

Folds of Migration The Story of a Black Dress

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Abstract:

In summer 2016, a long black dress was found discarded on the shores of the island of Lesbos in Greece. The dress probably belonged to a Syrian woman who crossed the Turkish border to Greece on a dinghy. When she reached the shore, she must have changed into dry clothes provided by a humanitarian agency, leaving her wet black dress behind. The dress was picked up by the *Dirty Girls of Lesbos Island*, a volunteer organization who collect, wash and redistribute the clothes of refugees. Instead of following its course to redistribution, the black dress was handed over to be displayed in Athens in a showcase dedicated to the refugee crisis at the *Lyceum Club of Greek Women*. The story of the black dress touches upon the intimate embodied experience of displacement, the biopolitics of provision of humanitarian aid, environmental issues, and, last but not least, the politics of representation of “refugeeness” in museum displays and exhibitions.

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Lesvos Island: a gateway to Europe



Fig. 1-2:
Front and back side of the black dress that was found discarded on a shore on Lesbos island. Photos: E. Petridou.

In the summer of 2016, refugees from Syria and other Asian and African countries were crossing the border from Turkey to the Greek island of Lesbos, despite the March Deal of 2016 between Turkey and the EU that had officially closed the pathway from Greece to Europe. In the summer of 2016, the shores of Lesbos facing Turkey were covered with material evidence that revealed the landings of refugees. Among all the 'trash' on the shores was a long black dress of closed collar and long sleeves, zipped at the front (fig. 1-2). Its narrative power derives from the fact that its meaning, value and materiality were subjected to change at a much faster and volatile pace than normally expected of clothes: under conditions of displacement, the functional value of the dress increased as it bore the memory and sense of home. It then became trash, before it was transformed to a potential gift of humanitarian aid and, therefore, part of biopolitical governance. Then it turned into an object of museum display and, finally, its life changed again into an item in store, part of a museum collection. The black dress narrates its adventurous cultural biography (Kopytoff 1986; Hoskins 1998), a biography with many folds and unexpected turns, indicative of the mechanisms of power that determine the value of human life as much as the negotiation of human dignity.

Lesbos has served as a gateway to Europe for thousands of refugees over the past two decades. The island is situated in the North Aegean Sea at a distance that ranges from 10 to 20 km from the Turkish coast. In 2015, up to 12,000 people in a single day were reported to cross the border. The garment was found discarded at a shore at the north of the island where the strait is at its narrowest. It journeyed to Lesbos on the body of a Muslim woman, most probably from Syria. In terms of style, it represents one of the two main dress styles that Syrian women usually adopted during their presence on the island. Both include dark garments that cover the entire body. The first style, followed mostly by urban and younger women, is a combination of a long blouse or shirt that covers the hips, with tight trousers. The second style, which the black dress represents, comprises just one long dress in many variations, which loosely embraces the body.

Clothing as Material Border



Fig. 3:
A pile of clothes, life-jackets, blankets and other materials discarded on the land of Lesbos.
Photo: Alison Tierry-Evans.

The dress was found among other 'garbage' of clothes, shoes, life-jackets and blankets (fig. 3). Since the beginning of 2015, hundreds of thousands of materials used for wrapping the body have been stranded on the shores of the Aegean islands, life-jackets in particular. Most people are used to the idea that clothes are thrown away and become trash because they are worn, torn or somehow damaged and cannot be mended. In this case, high quality

clothes in good state were discarded just because they became wet. Within the time frame of people on the move, wet clothes, shoes or bags become useless or heavy to carry, and are left behind.



Fig. 4:
Life-jackets and boat debris as traces of refugee landings on Lesbos island. Photo: Alison Thierry-Evans.

Leaving behind intimate clothes means leaving behind an intimate bodily experience, a material and sensual memory of home. Intimate clothing is replaced with other clothes (provided by humanitarian aid), which most often do not correspond to the expectations and needs of the displaced (e.g. in terms of modesty). There are many stories of donated clothes that need to be creatively combined by refugees to produce the desired outcome: for example, sleeveless dresses are worn over sleeved blouses, sleeveless blouses designed as outer garments are used as underwear or, in reverse, nightgowns are worn in public as substitute for long dresses. It is in this sense that clothes become a material and embodied experience of the border.

Media Representations of Being Refugee

The black dress was transformed to trash because it became wet. Crossing the border from Turkey to Lesbos involves crossing water. News of overcrowded sinking boats and refugees that never made it to the shore have dominated media representations creating a powerful emotional impact, and posing political and moral questions regarding the administration of the refugee crisis by the EU. Activists and artists have repeatedly used life-jackets in their projects and art installations to raise awareness of the dire conditions of 'refugeeness' and to point at the unsafe passage that thousands of displaced people are forced to undertake as a result of European border policies. Since the beginning of 2016, Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, for example, has extensively used life-jackets and boats in a series of public installations in different European cities, while in December 2015 on Lesbos humanitarian aid providers formed a gigantic symbol of peace on a hillside using 3,000 orange fluorescent life-jackets as Christmas message.

(<http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/article/35213616/migrant-crisis-charities-make-massive-peace-sign-out-of-life-jackets-on-lesbos>.)

Widely circulated media images of sinking boats construct refugees as subjects in a state of emergency, with their biological life taking over other aspects of their existence, political or social. Refugees are thus represented as leading what the Italian philosopher Agamben calls “a bare life”. (For a presentation and critique of Agamben’s theory on ‘bare life’ in the case of refugeeness see Trapp 2016). Donated clothing that expresses such a perception of refugees, may not be in good condition, maybe worn, torn or dirty, but still considered by many appropriate for people in such a need.

However, multiple incidents have occurred of refugees challenging the logic of biological necessity and negotiating their dignity through their refusal to wear certain clothes. For example, in a situation that is perceived to be one of emergency and extreme biological need, volunteers were surprised to find that brands were preferred to non-brands, regardless of the quality of the material. It is an interesting moment of negotiation of dignity and self-determination that challenges moral understandings of ‘bare life’, of people who are not supposed to be choosers or wear branded clothes. A female First Aid volunteer helping Muslim women at the shore change from their wet clothes reports how surprised she was to find that they were wearing string panties underneath. Donated string panties and shoes with high heels have been repeatedly mentioned by humanitarian workers as the example par excellence of the lack of understanding on the part of the local population of refugees’ “real” needs. Hundreds of bags of such ‘inappropriate clothing’ have been trashed by the people who collect and sort out used clothes.

Restoring Dignity

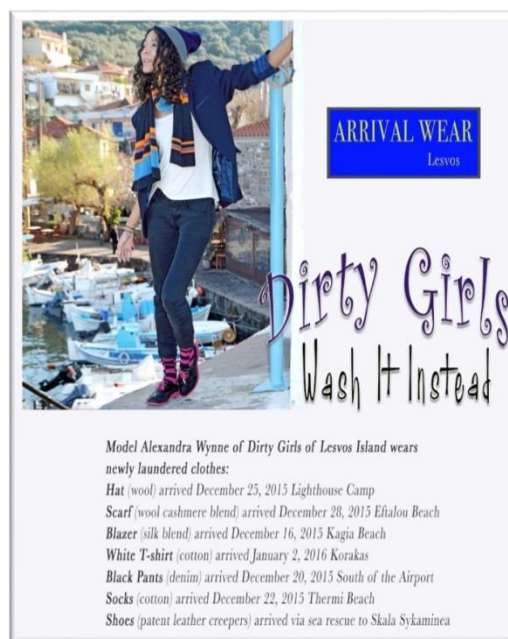
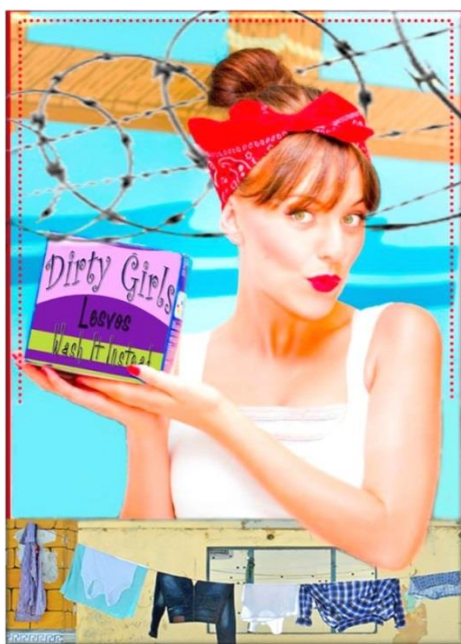


Fig. 5-6:
Posters of Dirty Girls promoting the idea of washing and reusing refugee clothes.

Let us return to the black dress, which became witness to all those workings of biopolitical power that unfold among the actors of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’: Left on the shore as trash, the dress would have made its way to the landfill, had it not been for the *Dirty Girls of Lesvos* (fig. 5-6), an international volunteer organization, who picked it up to be washed.

(Information on the Dirty Girls of Lesvos Island and news about its recent activities: https://www.facebook.com/pg/dirtygirllesvos/about/?ref=page_internal) Witnessing good quality clothing form piles of trash rather than been saved and reused, Alison Terry-Evans, an Australian photographer, initiated in October 2015 this organization for washing and redistributing clothes, blankets, sleeping bags and other materials collected from along the shorelines and at the refugee camps. As stated on their website, *Dirty Girls* believe their work to be

about equality, dignity and respect. Respect for the new arrivals by having their own kind of clothing available for them. Respect for the local community and the environment by helping reduce landfill. What is more, keeping the environment clean prevents the association of refugees with pollution, not only environmentally but also symbolically. Finally, the act of picking up, washing and taking care of refugee clothes, is considered by the *Dirty Girls* to be a sign of respect and care for the people coming across the sea.

The same act, that of the restoration of dignity through clothes-related projects, informs also Ai Weiwei's art and, in particular, his installation in a New York gallery titled 'Laundromat'. The artist collected clothes and shoes from the camp site of Idomeni in northern Greece at the official border crossing into FYROM, when the camp closed in May 2016. Once collected, each garment was recorded, washed, dried, ironed, folded and categorized. The exhibition consisted of racks with hanging garments while the walls and floor were wrapped with associated images and headlines from the press. The artist's intention was to create a sense of restoration, so much of clothing as for the people themselves. In removing dirt and wear from the clothing, the project was about the restoration of dignity. It also pointed at the forced inability of the people to take care of themselves and their clothes under conditions of displacement. (Information on the "Laundromat" installation can be found on the online digital architecture and design magazine *designboom*:

<http://www.designboom.com/art/ai-weiwei-laundromat-exhibit-washed-garments-refugee-camps-new-york-deitch-projects-11-07-2016/>. Also, for a presentation of Ai Weiwei's project and a comment on the restoration of dignity, see Macindoe 2017).

From Trash to the Glass Display

In the hands of *Dirty Girls*, the trajectory of the black dress changed, as it was transformed from trash to an alternative form of humanitarian aid. However, its prescribed course as an item to be redistributed to refugees would change again. Its biography continued as it was handed over to me by Alison, the founder of Dirty Girls, with the purpose to be used for a display on refugees in Athens. As a researcher of donated clothes and the ways they circulate in the form of humanitarian aid, I met Alison in the summer of 2016 for an interview at her home in the town of Eressos in Lesvos. Prior to our meeting, the curator of the Museum of the History of Greek Costume in Athens, an establishment that forms part of the Lyceum Club of Greek Women, informed me of her wish to dedicate the central display at the main hall of the Club to refugee clothing. (The Lyceum Club of Greek Women is an historic cultural institution in Greece promoting, among other things, folk dancing and the conservation of traditional costumes.) The black dress was thus donated by Dirty Girls to the Lyceum Club and started a new journey from Lesvos to Athens.

In Athens, the dress became part of a display bearing the title 'The first land' (fig. 7). The title refers to the island of Lesvos as the first safe haven for refugees after crossing the sea from the Turkish coast. On its left and right sides, the display contains garments that belonged to refugees who were forcefully displaced from Asia Minor at the beginnings of the twentieth century. These historic clothes, part of the Museum's collection, belonged to prosperous urban families. The garments include a man's redingote and a woman's fur-lined jacket (left) as well as a short jacket and a long sleeved coat dress (right). They are all displayed on dress-maker dummies.



Fig. 7:
Glass display titled 'The first land' at the Lyceum Club of Greek Women in Athens,
dedicated to the refugees on Lesbos island. Photo: E. Petridou.

The middle section of the display is dedicated to contemporary refugees who, like their Asia Minor predecessors a hundred years ago, have followed a similar route. The middle section contains two big photographs of people on the move, one contemporary in colour, depicting them wrapped in gold foil blankets, and one black-and-white, depicting them boarding on a small boat to cross the sea to Lesbos. By juxtaposition, a narrative of continuity of migration is constructed. What is more, the argument of continuity is reinforced by the creation of an aesthetic unity through a yellow and black synthesis of elements in the whole of the display. The politics of this display lie on the idea that contemporary refugees are placed in the same category with those who came from Asia Minor at the beginning of last century, thus inviting the visitor to read the present in the familiar terms of the past.

The middle section also contains the black dress, which is placed on the floor of the display (fig. 8). A short note informs visitors of where and how it was found. By combining historic garments with contemporary clothes, clothes of no particular sartorial interest nor exemplary in design, the display contains an interesting erasure of hierarchy and an emphasis on the social value of clothes.



Fig. 8:
The black dress at the bottom of the glass display. Photo: E. Petridou.

Still, it should be noted that the black dress is the only garment of the display that is not placed on a dressmaker's dummy but right on the floor. Does this act contain a discrimination between humble everyday clothes, familiar to many wardrobes, and historic garments? Probably. However, placed on the floor underneath the big photograph of people walking under thermal blankets, the black dress seems as if it was left behind on purpose as refugees abandoned their wet clothes and continued their journey.

References

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