



Article

Textile Practices, Gendered Labor, and the Politics of Care in Displacement and Diaspora

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Abstract

The article analyses textile practices in the contexts of forced migration and diaspora as feminist forms of resistance, care work, and memory-making. It demonstrates that embroidery, weaving, and sewing function as “technologies of affect” that empower cultural identity, support community continuity, and counteract the invisibility of displaced people. Drawing on the theories of Ahmed, Hooks, Anzaldúa, Taylor, and others, the text frames textiles as material archives and practices of “repertoire” embodied memory. Examples such as Palestinian tatreez, the Embroidery as Resistance projects, and the works of artists presented at the Venice Biennale illustrate the intricate relationship between art, politics, and everyday care work. The article critiques Western-centric approaches to fashion, proposing a redefinition of it as a practice of survival and care. Ultimately, the text suggests that textile practices not only document the past but also speculatively design feminist futures based on solidarity and freedom.

Keywords

Textile Practices, Feminist Futures, Forced Displacement, Diaspora Studies, Embodied Memory

Introduction

In toxic times, or – as Ziauddin Sardar (2021) describes it – in “postnormal times”, which, as Jim Dator (2026) also notes, are marked by mass displacement, exhaustion of governing structures worldwide, structural violence, and the erosion of collective belonging, fashion, and particularly textile practice, emerges not merely as ornament or aesthetic, but as an embodied form of resistance. For communities uprooted by conflict, climate crisis, or systemic marginalization, textiles are more than material necessities; they are mnemonic devices, repositories of cultural identity, and affective gestures of continuity. Woven into their fibers are stories of survival, acts of joy, and fugitive strategies for reasserting presence in environments that actively seek to erase it. This article explores how displaced and nomadic populations mobilize textile traditions, such as weaving, dyeing, and embroidery, as affective technologies that resist invisibilization, cultivate joy, and sustain cultural memory in the absence of land and permanence.

The global architecture of forced migration, from refugee camps to border zones and detention infrastructures, often renders displaced bodies as passive recipients of aid, bureaucratic objects rather than cultural agents. Yet even within these constrained spatial and political contexts, textile practices have persisted as quiet, insistent forms of worldmaking. In temporary shelters and informal settlements, salvaged fabrics are stitched into makeshift garments or ceremonial cloths; traditional motifs are re-embroidered onto aid blankets; communal weaving sessions become spaces of mutual recognition and healing. These practices, while materially modest, are politically potent. They activate what theorist Saidiya Hartman (1997) calls the “poetics of the archive”, a mode of historical reconstruction that centers affect, embodiment, and refusal.

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This paper reframes textiles not as nostalgic remnants of lost homelands but as tactile languages of belonging and resistance. Drawing on intersectional and decolonial frameworks, it situates textile practices within what Bell Hooks (1994) describes as an “aesthetic of radical care,” where the act of making, especially within marginal conditions, becomes a form of joy-infused survival. Joy here is not naïve or apolitical.

This work enters into dialogue with feminist theorists of materiality and affects. Textile-making, as tactile labor, as memory work, and as social ritual, epitomizes what Sara Ahmed (2010) terms “affective economies,” where emotions circulate through bodies, objects, and social formations. The handwoven cloth, the stitched motif, the reused thread, all operate as affective nodes, linking past and present, homeland and exile. Through these objects, displaced communities materialize what Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) names the “borderlands,” not only as physical thresholds but as psychic and cultural interzones where hybrid identities emerge.

In highlighting textile practice, this article also challenges the Western-centric frameworks of fashion studies, which often privilege the runway, the brand, or the object divorced from its sociopolitical context. Here, fashion is not about novelty or spectacles, but about survival, social reproduction, and political refusal. It is grounded in community, in continuity, and in the bodily acts of making. This reorientation resonates with recent scholarship on slow fashion, indigenous aesthetics, and craft-based resistance (Kettle, 2019; Niessen, 2020), which seeks to unsettle extractive narratives and foreground alternative temporalities and ontologies.

Moreover, this research contributes to a growing conversation on the role of affect in contemporary struggles for justice. In toxic times, marked by climate precarity, authoritarian resurgence, and mass displacement, affective practices like textile-making become critical tools for what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) calls “reparative reading”: the capacity to assemble meaning, beauty, and hope from fragments. Through threads and textures, displaced communities enact futures that are not yet realized but are felt—stitched into being through ritual, labor, and imagination.

By centering textile practices in contexts of displacement, this paper foregrounds the subtle yet powerful ways in which fashion operates as both an aesthetic and political force. These practices reveal joy not as escapism, but as strategy; not as sentimentality, but as structure. In weaving together threads of memory, resistance, and care, displaced makers stitch worlds that refuse to erasure—textile by textile, gesture by gesture, joy by joy.

This paper examines both grassroots and institutional articulations of embroidery as resistance, tracing how feminist textile practices move between domestic, communal, and exhibition spaces. From workshops such as Embroidery as Resistance in Berlin to installations presented at the Venice Biennale, these textile acts are not isolated gestures but part of a transnational network of care and creative labor. Their significance lies precisely in this circulation, across scales, languages, and bodies, where the domestic becomes political, and the aesthetic becomes a site of worldmaking. In foregrounding these continuities, the study situates embroidery as both method and metaphor for collective survival and speculative reconstruction.

Theoretical Framework

Within the architecture of displacement, the refugee camp is often positioned as a space of suspension—an exception to the normal order of citizenship, temporality, and political subjectivity. Giorgio Agamben (1998) famously described the camp as the *nomos* of the modern, a biopolitical zone in which individuals are stripped of political agency and reduced to “bare life.” However, such interpretations, while valuable for unveiling state violence, risk flattening the complexity of lived experience within these spaces. Against the image of the refugee as voiceless and dehistoricized, this paper aligns with feminist, decolonial, and materialist theorists who foreground the agency and creativity of camp residents through everyday acts, particularly those rooted in material culture, such as textile-making.

Refugee camps may indeed be designed for containment and control, but they are also spaces where alternative social practices and cultural expressions flourish in spite of constraint. This paper understands traditional textile craft not as peripheral activity, but as a meaningful and political practice that addresses deeply overlooked needs—those of identity affirmation, intergenerational continuity, bodily autonomy, and cultural belonging. These needs are not abstract or secondary to survival; rather, they are central to the psycho-social resilience of displaced populations. When camp residents engage in weaving, embroidering, or dyeing, they do not merely replicate lost

traditions; they reassert their presence, remake community, and actively resist the erasures of humanitarian and state discourses.

This approach draws from feminist affect theory, particularly the work of Sara Ahmed (2004), who writes that emotions are not simply private experiences but are social and material, “sticking” to bodies, objects, and spaces. Textiles, when viewed through this lens, become affective carriers, sensuous, labor-intensive, and memory-laden objects that create continuity between past and present. Embroidered motifs, cloth fragments from a former home, or color schemes tied to specific seasons or rituals all operate as aesthetic codes that reconstruct belonging amid displacement. The creation and circulation of these textiles forge what Ahmed calls “affective economies” that shape social worlds and produce alternative registers of value and recognition.

Equally relevant is Bell Hooks (1994) notion of “homeplace”, a space, often gendered and historically oppressed, where care, resistance, and cultural continuity are enacted through everyday labor. The sewing circle, the shared loom, the ritual of dyeing cloth; these are not merely nostalgic gestures but strategic affirmations of presence and possibility. In refugee camps such as Kara Tepe or Zaatari, where architectural structures are provisional and bureaucratic frameworks dominate, textile spaces emerge as critical counter-sites. They become nodes of relationality and embodied knowledge where camp residents, especially women, assert their capacity to create, to teach, and to narrate their own histories.

The refusal to relinquish textile traditions in exile also resonates with Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1987) concept of *nepantla*, the in-between space of hybridity, transition, and identity negotiation. Refugee camps epitomize *nepantla*: they are neither home nor hostland, neither settled nor temporary. Within these liminal spaces, textile practices articulate the complexity of diasporic subjectivities. For example, when Syrian Kurdish women in Greek camps embroider floral motifs onto UNHCR blankets, they not only reclaim an impersonal object; they inscribe into it the landscape, cosmology, and memory of a place that persists through threads even as borders attempt to sever it.

Material culture theorist Tim Ingold (2013) offers further insight into this process by emphasizing making as a way of thinking and worlding. In his view, the hand that weaves is not just executing tradition—it is participating in a form of knowledge production that is both bodily and ontological. Refugee textile practices thus can be seen not merely as “crafts” but as epistemological actions: ways of knowing, remembering, and relating that contest the idea of the camp as a space of passivity. These acts of making are deeply pedagogical; they often involve intergenerational transmission, informal teaching, and communal coordination, which serve to reweave the social fabric eroded by war, migration, and bureaucratic erasure.

Political theorist Ariella Aïsha Azoulay (2019) further deepens this perspective by arguing that imperial and humanitarian systems consistently separate people from the knowledge embedded in objects, especially in displaced or colonized contexts. To practice textile-making in the camp, then, is to resist this severance. It is a reassertion of what Azoulay calls “potential history”—a refusal to accept dispossession as the final word, and a reclaiming of the agency to continue history through embodied knowledge and creative continuity. In this sense, the act of weaving is also a political gesture that remaps the affective geography of the camp.

Furthermore, contemporary scholarship on forced migration has emphasized the role of non-institutionalized cultural practices in fostering resilience and cohesion. As Malkki (1996) argued, refugee identities are often essentialized in humanitarian discourse as “speechless emissaries,” reduced to silence or abstracted victimhood. Yet the ongoing practices of textile-making, far from mute, are profoundly communicative. They create an affective archive, a portable and wearable history that defies the narrative of loss as totalizing. These archives do not sit in museums; they move bodies, pass through hands, and endure the folds of fabric salvaged from ruined homes or aid distributions.

To understand the social and political significance of textile practice in refugee camps, we must decenter traditional hierarchies of what counts as political action. As feminist scholars have long insisted, care work, cultural labor, and aesthetic expression are not merely supplementary to political life—they are constitutive of it (Tronto, 1993). In the context of the camp, where the right to speak, move, and work is often curtailed, textile practice functions as a stealth form of insurgency: one that bypasses the languages of protest and instead asserts joy, presence, and cultural survival through everyday acts of making.

Within this landscape, the political economy of care becomes central. As feminist labor theorists such as Silvia Federici (2012) and Bell Hooks (1994) have shown, practices rooted in care, repetition, and embodied skill have

been systematically devalued because they resist capitalist metrics of productivity. Textile work, precisely because it is slow, relational, and feminized, exposes the limits of an economic system that measures value through speed and accumulation. In refugee camps and diasporic contexts, these undervalued forms of labor acquire radical meaning: they reconfigure production into relation, efficiency into endurance, and dispossession into presence. To stitch, mend, or dye becomes an act of political refusal, asserting that care itself is a mode of resistance.

Textile Practices as Feminist Resistance and Memory

At last year's Venice Biennale of Art, titled *Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere*, during one of the accompanying events – *South West Bank: Landworks, Collective Action and Sound* – the artist Shayma Hamad from Ramallah presented an installation entitled *Dough Ball*, in which the process of kneading dough was transformed into a ritual of mourning. Dough, a living and malleable material that requires time, patience, and care, intends to reflect the process of nurturing the memory of what has been lost. In the traditions of many cultures, particularly those of the Far East, bread and dough are often associated with remembrance of the deceased – such as baking bread on All Souls' Day or other commemorative rituals. Hamad's work harnesses this symbolism to emphasize the memory of victims of conflict and violence, especially in the occupied West Bank. The act of kneading dough is not merely a social practice that brings people together, reminding them of mutual care, community, and coping with loss. It transforms everyday domestic labor into a ritual imbued with political significance and constitutes a form of resistance deeply connected to the space of female community.

Feminist approaches, especially those from feminist labor theory and care theory, reveal that these often seemingly trivial and invisible domestic tasks – such as cooking, baking, caregiving, or sewing – are carriers of power and social reproduction. Through these daily activities and crafts, new layers of meaning emerge. Similarly, at the Biennale, the work of Dana Awartani, a Saudi Palestinian artist, was presented. Awartani created an installation titled "Come, let me heal your wounds. Let me mend your broken bones", consisting of seemingly simple embroidered panels in shades of yellow, orange, and red, suspended in space. The fabrics were previously dyed with natural pigments derived from herbs and spices – an ecological gesture that also draws upon the healing properties of these materials, referencing traditional textile dyeing methods from Kerala (Ansari, 2024). With each subsequent invasion in the East, Awartani punctures the fabric – often silk – symbolizing sites of impact, then mends it. This act holds symbolic significance, becoming a grassroots healing practice. The re-stitched fabric visually manifests the physical and emotional scars left in the real world.

As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes (Gimblett 2001, as cited in Murphy 2018, p. 68): "these are objects which, by the dents and tears and rips and distortions and contortions, tell you that something terrible – and something violent – must have happened." Gimblett thus emphasizes that these objects not only bear witness to tragedy but also confer an immediate, tangible reality to history. This helps these narratives to be received as authentic and indisputable, especially in contexts where stories – such as those of women – might otherwise face exclusion. The re-stitched fabric reveals the physical and emotional wounds inflicted on the tangible world. Awartani's work engages with a real territory – not only geographic but also corporeal – where materiality intersects with embodiments.

The body perceived as an archive is a perspective that accompanies contemporary art, as well as performative practices, feminist theories, and decolonial perspectives. In *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Diana Taylor explains that the repertoire is knowledge transmitted through actions, gestures, theater, or performance, and in this context, the body becomes a source of knowledge, memory, and history, entirely independent of writing. According to Taylor, the archive is not based solely on enduring elements such as concrete artifacts; rather, she proposes a radical expansion of this concept and its semantic scope. For Taylor, the archive is intimately connected with what is ephemeral and corporeal. As she writes: "The rift, I submit, does not lie between the written and spoken word, but between the archive of supposedly enduring materials (...) and the so-called ephemeral repertoire of embodied practice/knowledge" (Taylor 2003, p 51). Understood in this way, the body becomes a medium that unites the functions of an archive of memory and knowledge, but also trauma: an idea that is particularly significant from the perspective of marginalized communities, minorities, migrants, indigenous peoples, and women.

From a feminist perspective, the concept of the repertoire becomes a space of resistance against dominant forms

of power that exclude the body as a bearer of meaning. Taylor highlights the tension between what is durable and materially concrete (the archive) and what is more transient, ephemeral, and embodied (the repertoire), a division that is explicitly political in nature. As she writes: “The repertoire enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts are usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge” (Taylor 2003, 51). Thus, the repertoire not only preserves memory but also embodies, transforms, and updates it.

Women’s experiences, often connected with care, nurturing, and community, are therefore not typically part of the official archive; however, through gestures – not only artistic but also grassroots, tangible, and often ritualistic – they can endure. The repertoire Taylor describes requires presence – it is a form of knowledge that does not exist in isolation but is deeply rooted in relationships and embodied practices such as embroidery, sewing, and weaving. Taylor’s distinction between the archive and the repertoire can demonstrate how various textile practices integrate into a form of embodied, living memory, where embroidery becomes a gesture repeated over time, an embodied ritual conveying specific knowledge, emotions, and histories (independent of written language) rather than merely a technical skill.

Assuming Taylor’s conception of the repertoire as “embodied memory,” (Taylor 2003, p. 53) a knowledge requiring presence, relation, and action, textiles become a kind of carrier of what exists at the margins: personal and collective experiences – traumas, migration, women’s everyday lives – expressing communal narratives. It is alive and, like the body, materially remembers – it wears, carries certain traces or “scars,” and is susceptible to touch, which can shape or destroy it. If “Memory is embodied and sensual (...) it links the deeply private with social, even official, practices” (Taylor 2003, p. 141), textile practices can be understood as acts of bodily invocation and transmission of memory, which often express private (or more commonly collective) traumas and become a means to narrate within broader communal discourses. Projects such as the Berlin-based Embroidery as Resistance create grassroots spaces in which the female body becomes a subject situated between the personal and the political-material – a manifestation of memory. In line with what Taylor terms the “continuum between inner and outer,” (Taylor 2003, p. 142) fabric emerges as a medium that narrates communal histories through the sense of touch and repetition, where embroidery functions as a form of mapping memory, a visual and tactile rendering of history within material space. As Taylor writes,

Embodied memory, because it is live, exceeds the archive’s ability to capture it. [...] Multiple forms of embodied acts are always present, though in a constant state of againness. They reconstitute themselves, transmitting communal memories, histories, and values from one group/generation to the next. Embodied and performed acts generate, record, and transmit knowledge (Taylor 2003, p. 53).

This suggests that cultural memory is not an abstract concept but a living, embodied experience that connects individuals to communities and specific histories through grassroots practices and the senses. In working with textiles – embroidery and other craft practices – these acts represent a form of memory wherein power and identity are stored and transmitted. Weaving thus becomes a performative form of memory – the repertoire – in which body and material interact reciprocally, jointly producing communal histories. Embroidery as Resistance is a social and artistic space where embroidery, often *tatreez*, functions as a tool of political resistance, memory cultivation, and the construction of communal experience. *Tatreez*, in its history, is characterized by its motifs, which “have a historical significance, carrying rich and complex histories of culture and identity.” (Palestine News Network, 2022). It refers to “a unique style of Palestinian cross-stitch embroidery, which dates from about 3000 years ago.” (Palestine News Network, 2022). Despite being a particularly complex embroidery, it is first and foremost a tradition passed down from generation to generation and used by women to preserve their heritage and also as a way to convey a specific message. It is also an indicator of social class, and the motives or patterns vary from one region to another.

Similarly, within Embroidery as Resistance, Palestinian *tatreez* is employed as a means of transmitting personal and collective histories: experiences of migration and, often accompanying these, issues of trauma and belonging. In Berlin, Palestinian women share their embroidery patterns, for example from the Gaza Strip, teaching others their tradition. This is not only a tool of resistance but also a form of cultural heritage preservation, cultivated by a feminist group of Palestinian women.

At times, they are accused of Palestinian nationalism: “It is important to note and acknowledge that the feminist resistance of Palestinian women in subverting its colonization and occupation is tied to Palestinian nationalism,

which centres on the protection and continued preservation of its cultural heritage and tradition.” (Jayakumar 2024) However, it remains simultaneously a means of economic emancipation, through which women can earn income by conducting workshops, trainings, sharing skills, and selling garments they have created.

After October 7, 2023, when Israel once again attacked Palestine, Rasha Al. Jundi – a Palestinian artist originally from Nairobi and currently residing in Berlin (which remains one of the primary European centers of the Palestinian diaspora, where migrants include those who arrived in Germany decades ago: in the 1950s, after 1967, as well as refugees from Syria and Gaza following 2011) – initiated the project *When the Grapes were Sour* in response and opposition to the ongoing occupation of her homeland. This project, documented on Instagram (Instagram account @embroidered_exile) at involves embroidering *tatreez* patterns onto photographs of survivors or destroyed cities. This seemingly simple artistic gesture symbolizes, in addition to Palestinian heritage, an assertion of identity and, in a romanticized manner – as flowers growing from ruins or images – a hope for rebirth.

Al Jundi’s project also functions as workshops and gatherings, facilitating conversations about Palestinian embroidery, which is deeply rooted not only in history but also in personal experience: “Palestinian embroidery is a reflection of you, the Palestinian. I remind myself of the maternal figures in my life and their relentless patience while moving the needle steadily and rhythmically through the fabric. They stitched the seeds of love for Palestine in my heart.” (Al Jundi, 2023).

As early as 1921, Candace Wheeler observed that:

We can deduce from these needle records much of the physical circumstances of woman’s long pilgrimage down the ages, of her mental processes, of her growth in thought. We can judge from the character of her art whether she was at peace with herself and the world, and from its status we become aware of its relative importance to the conditions of her life. (Wheeler 1921, p. 4).

From this perspective, embroidery is not merely decoration – it becomes a material testimony of women’s lives, resistance, and intellectual processes, whose voices have been marginalized for centuries. Embroidery, or textiles more broadly, in the public sphere serve as a means of reclaiming voice and presence, resisting dominant norms – not only visual but also political. Collective textile practices such as workshops and gatherings incorporate pedagogy, elements of teaching, storytelling, and self-care, thus creating alternative structures of support. Many Palestinians in Berlin engage in artistic, activist, and educational activities often centered around themes of memory, identity, and social justice.

The organizers of *Embroidery as Resistance* are independent, grassroots artistic collectives such as *Curation of Tatreez* and the *Arab Women’s Solidarity Association*. In the urban space of Berlin, *tatreez* also functions as a visual gesture unmistakably associated with Palestine, and thus is employed during various protests and solidarity marches, often those connected to refugee women, for example on *International Women’s Day*: which, however, remains largely invisible within the demonstrators’ crowd. It serves as a grassroots, symbolic, visual gesture. Local activists and Palestinian women create textiles during workshops to then utilize them in public assemblies. Banners – particularly those embroidered with olive trees and branches – are subsequently carried during protests. In this sense, *tatreez*, produced within collectives, also operates as an element of participation, directly involving participants in the creation of a shared narrative and visual community.

Claire Bishop, in *Artificial Hells*, notes that contemporary participatory art is too often evaluated solely through the lens of its social effects, rather than its aesthetic or affective power. She highlights the tension between aesthetics and ethics, questioning whether participation serves the artwork or becomes merely a means to an end. In the case of practices like *Embroidery as Resistance*, this conflict is suspended: creation becomes simultaneously a political, aesthetic, and emotional act, rooted in bodily experience, touch, and memory. *Tatreez*, executed by women, both records histories of violence and resistance to it, and materializes affect – it does not illustrate but enacts, relying on concrete actions in space based on emotions. Perhaps, following Bishop, the primary goal of collective embroidery is not the struggle for equality or visibility, but rather personal and cultural freedom derived from everyday practices:

“Participation was directed away from the imposition of social equality and onto the question of freedom: a celebration of the everyday worker was replaced by a re-evaluation of everyday objects and experiences as a point of opposition to cultural hierarchy” (Bishop 2012, p. 81).

But can such grassroots, material, affective, embodied, and collective practices truly take root within the

structures of the dominant art world and its institutions? Do embroidered banners, communal workshops, and techniques and memories passed hand to hand have a chance to penetrate the frameworks of recognition, prestige, and visibility? Or as Jack Halberstam suggests: is this not about success as defined by the logic of the art world, but rather failure as a strategy? For Halberstam (Halberstam 2011) failure is the rejection of a compelling logic and discipline, a form of their critique. In his view, failure does not signify defeat but is a gesture of resistance against prevailing norms: a subversive alternative to hegemonic definitions of success, productivity, and value.

In the face of contemporary political, social, and climatic crises, embroidery, textiles, and communal practices of women's craft become a form of affective passage: both a gesture of resistance and a tool for building relationships, nurturing memory, and care. Projects such as *Embroidery as Resistance* or the embroideries appearing at protests within the Palestinian diaspora not only provide a visual expression of political dissent but also embody joy, solidarity, and memory as forms of survival. In this sense, they exemplify what might be called fashion as resistance – embodied through touch, shared time, and everyday materiality.

And yet, are these grassroots actions, although full of tenderness, rooted in micropractices and care, not doomed from the outset to invisibility and marginalization? Where the perspective of embroidery practice, communal sewing, and the mutual sharing of craft techniques is ignored, trivialized, and dismissed as 'women's work' 'too emotional,' "insignificant," understood as weakness or helplessness rather than resistance manifesting through affect. Can the textiles created within such practices thus become a form of feminist, social community in our toxic contemporary times?

In returning to these questions, this paper proposes that embroidery and textile practice operate not only as mnemonic or reparative gestures but as speculative media—technologies of feminist futurity. They do not merely memorialize what has been lost; they imagine what might yet be woven into being. Each stitch, each collective gesture, inscribes a possible future grounded in slowness, care, and mutual recognition. In this sense, embroidery exceeds the logic of nostalgia: it becomes a pedagogy of hope, a tactile rehearsal for other ways of inhabiting the world.

By foregrounding these practices, the paper calls for a revaluation of textile labor as epistemological action—a mode of knowing and imagining otherwise. In the threads of Palestinian *tatreez*, in communal sewing circles, and in the quiet persistence of displaced women's hands, we find the outline of a different social contract, one woven from care, continuity, and the courage to begin again.

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