

Dr Francesco Mazzarella, Prof Helen Storey, and Prof Lucy Orta Jun 9 5 min read

Valuing refugee and migrant voices



Embroidery is a key activity for young girls affected by gender-based violence as it encourages friendship and support between them, as well as learning a new skill together. Pieces are often made collectively to enhance this nurturing and safe environment – Dzaleka Refugee Camp, Malawi. Photo by Helen Storey.

As we approach [Refugee Week](#) with hopes to galvanise action, CSF researchers [Francesco Mazzarella](#), [Helen Storey](#) and [Lucy Orta](#) explore the connecting threads between their work. In conversation, they reflect on shared values, themes and learning experiences, highlighting hope and opportunities amidst present challenges.

“The value of this work we do is more than the sum of our parts. It shows how we can work on individual parts of a larger whole, in different ways, with different partners, and in different contexts.”

– Helen Storey

How would you summarise your long-term projects with refugees?

Helen: I am working with those who have been long-term displaced in Dzaleka camp (Malawi) and Maratane camp (Mozambique), while staying in touch with the [Zaatari Action](#) work that's now become self-sustaining with our Syrian colleagues in Jordan.

In Africa, we will be exploring new models to reverse refugee dependency on NGOs through making, adding skills and supporting the refugees to become the contracted suppliers to essential UNHCR procurements. Are we slowly becoming social engineers too? I'm looking at ways in which redesigning systems is as important as the physical work that you co-create.

Francesco: Through [Decolonising Fashion and Textiles](#), we are engaging in a reciprocal process of textile and fashion making. We are shifting narratives around refugees, mapping ways to build resilience within the local community, framing collective visions for the future, and co-creating culturally significant fashion and textile products and artworks.

Lucy: I've been working over the last 30 years to bring attention to issues surrounding migration and displacement – specifically how cloth and stitch as a language are intimately connected to our personal identities, memories, and emotions. Through practice, I seek ways to render vulnerable communities visible and to question social acceptance. To challenge the distance between artists and society and advocate for a more connected, engaged and socially responsible approach to making art. [Traces: Stories of Migration](#) aims to reveal the stories connected to migrant history in the UK.



Traces: Stories of Migration, Portrait Gallery at the Nunnery Gallery. Lucy Orta, 2023. Photo by Lori Demata.

What are you learning from this collaborative way of working?

Francesco: Our refugee collaborators are reminding us not to be pushed by our problems, but to be led by our dreams. We are including the research team in the making activities to create a sense of equality within the project. Considering that refugees are amongst the most interviewed and monitored populations, we want to shift power imbalances – challenging our privilege and prejudice and maintaining reciprocity and responsiveness to diverse ways of knowing.

Lucy: I see the process of working with different groups of migrants as a metaphor. Processes are powerful containers of meaning. They are about the relationship between an artist's voice and that of the community, expressed in the outcomes. Traces: Stories of Migration is a metaphorical process of people reflecting and shaping our understanding of the world around us.

“The dialogical structure of our community activities empowered participants by promoting empathy, understanding and connection. They helped build a sense of shared identity, and guided distinct individual outcomes.”

– Lucy Orta

Helen: The conditions for equality are almost impossible between yourself and those who you're interacting with, except in the act of making. Equality which holds hope seems to exist in the unplanned and in the surprises of our relationships.

Almost every refugee I work with shows me something about the life skills that we'll need to deal with the precarity of all our lives going forward. What I think is important very often isn't, in that scenario, and I must be careful to not be extractive. One of the requirements as a practitioner, artist or designer working in these sorts of spaces is your ability to be vulnerable and your willingness to be undone.



The "Living Hope" nursery school in Dzaleka Refugee Camp, Malawi. Photo by Helen Storey.

What challenges are you facing?

Helen: Climate change itself is a massive challenge. The homes of the people who I work with are washed away once a year, and they have repeatedly rebuilt the infrastructure of their lives. When and how we interact with them in that process is very pertinent.

Another challenge is trying to do this work based in the UK, whilst our own government has a migration policy that is so inhumane. They display cowardice and an avoidance of our all futures.

Francesco: We need to move towards a framework of ethics of care. Engaging vulnerable people in co-creation processes highlights the trajectory of trauma. For instance, we have witnessed that asylum seekers generally experience more trauma than refugees who are more settled, and therefore cannot be as creative.

We need to have effective safeguarding measures and support systems in place. We also need to collaborate with professionals from other sectors who are trauma-informed and can deal with the dark side of designing for social good.

Lucy: For me, the main challenge is the longevity of our projects and how to sustain the momentum and relationships. We're building empathy, we're building community. What happens to those communities once our research projects and funding ends?

We all need to be adequately equipped to understand trauma, to read the signs of the effect of our work on others, and to be able to provide or indicate where support can be accessed.



Two participants from the Decolonising Fashion and Textiles project, wearing traditional clothes and showing the connection built through the project. Photo by JC Candanedo.

What are your hopes for the future?

Helen: I hope I continue to learn the deeper stuff in the complexity of long-term displacement, and to be able to raise the impact of what we can do in response to it. I want to contribute to humane policy making for migration of all kinds.

Francesco: I hope we can better address the needs and aspirations of refugee communities, honouring their diverse cultures and invaluable craft heritage skills.

I also hope we can move beyond the current practice in which designers are ‘parachuted’ into marginalized communities to solve other people’s problems. Let’s shed a light on what we can learn from refugees.

“Hopefully we can decolonize design practice and shape an alternative fashion system that is grounded in equality, diversity, inclusion and sustainability of cultures.”

– Francesco Mazzeola

Lucy: I hope we can challenge the negative narrative around migration, using our practices as catalysts for that change – to combat the pernicious spread of xenophobia and advocate for a more connected, engaged, sociable, and socially responsible approach to arts and design.

Join us for a series of activities throughout Refugee Week and beyond...

- 20 June 2023: [Traces: Stories of Migration lead artist exhibition tours](#) | Nunnery Gallery, Bow Arts
- 24 June 2023: [Fashioning Heritage – storytelling, mapping, and building a more compassionate future with LCF](#) | Bow Arts Courtyard
- 24 June 2023: [Documenting memories through a photographic textile journal](#) | Bow Arts Courtyard Room
- 27 June 2023: [Public Action – Freedom to Play](#) | Parliament Square Gardens