

Decolonising Fashion and Textiles – in partnership with Centre for Sustainable Fashion, UAL

How can we work with vulnerable communities through the lens of design activism to prevent cultural appropriation and craft commodification while shifting power dynamics in the fashion system?

Overview:

This brief is part of a large research project titled 'Decolonising Fashion and Textiles', led by Dr Francesco Mazzarella from Centre for Sustainable Fashion, and running from September 2022 to August 2024, with funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The project team include internationally acclaimed artist Professor Lucy Orta, Dr Seher Mirza, Nicole Zisman, curator Camilla Palestra, film-maker David Betteridge, community artist and designer Alisa Ruzavina and photographer JC Candanedo. Project partners include: Victoria and Albert Museum, Bow Arts, Poplar HARCA, Arbeit Project Ltd, Rosetta Arts, the London Boroughs of Newham, Tower Hamlets, and Waltham Forest, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Through a reciprocal process of textile and fashion making, the project team and its participants are shifting narratives around refugees, mapping ways to build resilience within the local community, framing collective visions for a sustainable future, co-creating culturally significant fashion and textile artefacts, developing a social enterprise model, and outlining recommendations for positive policy change. The project contributes to re-examining research methods from a decolonial perspective, and shaping an alternative fashion system, grounded on equality diversity, inclusion, and cultural sustainability.

Provocation/ challenge/ scenario/ concept:

With the mass displacement of people on the rise, it is clear that we need to rethink and address the needs and aspirations of refugee communities and find ways to honour their diverse cultures. Historically, the textile heritage of marginalized groups has often been subjected to cultural appropriation practices or systematically undervalued and 'othered' as 'non-fashion'. While the fashion industry is currently being guided mostly by the three core pillars of sustainability – environmental, economic, and social – this brief invites you to contribute to the emerging discourse on design for cultural sustainability. This means valuing and sustaining diverse cultural heritages, cultural systems, values, behaviours, and norms as an essential component of a sustainability agenda.

This brief invites you to challenge dominant practices of social designers being 'parachuted' into marginalized or disadvantaged communities with the assumption that they can bring their own knowledge and expertise to solve other people's problems. This project encourages you to move away from such dominant design approaches, and participate in a process of 'decolonising' fashion, challenging colonial systems of oppression and exploitation, fostering ethics of care, and leveraging the values of equality, diversity, inclusion, and sustainability of cultures.

To respond to the brief, you will be invited to collaborate with London-based refugees and asylum seekers and work on a multidisciplinary project around the themes of: fashion / textile artefacts, ethical storytelling, and legacy (entrepreneurship or advocacy).

Two teams will be asked to engage in co-design of fashion and textile artefacts celebrating the identity, cultural heritage, and sense of displacement / belonging of yourself and your refugee collaborators.

Two teams will be expected to shift the prevailing negative narratives around refugees and develop an ethical storytelling campaign (e.g. through fashion photography, film, AR / VR experiences, social media, exhibition, etc.).

Two teams will be asked to contribute to the legacy of the project (e.g. developing a social enterprise model to enhance the resilience of refugees), and/or develop a creative campaign (e.g. performance mediated by costumes, textile banners, etc.) to advocate for positive policy change to overcome some of the barriers that refugees face in the UK.

Your work will be suitably credited within the larger project within which this brief sits. If you are interested, you could discuss with Dr Francesco Mazzarella opportunities for further engagement in his research activities beyond the timeline of this Collaborative Challenge.

Considerations:

Going beyond the well-recognised role of the designer as 'facilitator' (*i.e.* supporting on-going initiatives), this brief primes you to play an 'activist' role (*i.e.* making things happen) and contribute towards social justice and sustainability. Throughout the project, you will be invited to challenge common negative narratives around refugees, explore issues of agency and power relations in collaborative making contexts, develop, adopt, and adapt research methods to support decolonized design practice. Drawing upon findings from your own research and from inputs provided by the teaching team and project partners, you will be expected to develop experience in

fashion design for social and cultural sustainability, through a hands-on, participatory action research project.

You will be invited to reflect on your positionality, and explore the potential to play the role of a change-maker, challenging the *status quo* and collaborating with London-based refugees and asylum seekers in order to explore cultural, social, economic and environmental issues. You will be encouraged to engage in a reflexive process and adopt an embedded and situated approach to designing in order to co-create and deliver a participatory action research project which is envisaged to be beneficial to all those involved (e.g. students and refugee collaborators) in terms of building new connections, exchanging intercultural experiences, sharing skills, developing new mindsets, and contributing to social change.

Since the brief involves cross-cultural collaboration with vulnerable people, you will be invited to attend two workshops on unconscious bias delivered by Adam Ramejkis (Intercultural Communication Trainer at UAL). As this brief sits within a larger research project led by Dr Francesco Mazzeola, he will ensure that a safe space is created, that safeguarding measures are in place at all times, and the ethical implications of your project are suitably managed. If engaging with the traumatic stories of displacement of your refugee collaborators triggers unpleasant emotions at any time, you will be pointed towards counselling services and support available to you.

To respond to the brief, you will be connected with relevant stakeholders and community members, and invited to attend a series of masterclasses, comprised of talks by guest speakers aimed at informing your project and seminars intended to aid your development of mindsets and skills in systems and future thinking, critical reflection, collaboration, resourcefulness, activism, creativity and collaboration.

Timeline:

To complement the general schedule of the Collaborative Challenge with its consultancies with supervisors Dr Francesco Mazzeola and Dr Seher Mirza, you will also be inspired by diverse guest speakers and project partners sharing their expertise in co-creation, sustainable fashion, storytelling, social entrepreneurship, and campaigning, as well as experience of working with refugees and vulnerable communities. Therefore, it is recommended that you attend a series of masterclasses at the new LCF East Bank campus, to help you develop your project, as per the following schedule:

20/09/23, 6.30-8.30pm, LCF East Bank, 4th Floor – Collaborative Challenge Partner Q&A evening event

04/10/23, 12.30-14.00, LCF East Bank, Room 426 – Masterclass 1 “Decoloniality and Cultural Sustainability in Fashion Practice” by Dr Francesco Mazzarella and Dr Seher Mirza (Centre for Sustainable Fashion, UAL)

18/10/23, 12.00-14.00, online – Consultancy 1 with Supervisors and Partner + Research and self-directed study

25/10/23, 10.00-11.30, LCF East Bank, Room 426 – Masterclass 2 “Art / Design / Fashion as Social Practices, for Emergency, and for Emergent Times” by Prof. Helen Storey and Prof. Lucy Orta (Centre for Sustainable Fashion, UAL)

25/10/23, 12.00-14.00, LCF East Bank, Room 612 – Consultancy 2: Students pitch to Supervisors to address the Challenge.

01/11/23, 10.00-11.30, The Lab E20 – Masterclass 3 “Shifting Identities and Perceptions through Ethical Storytelling” by Kate Keara Pelen and Tim Stephens (University of the Arts London)

01/11/23, 12.00-14.00, The Lab E20 –Partner Q&A

01/11/23, 15.00-16.30, The Lab E20 – Workshop 1 ‘Intercultural Communication’ by Adam Ramejkis (University of the Arts London)

15/11/23, 10.00-11.30, The Lab E20 – Masterclass 4 “Empowerment and Entrepreneurship with a Social Purpose” by Charlie Fraser and Adele Meyer (TERN: The Entrepreneurial Refugee Network)

15/11/23, 12.00-14.00, The Lab E20 – Consultancy 3

15/11/23, 15.00-16.30, The Lab E20 – Workshop 2 ‘Intercultural Communication’ by Adam Ramejkis (University of the Arts London)

22/11/23, 10.00-11.30, The Lab E20 – Masterclass 5 “Building Community Power and Campaigning for Policy Change” by Froi Legaspi and Toyin Gbomedo (Citizens UK)

29/11/23, 15.00-18.00, LCF East Bank, Room 515 – Consultancy 4: Final presentations to Supervisors and Partner and potential pop-up showcase as part of the cultural programme of the ‘Designed for Life’ exhibition at LCF East Bank

Deliverables:

Although you are free to respond to this Challenge in any way you deem appropriate, you may like to consider producing the following outputs:

- Fashion and textile artefacts
- A communication campaign
- Social enterprise model

You will also be asked to present the outputs of your project to the Supervisors, partners, and the wider community. Additionally, there will be an opportunity to showcase the responses to this Collaborative Challenge brief within a wider project exhibition which will take place in a gallery space in Summer 2024.

Courses:

We are seeking up to 30 students to work in 6 teams of 5 people. This project is open to all Master courses, and a balanced mix of students from the three LCF Schools – School of Design & Technology, Fashion Business School, and School of Media & Communication – will be selected. This is a great opportunity for students with diverse backgrounds, interested in decoloniality, co-creation, fashion sustainability, storytelling, social entrepreneurship, and campaigning. Students will be assigned in groups at the beginning of the project.

How to apply:

If you are interested in this opportunity, please choose '**DFT**' project on as one of your 2 project choices. You can apply for two projects each. This will be monitored. If you have any issues, please contact cu@fashion.arts.ac.uk

DEADLINE: Wednesday 27 September, 6pm

You will be notified of your final project on Wednesday 4 October by the Collaborative Challenge Team.