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## **"I am an immigrant": fashion, immigration and borders in the contemporary trans-global landscape.**

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### **Abstract:**

In the light of the Brexit vote, and the recent surge in nationalism and xenophobia in Europe, this article analyses the condition of the immigrant within fashion to pose the question: how can fashion contribute to an understanding of immigration as a constitutive aspect of contemporary society? Considering Brexit as symptomatic of wider political changes that are currently informing other Western countries, the discussion focuses on the reactions of London's fashion world to the political scenario in Britain. "I am an immigrant" is a statement that has recently appeared in several collections and campaigns, with designers and high street brands publicly airing their pro-immigration messages. The discussion embraces philosophical contributions on the nation-state, sovereignty, and citizenship, and applies the notion of 'conviviality', as outlined by Paul Gilroy (2004), to discuss London's fashion and its reactions to the anti-immigration stance of the pro-Brexit front. It then unravels the idea of national identity as a romantic construct, and analyses works, within fashion, that challenge current perceptions of immigration as well as assumptions about cultural homogeneity. By deconstructing, through fashion, the very idea of national and cultural identity, we can in fact question binary oppositions associated to the category of the immigrant, such as 'citizen'/'alien', 'inside'/'outside'.

**Keywords:** immigration, Brexit, fashion, nation, identity.

### **Introduction**

Focussing on the British context, this article analyses the condition of the immigrant within fashion to pose the question: how can fashion contribute to an understanding of immigration as a constitutive aspect of contemporary society? It is a timely question nowadays that, across Europe, the US and South America, political parties opposing to immigration have triumphed at the polls, and nationalism and xenophobia are thriving

in many countries. In 2016, one of the main arguments of the pro-Brexit campaign focussed on a stricter control of immigration from other European countries. By invoking the protection of the British economy against the many threats posed by the European Union, the pro-Brexiters systematically forged modern racism to old imperial phantasies of economic and political sovereignty.

At the time this paper is being written there is still much uncertainty about the future relationship between the UK and the European Union, as the terms of Brexit are yet to be negotiated and an agreement yet to be established. However, despite the many (yet) unresolved issues, the current situation offers a precious opportunity for interpreting fashion's response to the current political and historical context, and for reaffirming its political relevance, which is often overlooked, if not intentionally diminished.

Indeed, exploring from the perspective of fashion the debate surrounding immigration and the 'multicultural' nature of British society lets some key epistemological questions emerge: in times of global migration, how can contemporary fashion theory understand displacements and conceptualise the figure of the immigrant? Moreover, how can it unravel the concepts 'tradition' and 'identity'?

There seems to be in fact a gap in fashion studies, that is, whilst the topic of immigrant labour has been widely investigated (Green 1997; Louie 2001; Rabine and Kaiser 2006; Ceccagno 2017; Krause 2018), the subject of immigration – and of inclusion and exclusion within society - has not been as extensively discussed from a theoretical perspective.<sup>1</sup> This is particularly striking considering the global challenge that immigration poses, at times of large-scale refugee movements. As denounced by the UN Refugee Agency, at the end of 2017, 68.5 million people have been displaced because of conflict, violence, persecution or human rights violation (UNHCR 2018). This article does not investigate forced displacement, nor the refugee crisis, but rather focuses on how the figure of the 'immigrant' - whether economic migrant or not – urges fashion theory to engage in deeper conversations with philosophical and post-colonial studies. The paper discusses different conceptualisations of the figure of the immigrant and analyses how cultural identity is being re-framed in the rapidly changing trans-global landscape.

As Europe shifts politically rightwards, nationalism and protectionism are on the rise, immigrants are demonised, and borders are reinforced, fashion studies need to address how fashion can deal with these nationalistic tendencies and open up a different understanding of immigration.

Considering Brexit as symptomatic of wider political changes that are informing also other European countries, it is important to initially concentrate on the reactions of London's fashion world to the political scenario in Britain. In September 2018, The British Fashion Council (BFC) invited to 10 Downing Street representatives from the fashion industry, such as buyers, executives and media, for a cocktail reception hosted by the Prime Minister Theresa May. As reported by Imran Amed (2018), the Chair of BFC Stephanie Phair addressed the risk of Britain's retreat from the global position that constituted its success, and consequently of London losing its prominence as a global fashion capital:

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<sup>1</sup> On the topic of immigrant arrivals and the fashioned body, see the interesting works by Caratozzolo, V.C. 2014. "Visibly Fashionable: The Changing Role of Clothes. Everyday Life of Italian American Immigrant Women" in *Making Italian American. Consumer Culture and the Production of Ethnic Identities*, ed. S.Cinotto, 35-56, New York: Fordham University Press. Tulloch, C. 2002 "Strawberries and Cream: Dress, Migration and the Quintessence of Englishness" in *The Englishness of English Dress*, ed. C. Breward and B. Conekin, 61- 76. Oxford: Berg.

sadly, growing anti-immigration sentiment threatens the very core of what makes London a global fashion capital. London is not a fashion capital because we have the biggest businesses. It is not a fashion capital because we have the best manufacturing. London is a fashion capital because we have the best talent from all over the world — from the EU and beyond.

These comments clearly highlight the vitality of international contributions and perspectives within not only British fashion but, more broadly, the British multicultural, hybrid society. In listening to the voices and reactions of London's fashion, this article analyses the condition of the immigrant as constitutive of the contemporary postmodern and trans-global society, and brings philosophical concepts on nationhood and identity in conversation with fashion research.

As addressed by Paul Gilroy (2004, 75) “something like it is now a routine feature of the postmodern and postcolonial processes that condition metropolitan life: diaspora dispersal, mass immigration, military travel, tourism, and the revolution in global communications, to name just a few”. Cultural theorists Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall, and philosophers Hannah Arendt, Giorgio Agamben and Étienne Balibar have systematically deconstructed the idea of the nation state as a sovereign power, as a primary unit that largely assumes border controls. Contemporary controls enacted at national borders continue in fact to be foundational, for they are the very staples for the consolidation of the nation and notions of sovereignty, and for marking the boundaries of the international system itself. The discussion embraces hence the considerations by Balibar (2015; Balibar and Wallerstein 1988) about the nation-state, sovereignty, and citizenship, and applies the notion of ‘conviviality’, as outlined by Paul Gilroy (2004), to discuss London's fashion and its reactions to the anti-immigration stance of the pro-Brexit front. It then deconstructs, through the lenses of fashion, the idea of a national identity, taking inspiration from the reflection of Eric Hobsbawm (1983) on “invented traditions” and Benedict Anderson (2006[1983]) on “imagined communities”. Having explored national identity as a romantic construct (Ribeiro 2002), built around “contested systems of cultural representation” (McClintock 1995, 353), the investigation focuses then on initiatives, within fashion, to challenge current perceptions of immigration as well as assumptions about cultural homogeneity. By unravelling, through fashion, the very idea of national and cultural identity, we have in fact a resource for rethinking binary oppositions associated to the category of the immigrant, such as ‘citizen’/‘alien’, ‘inside’/‘outside’.

The analysis presented in this article is also supported by interviews I held with fashion designer Alexis Temomanin, of the brand Dent de Man, and designer Stefania Biagini, of the brand SO IMMIGRANT. Both are themselves immigrants, and with their work they testify to the ‘convivial’ nature of British multicultural society.

Along this investigation, fashion reveals itself as a precious field for radically re-imagining our relationship to space, place and one another; and for challenging borders, nations and the institution of citizenship. Ultimately, to follow Balibar (2015; Balibar and Wallerstein 1988), Agamben (1998[1995]) and Arendt (2017[1951]), the article argues that fashion can address the ontological category of the immigrant beyond restrictive references to borders or nationality, and rather see it as an existential and political act.

### **Brexit and immigration: the stance of fashion.**

In 2016, the British Fashion Council conducted a survey prior to the Brexit referendum, revealing that “90 per cent of British fashion designers say they will vote to remain in the European Union” (Morby 2016). Since then, many designers as well as other representatives of the fashion industry, creatives and artists have openly spoken about the repercussions that Brexit could have, not only for fashion, but for the future of British society and culture. In the meanwhile, Katharine Hamnett’s eloquent t-shirts “CANCEL BREXIT” and “FASHION HATES BREXIT” have been sold in thousands of copies and have been often spotted at demonstrations such as the People’s March for Europe (London, September 2017), where Hamnett herself was a speaker. Since an agreement about the terms of the separation from the European Union is yet to be defined at the time this article is being written, the future of Britain is still rather uncertain: a no-deal Brexit is a possibility, just as a soft-Brexit, or even no Brexit at all. This political uncertainty has held the country for more than two years since the referendum took place in June 2016, and the two main paths – stay or leave – seem to find now a symbolic counterpart in the ironic Vivienne Westwood’s “Brexit Court Multi” shoes, whose description states: “each shoe showcasing a different flag, highlighting the two sides surrounding Brexit in true Westwood style” (Vivienne Westwood 2018).

The main arguments brought in support of the UK leaving the European Union focus on restoring British sovereignty, curbing immigration and reinforcing borders. In recent years, just as in other European countries and the United States, immigration has become in the UK a highly politicized issue, with the Independence Party promoting an anti-immigration campaign, which has become a prominent case for the Brexit front. In the UK, Euroscepticism and an anti-immigration stance constitute a rather rooted narrative that from Enoch Powell, in the 1970s, extends to nowadays, with Nigel Farage applauding the results of the Brexit vote as “Independence Day” (BBC 2016). The complicated relationship between the UK and Europe is accurately described by Stuart Hall whose considerations, outlined in the essay “Culture, Community, Nation” (2005[1993]), could well portray the current situation. Referring to Thatcherism, Hall explains that it was driven by “the illusion that Britain could snatch the goodies of a ‘single market’ without sacrificing an inch of national sovereignty or ‘Englishness’ as a cultural identity to the European agenda” (2005[1993], 36).

Indeed, one of the main arguments for Brexit, voiced by Conservative politicians such as Boris Johnson and Michael Gove, is that the European Union threatens British sovereignty, with EU rules overriding national laws and a growing amount of power progressively shifting from individual member states to the EU bureaucracy. One of the main principles of European membership is ‘free movement’, with citizens of one EU country having the right to travel, live, and take jobs in other EU countries. As reported in the Financial Times (2018), while many Brexit supporters aim at an overall reduction of immigration, others argue that - if it did not have the straitjacket of the EU - the UK could put in place a more selective management of immigration, such as the point based system of Australia and Canada. According to them, taking back full control of the UK borders would reduce the influx of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, which have moved to the UK in search of work, impacting on public services and depressing the wages of low-paid British workers (Boffey 2016). A reduction in immigration has become indeed a focus of the Brexit negotiations, with Theresa May remaining committed to getting net migration - the difference between

the numbers settling in and leaving the country - down to a “sustainable” level, which she defines as being below 100,000 a year (Financial Times 2017).

The topic of immigration, which currently dominates political and intellectual debates also outside the UK, has been widely explored by Étienne Balibar who in *Race, Nation, Class* (Balibar and Wallerstein 1988, 220) addresses the way immigration is problematized in contemporary political and cultural discourses:

utterances of the type, ‘There is an immigrant problem’, or, ‘The presence of immigrants poses a problem’ (no matter what ‘solution’ is being proposed), have recently gained currency and are in the process of becoming generally acceptable. It is, in effect, characteristic of these utterances that they induce a transformation of every social ‘problem’ into a problem which is regarded as being posed by the fact of the presence of ‘immigrants’ or, at least, as being aggravated by their presence, and this is so whether the problem in question is that of unemployment, accommodation, social security, schooling, public health, morals or criminality.

Donatella Di Cesare (2017), a distinguished voice in the philosophical debates on immigration and displacement, explains that those adopting an anti-immigration position and arguing for closed borders usually rely on three main principles. Firstly, the self-determination of the peoples; secondly, the national identity or integrity of the people, so that who comes from the outside pollutes this identity; and finally, the property of the territory, as though autochthonous peoples had the right to include or exclude, to decide who can stay or not.

Questions surrounding the rights to freedom of movement and residence, which have a crucial impact on the notion of ‘citizenship’, are particularly relevant in interpreting the anti-immigration argument that was a drive in the Brexit campaign. In particular, as stressed by Balibar (2015, 77), there is a very worrying link between populism, democratic citizenship, and the forms exclusion takes in contemporary societies: “because the participation of *citizens* in the exclusion of *non-citizens* passes through the delegation of power to the state, the line of demarcation between these two types of humans is sanctified or sacralised [*emphasis mine*]”.

The United Kingdom is notoriously a prime destination for many creatives and prospective students, with London being an international hub fostering talents, due to its colleges and art schools. Unsurprisingly, many artists have reacted against the surging nationalism and taken a clear anti-Brexit stance: just to name a few, Antony Gormley, Tacita Dean, Jeremy Deller, Michael Craig Martin, Jefferson Hack with Ferdinando Verderi, and Wolfgang Tillmans who even launched his own campaign featuring a series of posters (Tillmans 2016). As Lorna Hall, trend forecaster at WGSN, acutely points out, in this challenging historical period “artists and creative people are reacting to the fact that some of the rights and ideas that we have taken for granted are coming under threat. Fashion is really sensitive to the wider world” (Graham 2018).<sup>2</sup>

Nick Knight, who organised a series of panel discussions at Showstudio on the potential repercussions of Brexit, argues that without frictionless borders and continued access to talent coming from elsewhere, British fashion would lose the global outlook that

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<sup>2</sup> The fashion industry has been quick to respond to the wave of xenophobia of recent years, by taking a pro-immigration stance. In February 2017, following Trump’s travel ban, more than 80 fashion representatives including Grace Coddington, Diane von Furstenberg, Mario Sorrenti and Stefano Tonchi, made a video diary for W magazine, on the occasion of New York Fashion Week, with each of them stating “I am an immigrant” (W Magazine 2017).

characterises it, the production would be impacted, and design colleges would be seriously affected (Showstudio 2017). As reported by Amed (2018), the Chair of BFC Stephanie Phair reinforced these points, speaking at 10 Downing Street on behalf of the fashion industry:

the only way we as an industry can thrive is if Ms May ensures we will have access to the talent we need to keep London a thriving global centre of creativity, technology and business. The only reasons companies like Net-a-Porter, Farfetch — and, yes, even The Business of Fashion — were founded in London and continue to grow is because Britain was an open and progressive country that welcomed talent from abroad... This is our primary strength as an industry — and a country of only 65 million people that still manages to punch above its weight because of its open and globally minded stance.

Quick to react to the Green Paper on Industrial Strategy, outlined by the British Government in January 2017, the British Fashion Council (BFC 2017) prepared a detailed response emphasising its international outreach and addressing key issues, which can be summarised as such:

- the fashion industry's reliance on international trade, especially with Europe for all aspects of the supply chain (e.g. recruiting skilled workers, sourcing materials, placing orders, transporting collections and samples at trade shows and fashion weeks). For British fashion, the EU is the largest export market for apparel and a main source of "business talent and production skills";
- fashion relies on and foster international talent, across all levels and disciplines (e.g. design, production, business);
- London's reputation within the fashion landscape is built on the excellence of graduates from its world-renowned colleges, with non-UK nationals often settling their businesses in London after completing their studies;
- the UK is a "hub for creative talent", with its ecosystem depending on jobs being booked at a short notice and on the movement of people;
- current skill gaps identified in the British fashion industry have yet to be reflected in the Shortage Occupation List, and visa regulations need to take into account current shortages;
- delays in providing EEA nationals with assurances over their right to work and stay in the UK is resulting in losses of talents to competitors in the EU or other markets, and generally risk to destabilise businesses.

It is interesting to consider how this response, alongside the economic repercussions of Brexit, focuses specifically on the 'people', emphasising at different stages the multicultural and truly international nature of British fashion.

During a discussion panel hosted by Showstudio on the envisaged impact of Brexit on the fashion industry, Adam Mansell, Chief Executive Officer of the UK Fashion & Textile Association (UKFT), insightfully presented the terms of the problem:

there is a lack of understanding that controlling EU immigration would only control roughly 50% of the total immigration that comes into the UK. So, there will still be an immigration issue and, if we could not control it pre-Brexit, how are we going to control it post-Brexit? (Showstudio 2017).

These considerations highlight the difficulty intrinsic in the idea itself of ‘controlling’ immigration. As Mansell argues, limiting immigration with the aim of a reboot of local manufacturing – an argument often used in nationalistic campaigns such as the protectionist agenda of Donald Trump – would be unattainable without having access to a pool of talents and high skilled workers coming from other European countries. Reflecting the preoccupations of the fashion industry, in the Summer 2018 Julian Dunkerton, co-founder of fashion brand Superdry, even donated £1million to the People’s Vote campaign, backed also by London mayor Sadiq Khan, to give the public an opportunity to vote on the final terms of the Brexit deal, with the chance to stay in the EU if they vote against it. Dunkerton is not the only representative of a fashion brand to be directly involved in initiatives related to Brexit and in counteracting the hostility towards immigrants that the referendum encouraged. Peter Ruis, former chief executive of Jigsaw, which has a workforce drawn from 45 countries, launched in 2017 a Jigsaw campaign featuring billboards and shop windows with the statement “♥immigration”:

Why has the word immigrant been demonised, when it simply means coming to live in another country?...[I] want to start a conversation from the point of view where immigration is seen as a positive thing...We are all part of a vibrant, tolerant, global Britain. These are things we believe in as a brand (Woods 2017).

Initiatives like the Jigsaw campaign pay homage to the *debt* that a multicultural and multi-ethnic society, such as the British, owes to immigration, presenting it in a different way rather than as a *problem*. Indeed, the fear of diversity and difference, and the adoption of defensive and protectionist attitudes, Stuart Hall explains (2005[1993], 39), are features of the ‘new’ Britain, where cultural difference proliferates at ‘home’ and, on the other side, the European union is perceived as an encroaching presence. For Hall (2005[1993], 42), the main challenge and most urgent question of the twenty-first century is precisely the capacity to live with difference:

Since cultural diversity is increasingly the fact of the modern world, and ethnic absolutism a regressive feature of late modernity, the greatest danger now arises from forms of national identity which adopt closed versions of culture or community and refuse to engage with the difficult problems that arise from trying to live with difference.

The exhibition *Fashion Mix. Mode d’ici. Createurs d’ailleurs* (Musée national de l’histoire de l’immigration, Paris, 2014-2015), curated by Olivier Saillard, focuses precisely on this challenge, by demonstrating how migratory movements have a significant impact on the local culture and national fashion, since they provide talents, skilled workers, and enable cultural encounters. [FIGURE 1] In the exhibition, a map of the world traces with arrow-straight lines the trajectories of designers coming from outside of France, such as Cristobal Balenciaga, Elsa Schiaparelli, Charles Frederick Worth, and more recently Azzedine Alaïa, Alexander McQueen and Junya Watanabe. Fashion historian Cally Blackman (Saillard, Samson and Gruson 2014, 25) explains that creativity, imagination and competence were the only “passports” of the many immigrants who contributed to shape Paris fashion, where it has been possible to find the most qualified main-d’oeuvre and the most talented designers.

Commenting about the exhibition, Suzy Menkes (2015) observes that “even though Saillard hardly mentions the inflammatory ‘immigration’ word, we get the message: the Paris stew of high style does not have purely French ingredients”. In the catalogue accompanying the exhibition (Saillard, Samson and Gruson 2014), Luc Gruson, Director of the Palais de la Porte Dorée housing the Cité nationale de l’histoire de l’immigration, explains that each biography of the designers featuring in the exhibition tells, in its own way, the history of immigration. The important question he raises, in the first place, is whether treating the history of immigration through fashion could be a futile or even dishonest exercise, to finally dispels this doubt: “the history of fashion, and more precisely the history of haute couture, corresponds closely to the history of immigration” (Saillard, Samson and Gruson 2014, 9). Indeed, what French fashion stands for, that is, a certain ‘savoir-faire’, owes much to the talent of immigrant artisans, the ‘*petites mains*’ and other professionals that are part of the industry. The exhibition *Fashion Mix* highlights the pivotal role that fashion plays in the presentation of a convincing national identity and, at the same time, the character of fashion, which is both situated and borderless in the sense that, within fashion cultural difference is an invaluable resource.

As a fashion capital, known for the international and dynamic nature of its education, London is not only the place where prospective fashion workers/professionals chose to train but, and more importantly, a creative laboratory (McRobbie 1998). Workers, students and professionals coming from elsewhere contribute to London fashion in many ways, by enriching creativity, fostering the circulation of jobs, business opportunities and investments. Bringing inspiration and elements of their heritage, many designers have settled in the UK to become integral part of British fashion: just to mention a few, Mary Katrantzou, Marta Marques and Paulo Almeida, founders of Marques Almeida, Rifat Ozbek (British Designer of the Year in 1988 and 1992), Hussein Chalayan (British Designer of the Year in 1999 and 2000, and awarded MBE in 2016), Ashish Gupta, Roksanda Ilincic, Bora Aksu, Moroccan-born Joseph Ettedgui who established the London-based retailer Joseph, Nigerian-born Duro Olowu. At the same time, talents coming from elsewhere are appointed at the creative direction of British heritage brands, such as Johnny Coca at Mulberry and Riccardo Tisci at Burberry.

As a variegated landscape of crossing points of ethnicity and cultural encounters, London’s fashion constitutes a prime example of multiculturalism or, as I argue borrowing a concept introduced by Gilroy (2004), of ‘conviviality’.

In this respect, an interesting point about the perception of ethnicity and the perils of simplistic representations of cultural identity within fashion is addressed by Ghanian-British designer and former creative director of Gieves & Hawkes, Joe Casely-Hayford, OBE (Frank 2011):

I was always classified as a ‘black designer,’ so I had to struggle to work against that. I was into punk. I made clothes for The Clash. There weren’t African elements in my clothes until later in my career, even though people always expected them... I just felt the idea of hip-hop culture being the focal point of black identity was something quite narrow, and that there should be other diverse elements.. Our newest collection could be British, it could be African, it could be Bedouin. And that’s the point.

In order to grasp the richness of London’s fashion and culture, moving beyond



stereotypical identifications and groupist generalisations, it is useful to reflect on the idea of ‘conviviality’, elaborated by Paul Gilroy in *After Empire* (2004) to study urban interaction. This term refers to “the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multi-culture an ordinary feature of social life in Britain’s urban areas and in postcolonial cities elsewhere” (2004, xv). Gilroy explains that the concept of ‘conviviality’ has various merits, that is, it does not simply name everyday practices of multi-ethnic interaction, nor does it describe the triumph of tolerance, but it rather introduces a “measure of distance from the pivotal term ‘identity’, which has proved to be an ambiguous resource in the analysis of race, ethnicity and politics” (2004, xi). As addressed in *Between Camps* (2000, 250), the big challenge in understanding and theorising “intermixture, fusion and syncretism” is avoiding presuming the “existence of anterior ‘uncontaminated’ purities”.

Rather than being simply a metaphor to describe interaction, conviviality has hence an epistemological value: by invoking difference and openness, it overcomes the closed, fixed and reified notion of identity. It values the richness of intermixture and, in respect to the “glamour of difference” - the “market-driven pastiche of multi-culture that is manipulated above by commerce” (Gilroy 2004, 163) - manifests the dissident value of the multiculturalism that characterises post-colonial urban centres.

Not by chance, cultural theorist Kenvin Robins (2005[1991]) speaks of “the burden of identity”, whilst Iain Chambers of “the fiction of identity” (1993), which is crumbling in a world of dissolving boundaries and disrupted continuities, and is constantly challenged by the intensity of global cultural confrontations.

The idea of the ‘burden’ or ‘fiction’ of identity will be central in discussing how fashion can contribute to unveiling the complexity of identity formation and moving beyond an essentialist idea of national identity

## **Unstitching the nation**

Interestingly, the Burberry Spring-Summer 2019 Ready To Wear collection, Tisci’s first one as Burberry’s creative director, embraced the brand’s provenance and core values, emblematically naming the show ‘Kingdom’. Tisci’s celebration of Britishness, generally praised by the fashion press, was according to others too nostalgic, reverential and even naïve (Menkes 2018).

What is particularly intriguing in the collection is the presence of the burgundy British passport, worn as an accessory across the neck of each model, possibly a homage to the brand’s origin, or maybe an ambiguous reference to the current turmoil over Brexit and the proposal of returning to the older navy version. Transformed by Tisci into neck-chain trinkets, the passports can be read as an elusive allusion to British politics. Being an Italian at the helm of a British heritage brand, and having relocated to London as a teenager, he punctually stresses his debt towards England and his education at Central Saint Martins. When questioned about Brexit and immigration, Tisci’s avoidance of any confrontation translates into a defensively apolitical silence: “usually I’m not very political to be honest”, he confesses (Weir 2018). Despite Tisci’s strategically neutral position, it is impossible not to draw references to the current political scenario, dominated by heated controversies on British sovereignty and identity. Even though apparently neutral, the use of the passport symbol in the Burberry collection stands as a silent reminder of current controversies informing British identity and tradition.

As announced by former Immigration Minister Brandon Lewis (June 2017 – January 2018), British passports issued after October 2019, when the United Kingdom is meant to be no longer part of the European Union, will change their colour scheme from burgundy to dark blue and gold. In the meanwhile, the return of the navy cover, first used in 1921, has been hailed as a victory by pro-Brexit MPs, who saw the burgundy European cover as a “source of national humiliation” (Greenfield 2017). The restoration of the navy passport represents then a restoration of the British national identity that, in the words of Conservative MP Andrew Rosindell, was risking to be “submerged into an artificial European one” (*ibid.*).

The political relevance and symbolic power of the passport as an emblem of national identity underlines the importance to reflect on the complex triad of ‘territory’, ‘borders’ and ‘national identity’, as highlighted by Giorgio Agamben (1998[1995]) and Étienne Balibar (2015). With recourse to its usage in official legislation and everyday language, Agamben explains that the nation “closes the open circle of a man’s birth”: the word ‘nation’ comes in fact from the Latin *nascere*, which means ‘to be born’. In this sense, birth determines citizenship, with the nation holding the principle of sovereignty. Agamben (1998[1995], 128) observes that “*birth* immediately becomes *nation* such that there can be no interval of separation [*scarto*] between the two terms.” Therefore, every man is, first of all, a ‘national’ being, a *homo nationalis*, (Balibar and Wallerstein 1988, 93-94). Even though a mere construct, this attribute is functional to the constitution of the nation:

a social formation only reproduces itself as a nation to the extent that, through a network of apparatuses and daily practices, the individual is instituted as *homo nationalis* from cradle to grave, at the same time as he or she is instituted as homo (*economicus, politicus, religious*)... The fundamental problem is therefore to produce the people. More exactly, it is to make the people produce itself continually as national community. (*ibid.*).

In this sense, immigrants and refugees, represent a “disquieting element in the nation-state”, as Agamben (1998[1995], 131) and many others point out, since they disrupt the bond that holds together nativity and nationality, birth and nation, and ultimately man and citizen.

The tensions currently characterising the political debate in Britain are symptomatic of the paradox of our globalised society, where borders are being reinforced and discussions on immigration tend to concentrate on arguments such as self-determination, sovereignty and national identity (Di Cesare 2017). The effects of economic and cultural globalization, such as an accelerated mobility of people, information, capital and goods, and an increased interconnectedness between places, seem to be accompanied by a longing for cohesion – or we can say ‘*Heimat* seeking’ (Robins 2005[1991]; Buruma 1989) - ripe for exploitation by right-wing populists and nationalists. As addressed by Stuart Hall (2005[1993], 36) at the heart of modernity there is a “tension between the tendency of capitalism to develop the nation-state and national cultures and its transnational imperatives”; this friction has provided “nationalism and its particularism a peculiar significance and force at the heart of the so-called new transnational global order” (*ibidem*).

The ideal of *Heimat*-seeking relies on the notion of an authentic *Heimat* (German for home, homeland) and of authentic, separate cultures. However, rather than being an immutable and original entity, the nation, as well as national identity, is discursively produced through traditions, emblems, memories, and everyday rituals, which

corroborate a sense of belonging and identification.

Eric Hobsbawm (1983) and more recently Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt (2000) argue that tradition is not a fact but an invention. In particular, Hobsbawm explains that the “invention of tradition” is crucial in exploring the national phenomenon since the modern nation is subjectively made up of symbols, discourses and constructs such as “national history”. Invented traditions symbolize hence social cohesion, the identification with a community and the institutions that represent it as a ‘nation’. In a similar way, Benedict Anderson (2006[1983], 11-12) addresses the paradoxical nature of the nation, to which nationalism provides a narrative of endless continuity with a suitable past:

If nation-states are widely conceded to be ‘new’ and ‘historical’, the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glide into a limitless future. It is the magic of nationalism to turn chance into destiny.

Nowadays, the longing for cohesion, the ideal of *Heimat*-seeking, and the invocation of tradition, seem to protect against the collapse of a certain world order, threatened by migratory movements and pressurised by the forces of economic and cultural globalisation.

Both local and global, situated and borderless, fashion holds a particular relevance in relation to the fabrication – and conversely the deconstruction - of national identity and tradition. However, Goodrum (2005) observes, for a long time fashion has been overlooked as a mechanism in the construction and deployment of national identity. Some fashion scholars (Beward and Conekin 2002, Ling and Segre Reinach 2018; Paulicelli and Clark 2009; Craik, 1993) have explored - although in relation to different cultural and geographical contexts - the complex and layered nature of a national fashion, which comprises diverse and multiple practices. In particular, concerning the British context, Goodrum (2005) has pertinently investigated how fashion can be a site where the Anglo-British identity is constructed and crystallized.

It is then interesting to consider, on the opposite, how fashion questions the continuity of tradition, how it exposes Anglo-Britishness as a romantic construct and, in some cases, re-enacts it in an ironical way.

Within contemporary fashion, there are several references to ‘anglomania’, a craze for all things English that from the mid of the eighteenth century spread in Europe, and especially in France. Anglomania was both a political and intellectual phenomenon, channeled through the works of Voltaire and Montesquieu, and a stylistic phenomenon associated with “customs, manners and fashions” (Bolton 2006, 12)

Representations of Englishness as well as the spectacle of nationhood are the main focus of the emblematically titled exhibition *Anglomania: Tradition and Transgression in British Fashion* (The Costume Institute, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2006), curated by Andrew Bolton and sponsored by Burberry. The shows displays anglomania as a fantasy, based on

a caricature of England, concocted from the essential ‘otherness’ of the outsider’s perspective of Englishness...[This caricature] is based on idealized concepts of English culture that the English themselves not only recognize, but also, in a form of ‘autophilia’, actively promote and perpetuate (Bolton 2006, 13).

*Anglomania* juxtaposes historical costumes from the eighteenth and nineteenth century with clothing of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries by designer such as Chalayan, Alexander McQueen, Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren, in a series of theatrical vignettes located in the museum's English Period Rooms, The Anne Laurie Aitken Galleries. These tableaux (The English Garden; Upstairs/Downstairs; The Deathbed; Empire and Monarchy; Francomania; The Gentlemen's Club; The Hun; The Hunt Ball) draw on artistic and literary references from the eighteenth century, when artists and writers of the period such as David Garrick, Samuel Johnson and William Hogarth reflected a proud nationalism, reinforcing the Voltairian view of England as the land where the Enlightenment found its full expression: a land of freedom, reason and tolerance (Buruma 2000).

Whilst reflecting the complexity of drawing national distinctions such as Englishness (and Frenchness), *Anglomania* assumes these definitions as its premises in exploring representations of Englishness and the spectacle of nationhood. These definitions of Anglo-Britishness might invoke the idea of a cultural and historical heritage suggesting homogeneity. However, *Anglomania* unstitches narratives crystallizing national identity, by appropriating their own vocabulary, by disrupting the continuity of tradition and "remixing" (Evans 2003, 25) the pieces of these narratives in ironical tableaux. From these reinterpretations, the idea of cultural and national identity emerges as a "romantic construct" (Ribeiro 2002) that does not account for the rich diversity of contemporary England.

Within this context, Vivienne Westwood's work is particularly significant, since it unravels consolidated definitions of Anglo-Britishness. As Ribeiro (2002, 23) summarises, "from Gainsborough to Galliano, historical dress has been a potent source of Englishness." Westwood's keen interest in history, art, silhouettes and portrait paintings of the seventeenth and eighteenth century (e.g. Van Dyk, Thomas Gainsborough, Henry Raeburn), as well as in British traditional materials, takes the form of reinterpretations of the past that blend supposedly incompatible eras and garments. In particular, Westwood's first *Anglomania* Collection (Autumn-Winter 1993-1994) is an embodiment of the designer's fondness of and talent for parodying a crystallized idea of Englishness. Discussing the collection, Rebecca Arnold (2002) pertinently observes that Westwood's parody of symbols of national identity and tradition, such as those related to the monarchy and aristocracy, exposes the "lie" of a single definition of Englishness by borrowing emblems of a rarified culture that is far removed from ordinary life and people's experiences: "Westwood's anglomania in fact reveals the fissures and frictions of any notion of national identity, exposing frictions of class and culture. Westwood is obsessed by, but constantly fighting against Englishness" (Arnold 2002, 171).

Fashion is hence the site where the Anglo-British identity is constructed and materialized and, at the same time, the site where this identity is questioned, parodied and unstitched. One might then want to ask whether, beyond parodies of an idealized version of Anglo-Britishness, Englishness in dress can be defined at all. Many scholars, amongst whom Aileen Ribeiro (2002, 24), have declared the hopelessness of searching, within the complex, multicultural and hybrid British society, for a single and comprehensive definition of Englishness in terms of fashion, unless one is open to accept multiple and complementary images of Englishness.

Essentialists conceptions of national identity, as well as the recurring appeal to tradition, rely on the idea of cultural identity as "an unfolding essence, moving apparently without change, from past to future" (Hall 2005[1993], 38); an idea, this one, which does not address crucial changes shaping nationhood, nor its constitutive

relationship with imperialism and colonialism. The myth of national continuity, in fact, is nothing but a “retrospective illusion” (Balibar and Wallerstein 1988, 89), since it does not manifest the fundamental fact that every nation has been to some extent the colonized or the colonizer, and sometimes both at the same time.

Within the British context, nationhood cannot be understood outside its fundamental relation with imperialism and colonialism, which continue to shape the contents of political life in Britain. With the loss of the empire, there is indeed a loss of “certainty about the limits of national and racial identity that result from it” (Gilroy 2004, 116). This loss, together with the dissolving barriers of time and space in our trans-global world, and with immigrants and refugees settling in the former colonial core, foregrounds cultural syncretism and ‘conviviality’ as a way to overcome the flawed ideal of an uncontaminated national and cultural identity.

It is then interesting to observe how many artists and fashion designers keep challenging an essentialist conception of cultural identity, by incorporating motifs associated to ‘other’ cultures and creating a clash. In fashion – but we can observe the same in other creative fields - the use of foreign or ‘exotic’ motifs “is an effective way of creating a ‘frisson’ (a thrill or quiver) within social conventions of etiquette” (Craik 1993,17).

In this respect, the practice of British Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare (MBE) and London based British-Ivorian artist and designer Alexis Temomanin, founder of the label Dent de Man, is particularly representative since they both question identity and authenticity through their choice of fabrics.<sup>3</sup> The wax resist fabric used both by Shonibare and Temomanin has in fact a crossbred cultural background, being “inspired by Africa, made with a technique derived from Indonesian Batik, designed in the Netherlands” (Vlisco 2018). Although not authentically African, the textiles crafted by firms such as Vlisco are so ingrained in West and Central Africa that have for long been a symbol of African identity, which ultimately supports “Shonibare’s motto: nothing is what it seems” (Yinka Shonibare MBE 2018). Shonibare’s use of wax fabric in his Victorian-African hybridizations (e.g. *Victorian Philanthropist’s parlour*, 1996-1997; *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation*, 2002; *William Morris’ Family Album*; 2015) has been widely commented upon (Hynes and Picton 2001; Guldemon and Mackert 2004; Hemmings 2013), just as his exploration of English society and history. The subversive postcolonial parody performed by Shonibare’s hybridizations bears a political message, standing as a symbol of the entangled relationships between Europe and the African colonies. It is also a reminder that cultural identity is a fabrication, shaped by various forms of exchanges, circulations, refusals, appropriations and adaptations. Shonibare’s scepticism towards any essentialist conception of culture and identity follows along the lines of Benedict Anderson, Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha, and points toward the postcolonial notion of hybrid identity:

identity always requires a relationship to others and cannot exist in isolation; that relationship, in turn, is always constructed by your own relationship to others and that is always some kind of fiction. It is the ‘fiction’ that creates an ‘imagined community’ and I don’t deny the use or value in creating a community in

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<sup>3</sup> The notion of textiles as carriers of multiple cultural influences is the theme of the travelling exhibition *Migrations* (USA, Ireland, Australia, England, 2015 - 2016), curated by Jessica Hemmings. The exhibition focuses on the portability and hybrid position of textiles within the worlds of craft, design and art, exploring how easily they move around the globe, from their production to their consumption, often existing in many versions and re-interpretations.

itself. [...] I don't believe that there is such a thing as an innate or intrinsic identity and I am very sceptical of fixed notions of identity that seems to be a way to group different races together (Shonibare cit. in Simola 2007, 199).

In a similar way, Dent de Man, the only brand exclusively collaborating with Vlisco, combines symbols of Africanness with English-style silhouettes to question simplistic representations of cultural identity [FIGURES 2 & 3]. Speaking of his own heritage, Temomanin tells: "I take something perceived as African and put it in another context, to see how it disturbs...I aim to open a door, to create a conversation" (personal communication, 22 October 2018). The works of Shonibare and Temomanin materialize thus the encounters between the colonial centre and the colonized periphery, opening a space beyond any cultural binarism – 'a third space', to follow Bhabha – "a new, hybrid space of cultural difference in the negotiation of colonial power-relations" (Bhabha 1994, 292).

This hybrid, liminal space seems to mirror the space inhabited, on a personal level, by the immigrants in the new hosting society, who find themselves always in-between one sense of being and another. This point is clearly addressed by Stuart Hall (Chen 1996, 490), when he speaks about his own experience of migrating from Jamaica to England:

I am not and will never be 'English'. I know both places intimately, but I am not wholly of either place. And that's exactly the diasporic experience, far away enough to experience the sense of exile and loss, close enough to understand the enigma of an always-postponed arrival.

Hall's words hint at a crucial issue, that is, the question of belonging usually appears in ontological terms (e.g. belonging to a race, gender, culture, nation), as a sort of primordial identification. Bhabha acutely points out that, rather than being a second nature, *belonging* is nothing but "an inheritance of tradition, a *naturalization* of the problems of citizenship" (1994, xvii), with the political practice still being eminently territorialised. The experience of migration, the hurdles of citizenship, as well as the relationship of heritage and story-telling through clothing, are discussed by Temomanin, whose surname literally means 'make your way on your own'. Temomanin, who never shared his story until 2016 and tried to hide his identity behind his brand, was born in Bangolo, Ivory Coast. As a child, he was abandoned by his mother and spent most of his childhood with foster families, finally leaving the country when the civil war broke. When I interviewed him, 22 October 2018, he told me the story of his journey:

A German officer back in my country helped me get a tourist visa for France, where I knew nobody. I arrived in Paris where, despite speaking the language, I could not find a job since my status was that of 'tourist' and not 'refugee'. One day, after watching a documentary about London, its cosmopolitanism, youth and gay scene, I went to the British Embassy in Paris with the aim to get a visa for England. However, I was told I needed to be a resident in France or apply for a visa from my own country. How could I go back to a country torn by the civil war just to make an application? After five days waiting outside the British embassy in the hope to meet the ambassador, after many tears, pleas, and altercations with the officers and the police, I was granted an appointment with him to tell him my story. My records showed I had no family, as my surname

clearly reveals. The ambassador decided to give me an opportunity by providing me with a student visa.

I arrived in London in 2003, where I enrolled into English school. I was living my dream. However, the traumas of my past were still very much alive within me. Encouraged by my partner, I decided to reconnect with my origins. Once back in Ivory Coast, I visited all the families that hosted me. The last one returned me a box with all the fabrics I had collected since I was a child, which reminded me of my mother. I also came across the only suit that I have ever owned, bought for me by this family. It was a classic English-style suit. As a cathartic ritual, and a final reconciliation with my past, I had a similar dress made with the colourful fabrics, and I decided to wear it on my way back to London. The intention was to take it off on my arrival and never look at it again. I named it *One way without return* - just like me, and just like my mother who I never saw again since she left me.

However, once he landed at Heathrow airport, a trend scout noticed the suit and supported Temomanin in creating his label. The brand, which sold in 45 shops worldwide and held collaborations with Topshop and Asos, references Temomanin's origins – Dent de Man, or Man's Tooth, is in fact the mountain close to his natal village. Reflecting on borders enforcement, Brexit and the current political scenario, he told me, 22 October 2018:

London is the place that gave me the opportunity to rebuild my life and be creative, even though I initially did not speak the language. I was a child running away from war, and finally came to this place where I was given back my voice. Every time I hear about Brexit, I go back to the moment I applied to come here. I feel that, with Brexit, doors are shutting for people like me. The multicultural feel is exactly what attracted me to London. I saw the freedom of life showed in that documentary.

Temomanin's story and initial lack of rights is particularly emblematic, for it shows how our view of citizenship is deeply nation-centred, and - like in the case of many other immigrants' stories - the 'otherness' of the foreigner is ratified against the borders of a national territory. As pointed out by Balibar (1988, 95), individual and group identifications are projected against external borders or frontiers, which inevitably become internal, as a protection of an "internal collective personality" and the idea itself of a "home", of a homeland.

After having discussed the unstitching of national identity, through fashion, and its nature of a romantic construct, some questions arise: how are issues related to citizenship and belonging reflected within contemporary fashion? And how can fashion contribute to a different understanding of the condition of the immigrant, beyond mere borders?

### **"I am an immigrant": beyond borders, towards difference**

References to national identity and citizenship have recently surfaced in fashion shows as an allusive nod to the current political climate. For instance, the Vetements Autumn-

Winter 2018-2019 collection features prints of the Russian, American and German passport covers on clutches, sliders, boots and espadrilles. The fake identity documents used as ornaments on garments and accessories seem to perform a parody of national and social identity, of citizenship, and to desecrate the authority of official documents. Already in a previous collection, Vetements drew on the passport motif. For the presentation of their *Stereotype* collection (Autumn-Winter 2017-2018), attendees were provided with fake ID cards, driving licences and passports as invitations, each printed with name, nationality, age and photo of a fictional character, along with details of the show. Inevitably fashion editors rushed to post on Instagram their alter egos, who ranged from a 20-year-old Czech girl, to a German pensioner, or a trash-metal loving middle-aged man from Michigan. These stereotypes were also represented on the runway with a cast of men and women from different age groups and ethnicities. The passport-like invitations acted as a joke that allowed access - in this case to a runway show - and they signified the notion of belonging to an 'imagined community', whether national, cultural, or subcultural.

Demna Gvasalia, the mastermind behind the fashion collective Vetement, as a teenager few from his natal town Sukhumi, now located in the separatist state of Abkhazia, and moved as an immigrant to Düsseldorf. He is notoriously reluctant to dissect the inspiration behind the collections and provide a narrative; however, it is undeniable that with his work for Vetements, he constantly questions the boundaries of real and fake, of copy and original, enacting a simulation of the real that - to follow Baudrillard - is "no longer a question of imitation, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real itself" (Baudrillard 2001, 170). In particular, the Vetements Autumn-Winter 2017-2018 show is a parade of social and subcultural classifications, of flat stereotypes, of images of belonging to 'groups', which conversely allude to the complexity of identity formation, whether individual or collective.

Reflecting on the modern nomadic subject, Stuart Hall (2005[1993], 41) argues that a characteristic of the modern condition is the belonging to several and overlapping imagined communities, with the individual having to "negotiate several 'worlds' at once" and continuously crossing complex borderlines. The concept of 'imagined communities', as developed in particular by Benedict Anderson (2006[1983], 6), is crucial in overcoming essentialist conceptions of cultural identity and understanding both nation and nationality as cultural artifacts of a particular kind. According to Anderson, all communities larger than "primordial villages of face-to-face contact" are imagined, since their members will never know the majority of the other fellow members. The nation, in particular, is a "political community" imagined as both sovereign and limited. What distinguished communities is therefore not their genuineness or falsity but just the "style in which they are imagined".

The struggle of the modern subject looking for evidence of his belonging to a 'community' resonates also in the position of Hussein Chalayan, whose work notoriously focuses on themes such as migration, historical debate, and the relationship between identity and geography. A DNA test result, which surprisingly revealed his genetic links to Northern European populations, prompted him to re-think his own heritage (Frankel 2017):

Both my parents and I know ourselves as Turkish Cypriots; but I also see myself as a Londoner with strong connections to Istanbul. Knowing about the DNA sequences I've inherited from my parents did not suddenly mean that I would start to identify myself with continental Europe, with Swedes, Danes



or the English, or to deny my Turkishness. But it really made me wonder about who we think we are, and whether our connections to geography and our definitions of identity are as set as we think they are.

In some of his most well known and debated collections such as *Afterwords* (Autumn-Winter 2000-2001), *Between* (Spring-Summer 1998) and *Geotropics* (Spring-Summer 1999), Chalayan explored displacement, heritage, migration and identity in the twenty-first century. *Geotropics*, for instance, focussed on the theme of itinerary existence, investigating “ideas about the meaning of a nation, linking the concepts of nature, culture, nationalism, expansion and disputes over boundaries” (Evans 2003, 270). More recently, his menswear Autumn-Winter 2018-2019 collection expresses concerns about immigration and integration. Taking initial inspiration from the Périphérique ring road in Paris, beyond which lie the *banlieues*, the city’s working class suburbs hosting the majority of immigrant populations, the collection represents an imaginary round trip “beyond the centre of Paris and back again” (WWD 2018). The circular shape of panels intrinsic in the garment construction takes cues from the aerial map of Paris’ *banlieues* and the idea of going forward and being pulled back, as a reflection of how refugees arrive in Europe and are sent back to dangerous territories. Reflecting on immigration and the challenge to embrace rather than simply tolerate ‘others’, Chalayan draws a powerful parallel between the current political climate and the Holocaust: “we should be worried about immigration and integration in the same way that we were worried about the Holocaust; it’s the same thing” (Neel 2018). While in his comment, Chalayan collapses the distinction between the Jewish diaspora and the Holocaust (Avrum Erlich, 2009), his remark is an important reminder of the fact that the Jewish diaspora is emblematic of the condition of the immigrant. Hannah Arendt analysed extensively the status of Jewish refugees and immigrants and reflected on their assimilation and exclusion:

the outlawing of the Jewish people in Europe has been followed closely by the outlawing of most European nations. Refugees driven from country to country represent the vanguard of their peoples – if they keep their identity. For the first time Jewish history is not separate but tied up with that of all other nations. The comity of European peoples went to pieces when, and because, it allowed its weakest member to be excluded and persecuted (2003[1951] 119).

Harendt’s words are particularly relevant in times of surging nationalism and protectionist measures adopted against immigrants across all Europe. The increasing movement of populations, the postcolonial flow in reverse directions, the dispersion of cultural communities and formation of multi-layered ones are phenomena that can either disrupt the presumed homogeneity of communities or even, as Balibar suggests, reinforce it “by marking the exceptional position occupied by the *other man* and guarding against him symbolically and institutionally” (2015, 70). Balibar, alongside Agamben (1998[1995]), Deleuze and Guattari (1987[1980]), observes in fact that the political practice is eminently territorialized, that “it identifies or classifies individuals and populations relative to their ability to occupy a space, or be admitted to it” (2015, 69). It is exactly this territorialization that determines a series of rights and access to rights, which means that citizenship is defined by spatial categories such as residence and territory. In the case of immigrants, in particular, the condition of foreignness gets projected against a border of a national territory “to create an inadmissible alterity” (*ibid.*).

In recent years, the recurring motif of ‘immigrants’ as threatening ‘others’ has been and still is at the center of political, social and humanitarian debates. In the light of anti-immigration policies adopted in USA and Europe, and the divisive rhetoric fostered by populist movements arising in several European countries, representatives of the fashion industry have reacted by trying to challenge the perception of the word ‘immigrant’.

In February 2017, Prabal Gurung, who emigrated to the US from Nepal, used the catwalk as a platform for a political statement and ended his show at New York Fashion Week with a parade of models in a variety of t-shirts featuring messages that eloquently addressed the policies of Donald Trump such as “Break Down Walls”, “Revolution Has No Borders” and “I Am An Immigrant”. In a similar way, Delhi-born and London-based designer Ashish Gupta, opposes the anti immigration stance and rhetoric of Trump and the pro-Brexit campaign by proudly reclaiming the word ‘immigrant’. His Spring-Summer 2017 collection, presented at London Fashion Week, celebrated his Indian heritage, reminding us of the rich diversity that every immigrant brings, and the conviviality that characterises London’s society. Wearing a t-shirt that spelled “IMMIGRANT” across the front, Ashish Gupta embraced this condition in the face of anti-immigrant sentiments that reverberate throughout Britain and much of the Western world. In an interview released in 2016, he explains his intention to dispel the negative connotations surrounding the category ‘immigrant’ (Hardy 2016):

Why should we be ashamed of ourselves? We are qualified and educated, we work hard, we pay our taxes, we contribute to the culture. We should be valued, not scorned... I was very upset after Brexit, and for the first time in two decades I questioned whether I was welcome in a country that I thought of as my home. It made me sad to see how immigration was used to rile up so much hatred by politicians over the last year. It was shameful and ugly. And so, I just wanted to say ‘Yes, I am an immigrant. I run a business. I pay taxes, I create jobs, I contribute to the culture and the economy. I’m different but I am just like you’.

Interestingly, the words ‘immigration’ and ‘immigrant’ are characterised by an irreducible ambiguity that conceals a rather clear paradox. They are in fact generic categories that, as Balibar (Balibar and Wallerstein 1988, 220) explains, indiscriminately gather together populations of different origins, heterogeneous conditions of entry and legal statuses, “simultaneously unifying and differentiating”. In this sense, they provide the racists with an “illusory object” around which they can structure their thinking and self consciousness. However, since it resonates also with discriminatory ethnic and class criteria, the word immigrant does not apply to all foreigners in the same way:

“it is a category which precisely makes it possible to split up the apparently ‘neutral’ set of foreigners, though not without some ambiguities. A Portuguese, for example, will be more of an ‘immigrant’ than a Spaniard (in Paris), though less than an Arab or a Black; a Briton or a German certainly will not be an ‘immigrant’, though a Greek may perhaps be; a Spanish worker and, a fortiori, a Moroccan worker will be ‘immigrants’, but a Spanish capitalist, or even indeed an Algerian capitalist, will not be” (Balibar and Wallerstein 1988, 221).

These class differentiations are at the heart of the “global cosmopolitanism” (Bhabha

1994, xiv) that celebrates cultural diversity as long as foreigners contribute to the prosperity of the society, and are mainly educated economic migrants. Such considerations, outlined by Bhabha, Balibar and many others, are particularly poignant in the political context of Brexit and the accompanying debates on border enforcement. The discussed measures to control free movement from other European countries contribute to a perception of immigration as a problem, a burden, rather than a resource, as discussed with founder of the London-based and sustainable brand SO IMMIGRANT, Stefania Biagini [FIGURE 4]. The label, launched in 2017, donates part of its profits to the UK charity Refugee Action, and features a limited series of products such as tote bags, t-shirts and sweatshirts sporting the word “Immigrant”. This initiative is contemporaneous with the statements made by Prabal Gurung and Ashish Gupta, and seems to reflect the need, shared across various areas of the fashion industry and creative fields, to react to the prejudices still associated to the status ‘immigrant’, which have been exacerbated by the pro-Brexit campaign. However, in comparison to the work of the above-mentioned designers, SO IMMIGRANT is not part of a wider fashion project but rather an initiative entirely driven by its activist intention, which is to embrace the generic label ‘immigrant’ and challenge the public perception of it. In an interview I did with Biagini, 20 September 2018, she told me about the comments and reactions to the SO IMMIGRANT products:

I had so many reactions to SO IMMIGRANT. The majority of them were really encouraging, for instance most of the Americans love them. Once an elderly British couple got t-shirts and bags simply as a political act. Some customers got in touch from Brazil, Australia, Italy and Spain asking for products to be delivered to them. However, I had also some racist comments on Instagram, such as being accused of supporting Islamic terrorism and being against ‘white’ people...I am very glad I had the opportunity to engage in really interesting, deep and long conversations at the shops/events/markets where I have been selling my products. Some people questioned the word immigrant asking me why I did not use ‘migrant’ instead, whilst others suggested ways to differentiate different level of ‘immigration-ness’, such as putting some stars below the logo. A young man loved the t-shirt but was uncomfortable with the idea of wearing it because he did not want to be categorized under any labels. I said that it was a provocation and that by suggesting that ‘we all are’ immigrants we mean ‘no one is’ immigrant. In the end he bought the t-shirt.

Biagini’s experience with differing perceptions of and emotional reactions to the word ‘immigrant’ resonates with Balibar, who asks: “what is an immigrant, and, to begin with, where is he born?” (1988, 227), echoing Jean Genet’s (1960, 3) question on the Blacks - ‘what exactly is a black? First of all, what’s his colour?’. Generalisations such as ‘Blacks’ and ‘immigrants’ have for long been part of debates on inclusion and exclusion, which have recently re-emerged with a particular urgency in the West, for instance - Balibar observes - in the wake of riots exploded in apparently multicultural metropolises such as Paris and London, where class and race discrimination reinforce each other. Within post-colonial Europe, young immigrants or citizens of immigrant descent, while contributing to a hybrid culture – or we can say ‘convivial’, to follow Gilroy - can be seen as threatening the identity of a community. In our supposedly multicultural societies, discrimination takes hence new forms, “now transformed more or less completely into class differences” (Balibar 2015, 67).

Two recent, deeply related political developments in the UK prompt us to pose, time and again, questions about integration, inclusion and exclusion, and to rethink the notion of citizenship. Firstly, the “hostile environment” policies promoted since 2012 in the UK to deter illegal immigrants (Hill 2017). Secondly, the deplorable detention and deportation of British citizens from former Commonwealth countries that was brought into public attention in 2018 as the “Windrush scandal”. After WWII, the immigration boom from Commonwealth countries, encouraged as a response to post-war labour shortages in the UK, was to change British society, enabling cultural exchanges and cosmopolitanism. Members of the Windrush<sup>4</sup> generation, who arrived in the UK between 1948 and 1971 from Caribbean countries, despite having legally settled and built their lives in the UK, have recently been targeted by the government’s ‘hostile environment’ policies. Many of them could not prove they were legal residents of the UK since the Home Office had not kept any record and their landing cards had been destroyed (BBC 2018). Moreover, since they came from British colonies that had not achieved independence, they considered themselves British citizens. As Hannah Arendt acutely points out, the particular national structure of the United Kingdom had always made a quick assimilation and incorporation of subject peoples impossible, since the British Commonwealth has never been a “Commonwealth of Nations but the heir of the United Kingdom, *one* nation dispersed throughout the world” (2003[1951], 165). The political and moral failure of the British government and the pain and indignation inflicted upon members of the Windrush generation sheds further light on the limitations of the notion of citizenship and the sovereignty of the state, which is “nowhere more absolute than in matters of ‘emigration, naturalization, nationality and expulsion” (2003[1951]. 364).

Several scholars (Balibar, 2015; Hall, 2005[1993]) have argued for the need to rethink the very idea of citizenship, which does not reflect the cultural diversity of contemporary societies and is thus anachronistically restrictive. Di Cesare (2017) argues that political citizenship can and should be independent from national identity: speaking of ‘fatherland’ fosters in fact the idea that an ethnic homogeneity exists, which lets the spectres of the *ius soli* (birth in a certain territory) and *ius sanguinis* (birth from citizen parents) re-emerge. Already within the Roman law, the rootedness in the soil and the homogeneity of population were the criteria used to determine citizenship and, as Hannah Arendt (2003[1951], 353) points out, have become the very conditions for the rise of the nation.

Nowadays, the paradox affecting contemporary societies, characterized by multiculturalism and at the same time involved in political debates and initiatives to control immigration and preserve national identity, urges us to put into question the notion of citizenship as it stands. Stuart Hall (2005[1993], 42) very clearly presents the terms of the problem:

unless the universalistic language of citizenship, derived from the Enlightenment

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<sup>4</sup> Migrants arriving in the UK between 1948 and 1971 from Caribbean countries have been labelled the Windrush generation. The name references the ship MV Empire Windrush, which docked at Tilbury Docks, Essex, on 22 June 1948, bringing workers from Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago and other islands, as a response to post-war labour shortages in the UK. On the role of dress in the recreation of the self, within the context of the Windrush arrivals, see Checinska, C. 2018. *Fashion and Postcolonial Critique*, ed. E. Gaugele and M. Titton, Vienna: Sternberg Press.

and the French Revolution...is transformed in the light of the proliferation of cultural difference [or conviviality, we can say], the idea cannot and does not deserve to survive in the transformed conditions of late-modernity in which it is required to become substantively operable.

It is very timely that recent initiatives by fashion designers, such as Prabal Gurung and Ashish, reclaim the condition of the 'immigrant', bravely taking a stance and making a political statement. They remind us that 'being an immigrant' is a shared condition, and cultural homogeneity as well as autochthony are just myths. Other collections, instead, subtly allude to the notion of citizenship through operations that seem to parody and desecrate its authority. Passports, identity documents, proofs of citizenship, which appeared in recent shows, are possibly the most literal and yet allusive, enigmatic references to the current political climate in Europe. Fashion, which is borderless, appropriates the language of politics and parodies citizenship and national identity; it counterfeits official documents and commodifies the symbols of a belonging to an 'imagined community'. Without openly addressing the topics of border enforcement, citizenship and immigration, nor the lively controversies surrounding them, some of the current shows are silent, cautious witnesses of these debates: rather than taking any political stance, they incorporate key symbols of political life and re-contextualize them within the spectacle of fashion shows. They flirt with these themes without making a statement, but inevitably encourage within us, spectators, questions about national identity, belonging and citizenship.

As addressed by many philosophers (Balibar 2015; Agamben 1998[1995]; Bhabha 1994; Harendt 2003[1951]), spatial categories – first of which, the territory of the nation, defined by borders - are still so central to the definition of identity and citizenship. Especially nowadays, in response to the oversimplifications and fabrications of cultural homogeneity diffused by resurgent neo-Fascist and ultranationalist movements in many European countries, a different understanding of the figure of the immigrant is needed. An understanding of immigration, which moves beyond spatial categories of territories and borders, and rather inscribes it into Europe's history. As Gilroy effectively puts it, the "fascination with the figure of the migrant must be made part of Europe's history rather than its contemporary geography" (2004, 165).

The experiences of migration, diaspora, exile, even though extreme, have a crucial role in our rethinking of tradition and heritage; they are "prefigurative" (Robins 2005[1991], 28) in the context of our globalised society since it can indicate the way beyond the restrictive quest for a *Heimat*. Who can in fact advance nowadays claims of autochthony and cultural authenticity?

In this respect, fashion reveals itself as a site disclosing the complexities of identity formation and allowing an understanding of cultural and historical homogeneity as romantic constructs, as discussed in the case of the references to and parodies of anglomania. For what concerns the British context, the possibility to "build a new heritage based on an inclusive reflection of society and its composite stories" (Tulloch 2002, 74) resides precisely in understanding the 'conviviality' of the British society and culture, of which fashion is part. Moving beyond ethnicity and nationality, conviviality dissolves in fact essentialist conceptions of cultural identity as well as those binary oppositions associated to the category of the immigrant, such as 'citizen'/'alien', 'inside'/'outside'.

## **Conclusion**

What does it mean to be an immigrant? And what does it mean to be British or European within our trans-global society? Are these labels out-dated nowadays?

Fashion discourses are still often based on national tropes (e.g. Britishness, Englishness, Frenchness, Made in Italy), with territoriality still playing an important role in the trans-global scenario. Whilst national identity is a selling point for fashion and fashion is key to national narratives, fashion can also expose the constructed nature of national identity, showing that identity is an “open, complex and unfinished game” (Hall 2005[1993] 43). As previously discussed in relation to Brexit and the responses of the fashion industry, London fashion offers a precious opportunity to appreciate the richness that resides in ‘conviviality’ (Gilroy 2004) and the contribution that immigrants make to the local fashion and culture. In particular, recent initiatives and collections have reclaimed the figure of the immigrant, the modern nomadic subject, and have addressed the debt that fashion owes to immigration. These manifestations are crucial in times dominated by controversies on immigration and border enforcement.

This article has been inspired by those philosophical contributions (Balibar 2015; Agamben 1998[1995]; Harendt 2003; Di Cesare 2017) opening up an understanding of the figure of the immigrant beyond borders and spatial categories, and rather as an existential and political act of resistance, as a response to the nationalistic tendencies currently surging in many European countries and the US. Scholars speak of identity as a construction, fiction or burden, and expose the invented nature of ‘tradition’, which is still so functional in the deployment of national identity and the nation. They argue that the figure of the migrant is not ancillary but central to historical processes, and urge to understand it beyond the rhetoric of blood, borders and property of territory, to inscribe it instead into Europe’s history.

Our sense of place and identity is in fact realised as we move through a multiplicity of worlds, histories and, first of all, languages, as addressed also by cultural theorist Iain Chambers (2001). Indeed, philosophers have for long discussed our nomadic experience of language - a language within which we are never fully at home, a language always shadowed by a loss, an elsewhere, affected by another tongue. We are forever strangers, nomads, in our own language. This experience of language, a central topic within philosophy, mirrors the metropolitan figure of the migrant, who lives “at the intersections of histories and memories, experiencing both their preliminary dispersal and their subsequent translation into new, more extensive, arrangements along emerging routes” (Chambers 2001, 4).

An understanding of immigration as constitutive of contemporary society, and central to historical processes, inevitably exposes the contingency of all definitions of identity, tradition as well as of dichotomies like ‘citizen’/‘alien’, ‘inside’/‘outside’. It implies another sense of ‘home’, beyond the anachronistic search for a *Heimat*, which is still so inscribed into Europe’s imperial history. Within this context, the notion of ‘conviviality’ (Gilroy 2004) acquires a particular epistemological valence in overcoming identitarian ideologies and fabrications of cultural homogeneity. Gilroy (2004) discusses also the importance of postcolonial culture, the arts, literature – and we can add fashion - to the making of new European cultures. Their contribution can in fact be used to provide an antidote to the oversimplifications diffused by resurgent neo-Fascist and ultranationalist movements.

A more embracing approach in contemporary fashion theory, which takes into account philosophical contributions on immigration, national identity, citizenship, in addition to postcolonial studies, can offer then a new perspective on the role of fashion in

relation to issues such as identity, place and belonging. Fashion, which is situated and at the same time transcending boundaries, has the possibility to add something relevant and unique to current debates on national and cultural identity, tradition, and sovereignty, by addressing the central role of immigrants and contributing to re-thinking identity as open and multi-layered. Fashion holds indeed an important political valence in times of global cultural confrontations and, on the other hand, of surging nationalistic and protectionist tendencies.

As Homi Bhabha (1989, 35) states, “where once we could believe in the comforts and continuities of Tradition, today we must face the responsibilities of cultural Translation”. Within contemporary society, trapped in a complex paradox, new political challenges thus emerge for fashion as well as for fashion studies.

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