

Tricky Encounters & Transformative Journeys: The 'Decolonising Fashion and Textiles' Brief

Dr Francesco Mazzearella
PgCert, ARP, 15/01/2024

ual: centre for
sustainable fashion

Context

- Refugee crisis and hostile environment.
- Textile heritage of minorities subjected to cultural appropriation.
- Culture as an essential component of a sustainability agenda.
- Social designers 'parachuted' into marginalised communities.
- Need to decolonise dominant design practices.



Rationale

- Building on my Artefact submission (IP Unit)
- Delivery within Collaborative Challenge unit, embedded in the curriculum (MAs at LCF)
- Main unit I was teaching this term
- Linked to my current research project DFT
- Aligned with UAL Climate, Racial and Social Justice principles (4 & 5)
- Contributing to UAL Anti-Racism Action Plan



Positionality

Design educator, researcher, activist
with lived experience of migration –
crafting life journeys



Scope & Question

Brief for 30 MA students (from across LCF)
to work in 6 teams and collaborate with
refugees around the themes:
artefacts, storytelling, legacy

In what ways can design lecturers
create safe spaces that enable ethical
cross-cultural connections between
students and vulnerable people
(such as refugees)?



Methodology

Action research to collect qualitative data

- Participant observations (5 masterclasses + 1 day of workshops + final presentations)
- Evaluation questionnaire (1 at project end, filled in by 26 students + 6 refugees)
- Thematic analysis

6) Having participated in the project, has anything changed in your perception of refugees? If so, what was your main lesson learned?

Refugees are not just people who seek shelter or immigrants with job needs. They are indeed... and heritage which can enhance & make it more diverse thus paving...

7) Based on your experience in the project, what is your main lesson learned regarding privilege, prejudice, and power imbalance?

Addressing the lack of cooperation/c... one umbrella in order to enhance as a potential source of income identifying diversity and thus...

8) Have you developed and applied decolonising project? If so, can you please say a few words about it?

For taking the inspiration from model of Opportunity Employment part we focussed on 6Ps (Areas) of... and make prototype fabric book...

9) What new skills (e.g. systems thinking) and personal qualities (e.g. communication) you developed through this project?

Personally, I developed the idea of communication gap... the critical clarity on creative circularity with various distinct yet overl...

10) What elements of the project do you think were most successful?

The content of fabricate to the respective person's culture rather than a generic crafts... be explored more in digital as...

11) From your point of view, what would you recommend for future projects?

- 1) Expanding Instagram to...
- 2) Expanding the fabricate...
- 3) Working on individuality by forming questionnaire on refugees to know about their...

ual: london college of fashion

Evaluation Questionnaire

We would like to hear about your experience in the Collaborative Challenge 'Decolonising Fashion and Textiles'. 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 (Please tick one only)

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

2) Overall, did the project meet your expectations?

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

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

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Feel you have agency to create positive social change	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Gained new knowledge (e.g. on decolonising fashion, cultural sustainability, storytelling, social entrepreneurship, policy, etc.)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Feel more connected to your and other people's cultural identity and heritage	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are more aware of ethical issues related to designing for social change	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

4) Did the project create a safe space for you to engage with students? If so, how did that happen?

Yes. It happened during meeting that we had. Also having a common goal and the honesty of the members in expressing their feelings made me feel very close...

5) How did the project helped you ethically connect with other people's cultures?

By bringing us together in a project...

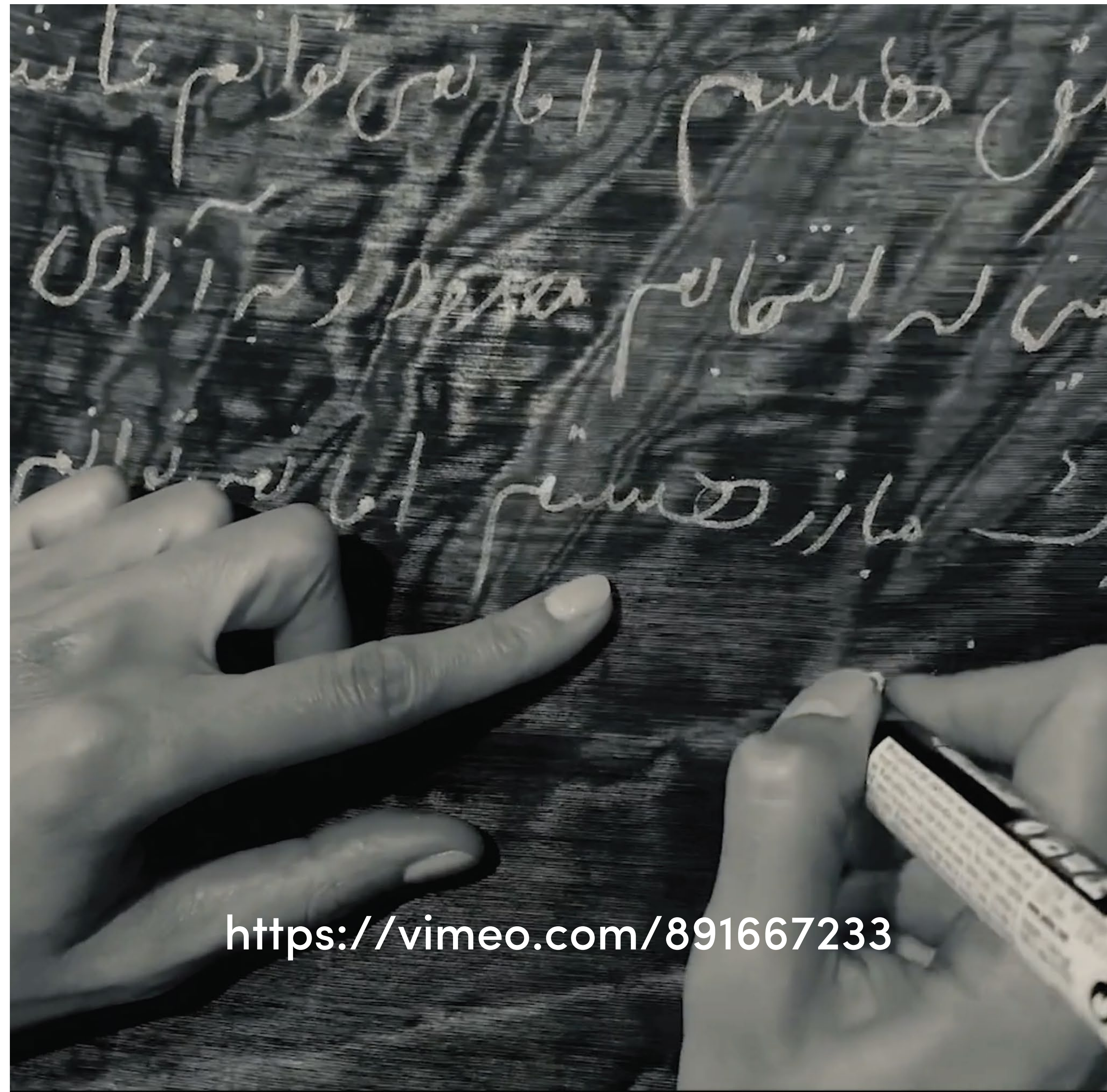
Intervention



- Decolonising Fashion, for Emergency and Emergent Times – F. Mazzarella & H. Storey, 18/10/23
- Art / Design / Fashion as Social Practices for Cultural Sustainability – L. Orta & S. Mirza, 01/11/23
- Shifting Identities and Perceptions through Ethical Storytelling – T. Stephens, 08/11/23
- Intercultural Communication Workshops 1 & 2 – A. Ramejkis, 08-15/11/23
- Empowerment and Entrepreneurship with a Social Purpose – S. Escobar & S. Lleshi, 15/11/23
- Building Community Power and Campaigning for Policy Change – F. Legaspi, 22/11/23
- Final presentations and pop-up showcase – All teams, 06/12/23

Findings

- Safe space
- Ethical connections across cultures
- Shifting perceptions and narratives
- Privilege, prejudice, and power dynamics
- Decolonising design
- Learning



<https://vimeo.com/891667233>

Safe Space

“The project did encourage me to open up about my vulnerabilities, and allowed the refugees to speak about their journeys in a safe environment” (student)

“The honesty of the project members in expressing their feelings made me feel very close to them” (collaborator)



Ethical Connections

“Shifting mental spaces towards empathy rather than being scared of learning about other cultures” (student)

“Listening with mind, not just with ears” (student)



Shifting Perceptions

“It removed a lot of stigma I had towards refugees. I even forgot people I was interacting with were refugees” (student)

“I learned that refugees are delicate yet more resilient than the average human, and that their strength is something to learn from, and embody as individuals” (student)



Privilege & Power

“As a student at LCF and in life one must put aside the sense of self and ego, and open-mindedly behave like a sponge and be welcoming to new perspectives that may not be something one is familiar with” (student)

“I found the existing differences of opinion very natural and the way the team dealt with them very mature” (collaborator)



Decolonising Design

“Working in solidarity ‘with’ refugees rather than assuming an ‘helper’ attitude” (student)

“To not centre the English language, to not lead as students representing a Western institution” (student)



Transformative Learning

“This project is giving me an opportunity to get closer to my feelings, and turn my pain into something beautiful”
(collaborator)

“A lot of things have changed since this Collaborative Challenge has started. The main lesson I learned was that we should always be thankful for whatever we have in our life, and we should work towards a better future” (student)



Reflections

Strengths:

- Rich and informative sessions
- Variety of engagement methods
- Ethical approach, space for listening
- Connecting diverse cultures

Challenges:

- Recruitment & retainment of collaborators
- Inequality between students & refugees
- Using refugee labels
- Student disclosing sensible information
- Dealing with emotions (ref: Gaza conflict)



Process:

- Only 1 questionnaire, refined the questions
- No focus group – enough data
- Observations throughout, blogged quite late

Inspiration:

- Transformative experience for all
- Meaningful and powerful project outputs
- Enhanced flexibility, self-efficacy, resilience

Next:

- Collaboration with LCC students & beyond
- Feeding into DESIS cluster & elective unit
- Contribution to Social Purpose at UAL
- Feature in DFT symposium & exhibition
- Sharing resources on digital platform
- Potential journal article



References

- Ahmed, S. (2020). *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Postcoloniality*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Bradbury, H. (ed.) (2015) *The SAGE handbook of action research* [electronic resource], Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Costanza-Chock, S. (2020). *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Gamman, L. & Thorpe, A. (2015). "Design for Empathy" – Exploring the Potential of Participatory Design for Fostering Restorative Values and Contributing to Restorative Process. In: *Offenders No More: An Interdisciplinary Restorative Justice Dialogue*. New York: Nova, pp. 79-100.
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Harvard University Press.
- Griffiths, M. & Yeo, C. (2021). *The UK's Hostile Environment: Deputising Immigration Control*. *Critical Social Policy*, pp.1-24.
- Hall, S. (ed.) 1997. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage Publications.
- Kara, H. (2015). *Creative research methods in the Social Sciences: A practical guide*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.
- Niessen, S. (2020). Fashion, its Sacrifice Zone, and Sustainability, *Fashion Theory*, 24(6), pp.859-877.
- Öz, G. & Timur, S. (2022). Issues of Power and Representation in/of the Local Context: The Role of Self-reflexivity and Positionality in Design Research. *The Design Journal*, 26(2), pp. 252-269.
- Pettit, J. (2020). Transforming power with embodied practice. In McGee, R. and Pettit, J. (eds.) *Power, Empowerment and Social Change*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Tuhiwai-Smith, L. (2012) *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed Books.
- Tunstall, E.D. (2023). *Decolonizing Design: A cultural justice guidebook*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- University of the Arts London (2020) 'Code of Practice on Research Ethics'. [online]
- University of the Arts London (2021). *Anti-racism Action Plan* [online]
- University of the Arts London (2023a). *Climate, Racial and Social Justice Principles* [online]
- University of the Arts London (2023b). *Ethics for Making* [online]

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