



Black and White, the Migrant Trend

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"B&W – Black&White, The Migrant Trend" Round Table on brand identity, retail and distribution platforms with Manuela Bucciarelli, Giulia Ceragioli, Alessio De Nevasques, Olivia Mariotti, Mary Angela Schroth, Sara Sozzani Maino, Francesca Paiella and Clara Tosi Pamphili. Photo: Marco Bellucci.

In 2015, 51.5 million people were displaced all over the world. If considered a state, together they would have represented the 25th most populated nation on earth. The same year, referring to this number and this imaginary 25th Nation, Elena Abbiatici, Sara Alberani and myself founded Nation25 – an artistic-curatorial collective and participative platform that deals with contemporary socio-political and environmental themes with a special focus on migrant issues. Today, the migrant population, including refugees, asylum seekers, evacuees and the stateless, has risen to 70.8 million and has moved – between Iran (82.9 million) and Thailand (69.03 million) – to be the imaginary twentieth place in the ranking of populations by country.

VISION BEYOND NATION

Nation25 develops workshops, a participatory laboratory, exhibitions, actions and works of art. The process of work and the exchange it activates is often prioritized over the final form or product. The platform creates an opportunity for collaboration, meeting and exchange between asylum seekers and non-asylum seekers, involving from time to time in its projects experts not only from the artistic sphere but also other related fields, like sociologists, anthropologists, activists and others. Nation25's first project, which allowed us to meet and work together with Moleskine Foundation for the first time on an AtWork workshop, was the Nationless Pavilion in the context of the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015. This pavilion gave visibility to those excluded by the national representation system of the Venice Biennale. AtWork Venice, conducted by Emilio Fantin, was one of three art workshops in the Nationless Pavilion. Both Italians and asylum seekers participated in these workshops and were tasked with creating a group installation that would represent the 25th Nation, its needs and operating systems. The final installation "Nation 25 Under Construction" was presented at "S.a.L.E. Docks" at Magazzini del Sale in Venice.

In our second collaboration in 2019, Nation25 was a cultural partner of the AtWork "Where is South?" workshop in Venice, with the project "B&W – Black&White, The Migrant Trend". The project

developed in collaboration with A.I. Artisanal Intelligence, Fum Studio and under my own artistic direction, began as a study on the fashion style of the migrant population. B&W was developed during an intercultural laboratory in June and October 2019 at MACRO Asilo, Museum of Contemporary Art in Rome. By using the term migrant, we refer to an individual who, legally or illegally, is living in a country that is not their native one and who therefore is the bearer of traditions and knowledge of origin while meeting and reacting to those of the country of arrival. Despite many personal and individual variations, the unique style adopted by migrants has certain fixed elements that tell us much about the history of the world, of trade, of colonial and media power, and its myths.

Nation25's approach echoes the ethos of AtWork: we share the desire to show things which are often taken for granted in a new light – freeing them from predetermined or pre-established ideas. Breaking free from fixed thinking allows for new and marvellous ways of seeing the world. For example, the presence of asylum seekers is often criticized, while their positive impact on the societies they join is hardly ever highlighted and considered part of our shared culture. Moreover through some of the projects we were able to highlight how the terrible journeys and life events experienced by migrants often lead them to develop unimaginable resilience and resistance, turning them into "Unrecognized Heroes."¹ With our projects, we seek to break stereotypes and reveal a different perspective that allow people to re-think and re-imagine society.

The calling into question of pre-established ideologies regarding different geographical locations around the world as well as the stereotypes linked to the cardinal points, South, North, East and West, was the "trait d'union" of the "B&W – Black&White, The Migrant Trend" project and the "Where is South?" AtWork initiative. The very way in which young migrants dress is a visualization of a "confusion" (which, in Italian can be translated as "with-fusion") of myths and the influences of different places. In this context, clothing reflects the references and traditions of more than one compass point, breaking with the idea of the fixed nature of predetermined geographical locations.

I must correct and contradict myself however regarding the definition of "the fixed nature of predetermined geographical locations". During the workshop, it emerged that often times even that which seems firmly rooted in a specific geographical place is full of references and influences that call into question the very idea of a "defined geographical origin."

Consider, for example, the intricate story of wax print textiles, a fabric often worn by migrants of African origin. To put its history in a nutshell, this printed waxed cotton, which today is considered the quintessential African fabric, was in fact first created in Indonesia: the Javanese batik. Due to Dutch colonization in Indonesia, Dutch textile factories became familiar with this batik technique and began to produce such fabrics in an automated process. Initially produced only in the Netherlands, introduced to the then Dutch colony Gold Coast in contemporary Ghana, the fabric became popular in Africa after its use was spread by missionaries. Today, there is fierce competition over its

[2] The wax has been defined as "a symbol of the encounter between cultures" by Anne Grosfilley, an anthropologist who studied the intricate history of this textile and author of Wax & Co. *Anthology of Printed African Fabrics*.

production between Dutch, African and Chinese manufacturers. These influences and encounters between cultures,² just like the different anthropological and cultural aspects linked to the "migrant trend", when examined through an open comparison free of preconceptions, are what has brought this debate to life and enriched the workshop and "B&W" meetings. The program included round table discussions regarding sustainable fashion, brand identity, retail and distribution platforms, ethical fashion, and masterclasses in tailoring and fashion design. The collaborators involved included Fashion Revolution Italy, Moleskine Foundation and Vogue Italia.



[1] "Unrecognized Heroes" is the title of a poem by Ibrahim Kondeh, a young asylum seeker who took part in the "B&W" workshop.

Right: Masterclass and discussion led by Anthony Knight on African and Italian tailoring techniques, "B&W – Black&White, The Migrant Trend", Macro Asilo, Rome. Photo: Marco Bellucci.

[3] The B&W Factory was led by Ilaria Bigelli and Paolo Rinaldi who are designers from Accademia Costume & Moda, Rome.

**FOLLOWING THE
MIGRANT TREND**

Like AtWork, "B&W" was a horizontal rather than a top-down research process, with the participants themselves – mainly young asylum seekers – taking an active role in the process.

In fact, together with the participants, several moments of research and reflection took place to identify together the distinctive characteristics of what we have called "migrant style." We started with the study of the participants' personal wardrobe, to then analyse the design choices of clothes made by young aspiring fashion designers. We also created an exchange with professionals in the sector on tailoring techniques from different countries, in particular Senegal, Nigeria and Italy and, finally during the "B&W Factory" week,³ we all designed collectively a waist bag that took inspiration from the original and versatile ways in which they are worn by many young immigrants.

We were attempting to define "the migrant trend" by identifying constants and shared characteristics. Examining how participants were dressed led to discussions on identity. We observed the trans-

formations in the way people dress before, during and after their journey, and created "Facebook Mood Boards" together with participants. The mood board is a mix of text, images, materials, used by designers to convey a general idea or feel about a particular topic in order to visually illustrate a style.⁴ The participants made use of this instrument by collaging a selection of photos taken from their social media profiles which allowed them to identify the elements of their own style and to discuss the choices in the way they dress.

What is more, during the first phase of the workshop, we studied, wore and photographed clothes created by young tailors who are asylum seekers. This led to the group discussing not only everyday clothes, but also the kind of clothes conceived and made by migrants in Italy.

This exchange highlighted how a few accessories – such as a wax tie made by Moustapha Sylla, a Senegalese tailor and asylum seeker in Italy – have the power to evoke a mixed sense of identity. For example, someone who wore only wax shirts sold in his aunties' store in Africa, but who now wears mainly white shirts and striped ties in Italy, had the chance to wear a white shirt with a wax tie during the workshop. This perfect mix of both influences reflected an intercultural identity.

[4] During the workshop, the use of mood board in fashion was introduced by Giulia Ceragioli of FUM Studio and Alessio De Navasques of A.I. Artisanal Intelligence.



Left and Top: "B&W – Black&White, The Migrant Trend" Lab, Facebook Moodboard by Ibrahim Kondeh, Macro Asilo, Museum of Contemporary Art, Rome. Photo: Nation25

aspects. Mimesis is in fact a feature created to allow to blend with the context, that I find is an interesting suggestion referring to people who live in a new context. Furthermore, as a pattern belonging to the military world, it is often linked to the political situation of some of the countries where young people come from (such as dictatorial governments, war zones, etc.).

Personalized intervention on clothes, often through changes to the original garments like adding patches or color, and the original use of accessories, such as the waist bag that is often worn around the neck or across the shoulder instead of around the waist, are also central characteristics. We observed a widespread presence of necklaces or accessories with reference to the countries of origin and arrival, such as the presence of the word Italy and the Italian flag on the garments, as well as the pendants in the shape of Africa.

Other strong features are decisive and striking colour combinations as well as the mix of traditional elements, such a veil or turban, with shirts of Western musical groups or other garments and accessories related to Western traditions. Many clothes are just the ones worn by young people in Europe, since pop culture, musical myths and media influences are shared, but young migrants often associate them with those deriving from the traditions of origin, creating an original and unique mix.

B&W is carrying out this research through dedicated moments, always in collaboration with young migrants. Furthermore, in collaboration with Comesso Fotografo, we are continuing the photographic series in order to increase the study sample which, to date, has focused in particular on young people of African nationality, to also include the influences deriving from Asian and Arab origins.

In our first "B&W Factory – Officina B&W" we created a versatile waist bag to be worn over the shoulder, around the neck and around the waist. These constants, as mentioned above, are an inspiration for future B&W accessories or garments designed in collaboration with the network of migrants tailoring realities.



MIX UP! DEFINING TREND PATTERNS

In addition to the observations and study on the participants' social profiles, we carried out a kind of "detective investigation" (proposed by Clara Tosi Pamphili by A.I. Artisanal Intelligence) starting from the photographic series created for the occasion by Comesso Fotografo (Francesco de Luca) in collaboration with the Talking Hands of Treviso. The splendid photographic series presents the portraits of a number of young asylum seekers in their daily outfits. The cross-study of social profiles and the photographic series allowed us to start indicating some recurring characteristics.

One of them is the use of the mimetic pattern. We discussed how the choice of camouflage is linked to interesting social and identity

TAILORING REALITIES

Therefore, on one hand, "B&W" seeks to identify young migrants' "street style", as well as their history and the points of reference that inspire it. On the other hand, our research is structured in order to become a platform that supports migrant tailoring organizations in Italy – organizations that mainly grow out of welcome centres and allow many to continue to work and others to make the most of their time while they wait for official documentation. These organizations are as vulnerable and fragile as the situations of the migrants they employ. Given this vulnerability, along with their innovative and original nature, together with Nation25, A.I. Artisanal Intelligence and FUM STUDIO, we began to provide a platform and entry point into more established fashion circles. As such, one of the most important moments in the project was to take part in the exhibition "The Shape of Water"

at AltaRoma, 2019, curated by A.I. Artisanal Intelligence. It was in this context that Moustapha Sylla (Sylla Sarto) and Nosakhare Ekhatore (Nosa Collection) together with "Atelier Trame Libere" from Rieti and "Talking Hands" from Treviso – two fashion-design workshops run by refugees and asylum seekers – were able to display their collections and catch the attention of established figures in the fashion world.



One of the first results of "B&W", following this presentation, was to establish a scholarship to study at the Accademia Costume & Moda of Rome, for the talented and young fashion designer Nosakhare Ekhatore – who is also an AtWork participant. This is the very first scholarship awarded to an asylum seeker at this renowned fashion academy – we hope it will be the first of many.

Some of the "B&W" participants were invited to take part in the "Where is South?" AtWork workshop in Venice in 2019: Hina John from Atelier Trame Libere; Nosakhare Ekhatore of Nosa Collection; Lamin Saïdy from Talking Hands as well as the artist and designer, Wendorlink Zerpa. In this intimate, collective setting, the aim was to examine this issue more closely and rethink perspectives regarding ourselves and our position in the world. Victor Abbey-Hart from Gavachy, an AtWork participant whose professional development "B&W" aims to continue to support, was able to join us in October and share his growing talent and passion.

Last but not least, this collaboration also led "B&W" and the project's technical sponsor, Puntoseta to design a silk scarf to spread the message of the varied definitions of South that emerged during the "Where is South?" workshop: "My South is Rebirth", "My South is Spectacular" and "My South is Dreams" are just a few of the many phrases that appear on the scarves – with a bold rubber stamp ink-effect that contrasts with the delicate silk.

"B&W – Black&White, The Migrant Trend" Lab, research wall from the photo series by Comosso Fotografia in collaboration with Talking Hands, Macro Asilo, Museum of Contemporary Art, Photo: Nation25.

To help spread its message, the scarves were worn by the crew of the Kleronia, "the human boat", in collaboration with UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency and Moleskine Foundation, during the Barcolana 2019 in Trieste.

In 2019, "B&W" started to create a solid network of fashion professionals and scholars, both migrants and non-migrants, working to promote inclusion, sustainability, research and innovation through fashion. At the moment, we are working to implement the network and create a service platform capable of promoting the "migrant trend" through research activities, exhibitions, counseling and training, connecting the fashion industry with migrant tailors, ateliers and designers. The platform aims to continue the creation of study opportunities and internships for young talents, to encourage the collaborations among visual artists with designers and brands of the network and to respond to the different business needs of each reality. Furthermore, we intend to convene new moments of intercultural encounter, network exchange, train and production, as well as of sociological and identity research linked to this style, the "migrant trend."

Breaking free from fixed thinking allows for new and marvellous ways of seeing the world.

"B&W – Black&White, The Migrant Trend" at A.I. Artisanal Intelligence "The Shape of Water", AltaRoma 2019. Photo: Loni Mjeshtri.





Silk scarf designed by Black&White in collaboration with Puntoseta with the phrases about personal "Souths" created by AtWork Venice "Where is South?" workshop participants. The scarf was worn by the Kleronia sailing boat crew during the Barcolana initiative to promote and give visibility to the AtWork message. Photo by Raffaele Bellezza.