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Displaced and diffused: fashioning in the refugee experience

“Security, protection, general well-being are all dependent upon the presence of the right amount of clothing...” writes Carter (2003: 102) on Flügel’s negotiation of sub-conscious dress values. But this assertion is incomplete- how can we have the right amount of clothing, if we do not have the right type of clothing? And, how do we know what the right type of clothing is for a particular society, when our understanding and behaviours are not connected with the social codes of that environment? When our social orientation is displaced, our fashioning capabilities are diffused, until a sense of place can be developed after a choice for (or against) fashion-ability is made. This choice is inherently dependent on social circumstance and an individual ability to respond to an environment. Entwistle (2000), and Eicher, Levinson, and Lutz (2000) assert that while fashion is not everywhere, given certain dynamics such as social mobility, fashion can exist anywhere: even for the refugee. Appadurai (2006: 32) notes the challenge of negotiating foreign codes in his discussion of the constantly evolving demands placed on socially mobile groups by fashion systems. With this being the case, how do grown individuals who are newly placed within these differently fashioned social codes negotiate the evolution of their identity, to suit their new circumstances? In the case of the refugee these circumstances are highly variable as well as unpredictable, especially when taking into account the variety of possible refuge or transitional locations which may be places of detention,

encampment, or settlement. Given the highly subjective nature of refugee experiences, this essay aims to explore a few locations of significance between the refugee and fashion processes, rather than attempting to define the role of fashion in refugee experiences.

Locating fashion within a refuge

The refuge that can be discussed in this paper is a location of asylum for the refugee. The type of refuge in question accords the assertion by Flügel (1976 [1930]: 140) that "... in a rigid hierarchy fashion is impossible", as well as the "... two social tendencies ... essential to the establishment of fashion... the need of union... and the need of isolation..." as identified by Simmel (1971: 301). In considering these prerequisites of fashionable society, the different strata of fashionability can be explored (for example: couture, trend, sub-culture, and anti-fashion). It is through the negotiation of these strata, that citizens and non-citizens grow into and evolve a better positioning of their well-being and identity within societies. Identity is the evolving aspect of our lives against which our well-being is frequently assessed: Where do we think that we look like we belong? Where do others in our societies think that we look like we belong? And, to whom does it matter? Through our interactions with others, our identity and our well-being our sense of belonging is negotiated: where we fit in, where we do not, what aspirations we have, what is denied us, our placement in social contexts, our habitations that we fashion with spaces, actions and things. As a strong sense of identity motivates and evolves, a strong identity in comparison may inhibit certain necessary social evolutions. For example, an individual asylum seeker needing to settle into a very different community, but also needing to perform rituals

that were practiced with others in order to maintain a strong sense of self. However, if the refuge community will not allow them such expressions, the refugee must decide whether to acculturate (even partially), or be ostracised.

Just as fashionability is a constant negotiation, neither is being a refugee a static situation- it is a process that is experienced. The actual displacement action wherein an individual becomes a refugee may occur in a very small amount of time, it is possible that no preparations for eviction have been made. In the violent evictions that frequently proceed mass displacement, it would be unusual for there to be time in which to transform the Hussein Chalayan (2000) 'After Words' Autumn/Winter Collection chair covers into appropriate clothing for a flight to refuge. But perhaps they would be taken if they were heirlooms, or particularly useful artefacts; this again depends on the values and foresight of the refugee. Here it should be noted that the refugee can never be sure of the nature of their destination. The type of refugee experiences explored through this essay reflect many contemporary refugee experiences, where asylum has not necessarily been granted prior to the refugees arrival in the state where they are seeking asylum. These are individuals between flight from their home/habitat/origin, and acculturation into their new home/habitat/refuge/destination; perhaps on reaching their destination they are taken into a detention centre, a foreign halfway house, or an established diaspora community. The uniqueness of each refugee experience must be given note, from each unique reason to abandon their homeland, with unique ways of coping with the volatile dynamics of the displacement process.

Refugee: Dialogue with the fashion industry

Besides media reportage of refugee situations, there is little representation or discourse with the fashionable 'settled' or 'developed nation' audience. In high-fashion, there have been recognised conceptual works of a couple of designer/artists- Hussein Chalayan ('After Words' A/W Collection, 2000) and Lucy Orta ('Refuge Wear' Collection, 1993-1998) which are presented as elegant, powerful and thought provoking gestures about the flexible materiality of the refugee experience: stunningly glamourised gestures of solidarity. They are rare ethical provocations in the spectacular world of fashion. But what do such gestures achieve? The impact is immeasurable beyond the spectacle, though it is possible that the spectacle evoked empathy from the audience for the refugee; and maybe even allowed catharsis for the designer/artist. Nonetheless the season of presentation fades, what is the purpose of any sentiment lingering in the marketplace? Perhaps the gestures are relegated to the archives, only to be recounted in portfolios and cited in design or art theory texts, where they are held as rare beacons of social advocacy in the high-fashion, design, and art industries.

Although it is unlikely that the refugee will ever know about these gestures, such gestures advocate the issues facing refugees to privileged persons, who are perhaps able to make further enquiry and engage with refugee advocacy without feeling accosted by the stereotypical picketing activist: with fists-full of placards and outraged anti-state sentiment. It is unfortunate that other than these conceptual examples of the fashion system's formal connectivity with the refugee, the only

echoes of the 'refugee' in fashion media are the trendy foreign identities that bubble-up onto occasional seasonal catwalks, or more sordidly through the migrant-workers still exploited in sweat-shops benefiting the price-points of mainstream fashion. In multi-cultural societies you may also get a glimpse of the refugee through clustered diaspora marketplaces. But more detail is needed to regard the fashion of refugee.

Refugee: Testimony

Contemporary refugee testimonies on material culture are rare, let alone testimony which details the malleability of codes and behavioural fashion-ability within such experiences. There are a couple of likely reasons for this. The refugee material cultures of the last couple of decades do not have the critical-mass to be placed in refugee/migrant museum archives, such as those dedicated to the mass European exodus of World War II, or even the Korean War, or Vietnam War. It is also probable that sufficient time has also not yet elapsed for more recent refugees to feel able to discuss details of their refugee experience publicly. However, throughout the majority of refugee experiences one thing remains constant: being a refugee is regarded as a humanely abject and precarious experience. Surviving a refugee experience can be so personally damaging that even after resettlement the unforgettable recollection of events alone can be traumatic. These psychological scars can last a lifetime; and be collected into lifetimes where diaspora are involved. There are even instances of former refugees living as though their bags were packed, ready for their next eviction, after forty years of being settled (Parkin, 1999: 304). What would these individuals take with them, after forty years of preparation? Studies into the psychology of traumatic experiences (Ager and Loughry, 2004; Almedom and Summerfield, 2004;

Ursano, Fullerton and McCoughey, 1995 [1994]) identify that the ability for an individual to cope through an experience is determined by more dynamic factors such as upbringing, strength of character, and opportunity. An example of some of these cross-cultural dynamics can be viewed through these excerpts from a conversation between a Timorese-Australian and the author:

“I thought: Their clothes are different to ours. What will they think of us?

Even the beautiful yellow dress that Tia Bot made for me, to take with me – my BEST clothes, they are wrong here. They will see how different I am, and that I do not belong. Will this be a problem?”

“I cannot alter Tia Bot’s dress it is too good, she made it for me- I will send it back to Timor, for my cousin to wear. I have only worn it once, before I left, when we went to church.”

“Staying here, my good Timorese clothes are not right. It is different here, I have to be different. I need to get clothes like the others, the Australians. New clothes will be better.”

Excerpts from a conversation with “Ajze” (2008, pers. comm., 27 April)

“Ajze” is the chosen pseudonym of a woman who came to Australia as a refugee as a young single (East) Timorese woman over a decade ago. In these excerpts Ajze recounts her anxiousness on being invited to a party held by Timorese friends soon after her arrival in Australia as a refugee granted asylum. Fleeing persecution by the Indonesian military in East Timor, Ajze was granted asylum in Australia and was placed with family friends who were already settled in Australia. Acknowledging the importance of maintaining mother tongues within diaspora, this recollection of Ajze’s

shows that despite there not being a language barrier at the party, the language alone is not enough for her to feel comfortable. Ajze's uncertainty about the Timorese who might be present at the party worries her, and the possibility of projecting an unfavourable image by wearing her dress from Timor was reason enough to not go to the party. From Ajze's retelling of this experience she acknowledges that this anxiety was probably unfounded. Conversely any perception of backwardness was unlikely to have bothered the diaspora into which Ajze was starting to integrate, but rather gain empathy by the diaspora recognising dress cultures of their family who remain in Timor. Initially however, Ajze had decided to be cautious and stand out as little as possible, until she felt that she will not be judged adversely for her different visual identity. To be seen to converse with the local dress vernacular, Ajze wanted to be seen to be suitable for that place. This is probably not an unfamiliar anxiety amongst refugees who travel alone, there is a consistent uncertainty of their acceptance within a refuge society, despite acknowledging and needing to explore the refuge to find and reinforce their new sense of place. At the same time, Ajze cannot alter the dress to suit her new circumstance, as the dress itself embodies the well-wishing of her great aunt (Tia Bot) who made the dress for her, and which, were she still in Timor would be a highly valued garment which allows her to access to more formal occasions by being appropriately attired. The strong ideals of dress appropriateness within Ajze's Timorese culture are mirrored in her story, these are especially prominent when attending Timorese rites-of-passage. An example of this would be a woman not attending the public aspects of her sister's wedding, and only participating in the familial and facilitation aspects because of inadequate dress ("Elsa", 2007, pers. comm. 24 July).

Refugee: Dressing like a native

The examples of dress code negotiations presented above, regard the visual identity of the refugee within special events which serve to validate and reinforce social identities. Such dress-code barriers to special events are by no means unique to Timorese societies. Dress codes exist to certain degrees in all dressed societies, even in the extreme “rigid hierarchy” where Flügel insists that fashion cannot exist (Flügel 1976 [1930]: 140), as the demands constrict the free expression of visual identity by demanding a stringent conformity of dress styles by subjects. Woodward (2005) discusses similar anxieties of self-presentation through her study of London women, who develop and appropriate certain styles of dress to ‘feel right’ in a situation. These ‘native’ women also experience anxieties of their everyday dress: perhaps this is because they are overburdened by their knowledge of parameters, as well as feeling limited in capacity to express themselves within local social dress codes. Whereas the refugee, though they may be focusing intensely on attaining appropriate dress in the refuge (as in the case of Ajze), may also not have the personal resources to follow this through. To this extent the refugee who appropriates local dress, and/or wears the dress available to them with style, may be regarded as ‘stylish’, and even fashionable, but as yet they cannot engage with the complexities of expense and change within the elite high-fashion system. This inability to move beyond the two choices of mimicry of form, or remaining within a diaspora dress vernacular, is not surprising for the majority of refugees. There are simply too many other new local non-dress codes needing negotiation by the refugee for survival in their refuge. However, this notion of mimicry is very different from the dated (Entwistle, 2000: 62) ‘emulation’ theories proposed by Simmel (1971) and

Thorstein Veblen in the late nineteenth century. The level of fashionability with which the refugee is comfortable to engage, is more concerned with imitation as a way of subtly learning about the codes of fashionability, and the limitations of transgressing this fashionability, to evolve their sense of place within fashionability and thereby the visual culture of their refuge society.

Refugee: or diaspora?

Diaspora create a hybrid environment where traditions, codes and habits from the diaspora state of origin meld with the codes and even the habits of the society local to the refuge. As the refugee experience often remains in the psyche of diaspora, so to are the intentions to retain a sense of origin (predominant within many diaspora). In conversation with "J.C." (a veteran refugee aid worker), an example of this cross-over became apparent in the case of a group of South Asian refugees being relocated in a North Asian country. In this instance the refugees were being housed in temporary camps, without knowing (as in most camp situations) when they would be re-settled. J.C. noted the significant visual difference between the dress of the refugees' as a hybrid of South Asian and casual "westernised" dress styling, whereas the locals of the refuge (North Asian) practiced more sophisticated styling trends (J.C., 2007, pers. comm. 10 September). After a certain period of time had elapsed after which J.C. (because of past experiences) had expected to notice some acculturation by the refugees, it could be observed that as a group the refugees still insisted on wearing the fashionable trends of their state of origin, rather than acculturating to the local dress trends in their refuge state (ibid). When asked about this subject, some refugees were insistent that they need not change, as they would

probably be returning to their country of origin soon, and this is the way that they dress. Though there were possibly financial reasons contributing to this stance, overall the refugees seemed to consider that there was no point in changing and losing that aesthetic connection with their state of origin (ibid). In this instance the refugees acknowledge that they do not belong to the culture of their refuge state (nor do they aspire to). Visually they will feel free to express this for as long as their diaspora visual identity does not become a target of persecution by the refuge state, and for as long as this diaspora has a certain critical mass through which they can evolve and continue to acknowledge their heritage. Through the displacement of the refugee, and the diffusion of personal capacity, the refugee camp is a location where diaspora start to evolve, and where new habits will tend to emerge to support a way of surviving in this local. For many an important part of this survival revolves around the presentation of the self, which within the close quarters of a camp relies on the availability of resources and the allowances of local and camp codes. In the camp of diaspora these restrictions are outweighed by a significant benefit over solitude: "... against the isolating aversiveness of pain, mental and material culture assumes the shareability of sentience..." (Scarry, 1987: 326): wherein the burden of a refugee experience can be collectively negotiated.

Refugee: Negotiating settlement

Settled persons negotiate their identity in relation to their habitat. This interaction is important to their sense of well-being through reinforcing a sense of belonging in their place. Conversely the unsettled person, the displaced person, the refugee is taken to the extreme: they are unfamiliar with, or unable to discern local behavioural codes or

memes, amidst the greater unfamiliar machinations of the unexplored society, where they seek refuge. It is unlikely that the people smugglers, detention centres, or half-way houses are able to provide translated copies of the *Dress for Success* (Molloy, 1977) publication or the latest style catalogues. The refugee must negotiate their behaviour between new and old understandings of fashionability. Evidence of protocols through which asylum seekers gain knowledge about the different social codes can be gleaned through the memoir of Najaf Mazari, who richly recounts his experiences as an Afghani refugee seeking asylum in Australia (Mazari and Hillman, 2008). Arriving by boat as an 'illegal immigrant', Mazari is detained in the Woomera detention centre in the outback (desert) of South Australia, in accordance with the Australian immigration laws. A highly skilled rug-maker by trade, Mazari has an intimate connection with textile artefacts, and his memoir evidences distinct material culture differences between his past life in Afghanistan, and current life in Australia. It is interesting to note that little is learned by Mazari of Australian social codes whilst in detention; this point is further highlighted by his being chosen as an official camp communicator to other refugees. Instead Mazari is left to negotiate the intricacies of the Australian cultural codes on his release from Woomera, on obtaining a Temporary Protection Visa. "Clothing here is strange, also – I haven't yet become used to it. Nobody cares about clothing. They wear T-shirts and jeans and young boys wear baggy pants and the girls leave the middle of their bodies bare... [t]he way that people dress doesn't bother me, but it seems strange... they look cold." (ibid: 184-185) In the case of this refugee, Mazari's strength of identity allows him to feel comfortable in his critique of his potential demographic placement within the refuge, despite not being immediately taken in by a local diaspora community.

Refugee: And international vernaculars

Mazrahi mentions the ubiquitous jeans and t-shirt ensemble which infiltrates the stratas of 'fashionability'. From high-fashion (spectacle), to mid-market fashion (bread and butter), to anti-fashion—the jeans and t-shirt are a staple of everyday-wear globally, and strongly identified with the easy “cool” of a Western-style pop-culture. The 'jeans and t-shirt' are interpreted as the need suits, and as a dress medium they stand apart from other clothing styles in their broad global vernacular: no other clothing style saturates marketplaces globally with such durability and scope. The vernacular of 'jeans and t-shirt' visually transgresses traditional cultural backgrounds, by presenting a stylistic cultural vernacular to identify with an alternative demographic. This may not be 'high-fashion' but it is certainly more than 'clothing' (Candy, 2005). The 'jeans and t-shirt' ensemble has come to effortlessly transgress the ranks of style ranging from high-fashion to clothing. In the case of the refugee, what is perhaps regarded as a different style of clothing worn in the society where they would like to belong, would actually be an interpretation of fashionability by the younger refugee. The refugees wearing the hard-wearing denim are suiting themselves for broad placement in more opportune situations. This is an active engagement with a long established global dress vernacular, and the placement of an otherwise precarious selfhood (the refugee) beyond the confines of statehood or nationality.

Refugee: Finding placement

Coming into a new society requires the refugee to negotiate their learned behaviours as they relate to the established local behavioural codes found throughout their refuge. An individual's proficiency in negotiating such codes and memes evolves. To become fashionable in acculturating or representing their own cultural difference, the refugee is forced to question their (tacit) socially constructed behaviour. This interaction provides a cathartic opportunity to some, but this depends largely on the persona of an individual, and the opportunities that they are presented with. These opportunities vary from the acceptance of the local refuge communities, or the ease with which the refugee can acculturate to the local codes. These opportunities, as well as the possibility of being absorbed into a diaspora, would seem crucial to the refugee finding their place, possibly coping with their experiences, evolving their identity, and even gaining a sense of well-being. Logan (1998 [1991]: 178) discusses individuals who create 'flow' experience under adversity for use as coping devices. Expanding Csikszentmihalyi's (1990, 1994) concept of 'flow' would seem at odds with a refugee negotiating a foreign society: primarily because the refugee is often extremely self-aware. Whereas 'flow' as defined by Csikszentmihalyi (1994: xiii-xiv) required the right balance between skill level and the opportunity to apply that skill to the required level, so that the individual's self-awareness is eclipsed by contentment in the flow of their skill being exercised. In the case of refugee fashionability and Logan's identification of 'flow' as a coping mechanism (Logan, 1998: 178), the skill of reading behavioural codes can contribute significantly to this, but for the refugee it is more likely that a flow experience will come from a learned practice, which they have brought with them, such as Najaf Mazari's rug-making practice. Logan (ibid) also sites Frankl (1978) as another explorer of the coping mechanisms developed through

confinement in concentration camps of German occupied Europe in WW II, with Frankl referring to this process as 'dereflection' (Logan 1998:178).

In conclusion

To be a refugee is to be displaced from ones known habitat and seeking asylum in another. Undoubtedly, such experiences are incredibly traumatic. However, the hope of saving and even bettering their lives outweighs the adversities of persecution, loss of family, loss of place and loss of livelihood. In this process the visual presentation of self plays a very important initial and continuing role, gauging difference between the refugee and the citizens of the refuge. An impression of the dynamic of adversities with regards to this negotiation of dress difference (experienced by refugees) can be partially gleaned from available testimonies, reports through the mass-media and reports from aid and advocacy groups. Given such adversities challenging the refugee, even through the few examples presented in this essay, it seems as though material culture (within which 'fashion' is located) plays a significant role in the settlement of the refugee, as it does for the negotiation of settled visual identities. Fashion, as well as that which it creatively instigates, are keys to social identity, and the refugee surely brings with them identity: possibly damaged or enhanced by fortune but nonetheless identity. Contributing to the contemporary assertion that 'fashion' can exist anywhere, this paper has presented different locations of the refugee to debate that this 'fashion' even exists for the refugee between locations of settlement. Perhaps this cannot be high-fashion. But in negotiating fashionability throughout the vast experiences of refugees, there is an enrichment of the local through engagements with the space, behaviour, and

negotiation of the status-quo. In the case of the refugee 'fashionability' is a necessary cross-cultural language with which to engage, and subsequently allowing fashion to exist: even in precarious locations of self.

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