forms. To start the process and build empathy, the lead researcher showed and talked about some clothes and accessories representing different places (across the Global North and South) in which he lived throughout his migration journey in search of better education and employment opportunities. The second author of this paper (a designer, maker and researcher who grew up in the Global South) brings her different frames of social and cultural reference to the project while critically reflecting on her own privilege and the power dynamics at play. There is also a breadth of cultural understanding present within the team, with a wide range of languages spoken and cultural overlaps between participants and researchers.

The project team designed the workshops to match the participants' needs and aspirations rather than delivering *a priori* set practical skills, such as operating a sewing machine or teaching technical aspects of making. This decision was made as part of a decolonising design approach focused on co-creation and embedding equity throughout a reciprocal process of making and learning, rather than teaching others based on designers' knowledge, expertise, agenda, or aesthetics. The research team actively participated in the workshops where everybody reflected on their life experiences and shared their stories of migration, identity, and cultural heritage, contributing to a decentred design approach. Overall, the participants valued the sensibility expressed by the research team and the safe environment which was created for the activities; they felt welcomed, safe, and cared for throughout the project:

[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 guidance"*.

#### **4.4 Empowerment – Collectively Framing Visions for a Sustainable Future**

The mapping and collective future envisioning workshops encouraged the participants to turn their current – challenging – realities into visions for a preferred future while building hope and agency. For instance, one participant in the pilot project expressed her desire to study acting and is now actively pursuing this goal, while another shared her aspiration to get into higher education, and since then has enrolled in a University. Other participants want to start their own businesses or aspire to work in entirely different professions than before. Such plans demonstrate that the project participants – who initially felt powerless either in their own countries or while waiting for the refugee status to be approved in the UK – are finding power within themselves (in terms of enhanced sense of self-worth), are enacting their own power to achieve their personal and professional goals, and are starting to build collective power with the communities they start to belong to.

The project also acts as a springboard for further opportunities for the participants. The participants attended exhibition tours at Bow Arts and the Victoria and Albert Museum, and a full-day workshop was arranged by the project team responding to the participants' needs to learn certain technical skills. A number of participants have signed up to vocational courses to enhance their fashion design skills. The project also offered different opportunities to the participants, switching from attending workshops to paid facilitation of creative activities for members of the public while another participant was hired to photograph some events. Another participant was hired as community co-curator in the cultural programming team of the University where the project is situated, and two participants undertook work experience with a textile maker in her studio to assist her in finishing the banners.

#### **4.5 Cultural Sustainability – Reframing, Sustaining and Regenerating Cultures**

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 own identity”*. As stated by the participants, education, access to information, increased participation of cultural minorities, and policies are needed to sustain cultural heritages. The research also proposes a cultural approach to advancing a sustainability agenda, meaning considering cultural heritage as a resource and asset to foster social inclusion, make local economies flourish, and tackle environmental challenges while simultaneously navigating the space of becoming aware of and unlearning inherent biases.

Working together to give shape to the collective manifesto and seeing the ideas materialise, one participant looked at the banner once completed seemingly elated and, with a sense of accomplishment, she stated: *“I didn't know I could do this...it is beautiful”*. This tension of finding the self in relation to shifting cultures while also feeling the need to assimilate to a new culture is where making gives design discourses its potent power and meaning.

One participant expressed that, through this project, she learnt more about cultural sustainability and that *“textiles can be a huge factor in preserving that and increasing cultural appreciation”*. Another participant stated: *“this project made me love my culture more. No matter where I go, my culture will remain with me”*. Another participant said that the project allowed space for her cultural identity to evolve. The project also demonstrated that, while some refugees are proud of their cultural heritage and want to sustain it, others don't want to wear traditional clothes because they associate their home country to traumatic experiences, or they prefer wearing Western clothes to feel better integrated in the community where they are resettled. This shows that sustaining the past or cultural heritage is a



vital choice that can only be expressed when the spaces for these dialogues are open-ended. This creates future possibilities of healing and regenerating, to consider and navigate the impacts and remnants of colonialism as it is embedded almost everywhere.

#### **4.6 Community Resilience – Mapping Connections to Foster Belonging and Resilience**

The project presented in this paper contributed to highlighting that most of the participating refugees, despite the challenges they face and the limited resources they have, volunteer their time, and support each other. This is a lesson of community resilience that all those in more privileged positions can learn. The research activities successfully allowed the participants to reflect, contemplate and share information as well as aspirations. An important outcome was the re-established connections and a sense of belonging activated by the mapping activities. Through the conversations taking place during these workshops, the participants discovered new places and were inspired to connect with 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 which empower one another”*.

Importantly, the research shed 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 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”*.

This critical perspective challenges the notion of resilience, as a good quality to have, but it would be better if there wasn’t the need to be resilient in the first place. In fact, if people didn’t have to face external shocks to react to, or if the system was working well and providing the right support, refugees wouldn’t have to build resilience in themselves and in their community.

## **5 Discussion**

Although the project led to valuable outputs and outcomes, many barriers and challenges were faced throughout the research, as discussed below.

- **Shifting Designer Roles** – Conducting participatory action research with vulnerable people offers an opportunity to experience considerations that are likely to become more and more important as designers play an ever-adapting role and Universities enhance their civic work and social purpose. The designer’s role is fluid in these spaces, and the identity shifts not epistemologically but as required in practice. Moving away from the design of tangible outputs, the designer working in social innovation contexts can play multiple roles, such as that of a researcher, strategist, cultural insider, storyteller, sensemaker, facilitator, co-creator, maker, activist, entrepreneur, etc. (Tan, 2012; Mazzarella *et al.*, 2021).
- **Ethics of Care** – Large Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) require long approval and administrative times which are at odds with the fast-paced changing realities of refugee participants. This research also points towards the need to further develop and adopt a

framework of ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982), which challenges traditional moral theories as male-centric and problematic to the extent that they omit or downplay certain virtues and values (*e.g.*, care and compassion) usually associated with women.

- **Socio-cultural Context** – Designers should immerse themselves in the research context in order to get a sense of the place, understand previous design interventions, or develop and test research methods that are culturally relevant. In this regard, critical tools such as cultural code mapping can be used by designers in the context research phase of their projects for social change (Santamaria, 2023).
- **Cultural Routes** – Findings from the research highlight the need for researchers to engage with culture not as a return to our ‘roots’, but as ‘routes’ through which we travel, our culture moves, changes, and develops (Hall, 1997). It is particularly important for designers to respectfully engage in cultural representations and signifying practices with refugees and asylum seekers whose identities are constantly shifting. In fact, designers working with people who live in transition across countries and cultures need to be careful in navigating potential conflicts that can emerge when bringing together people from different cultures. Whilst this can create distance and isolation, the role of the researcher should be to facilitate dialogue, co-existence, and foster connection (Gupta & Ferguson, 2008).
- **Shifting Identities** – Drawing on Hall and Du Gay’s (1996) questions of cultural identity, this project demonstrates that reflecting on fashion and textile heritage and engaging in creative making processes offer a crucial empowerment opportunity for transient participants to shift from a ‘crisis of identity’ to new forms of identity, and undertake a life-changing process, through design and craftivism (von Busch, 2022).
- **Participants’ Engagement** – A significant challenge that researchers working with refugees often face is participant recruitment and retention. This is because some migrants are undocumented or may use different communication channels than emails or newsletters. Moreover, they live transient and challenging lives and generally struggle to commit to long-term projects. The design and delivery of the project also evidenced the need to take into consideration issues such as gender difference and language barriers of the participants, and location of the activities.
- **Project Partnerships** – The research highlighted the crucial challenge to foster exchange, negotiate expectations of project partners and navigate their diverse agendas (Thorpe *et al.*, 2017). It is essential also to partner with local grassroots organisations which can give access to community members. They may also be more agile in working around the bureaucratic issues that HEIs must deal with.
- **Reciprocity** – It is important to include the research team itself in the making activities to create a sense of equality within the project, especially considering that refugees are amongst the most interviewed and monitored populations. 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 (Pettit, 2020), and maintaining receptivity to diverse ways of knowing and approaches to knowledge (Öz & Timur, 2022).
- **Empathy** – Working with vulnerable people requires designers to practise critical reasoning and compassion (Bloom, 2016), but also empathy towards others (Gamman & Thorpe, 2015) and develop dialogical relations grounded on inclusion (Cipolla & Bartholo, 2014). Whilst

designers working in challenging circumstances must have effective safeguarding measures and support systems in place, further research is needed as well as collaboration with professionals from other sectors (*e.g.*, nursing, social work, etc.) who are trauma-informed and can deal with the ‘dark sides’ of designing for social good.

- **Impact** – The project highlights the challenge of evaluating impact, which is recurring in social innovation projects. This poses the need to find effective evaluation methods (*e.g.*, the Design Value Framework developed by the Design Council, 2022) to capture – often intangible – stories of change, and adopt suitable language to articulate social impacts.
- **Legacy** – It is crucial that researchers in social design are sensitive in handling expectations, and support participants beyond the project’s timeline and funding, connecting them to future activities or pointing out other opportunities available in terms of education, employment, or entrepreneurship. Hopefully, the project presented in this paper will inspire the readers in activating further design interventions within their places, fostering a network of ‘small, local, open and connected’ initiatives (Manzini, 2011), but also thinking about sustaining legacies through ‘infrastructuring’ processes (Thorpe & Rhodes, 2018) that support community resilience.

## 6 Conclusions

It is important to acknowledge that the findings presented in this paper are from a short pilot and the first phase of an on-going project. More time is needed to thoroughly evaluate the long-term project impact on the community. Nevertheless, the project allowed to develop new understandings and definitions of design for cultural sustainability and community resilience, elicited through the lived experiences of participants with asylum-seeking or refugee status, particularly in relation to their shifting identities. The project provided the participants with a crucial grounding space where they can reflect on themselves and their shifting identities, and aspire to rebuild their lives in a new place. This space is hard to come by for those escaping harsh realities, conflict, and violence, those who are socially invisible, often ignored and viewed with negative connotations while also dealing with isolation in transitory worlds.

Through a variety of original research methods (photovoice, storytelling, textile making, mapping, and manifesto co-design), the research team and the participants reflected on their own journeys, acknowledged that the only constant in life is change, and reminded themselves not to be pushed by their own problems, but to be led by their dreams and build power within themselves as well as collective agency to shape a better future. By initiating a reciprocal process of making and learning, the project enabled the development and application of research methods from a decolonial perspective, the building of meaningful connections with the local community and partnerships with relevant organisations, as well as contributing to advancing the social purpose and place-making agenda of the University where the project was initiated.

At a personal level, the project made the researchers engage in a process of self-discovery (of their own vulnerabilities as well as qualities) and question the value they could bring to the participants. While the researchers were driven by an ambition to activate change in others through this project, they also challenged their own practice research as a process of decolonising design. In the end, their

role became more focused on identifying what the participants' skills and aspirations are, and design a research process that best matched those.

Learnings from the experience presented in this paper keep informing the on-going research. The project continues to elicit the stories of diaspora communities but will also expand on co-designing fashion and textile artefacts grounded on the shifting identities and cultural heritages of the participants and outline a social enterprise model to enhance the resilience of the refugees. It will also include advocacy work aimed at outlining recommendations for positive policy change to overcome some of the barriers that UK-based refugees face, especially in light of our collective uncertain future.

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