



The Fabric of My Life

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A new international project: The Fabric of My Life



The Fabric of My Life (known as FABRIC), is a collaborative project between cultural institutions in Denmark, Greece and Denmark with the aims of innovating and testing new methods for exploring migration history in the cultural sector, empowering refugee women, and training cultural workers and design students. It was enabled by support from the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union, and will run from 2018 to 2022.

FABRIC fosters new digital and cultural productions co-created with refugee women. Clothing is an immediate, tactile, tangible and visual means of communication among Europeans and with the new citizens. Yet female clothing has become a contested field in this context. Scholars have used various paths to explore “modest fashion” and how it is practiced in new localities when forging new lives (Klepp and Bjerck 2014; Klepp, Vramo and Laitala 2014).

In FABRIC, clothing is acknowledged as an individual means of communicating identity, history and a better future. European and refugee women are invited to co-create and contribute to exhibitions in digital, pop-up, and conventional formats, and use clothing to narrate their life stories: Who taught me to knit? What did my grandparents wear? Who made my wedding gown? What is appropriate dress for me? The FABRIC team also co-creates podcasts of these narratives in several languages. There are plans for exhibitions of clothing and digital recreations of wardrobes lost during conflict. These cultural products are powerful dialogues reflecting and restoring memories of lost histories, both within Europe and beyond. They give a voice to a wide public in Europe and they offer culture, reflection and entertainment in various European languages, as well as in the languages of

the new European citizens: Turkish, Kurdish, Arabic, Farsi, Tigrinya and more. FABRIC wishes to promote the view that refugees not only need food, clothing and shelter but also access to art, media and culture.

Flight and immigration are not new phenomena but age-old formative experiences in Europe. FABRIC therefore links to other historical movements of people in the 20th century in Europe through memories and cultural heritage in oral narratives of female migrants. Forced migration often requires a departure with only clothes and some jewellery and other valuables in a suitcase. The latter are usually lost or sold in transit, leaving just the clothes as objects of memory. Greek families possess clothing that was brought from Asia Minor in 1922; German families have clothing from their flight after World War II and from each side of the Iron Curtain. Likewise, today’s refugees from north Africa and the Middle East travel with modern clothing items. And, in their new lives, these clothing items gain new value as tokens of memory embedded with new meaning symbolising personal histories. Anthropologist Mark Vacher has suggested that these objects from the home culture are endowed with “dispositional longing” (2007). They contain special meaning, are carefully preserved, and not likely to be donated to a museum or discarded. FABRIC will use voice recordings and photographic documentation to include these objects in sensitive public storytelling with descriptions and narratives of their meaning by their owners. The narratives are recorded in the speakers’ mother tongues. Fashion and clothing scholars have previously demonstrated how wardrobe biographies of refugee and migrant women can become a key to understanding journeys of immigration in which dress objects connect past,

present and future, and express memories, dreams and aspirations for individual people (Bang 2013).

Since the European refugee crisis began in 2015, artists have used refugees' clothing as a way of starting debates and reflections in galleries and art museums. Chinese artist Ai Weiwei curated the art project *Laundromat* as well as an installation of clothes left behind by Syrian refugees in a camp in northern Greece in a New York gallery. The National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens featured a special exhibition *FACE Forward... into my home. Portraits and Stories of Refugees* from November 2017 to January 2018, co-funded by the Greek Ministry of Culture and Sports, the United Nations Refugee Agency and the European Union's Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid.

At the ICOM Costume Committee Annual Meeting 2017, Greek social anthropologist Elia Petridou discussed the public display of a woman refugee's black dress collected on the shore of Lesbos in Athens. The dress was displayed in the Museum of the History of Greek Costume in Athens with garments from the 1922 refugee crisis. This comparative display demonstrates the combination of two bodies of evidence for refugees' experiences, which FABRIC very much want to emulate. Petridou raised crucial questions about the intimate embodied experience of displacement, the biopolitics of provision of humanitarian aid, environmental issues, and the politics of representing "refugeeness" in museum displays and exhibitions.

FABRIC partners include cultural institutions in three European countries: in Denmark, the Centre for Textile Research, the Design School Kolding and the National Museum of Denmark; in Germany, Deutsches Textilmuseum, Krefeld and the Akademie für Mode und Design, Düsseldorf; in Greece, ARTEX. Most of the partners have previously been involved in initiatives at the crossroads between migration, integration, gender and dress. In the *THREAD* project (2017-2019), Danish private and public partners used textile craft and culture as a catalyst for encounters between refugee women, local craft organisations, and potential employers (Malcolm-Davies & Nosch 2018). In FABRIC, textile art and textile artists are given space and opportunities to visualise the bonds between women, migration and textile cultural heritage. Two talented female textile artists, Solvejg Berg Søndergård from Denmark and Rezvan Farsijani from Iran/France, work with refugee women as collaborators

in art workshops. This co-creation is accompanied by artist's talks, open virtual/digital workshops and pop-up exhibitions.

FABRIC is still collecting voice recordings of personal clothing stories and all contributions are welcome. The podcast platform is constructed by the social enterprise and coding school Hack Your Future (HYF), whose volunteers train refugees in digital media and programming skills. The FABRIC podcast platform has become a training project for the portfolios of refugees attending HYF's courses. If you are interested in sending us a podcast about the fabric of your life, or if you wish to volunteer as a podcast interviewer, please contact us: ctr@hum.ku.dk

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